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Malabar Christianity: Practices and Theology between Cultures.

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Tess Joss, M.A.

To my parents,  
Marymma Joss and Joss C. Kappalumackal,  
For always putting my happiness first.

To Balu,  
For making me a better daughter to them.

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## **ANNOTATION**

This work focuses on Indian Christianity. While the field of Indian Christianity has been extensively studied, there have been no efforts made to understand if Indian culture, which has housed Christianity for at least 14 centuries, has transformed Christianity in any way, and if so, how. This thesis is an attempt at tracing this transformation, critically assessing the knowledge that has been generated by scholars in the field, and see if it is a worthy cause to rethink Indian Christianity.

## **KEYWORDS**

India, Christianity, theology, study of religions, culture

## **NÁZEV PRÁCE**

Malabarské křesťanství: Praktiky a teologie mezi kulturami

## **ANOTACE**

Předmětem práce je indické křesťanství. Třebaže bylo indické křesťanství velmi studováno, nikdo se až doposud nepokusil zjistit, zda a případně jak moc indická kultura ovlivnila charakter křesťanství v Indii. Tato práce si klade právě tento cíl. Předkládá analýzu dosavadního bádání a nabízí zcela odlišné vysvětlení tohoto fenoménu, než se doposud argumentovalo.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Indie, křesťanství, teologie, religionistika, kultura

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## INTRODUCTION

India has seen the arrival of Christianity through many stages and movements. Since the earliest of European missions to the country, there have been many steps taken to preach the message of Christ to its indigenous people. In the process, missionaries have had to deal with cultural differences, and problems of translation, among others. Despite their difficulties, they managed to establish their churches in India. However, we cannot say that they were very successful in their attempts to Christianise the country. According to the 2011 census of India, the total population of Christians in the country amounted to 28.7 million which is a mere 2.3% of the whole population.<sup>1</sup> There were already Christians in India before the Europeans arrived, and they now form a significant part of this number. Considering that, and the zealous mission works that have been going on since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 2.3% is a small figure to show for the success of missionary conversion. Missionaries have pointed out reasons, for why converting Indians is difficult. Moreover, there have been doubts expressed, since the early missionary works of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, about Indian peoples' ability to grasp the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and the religion he formed. Missionaries noticed that while it was not difficult to convince Indians of the greatness of Jesus, fundamental things like the exclusivity of Christ, and the falsity of local religions just could not be understood by the locals. It was their impression that Indians simply could not comprehend, what their message of Christianity hoped to convey. It needs to be seen if this instinct was mere whimsical speculation or if it was their observations that led to them having formed such opinions.

Indian Christianity has been subjected to a fair amount of scholarly work. Social scientific disciplines such as history and anthropology have undertaken these projects and have managed to throw light on some basic features of the group of Indian Christians. Their findings have given us bodies of information that serve as good reference points to begin our research with. However, their contribution to understanding this group, its dynamics and its interaction with others has ignored one fundamental feature, which is, how did Indians transform the Christianity they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>



received. Did they receive it in the same way as was given to them? Did they alter it, and if so, how did they do it? This thesis strives to make an attempt at understanding this transformation, which has resulted from the process of evolution that this religion went through, once it established itself in the Indian subcontinent.

This project is a product of the research programme Comparative Science of Cultures that has been scientifically studying cultural difference and how the dominance of one culture and its worldview over the rest, centuries ago, laid the foundation for how the social sciences evolved and consequently how we see the world today. With the pioneering work of S N Balagangadhara, namely, *"The Heathen in his Blindness...": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*, and the theory put forward by him, that is applied by scholars across the world who have contributed to various fields along the parameters of this research programme, we now have the necessary tools to understanding how a culture like India has so far been studied. It opens to us an alternate way of understanding cultures and how they interact with each other. This helps throw light on the misunderstandings that occur, when cultural interactions take place. There are discrepancies in the understanding of concepts, taken for granted notions and category mistakes that we are accustomed to making. Regarding the field this thesis tackles, within the considerable body of scholarly works we have at hand, much has been theorised, stated and swept under blanket terms. Because of this, it is common to find features of Indian Christianity that are pointed out to be atypical of Christianity. The scholarly works we have, have been unable to provide reasons for why Indian Christianity is so different. This difference has been pointed out by scholars who expressed surprise at the way many of Indian Christian traditions are practiced and continued. If certain aspects of Indian Christianity causes surprise, then why have they been not studied? Why simply stop at saying that it is the Indian-ness of Indian Christianity that sets it apart? Why not study what this Indian-ness is? The purpose of this thesis is not to point at more differences or point out the shortcomings of earlier works done (even though both are going to happen here), but on showing why they occur in the first place. Hopefully it will pave a path or show new directions that we can take to study this group.

There are certain requirements I hope the reader meets before they start. As mentioned earlier, this is a project undertaken within a school of research. For those unfamiliar with it, all the

considerations of the research programme necessary for this topic, are explained in the initial parts of the thesis. To understand this framework, and use it to study a culture like India's, is a challenge, because the attitudes generated by the social sciences built on centuries of assumptions, are deeply ingrained in us. While looking at the world with a fresh pair of eyes is interesting and perhaps rewarding, it also requires a shedding of most of the assumptions, that we have held onto until now. This is what makes the task at hand a difficult one, because it involves a lot of unlearning. My education in this unlearning began, and has been continuing through this thesis. As one progresses chapter by chapter, I am hoping that the reader will join me in this process of unlearning, learning and relearning.

## **Questions and Structure of the Thesis**

The *first chapter* is a literary review of the work done in the study of Indian Christianity so far. It will deal with a brief history of the Christians of India, what kind of scholarly work has gone into studying them, and making sense of them or figuring out how much they are a product of various assumptions, that scholars adopted while studying their subject. What the chapter will do, is use the material previous scholars have produced, and deal with the various sub-topics that they have dealt with. This will point to an important issue that has been largely ignored and see where the road would lead us, if we look into this ignored aspect. This chapter will ask the crucial questions that this thesis will set out to answer.

The *second chapter* deals with the concept of syncretism. One of the latest trends in the study of Indian Christianity, is to sweep instances where Indian believers exhibit non-Christian tendencies, under the term of syncretism. Scholars have liberally used the notion of syncretism to describe the practices of Indian Christianity. This chapter will look into what this concept is, in what historical context it came into existence, its evolution over centuries and how it is currently used. What we will try to figure out is, if there is a theory of syncretism, which enables us to have some grasp on the phenomenon. To do this, we will take the most accepted understanding of syncretism that we have, and check if this is able to explain much about the traditions of Indian Christianity, which is known

to be syncretic. It will also try to determine, if there is any sense in classifying many aspects of Indian Christianity as syncretic entities. In a broader sense, it will be an attempt at examining the very notion of religious syncretism, and checking the viability of such a concept. In other words, we will look into whether it is a loosely used term, or if there is any substance to it that will help us understand the phenomena of syncretism. In the process, we shall touch upon some salient features of Indian traditions, that could possibly give us new grounds for subjecting the term “syncretism” to scrutiny.

The following chapters deal with how Indian Christians understand Christianity, which will form the bulk of this thesis. The third chapter proposes a hypothesis about the Indian understanding of theological concepts. For this purpose, four Christian concepts and beliefs, have been chosen to study how Indian Christians comprehend and formulate their understanding of them. They are- (1) the notion of Jesus being the only Way, (2) Salvation, (3) Sin and (4) the Holy Spirit. I have also taken the liberty of delving briefly into the Indian notion of truth, tolerance, soul and what they make of the concept of Free Will, so that the picture that I am trying to present of the Indian Christian understanding of theological ideas becomes clearer. To find answers to this, a group of 130 lay Christians and 11 priests and nuns were interviewed, whose responses will be analysed in these chapters.<sup>2</sup> For anonymity’s sake, the names of these priests and nuns have been changed. Their answers, which are extensively quoted, revealed findings that were quite unexpected at the beginning of the fieldwork though not surprising. Through their words, we will see if the proposed hypothesis is helpful or not.

There are, however, some things that need to be said about the focus group. While this thesis began as an endeavour to have a general idea about Indian Christians, during fieldwork, it was soon discovered that Protestants are well-trained in speaking about theological concepts. Therefore, it took a greater effort to unearth their true understanding of these concepts, beneath the expertise they had developed in articulating them. In addition to that, I had considerably lesser access to Protestant communities. My hypothesis stands for all Christian communities of India. However, due to these two reasons, this thesis will not be taking Protestants into consideration. Also, while the people who were interviewed are from all over India where there are large Christian

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the field work conducted, please refer to the appendix.

communities (mostly Kerala, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu), the north-eastern states of India that have a high population of Christians (though mostly Protestants), have also not been interviewed for the above two reasons. This project is the first step that has been undertaken to understand Indian Christianity from the perspective of the research programme Comparative Science of Cultures, and including all Christian communities in the focus group is the goal of this project in the longer run. For now, however, the most accessible groups whose mother tongues were not English have been taken into consideration. We will see why it was important to select groups of people who spoke their native languages during the course of these chapters.

There is a caveat though. I would like to caution the reader to what these chapters might contain. There will be many points at which, the western reader might be tempted to think that, devoted Indian Christians are ignorant of basic ideas in Christianity, because of their responses that may sound illogical or lacking coherence. If you are one of those, then I urge you to look past dismissing this as ignorance, but rather see the pattern in their responses. If it was one, two or three individuals or a small number of people who gave absurd responses, then this could be attributed to ignorance. However, if an entire group of people give strange yet similar responses, then it would be foolish to attribute it to ignorance. To the Indian reader, I would like to state that, this thesis in no way tries to belittle the faith of Indian Christians. Neither does it make an empty celebration of Indian Christianity's lack of dogmatism. It only tries to account in detail, how a culture like India's, altered a religion like Christianity when it took root in the country, so much so that the followers of the faith in India, do not exhibit the general attitudes and tendencies towards their faith, that those in the West do.

Following this analysis of what Indians say, there would be a conclusion where I try to point at the answers I have managed to provide, and questions that I wish to provide answers for in the future. This thesis is a work in progress and its aim is to clear some of the ground for future studies of Christianity in India. At this point, we have only arrived at the stage, to rethink Christianity in India. I hope that this thesis provides directions to be taken in the future. To locate patterns in which Indians understand and distort Christian concepts, is chiefly what is done in this thesis. These patterns are going to be the stepping stones that will help us study the phenomenon of Indian Christianity someday.

Finally, this thesis is a sincere attempt to study Indian Christianity, without using the so-called established facts to make strong assumptions, and supposing those assumptions to be knowledge about the field. I began this journey with an empty slate, and the intuitions of the community I come from, which incidentally, also happens to be the area I have chosen to study. Being a part of this community makes me my own subject of scrutiny. If you see shortcomings in the theological sections of this thesis, consider these as part of my own struggles with understanding the same. If you feel I have been quick to assume the thought processes of these Indians in certain aspects, then I can assure you that they have been reached after lengthy discussions with the subjects, discussions with my peers here in the West, who helped me arrive at these conclusions objectively, and experiencing cultural difference in a way that have opened my eyes, to how easily we tend to be blind to the cultural baggage of the words we speak, in a dialogue with people of other cultures. I hope all of this is reflected in the thesis. We thus proceed into undertaking a project, on a path not treaded upon before, hoping that it leads us to a productive beginning.

## **Chapter 1**

### **INDIAN CHRISTIANITY: ORIGINS, PAST, AND PRESENT.**

#### **Stories of Origin of Indian Christianity**

There are a few stories of how Christianity made its way to India. While some are known for being legends, there have been attempts at making some recognised as real events. There are yet others that are given much less importance, some of which can actually be verified. However, the favourite story, that is as supported as it is contested, credits the origin of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent, to St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Christ. There are two stories of his arrival to India and both are as different as stories can get.

According to the first story, St. Thomas came to Taxila, in today's Pakistan, through Persia as a slave who was bought by a merchant to work for King Gundaphorus. The identity of this king was unknown for a long time until an Englishman, James Lewis (who also went by the name of Charles Masson), excavated a massive number of coins that brought back to history many forgotten people of importance of a period long gone.<sup>3</sup> Until that time, this king was seen simply as a legendary figure who played an important role in the Apostle's mission in India. Lewis' discovery of these coins, with the seal of a king whose name bore a resemblance to the king in the *Acts of Thomas*, lent this narrative credibility in the eyes of those who advocate the veracity of this story. Those who oppose this story raise questions about its truth, because of lack of concrete evidence, the only existing one being the discovery of a 2-inch cross at Taxila which does not tell us much.

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<sup>3</sup> NEILL, Stephen. *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*. B.m.: Cambridge University Press, 1984, Pg. 28.

The fact is that this story is heavily dependent on the *Acts of Thomas*- an Apocryphal text that is not included in the Bible, and occupies an important place in the gnostic tradition of Christianity. But if we are looking for empirical evidences of the Apostle's arrival to India in this text, a difficulty arises when the text itself is put to scrutiny. Firstly, it was not authored by St. Thomas but supposedly by an unverified<sup>4</sup> author in Edessa (Mesopotamia) two or three centuries after the death of the Apostle.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, some scholars speculate that, the dramatic and fantastical stories of this text are made up, and the Indian locations cited in the text are those that were known in Edessa, where it was written, about the "far east".<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Church declared the text heretic and found it unacceptable after the Council of Trent in (1545-1563). However, the text is still held important, and as evidence for the story of St. Thomas's time in the northern parts of India (that includes current Pakistan).

The second is the more popular story from south India. According to this legend, St. Thomas set foot on India's southern shore of Muziris in Kodungalloor (Cranganore), Kerala, which was an important port for spice trade until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. On his arrival, he claimed to be the disciple of the one who had come to save the world and set about in his mission to convince the locals of the same. He is believed to have been responsible for Christianity taking roots in India through Kerala. St. Thomas is a part of the rich oral tradition of the group that calls itself the St. Thomas Christians. However, this story was not put to writing until just three centuries ago.<sup>7</sup> Some critics say that the formalising and strengthening of this story was made by the Portuguese who wanted to add momentum to their proselytising efforts.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars also observe that western scepticism

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<sup>4</sup> It is speculated that the author is the Syriac scientist, poet, philosopher and scholar Bardesanes who was well-known for his knowledge of India.

<sup>5</sup> KLIJN, A.F.J. *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> MCGRATH, James F. *History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question*. *Butler University Libraries*. 2008, Biblical Studies Commons, History of Christianity Commons.

<sup>7</sup> NEILL, Stephen. *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*. B.m.: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pg. 33.

<sup>8</sup> VAKAKKEKARA, Benedict. *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians: a historiographical critique*. Delhi: Media House, 1995; GILLMAN, Ian and HANS-JOACHIM KLIMKEIT. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. 1st vyd. USA: The University of Michigan Press, 1999 and, NEILL, Stephen. *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*. B.m.: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

regarding the saint's presence in India might have "prompted Indians to adopt an even more intransigent stand on the issue".<sup>9</sup>

All aspects of the St. Thomas story are either speculative or disproved by modern scholars. For example, according to oral history, St. Thomas's first converts were 7 *Namboothiri* Brahmins in Kerala. Some Keralites still claim to be able to trace back their familial roots to these 7 *Namboothiris*. This aspect of the story adds traction to the current narrative of St. Thomas Christians being of high caste. However, it has been disproved by some historians, who say that there were no Brahmins in Kerala until the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> It is supposed that the story of the 7 Brahmins is a metaphor for the 7 churches that the saint established, in different locations in Kerala. Today, all except one, are areas with high concentrations of St. Thomas Christians. According to this story, the saint was martyred and his body was buried in Mylapore. While the supporters<sup>11</sup> of the story strongly insist that the few mentions made of the tomb of the saint in Mylapore in medieval travelogues<sup>12</sup> serve as enough evidence for his presence and death in India, those who oppose<sup>13</sup> it, produce evermore convincing evidences to show that the story of the tomb was a Portuguese invention, which was propagated for missionary, political, and economic reasons. In light of this confusion regarding the Church's origin in India, the reverence given to St. Thomas in India, is seen with suspicion. Despite the suspect historicity, the legend of St. Thomas is a crucial part of the belief of the St. Thomas Christians of India (and to some degrees Pakistan), especially for those who belong to the Syrian rite. The third day of July is celebrated with gusto as St. Thomas

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<sup>9</sup> IAN GILLMAN and HANS-JOACHIM KLIMKEIT. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. 1st vyd. USA: The University of Michigan Press.

<sup>10</sup> MALEKANDATHIL, Pius. St. Thomas Christians: A Historical Analysis of their Origin and Development upto the 9th Century AD. In: *St. Thomas Christians and Nabuthiris, Jews and Sangam Literature*. Thrikkakara: Little Flower Offset Press, 2003; MENON, A. Sreedhara. *Kerala Charithram*. B.m.: D C Books, 1967, pg. 9; MENON, A. Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*. First. Kottayam, Kerala: D C Books, 2007; BALAKRISHNAN, P.K. *Jathi Vyavasthithiyum Kerala Charithravum*. B.m.: D C Books, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> MUNDADAN, A M. *History of Christianity of India*. B.m.: Panther Press, Theological Publications of India, 1970; ZACHARIAH, K.C. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*. 1st vyd. Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006. ISBN 81-250-3009-3.

<sup>12</sup> CORDIER, Henri. *Ser Marco Polo; notes and addenda to Sir Henry Yule's edition, containing the results of recent research and discovery*. London: Murray, 1920.

<sup>13</sup> SHARAN, Ishwar. *The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*. Delhi: Voice of India, 1991.



day, included in which are processions and festivities that have been part of the celebration for many centuries.

Yet another story claims that this religion reached the subcontinent in the 4th century (or 6<sup>th</sup> according to some) through Syrian traders who came and made settlements in Kerala. Knana Thomman/ Thomas of Cana, a Judeo-Christian is credited for spreading Christianity in this state according to this story. While again, there is no empirical proof, Knana Thomas is a prominent figure featuring in the oral tradition of this community. In Malayalam, St. Thomas Christians are called Mar-Thoma Christians, a name that advocates of this story say the group has acquired from Mar<sup>14</sup> Thomas- the Syrian trader. Various scholars have put forth reasons why traders from the Middle East migrated to Kerala. Some say it was purely for trade<sup>15</sup> while some say that it was to escape persecution, first from the Sassanid rulers in Persia and then, the spread of Islam a few centuries later<sup>16</sup>. It is said that it is owing to these settlers being Syrians, that Syriac became the liturgical language of this community, which was in use until the last century, when translations into Kerala's native tongue, Malayalam, were finally made. It is a plausible story. However, there is again no empirical evidence available to prove it. Prominent scholars<sup>17</sup> have made a case for its truth, by referring to Portuguese records of the sets of copper plates, that were supposedly granted to Mar Thomas by the king of that time. However, those plates cannot be found.<sup>18</sup> The few that are housed in two seminaries in Kerala are believed to be fake, or copies made by some foreigners who were not familiar with the local language. Either way, we do not have evidence to prove the story of Thomas of Cana. What can be said though, is that it is likely that the earliest arrival of Christianity to India might have to do with settlers from Syria who could have brought along with them, their St. Thomas tradition. Lack of proof prevents us from narrowing down on one of the origin stories of Christianity in India. However, the same lack of proof also enables invested parties to say that lack of proof is not proof that these events did not happen at all.

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<sup>14</sup> Mar/ Marya= "Mr" or "Sir" in Syriac and "Lord" in Aramaic.

<sup>15</sup> PHILIPPOS, Edavalikel. *The Syrian Christians of Malabar: Otherwise Called The Christians of S. Thomas*: 1869.

<sup>16</sup> GARBE, R. *Indien und das Christentum*. 1914, pg. 153-6.

<sup>17</sup> A M MUNDADAN. *History of Christianity of India*. B.m.: Panther Press, Theological Publications of India, 1970 and L W BROWN. *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: an account of the ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> JOSEPH, T K. *Malabar Christians and their Ancient Documents*. 1929, pg. 5.

We can see that there are a few contesting stories about the arrival of Christianity to India. While followers of the faith have attested their belief to St. Thomas's mission in Kerala, which a large group of them believe they are products of, many scholars and people belonging to religious orders have devoted an extensive amount of resources into finding the most plausible origin story. As we have already seen, the evidences for proving most of what we know about the beginning of Christianity in India are scarce, mostly stories, and legends at best, or simply inconsistent. But this does not pose a problem to us because what we will do in this thesis is not verify its history.

The surge in the number of Christians in India happened with the coming of the Portuguese. They worked towards making both settlements and converts in the Indian lands. There are two ways they tried to convert. First, they tried to rectify the errors of the Christian Church that that they thought was required. Second, they focussed their attention on possible converts from the heathens.<sup>19</sup> The Portuguese missionaries expected the first task to be comparatively easy, because Indian Christians were already privy to the person of Jesus and his teachings. However, as time went by, they realised that it was not easy to get rid of the customs of this people, which they had come to see as blasphemous. This was because, the Christians who had been in India for many centuries before the Europeans had come, had by now become so rooted in Indian culture that missionaries saw no difference between them and Hindus.<sup>20</sup> In time, they began to feel that it would be easier to make new converts than to make already existing Christians have the right beliefs and follow Christianity properly.

The encounter with Portuguese Christianity, although it started on a promising note, turned out to be problematic for Syrian Christians. For a century, the Syrian Christians were assumed under the Roman Catholic Church that tried to bring about many changes within this group. One of the marked events through which the discontent of the local Christians became very apparent, was at the *Synod of Diamper* in 1599 where rules were laid down for these Christians to follow and they

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of Portuguese strategies of Christianising Goa, see, ALBUQUERQUE, Teresa. *Goan Pioneers in Bombay*. Bombay & Goa: Broadway Publishing House & Goa 1556, 2012, pgs ix-xxx.

<sup>20</sup> GOEL, Sita Ram. *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters: AD 304 to 1996*. New Delhi: Voice of India, 1989.

were formally taken under the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> In 1653, a revolt finally broke out which had devastating effects on the ancient Syrian Church.<sup>22</sup> This Church broke into many different denominations, some choosing to remain autonomous, some pledging their allegiance to the Patriarch of the East and some remaining under the Roman Catholic banner. Later, some of these groups joined Protestant denominations. All sources available, show that it was Portuguese interference that brought about schisms in the old Indian Church, some of which have still not been buried.<sup>23</sup>

Conversions by Europeans in the rest of India, were as problematic. The Goan Inquisition (between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century) stands most guilty of bringing about this unrest.<sup>24</sup> Proposed by St. Francis Xavier, this inquisition first led to a mandate which saw the closing of all Hindu temples in 1541.<sup>25</sup> By 1559 over 350 temples were destroyed and *murti puja* (what was seen as idol worship) was banned, followed by Hindus not allowed to keep their jobs, brutal tortures and even burning at stake.<sup>26</sup> The tumultuous periods of conversion ceased after the inquisition was abolished in 1820. By this time, missionary works were already well established by the English, Germans and French in other parts of India. By 1858, Baptists, Anglican, Lutheran, both British and American successfully converted people in large numbers in the north-eastern regions, Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. In the decades to follow, missionaries braved their way into central and north

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<sup>21</sup> JONAS THALIATH, T. O. C. D. *The Synod of Diamper*. 1st vyd. Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, Rome, 1958. Thaliath's work details the minutes of the Synod and points at the causes for contention among Syrian Christians. Through this work, he shows how Archbishop Alexio de Menezes adopted unapproved methods to conduct the Synod which renders the Synod moot. The Catholic Church is embarrassed about this episode and has stated that Menezes' misguided zeal spoiled the old Malabar rite (Catholic Encyclopedia 1913).

<sup>22</sup> MACKENZIE, Gordon Thomson. *Christianity in Travancore*. B.m.: Travancore Government Press, 1905 and KOLLAPARAMBIL, Jacob. *The St. Thomas Christians' revolution in 1653*. Kottayam: Catholic Bishop's House, 1981

<sup>23</sup> VISVANATHAN, Susan. *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief, and Ritual Among the Yakoba*. Madras: New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pgs. 14-68.

<sup>24</sup> LAWSON, Charles Allen. *British and Native Cochin*. 2nd vyd. New Delhi, Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 1861, pg. 9.

<sup>25</sup> GOEL, Sita Ram. *Francis Xavier SJ: The Man and His Mission*. New Delhi: Voice of India, 1985, pg. 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> SHARMA, Anjali. Goa Inquisition. *The New Indian Express*. 2015. Also, see DELLON, M. *An Account of the Inquisition at Goa In India*. Pittsburgh: R. Patterson & Lambdin: Buller and Lambdin, Printers., 1819 for a detailed account of the Goan Inquisition.

India.<sup>27</sup> The British, who had assumed the role of governing India, debated the cause of conversion in the country. It was however felt that India, with its heathenish customs and religions needed British interference, only then could it be brought out of darkness.<sup>28</sup> Various ways of implementing this goal were set in place, especially through education and missionary works. The means adopted by both were different and while Portuguese missionary activities had violent upheavals, the missionary activities of the British contained no less violence.

## **Body of Facts, Stories and Interpretations**

Not just the social sciences, but even natural science has been employed in studying the Malabar Christians, its ethnic origins and evolution. Anthropologists, theologians, historians and linguists over the last few centuries, and geneticists in the past decades have made a large body of facts available to us about the group. These facts have definitely enriched our knowledge about Indian Christianity. However, the facts collected by these scholars, do not provide answers for the questions I am trying to raise here. Through this thesis, I try to show that having facts, does not help us raise questions about the evolution that Christianity underwent in India, and how it's adoption by people of Indian culture, transformed it. Since this thesis deals with the question of how to look at Indian Christianity, the first and foremost step to be taken is to review the literature that scholars of this field have produced.

According to some scholars of early Indian classical literature, there have been a few odd mentions of the rituals, festive processions and trade of the ancient Christian community of India among

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<sup>27</sup> NEILL, Stephen. *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*. B.m.: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pgs.: 331-359; See also, FRYKENBERG, R E. *Christianity in India: From the Beginning to the Present*. B.m.: Oxford, 2008 for missionary activities. See, WEBSTER, John C.B. *Missionary Strategy and the Development of the Christian Community: Delhi 1859-1884*. In: *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pgs. 211–232 for the strategies applied by missionaries to spread Christianity in north India.

<sup>28</sup> CUNNINGHAM, A.M., J.W. *Christianity in India: An Essay on the Duty, Means, and Consequences, of Introducing The Christian Religion among the Native Inhabitants of the British Dominions in the East*. London: J. Hatchard, bookseller to Her Majesty, 1808, pg.: 1.

descriptions that were part of the everyday scenes that the poets of the Tamilakam<sup>29</sup> described.<sup>30</sup> There are also brief mentions by travellers such as Marco Polo who mentions the Christian shrine he got to visit on one of his travels to the southern coast of India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Joseph the Indian, who was a priest, is the only recorded Indian traveller to have visited Europe and Babylon in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. His account, which was scribed by an unknown European fellow traveller, was the first insider report the West got of Indian Christianity. Along with these travellers, we have the accounts of lesser-known travellers such as John of Marignolli, a Father Jordanus Catalani, Odoric of Pordenone, among others who have mentioned this community and practitioners of the Syrian or eastern faith in the passing. The “facts” that these accounts have generated is the only historical understanding we have on the subject. Unfortunately, missionaries and scholars in the last few centuries treated them as evidence and many history-based scholarly works are based on these earliest impressions.

The debate at the forefront, of issues concerning Indian Christianity, is the legitimacy of the St. Thomas story. Among the literature available on Indian Christianity, the sheer number of books written on this matter, and the scholars engaged in the debate testifies to the scholarly preoccupation with this aspect of the community. There are also those who neither support nor oppose the story<sup>31</sup> and yet fill up pages on the issue all the while, taking a neutral stand. However, the importance of this story is such that it cannot go unmentioned in any scholarly work.

History also records all sorts of allegations made against early Indian Christianity, the chief of which was that it had branched from Nestorianism. Nestorianism was considered highly heretical especially by western Christianity. This gave even more impetus for western missionaries to point out the errs of Indian Christianity. There has been a debate on the same with again, scholars taking

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<sup>29</sup> The ancient Tamil country which includes Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the southern parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>30</sup> PUTHUR, Bosco. *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*. Kochi: Liturgical Research Centre Publications, 2000; MALEKANDATHIL, Pius. *St. Thomas Christians: A Historical Analysis of their Origin and Development upto the 9th Century AD*. In: *St. Thomas Christians and Nabuthiris, Jews and Sangam Literature*. Thrikkakara: Little Flower Offset Press, 2003, pg. 13.

<sup>31</sup> VAKAKKEKARA, Benedict. *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians : a historiographical critique*. Delhi: Media House, 1995. ISBN 81-7495-000-1.

opposing sides. These debates also saw the superimposition of the western prejudices about Nestorianism on Indian Christianity. In these debates, and considering the scholarly resources invested into tracing the history of the arrival of Christianity to India, we lose sight of one important issue- that finding answers to these will only extend the body of facts we have on the subject. So far it has not helped us understand the nature of Christianity in this country, and what became of it as a result of being nourished in a pagan culture. And attempts to understand it have not been made.

## **The Heretic Christians of India**

Many of the descriptions we have about Indian Christians are from colonial writings that have been in circulation since the fifteenth century. It was felt by their authors, that Indian Christianity showed none of the qualities that Christianity was held to espouse.

The whole system was one of fraud and dissimulation— of compromise and abnegation. So little of Christianity was there in it, that the English historian of Christian India is compelled to apologise for devoting to its chapter of his book.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, wrote a coloniser on his encounter with Indian Christianity. Such was the exasperated state of most missionaries who expected the heathen land of India to be viable for the seeds of Christianity. There are two kinds of colonial accounts. First, of what they witnessed as the degraded state of Christianity that already existed in India before their arrival. Second, of what they began to understand through converting natives, observing first hand and experiencing Indian culture through their daily activities. This, they believed, helped them understand the Indian way of thought which would in turn help them win more converts, and help future missionaries. In either of these cases, the attitude towards Indian Christianity, is that of dissatisfaction if not contempt. The latter kind is now largely disregarded, because such texts are deemed politically inappropriate, as it gives the impression that Indians are idiots incapable of understanding the finer points and

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<sup>32</sup> KAYE, John William. *Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859, pg.: 34.

nuances of Christianity. However, the early missionaries between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries were under no obligation to not record observations of what they saw, as they understood them.

One of the first observations they made is regarding the difference they saw in the eastern way of thought from the western one.

The energy of Europe, of the city whose Ceasars had conquered the world, had made an empire of Christianity, an empire whose subjects were zealous for their own enslavement, and in whom obedience to conscience, or to God alone, would have been treason against the world church and punishable with death. Nothing like this had bound the churches of Asia. *Perhaps the force of character necessary to produce it was not to be expected from the Asiatic mind.* No doubt something of tyranny, and much of servile obedience might be found among the patriarchs and the people of the Asiatic churches; but, for the most part, there was liberty unknown to the churches of the West.<sup>33</sup> (Italics added)

Kaye says that there is the presence of a liberty in the eastern way of thinking which was absent in the ancient West. He implies that this affected the way Christianity was shaped in the East. He did not, however, elucidate further on what was different but just stopped at noting the difference.

The eastern way of thinking had for some centuries garnered suspicion and prejudice. Scholars have also pointed out that the differences between the way the eastern and western churches developed, lies in the different modes of thinking in the two. Blaming Zoroastrianism and Hinduism as the reason behind the strangeness of this peculiar eastern way of thought, Church historian J. F. Bethune-Baker says:

The most fundamental feature of Oriental thought is probably the schism and unrest of the human mind, in view of the limitations of human nature, with uncontrolled longings after the infinite and absorption into God but Hellenism

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<sup>33</sup> TINLING, James F.B. *Early Roman Catholic Missions to India with Sketches of Jesuitism, Hindu Philosophy, and The Christianity of the Ancient Indo- Syrian Church of Malabar.* London: S. W. Partridge And Co., 1871, pg.: 14.

found in the world so much of beauty and of pleasure that its aspirations after the unseen were much less real. Both had in view, no doubt, the same end the unity of the divine and the human; but *Orientalism sought it by the annihilation of the human*, while the method pursued by Hellenism certainly tended to annihilate the divine. The distinction between the two was not maintained. *Characteristic of Oriental religions are frequent incarnations (or emanations) of God in the most perfect form available, to teach men knowledge of truth and conduct them to heaven; but all are transitory, there is no permanency about them and no true assumption of humanity: the human is to be absorbed in the divine.* (Italics mine)<sup>34</sup>

Bethune-Baker too, like most scholars of his time, had an insight regarding the difference in the western and eastern way of thinking. He went on to imply that this is the reason why Christianity in the East shows a difference in the way it evolved, from Christianity in the West. However, like scholars of his time, he stopped at pointing out the difference and not delving into studying this difference.

The kind of colonial works that imbibe an anthropological approach describe every little aspect of the Christian life, beginning from their clothing, daily habits, profession, marriage and funeral rites. Yet again, they give us facts, that do not produce knowledge about the group. However, it would be foolish to dismiss these anthropological works, on the basis that they do not add to the knowledge that we need to have about the community. Analysing the details that colonisers chose to mention, and their reasons for doing so, says more about their experience and the underlying ideas behind their impressions. It brings to light, the framework on which they operate and understand the world, which is where we will begin our work.

Most of the effort that has gone into producing scholarly work about the religion and its adherents are results of these anthropological endeavours. There are scholarly works that are still getting published, which make use of these facts and impressions in various permutation and

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<sup>34</sup> BETHUNE-BAKER, B.D., J. F. *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine to the Time of the Council of Chalcedon*. London: Methuen & Co., 1903, pg. 72.



combinations.<sup>35</sup> The result is that we do not have more nuanced impressions to take this research further. The question however is, do we need more of them? We already have at hand, the insights brought to us by generations of previous scholars which is very useful to us. How do we take it further? What we can do, is look at them afresh and try to understand how this religion got naturalised in Asia. The way I try to do here, is by assessing how Indian Christians understand theological concepts and distort them.

The first step towards assessing the theological comprehension of Indian Christians, is to understand how distortions take place. What we need in order to study Indian Christianity, is to focus on the importance of the framework at play when concepts get distorted, and the consequences of overlooking this major component, when an encounter between different cultures occur. There are very few material available on the matter, because the study of distortions of western concepts that Indians make, is rare.<sup>36</sup> Here, I will attempt to contribute to it with examples taken from the annals of missionary records, that dealt with difficulties in the translation of Christian texts into Indian languages, and the problems that missionaries posed while debating and trying to convince Indians of the truth of the religion. This we will do in the third chapter.

## **The Melting Pot Conundrum**

Another major issue that the literature of this field increasingly seems to tackle is syncretism. Indian Christianity is often called syncretic. The works on religions and the religious communities of India of the last few decades have made use of this term liberally. When it comes to Christianity, the scholarship of especially the last two decades, celebrates Indian Christian practices as the Indian-

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<sup>35</sup> PERUMTHOTTAM, Joseph. *A Period of Decline of the Mar Thoma Christians, 1712-1752*. Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1994; PUTHUR, Bosco. *St. Thomas Christians and Nabuthiris, Jews and Sangam Literature*. Thrikkakara: Little Flower Offset Press, 2003; PULIKKENNEL, Joseph. *Identity of Nazrani Church of Kerala*. Kottayam: Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1997; BROWN, Judith M a R E FRYKENBERG. *Christians, Cultural Interactions and India's Religious Traditions*. B.m.: Richmond: Curzon, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> One such study was done by FÁREK, Martin. Did Rammohan Ray Understand Western Religion? *Nomos*. 2012, 77, 64–86. He shows how Rammohan Roy distorted western concepts, particularly theological ones.

ness of local Christianity. Reading colonial texts will bring to our attention that the same practices were described by the colonisers and early missionaries as “heathenish” or “satanic”. What is puzzling is that, one is left wondering what made these negative remarks about the practices of native Christians, into facts about them with neutral attributes? What caused the shift? There can be various reasons for this. To be politically correct could possibly be one of the driving forces behind it. It would be considered immoral to denigrate the practices of Indian Christians at least in this day and era. However, this kind of attitude masks reality. Moreover, it disables us from doing any critical assessment of syncretism when it is applied to the field of religious studies.

What is syncretism? Let us take music for example. World music is a genre that is gaining much popularity in current times. It mixes traditional, neo-traditional and modern elements of both the East and the West. Now this is an example of syncretism because it merges elements of different kinds of music to make a product that is new. The same applies to other art forms such as dance, weaving, painting, etc., In all these cases, it is the coming together of two entities of the same kind to produce a hybrid entity. But does it apply in the case of Indian Christianity?

It is generally noted that Indian Christianity is an amalgamation of Christian beliefs and Indian practices. The advocates of syncretism assume that the Christian doctrine and beliefs stay in place when they are exported to other cultures. Certainly, there is no way to measure the beliefs of the local Christians, and gauge them against the belief that is expected of the practitioners of this faith. Our only guiding light for this, is the responses of native Christians on the doctrines of the Church, which we depend on extensively for this thesis.

Missionaries criticised native Christians for not being able to grasp doctrines. Contemporary scholars also observe a peculiarity in the way native Christians relate to doctrines. But they merely see it as a different relationship to doctrine without investigating why it is so. Such kind of criticisms arises because we assess Indian Christianity by the yardstick of religion. Without the assumption of a syncretic Christianity, we will be able to see that the practices of the community that have been continued for generations, speak more of their cultural inclinations than how they are as practitioners of the faith. I believe that, to understand what syncretism is, is such an important task, that I have given place for it here in the form of a chapter. In the next chapter, the theme of

syncretism will be thoroughly investigated. This section will try to show the problematic nature of the liberal use of the concept that is syncretism. It might make us understand the dangers and futility of using concepts to misrepresent a community in a country.

## **At the Beginning of the Road**

When Christianity took roots in India, something about her culture transformed this religion, in a way that so far, has been unseen anywhere else. Or perhaps it would be better to say that if such a transformation has taken place anywhere else, it has not been documented. Christianity in India, since its arrival in the earlier phase of the religion's existence, got naturalised to the extent that it exhibits properties atypical of Christianity in the West. If the properties of Indian Christianity are indeed atypical of Christianity, why do we continue to keep classifying it as another version or a branch of Christianity? When the number of atypical features is greater than the number of the properties that are typical to a phenomenon, it is a cause for concern and could indicate that perhaps these atypical features might be pointing at some different direction altogether. We are now about to make sense of these atypical features; check for any patterns that might be uniform to them, and locate what could be causing them.

So far, I have pointed at the problems I wish to tackle in this thesis. Before we begin, let me put forth in a more concrete manner what they are. This thesis takes a look at the axioms that have been used in order to study and understand groups of Indians, who call themselves practitioners of the Christianity. I posit that Indian Christians, distort theological concepts and interpret them in ways that are intelligible to them but erroneous when compared to what theology dictates. To demonstrate this, I have gone into what Christianity proclaims, how it is taught to Indians by the Indian churches, and find out how much of how people understand and practice Christianity can be compared to what Christianity stands for. This will help us determine how to look at Indian Christianity- as another variant of Christianity, or whether it takes the shape of another tradition among the myriad of traditions that are native to Indian culture. Using the framework of the Comparative Science of Cultures, this thesis attempts to show why it is a compelling cause to revisit

Indian Christianity. It will not only enable us to see that it is an entity that scholarship has not yet begun to understand, but also point at the importance of preserving the typical nature of this community, which has allowed for peaceful co-existence with other traditions and communities of India, for many centuries

## **Chapter 2**

### **SYNCRETISM**

#### **The birth and evolution of a concept**

Religious syncretism is generally believed to be a mixing of different religious beliefs and practices. The concept of religious syncretism is disputed. While it is said to be an intermingling of different religious traditions — a common point from where scholars in the field begin, their explication and use of the concept begins to differ from this point onwards. The term syncretism originates from *synkretismos*, a political term which was coined by Plutarch in his treatise on *Fraternal Love*. There he talks about Cretans, the inhabitants of Crete, who generally lived in discord amongst themselves, but united in the face of enemies. He called this *synkretimos*, which indicates an opportunist unity against opposition.<sup>37</sup> This is how the term was originally used.

However, the way it is understood now is not the same. The translation of *synkretismos* in Latin is *confusio*, which indicates confusion caused by mixing of elements from varied sources.<sup>38</sup> By the 17th century, the term came to be mostly used in the theological context and was seen in a negative light, because syncretism was established among the consequences of non-Christian and potentially heretic elements mixing with Christian doctrines and sanctioned practices. One of the prime reasons for this negativity also has to do with a series of theological debates that were sparked within the Lutheran Church during the Reformation period. This was due to the efforts of a theologian, Georg Calixtus, who developed a friendlier and more open attitude, towards the other denominations of Christendom, and hoped to unite them by removing all the “unimportant

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<sup>37</sup> KRAEMER, Hendrik. Syncretism. In: *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. B.m.: Harper and Brothers, 1938, s. 200–211.

<sup>38</sup> MARTIN, Luther H. Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye. In: *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. B.m.: Brill, 1996, s. 215–24.

differences” in doctrines. He was strongly opposed by orthodox Lutheran theologians, charged of syncretism, and this went down in the annals of Church history under the name of the Syncretistic Controversy. We can see that as far as Christianity was concerned, the concept of syncretism had negative connotations.<sup>39</sup>

The latter half of the 17th century also saw the expansion of missionary works across the world with missionaries finding their way to Asia, Africa and the Americas. As Christian churches were established in these places, it became more and more obvious to the missionaries that, it would not be easy to get rid of the practices that people of the indigenous groups practiced, while being adherents of the new religion that they acquired. Some practices were, however, allowed because it helped further their cause of conversion among the natives. For example, among the Tswana tribes in Africa, provisions were made for the indigenous people to perform their rain ceremonies, rituals of birth and death through the Church. They were also allowed to do divination through the Bible as opposed to the traditional practice with dice.<sup>40</sup>

Even though it came to be understood that allowances had to be made, it was not something that bode well with the European missionaries, as we can see from their travelogues. For example, the Christians of the Syrian rite and heritage, who have been in India arguably since the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., had either adopted many Indians customs, or simply not prevented new converts from carrying on with their Indian practices, after adopting the new religion. The group had this written about them on the state of their ‘Christian-ness’ after their first brush with European Christianity in the 15th century:

There are at this time 150,000 *Christians on the coast of Malabar*; members of a church, which has subsisted from the earliest ages of our Religion. Many of them prove their Hindu original, by their adherence to habits, which prevail among the Bramins. But, if local circumstances have thus, in some degree changed the

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<sup>39</sup> The Catholic Church is more lenient towards adopting practices foreign to it, as long as these practices can be modified to be embodiments of Christian beliefs.

<sup>40</sup> SIMPSON, Diane. Syncretism in Two African Cultures. *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*. 1995, 2(1), pg. 63.

outward face of our religion, none of its vital parts are sacrificed.<sup>41</sup>

Even though there were sympathetic missionaries, who believed that Christianity in India had maintained its vital elements, they believed it was still in wanting because of the rituals that ensued in practising this religion, which were heathen. In India, as with other continents, several successful and unsuccessful efforts were made for Christianity to be rid of indigenous practices. For our purposes, from the sources available, and as is gleaned from the scholarly works produced on the basis of these travelogues and similar literature, it seems certain that the amalgamation of Christian belief with indigenous practices is what is implied when one talks of syncretism. It is therefore, not surprising that syncretism, which was viewed negatively because it tempered with the sanctity and integrity of doctrine and its ensuing practices, came to be an oft-used concept especially in the case of the kind of Christianity practised in non-western countries.

Syncretism became a term of abuse often applied to castigate colonial local churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to "illegitimately" indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity they had originally been offered.<sup>42</sup>

Charles Stewart, who has immensely contributed to the study of syncretism, says that it was not long before, that syncretism was delivered at the very doorstep of academic anthropology. This happened through the theological debates of the 17th century, followed by missionary ideas, the policies they applied and through the reports they sent back to the West.

British social anthropologists of this period were quite aware of the differences between themselves and missionaries. ... Anthropologists could describe the socio-cultural form of religious beliefs, but they were not in a position to judge the validity of these beliefs. Apparently, anthropologists implicitly accepted that syncretism was a theological concern. The term was thus surrendered to theologians and missionaries, who preserved its negative connotations. And these

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<sup>41</sup>CUNNINGHAM, A.M., J.W. *Christianity in India: An Essay on the Duty, Means, and Consequences, of Introducing The Christian Religion among the Native Inhabitants of the British Dominions in the East.* London: J. Hatchard, bookseller to Her Majesty, 1808.

<sup>42</sup> STEWART, Charles. Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture. *Diacritics The Johns Hopkins University Press.* 1999, **29**(3), 40–62.

could never be kept entirely out of anthropological discourse.<sup>43</sup>

Anthropologists believed that they were not entrusted with the job of judging the validity of beliefs and resigned to leaving the matter of syncretism to theologians and, it is in this very domain where the notion of syncretism remained for a considerable period of time. However, in their infrequent use of the term, anthropologists did not deprive the concept of the negative light it was seen in. It is then no surprise that, when scholars from these indigenous communities became aware of the meaning of syncretism, they strongly opposed the use of it to describe indigenous churches.

Africanist anthropologists have subsequently grown increasingly uncomfortable with the s-word. Some have argued against its applicability on the grounds that independent African Churches have faithfully adapted Christianity to local cultural contexts [Kiemrnan] and should not, therefore, be considered syncretic. Still other anthropologists have largely bypassed the word or developed alternatives such as "selective conservatism" [Wilson 548] or "bricolage" [Comaroff, *Body of Power* 12].<sup>44</sup>

The opposition to the concept was firstly because it made indigenous churches look inferior in comparison to their western counterparts and secondly, because the more it came to be used in anthropological scholarship, the more confusion there was, in terms of how the concept should be understood.

## **Syncretism as a concept**

It was through J G Droysen's *Geschichte des Hellenische mus* (originally published in 1836) that the notion of syncretism first came into academic currency.<sup>45</sup> Syncretism so far had been treated as a derogatory term to denote religions that had mixed in undisciplined ways. The focus on it as a theoretical concept was not developed yet. If syncretism is a phenomenon, various other terms have

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43 STEWART, Charles. Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture. *Diacritics The Johns Hopkins University Press*. 1999, 29(3), pg. 46.

44 *ibid.*

45 MARTIN, Luther H. Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye. In: *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. B.m.: Brill, 1996, pg. 215.



been used to describe it such as hybridisation, cultural entanglement and creolisation.

In the 1990s, there was an attempt to bring back the concept of syncretism, this time in a favourable light, due to the emergence of a postcolonial consciousness in the light. In its perspective, it became problematic to cast descriptions of any religious tradition in a negative light.<sup>46</sup> Yes, this is one of the factors, but not the only one for the concept to have found some positive meaning. Even as early as the 1940s, there were different positions anthropologists held on the matter.

In the New World a much more positive attitude toward the concept of syncretism has long prevailed among social scientists. The simultaneous existence of two such different positions may be attributable to the relative lack of interchange between American and British anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s. This mutual isolation was reinforced by a regional division of labor whereby British or British-trained social anthropologists largely monopolized research in Africa while American-trained anthropologists carried out the majority of studies in the New World. The two opposed discourses of syncretism thus, amounted to different "localizing strategies" [Fardon]-regionally generated theoretical contributions, which in this case addressed the very same concept and term [Shaw and Stewart 13].<sup>47</sup>

Stewart says that while most territories that underwent British colonisation and thereby, were scholarship-wise trained by the British colonisers, did not get independence till the middle of the 20th century, Americans, who on the other hand gained their freedom almost two centuries earlier. Thus, the United States employed strategies for nation building, which included espousal of versions of a "melting pot" ideology, where "melting pot" became analogous to syncretism in the ethno-political domain. This laid the groundwork for syncretism to be seen as a positive phenomenon. However, this kind of syncretism was distant from what so far, had come to be understood as syncretism. The shift was not merely in terms of whether it was assessed positively or negatively, which depended on the scholarly tradition, where this concept was encountered. It

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<sup>46</sup> KRAFT, Siv Ellen. „To Mix or Not to Mix": Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy. *Numen (Brill)*. 2002, **49**(2), 142–177.

<sup>47</sup> STEWART, Charles. Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture. *Diacritics The Johns Hopkins University Press*. 1999, **29**(3), pg. 47.

was also in terms of the many additional elements of society that came to be considered as factors contributing to the idea or concept of syncretism, like language and identity politics among others.

## **A Scrutiny**

The usage of the term syncretism, as we know it now, is only a few centuries old and had its origin in Protestant Christian theology. Therefore, this is where we will begin. Although the concept is comparatively new, its implications and consequences have been tackled with, since the beginning of Christianity. Christianity, in its early years, was nurtured and nourished in pagan Rome, which was rich in ritualistic practices, that formed a pivotal aspect of people's everyday life. This new religion demanded that there be practices corresponding to its doctrine that its followers could practise. While new practices were set in place, the question of which traditional practices could be continued also arose. This happened because (1) Christians could perform only those practices that were deemed to be in compliance with the doctrines of the Church (2) it was not easy to give up practices that had been followed for generations, and (3) there was no clarity as to what differentiated pagan religious practices from civic practices performed by pagans, hence, lack of clarity regarding which practices to continue and which to abandon.

In the early centuries of *Anno Domini*, when this new religion was taking form, the Apostles to the early Church Fathers explicitly wrote about what were the right practices and beliefs to have.<sup>48</sup>

“About what kind of practices are we talking? Like honouring the martyr on his feast day by getting drunk; attending circus games and enjoying spectacles; banquets, giving presents, etc., during the New Year (i.e. the first of January); honouring an important person (like the emperor) by holding races and games; ‘secular’ festivals and banquets; attending shows in the theatres and hippodromes...the list is practically endless. If the pagan world is that because of the pagan practices, the practices are pagan because they are idolatrous and

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<sup>48</sup> See 2 John 9-11, 1 Timothy 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:8-13 for warnings against temptations and tendencies to harbour wrong beliefs, and encouragement to follow the practices that were deemed right, for a follower of Christ.

idolatry is the worship of the Devil, what must a Christian do in order to remain one?"

Tertullian found the shows in theatres an expression of idolatry; Augustine found them more neutral. Christians thought that celebrating the New Year was not wrong; Churchmen like Ambrose and Jerome were unanimous in attacking it "virulently."<sup>49</sup>

Balagangadhara, referring to Robert Markus, a historian, explicates that in the matter of practices, there had been a trichotomy that had been in place before, of Christian (sacred), civic (neutral) and pagan (profane). This was soon replaced by the dichotomy of sacred (Christian) or profane (pagan). Clothing, accessorising, the question of what to eat, which public events to attend, whose house one could enter, among other civic activities became questions that required theological consideration.

As Christian discourse shrank to the scriptural, so the world of which it spoke shrank to the sacred. The secular became marginalised, merged in or absorbed by the sacred, both in discourse and in the social structure and institutions. Corresponding to the 'epistemological excision' of the secular from the Christian discourse a 'de-secularisation' of its society took place on a variety of levels.<sup>50</sup>

Scholars have dedicatedly shown how Christianity was a product of syncretism and how the socio-cultural milieu of its birth had deep impacts on how the religion was to take shape. It is trivially true, that any religion during its conception takes in from whatever its cultural atmosphere provides. And, Christianity is a good example of that. However, it cannot be ignored that there were painstaking efforts made, at determining what were right beliefs and classifying what constituted to be right practices. It proves the fact that it is of utmost importance in this religion to have the right beliefs and practices. In addition, it explains why syncretism is seen as a threat to Christianity. These efforts to purify the religion were as important at its conception as they were when

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<sup>49</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*": *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 442.

<sup>50</sup> Markus, Robert. *The End of Ancient Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990:226 quoted in S BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*": *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 443.

Christianity expanded during the Age of Exploration. Even today, when Christianity has been encountering what it perceives as attacks to true doctrines, from liberal Christian denominations that have a more empathetic attitude towards the many forms of Christian worship that have sprung in non-Western cultures, these efforts are being made

While Christianity sets its boundaries in terms of doctrines and (to a large extent) practices tight, it also needs to expand. It acquires converts that helps it grow. However, its proselytising drive makes it encounter peoples of various cultures, with their own cultural specific constrains. In order to win converts from these peoples, it has to negotiate terms through which it can earn converts, and this happens at the cost of accepting the variations that new converts bring to the fold. As a consequence, it becomes increasingly less Christian in the process of spreading itself. This is what happened to Christianity when it got converts from the Asian, African and South American cultures.<sup>51</sup> At this juncture, it can be pointed out that we are heading towards the essentialisation of Christianity — something that many scholars would object to. However, what will remain of Christianity if its essential beliefs will not be considered? Moreover, such an attitude disregards and does not give us the opportunity to explore what happened when Christianity encountered other cultures, and the kind of debates it raised. If the rejection of the importance of essential beliefs of Christianity was a valid approach, how would it account for the debates that are still ongoing about indigenous Christian practices that most non-western Christian communities practice? These practices or at least elements of these practices, have to somehow be at odds with Christianity, no matter how subtly they are expressed by scholars, if they are talked about and studied by them. Would it be too far-fetched to say that syncretic practices would not have been an issue demanding studies done on them, if they were not found to be odd by those who criticize or discuss them?

Talking about the concept of syncretism as such, it is not uncommon to see some scholars talk about the positive connotation of the almost forgotten term before the period of Reformation, when

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<sup>51</sup> For instances, see BEATTY, Andrew. The Pope in Mexico: Syncretism in Public Ritual. *American Anthropologist (Wiley)*. 2006, **108**(2) for South American Indian Christianity; JONES, Arun. The Great Revival of 1907 as a Phenomenon in Korean Religions. *Journal of World Christianity- Penn State University Press*. 2009, **2**(1), 82–110 for Korean Christianity; BRAUKÄMPER, Ulrich. Aspects of Religious Syncretism in Southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Religion in Africa- Brill*. 1992, **22**(3), 194–207 for Ethiopian Christianity.

it was revived.<sup>52</sup> A question arises as to how these scholars assumed that syncretism had a positive connotation till then. It was merely a term used to describe a strategy, that certain groups of people adopted in the face of crisis. A strategy cannot in itself be positive or negative, whereas the results it yields can be so. For example, rainwater harvesting is something that is done in areas that suffer water-shortages. Sure, it has many positive impacts, but the very system of rainwater harvesting does not call for any ‘positivity’. It is simply a solution that has been put in place to combat a crisis and in the absence of this crisis, its importance vanishes. Similarly, in ancient times, syncretism was a problem-solving strategy that came of use in the face of trouble. In times of no trouble, it did not exist. The strategy itself had no positive or negative quality. This ascribing of quality seems misplaced.

Reclaiming of the term five centuries ago, made it go through a major change. The first time negative quality was ascribed to this notion was during this period. The issue of purity of beliefs and practices was raised by Protestants who deemed the Scriptures with the highest significance. The Syncretic Controversies added to this negative connotation and it was here that syncretism took shape as a concept that we are now familiar with, which has to do with the notion of mixing.

Despite being able to find a comprehensive history on the meaning of the concept and its evolution, and regardless of the attempts made at understanding this phenomenon in religious studies by anthropologists and scholars, we do not yet have a consensus on what it means or clarity on a way of using it. What do we do with a concept that is wholeheartedly accepted by one stream of social scientists on one hand, and scarcely used by a sceptical stream of social scientists on the other? There have been very few attempts to tackle this problem. A few scholars in the field have tried to provide definitions of the same.<sup>53</sup> Then there are scholars, who find that the idea of syncretism does not point to directions one ought to take to understand it. As anthropologist F Niyi Akinnaso puts

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<sup>52</sup> SHAW, Rosalind a Charles STEWART, ed. *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. B.m.: Psychology Press, 1994 and RUDOLPH, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987; STEWART, Charles. Relocating Syncretism in Social Science Discourse. In: *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pg. 264.

<sup>53</sup> DROOGERS, André. Syncretism: the Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem. In: *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. B.m.: Rodopi, 1989, Currents of Encounter, s. 7–25; PYE, Michael. Syncretism versus Synthesis. *British Association for the Study of Religions*. 1993, **Occasional Papers** and PYE, Michael. Syncretism and Ambiguity. *Numen (Brill)*. 1971, **18**, 83–89.

it: “syncretism recognised change without being able to explain it.”<sup>54</sup>

Akinnaso is not alone. Eminent anthropologists such as Mikael Rothstein<sup>55</sup>, Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw<sup>56</sup> have advocated for the need for a theory of syncretism, which is absent at the moment, because it is quite evident that we have no understanding of the criteria we must use to distinguish between what is mixed, and what is not. Yet, it is strange that the concept is still in academic currency. Owing to the uneasiness caused by the shaky notion of the concept, many scholars have chosen not to use the term at all, which is why theoretical contributions made to the area are few and far between.<sup>57</sup>

Despite contributions made to the theoretical understanding of the concept being low, there is no dearth of studies conducted on syncretistic religious traditions across the world. This raises questions about the fruitfulness of these studies. Scholars who work on syncretism make it a point to mention the definition of syncretism that they are going to work with. However, definitions alone do not suffice.<sup>58</sup> In the absence of a theory to explain the phenomenon, (some scholars have even pointed out that) these studies constitute discussions about the preferences and tastes of those, who chose to delve into the matter.

Syncretism, many scholars feel brings into question the “purity” of a particular religious tradition which gives rise to more issues.

Syncretism poses historical questions about roots, cultural contacts and received influences. These are questions, which ordinary people are entirely capable of formulating in their own terms to understand religions as well as other cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in KRAFT, Siv Ellen. „To Mix or Not to Mix”: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy. *Numen (Brill)*. 2002, **49**(2), 146.

<sup>55</sup> ROTHSTEIN, Mikael. *Belief Transformations: Some Aspects of the Relation Between Science and Religion in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)*. University of Michigan: Aarhus University Press, 1996, 1996.

<sup>56</sup> SHAW, Rosalind a Charles STEWART, ed. *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. B.m.: Psychology Press, 1994 and RUDOLPH, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.

<sup>57</sup> KRAFT, Siv Ellen. „To Mix or Not to Mix”: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy. *Numen (Brill)*. 2002, **49**(2), 142–177.

<sup>58</sup> BERNER, Ulrich. The Concept of „Syncretism”: An Instrument of Historical Insight/ Discovery? In: *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pgs. 296.

phenomena; anthropological analyses are merely professionalized extensions of this popular mode of thought.<sup>59</sup>

Two things are to be noted here. First, this notion of purity has been the most problematic of all in the study of syncretism. The question of what is pure and what is not, is not something we can solve. If syncretic Christianity is the mixing of pure Christianity with non-Christian practices, what we need to do first, is establish what pure Christianity is. However, there is no such thing as pure Christianity. There are enough scholarly works available that show the Hellenistic roots of early Christianity and attempts at de-Hellenising done by the apostles themselves (Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and in his address to the Corinthians) and the successful assimilation of Greek philosophy into Christian thought (by Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, etc.). It is basic common sense that Christianity was influenced by the philosophical milieu it blossomed in and over the years, it was developed into a formidable body of theology.

Not just that, there is no single Christianity anymore, owing to the schisms caused by theological disagreements between certain involved parties. Each denomination holds its theology sacred and true, and we cannot pick one to be the epitome of pure Christianity. Furthermore, the question of what is pure Christianity belongs to the domain of theology and because there is no way to confirm that, taking this path is not just unfruitful, but also damaging to the cause of understanding what syncretism is. And, as Stewart states, people are capable of “formulating in their own terms” the roots, influences, and purity of entities, that constitute to the contributions made in this area of studies. This points at the lack of a theory wherein, answers provided are susceptible to cultural frameworks, that form their own peculiar background ideas, and other subjectivity-causing factors.

So far, we have only pointed at the flaws in the usage of the concept of syncretism and also, expressed curiosity about the viability of the concept when applied in religious studies or anthropology. It is, however, undeniable that syncretism is very much a concept in use, and if it is to be used in future, we need to understand how to do it in unproblematic ways. Therefore, by examining a few instances of syncretism, we can try to understand better, what syncretism refers

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<sup>59</sup> SHAW, Rosalind a Charles STEWART, ed. *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. B.m.: Psychology Press, 1994, pg. 128.

to. But, before that, a detour is necessary.

### **Why Do We Need a Theory?**

In "*The Heathen in his Blindness...: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*, Balagangadhara dealt with the phenomenon called 'religion' and disproved its universality in a way that was until then unheard of in the social sciences. Today, the idea that there are religions across all cultures has been taken for granted. Balagangadhara questions this notion by delving into what made such an idea come into existence. He systematically shows how, for such an idea to have originated, it could have come from a culture that had religion at its root. When such a culture looks at another culture, it studies the other, through cultural constraints of its own. When the West looked at other cultures, it assumed that at the heart of them lay their religion. What happened here is that they created an entity in these other cultures that were alien to them, in order to make sense of them. The result was that, besides being convinced that all cultures have religions, they also assumed that in order to understand them well, they had to study their religions. A crucial aspect to his thesis is how, a lack of a theory of religion was what caused this to happen, and he went on to building one that would explain that religion is peculiar only to the western culture.

In order to build this theory Balagangadhara began with poring over the wide array of definitions available for religion and showed how definitions are an unviable way of acquiring knowledge about something, and contrasted it to the presence of a theory which 1) explains the phenomenon and 2) saves the phenomena. As he explains:

Everyday, we see the movement of the sun around the earth in terms of sunrise and sunset; our theories tell us, however, that the solar system we inhabit is heliocentric. Every time we immerse a stick in water, we see it bent; we know that it is not. Each one of us can think of many such examples, but the point is that *none of the theories tells us that our experiences are illusory*. Instead, they explain why we see the way we do. That is to say, *they save the phenomena*. It is also equally undeniable that theories also correct our experience, but we need to



note that *it is theories that do so*.<sup>60</sup>

He explains that theories help in settling disputes because it is in the nature of theories to be equipped with strategies to do so. One such strategy, he says, is that of providing counter-examples. In the case that an example from a domain of objects identified by some theory “behaves differently, one can refute the theory in question”, unlike giving counter examples to target specific definitions, which will only ensue “interminable discussions”. In other words, a theory explains phenomenon X, which enables us to discuss whether a particular specimen is an example of the phenomenon or not. Think of how useful this would be to us, if it can help us identify whether the rituals of a particular community is syncretic or not. Since what we have are only attempts at building a theory of syncretism at the moment, our next best option is to pick out an instance of religious syncretism and study it. To continue in the lesson that Balagangadhara gives:

If you want to study the nature of cats, and you have identified at least one organism that you call ‘cat’, then you will have to study that organism, which you have identified as a cat and not the concept ‘cat’.<sup>61</sup>

Let us for now make our goal, picking out an instance from the numerous ones that scholars have provided over the last few decades. But before that, one more detour is required that would help us with studying the instance and determining whether it is indeed an instance or not.

## Setting the context

In the beginning of his essay on the theory of religion, Balagangadhara gives us a picture of the Roman society and the place *religio* had in it. Ancient Rome had a cornucopia of cults of different gods and goddesses, practices and philosophical schools. He says that in a cultural matrix such as that of Rome, there were two things that were accepted. First, that human nature entertains multiple perspectives and second, that if such was the case, differences and diversities were a given in

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<sup>60</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*”: *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 272

<sup>61</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*”: *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 280-81.

human communities. It is then a cause for curiosity as to why Rome refused to accept Christianity in its initial centuries of existence. Balagangadhara explicates that Rome had to encounter some problems that Christianity posed, which were until then unheard of, if not absurd. Among the Romans, the relationship between what they believed and what they practiced was of a peculiar nature. Although many of the intellectuals, such as Cicero and Plutarch, among others, held high positions in presiding over religious practices, they were doubtful about the existence of their gods. What is important to understand is that this attitude towards the gods was not uncommon among them. Despite their doubts about the existence of the gods, they did not fail to perform their religious duties by participating in or officiating rituals.

As Balagangadhara points out, there was no link between what these intellectuals believed and the religious practices that they took part in. European scholars of the Age of Enlightenment, such as Montesquieu and Hume, have supplicated the scholarship that followed, with (what they thought were) reasons as to why this must have been the case. In all these explanations, even those that acknowledge the genius of the Roman intellectuals, what is striking is that these Romans were typecast, sometimes explicitly, as immoral people, who were hypocritical because their actions had no relation with what they truly believed in. Balagangadhara says that in order to make this dynamic, that is typical of Roman culture, between beliefs and practices intelligible, we must understand them as facts of a certain culture and not a moral problem about the individuals of these times, as is the way resorted to, by many intellectuals from the Enlightenment period onwards.

In order to understand them, Balagangadhara reverts to the writings of these Roman intellectuals who describe what *religio* is. In the famous *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero wrote:

I am considerably influenced...by the plea...when you exhorted me to remember that I am both a Cotta and a pontiff. This is no doubt meant that I ought to uphold beliefs about the immortal gods, which have *come down to us from our ancestors*, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion. For my part, I shall always uphold them and have always done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned shall ever dislodge me from the belief...*which I have inherited from our forefathers*...Balbus...you are a philosopher, and I ought to receive from you

a proof of your religion, *whereas I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof.*<sup>62</sup>

Let us take stock of what this means. What was *religio* to the Romans? It was something that they had inherited from their ancestors. In that case, *religio* is what *traditio* is, precisely because it is something that is handed down. As the above example implies, and as Balagangadhara succinctly puts:

Continuing a tradition does not require any reason other than itself: what is being continued is tradition itself. That is to say, no theoretical justification was needed to practise and uphold ancestral customs.<sup>63</sup>

Rome was accommodating of different *religios* because they had respect for what had been passed down and hence were *traditios*. But what happened when Judaism and Christianity entered into this fold? Rome's biggest contention against these two religions would have been that they are not *religios*, which means they are not traditions. However, the Jews found a way to tackle this issue.

The Jews appear to have met this charge in two ways: first, by showing that the Jews were a people with history; second, by laying claims to great antiquity. The many apologetic texts written by the Hellenic and Alexandrian Jews, including the famous one by Philo of Alexandria, attempted to argue that Judaism and Israel were more ancient than the Ancients were. Greek legislators, claimed Philo, actually plagiarised the Mosaic Law, and Heraclitus stole his theory of opposites from Moses "like a thief" (Wolfson 1947). This need to establish the antiquity of Judaism, I would like to suggest, is aimed at showing that Judaism was a 'traditio'. When it comes to traditions, especially where a group claims exemption from practising the traditions of others, the most important 'property' is their antiquity. The Jews could argue that theirs was the most ancient of all traditions, therefore, a '*religio*' *a fortiori*, allowing them not to follow the

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<sup>62</sup> *De Natura Deorum*, III, ii: 290-291, quoted in BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*": *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 39, (his italics).

<sup>63</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*": *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 41.

traditions of others in matters of conflicting injunctions.<sup>64</sup>

As mentioned earlier, besides practising their own traditions, the Romans had to respect other traditions as well. This sometimes included participating in ceremonies of gods or goddesses that one did not personally pay homage to. The Jews would not do that and, however uneasily, found a way around that also.

It is important to recognise the novelty of the Jewish apologetics: with varying degrees of success, they tried to provide theoretical justifications why their traditional practice did not allow them to “seek the gods of the strangers.” It was not sufficient to show that the Jews followed an ancient custom given to them by Moses. They had to justify that their ancestral practice forbade them from worshipping the various deities that littered the Roman landscape. That is to say, they had to provide a ‘philosophical’ underpinning to their ancient custom. That is what the Jewish apologetic texts attempted: explain why, if the Jews had *traditio*, they would not venerate the ancestral customs of other peoples. Their explanation, of course, centred around their scripture – more precisely, around its truth.<sup>65</sup>

In a milieu where respect for most, if not all *traditios* was the norm, Judaism found a way of establishing itself as a *traditio* that required for its adherents to not follow traditions of the others. Because of their considerable success in convincing Romans about their antiquity, the Jews came to be a recognised group of people with a *traditio* in Rome.

For Christians, the task was more difficult. If they were to prove that they were a *religio*, the challenge to the Christians was to show that they had a *traditio* as well. The story that Christianity paints with its arrival in the Roman ethos, however, is very different. The problem they faced was entirely unique and the answer they provided was one that Rome was not prepared for. Jews considered their scriptures and stories to be the history of the Jewish people. The Christians appropriated this Jewish history as their own by asserting that it was the fulfilment of Judaism. By

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<sup>64</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 44.

<sup>65</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 45.

appropriating Jewish history, they could by default claim that theirs was a tradition that originated from antiquity. But, they went on to doing something more. On top of saying that their scriptures contained the history of the Jewish people and by extension theirs, they claimed that it was the history of the entire mankind. Because according to their beliefs, Jesus was the Son of Man and his sacrifice was for the benefit of humankind and not just a particular set of people. Thus, besides being the fulfilment of Judaism, they asserted that Christianity was the answer to the expectations of all peoples.

When accused by the Romans for not being a *traditio*, the Christians transformed the question of whether they were true to antiquity by formulating that because their doctrines were ancient, therefore, they were true. To put it simply, they asserted that they were a *religio* because their doctrines were true — the very idea was bizarre to the Romans. For the Romans, for something to be a *religio* it had to be a *traditio*. Yet, here was a group that claimed to be a *religio* without being a *traditio*. In other words, they broke the link between *religio* and *traditio*, the same link which was a feature of the Roman *religio*, or what is typically a part of paganism.

Christians were convinced that theirs is the true doctrine. The non-Christians were not adherents of it therefore, theirs was false *religio*. To the Romans, the idea that a *religio* could be false sounded absurd.<sup>66</sup> How could *religio* be false? *Religio* after all was *traditio* and traditions could not possibly be false or even true for that matter. Traditions were just traditions that had been passed down. This will be delved into again, later. Right now, what we must keep in mind is that because Christians believed that the Roman *religio* were false, their practices were false too. This led to a rejection of most pagan practices by converts and only those that could be justified by Christian doctrines were retained. This was an important and crucial period in the history of Christianity because it was in its infancy and doctrinal laws were in the process of getting established. The converts, who were accustomed to having various practices that had been handed down, were now faced with finding and inventing practices that they could follow, as long as they were sanctioned by the doctrines. In other words, their practices had to be expressions or embodiments of their beliefs. Thus,

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<sup>66</sup> To understand how ancient Romans understood the question “Is your religion true?”, see BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. a Sarah CLAERHOUT. De antieken en het vroege Christendom: een heidense visie uit India (Ancient Roman Culture and Early Christianity: A Pagan Perspective from India). In: *Christendom en filosofie : opstellen over wijsbegeerte, wereldbeeld en wetenschappen van het antieke christendom over Nietzsche tot fundamentalisme vandaag*. Gent: Academia Press, 2014, s. 51–82.

Christianity established a link between beliefs and practices — a link which we can see did not exist before. In Roman *religio*, practice took precedence, and belief could always be contested. However, with the coming of Christianity, the relationship between beliefs and practices was sealed.<sup>67</sup>

Why is this analysis important to us? We will get to that now. Christianity turned religion into an entity in the world, which was different from the *religio* that Romans had. Of the many aspects of a religion, two important ones are — belief and practices. For Christians, the latter became the embodiment of the former. Without the former, the latter has no significance.

During the Age of Exploration along with new geographical territories, the discovery of many people was made by European travellers. They witnessed practices of the native people that struck a resemblance to what they understood as religious practices. They saw people going to temples, bowing to idols and engaging in similar activities that fit into the broad scheme of what religion is and assumed that what they saw were forms of native religion. Under this scheme, even actions such as sporting *bindi*, or a turban, were seen as expressions of religion — false religion, yes, but valid expressions of local religion, nonetheless. Making such assumptions came naturally to these Europeans because they came from a culture that associated certain regular activities with religion. Why did they assume that there had to be religions in these places? This is because of the theological consensus that God had planted a sense of divinity in all human beings and in the presence of this divinity, it was impossible that a religion be absent among people. Religion, as they believed, was a cultural universal. Some explorers, especially those that went to Africa and the Americas did express doubts regarding the existence of religion in these parts of the world. But, through some strategy or the other, most of the intelligentsia of the time strove to save the consensus from the attacks of these descriptions and the anti-consensus scholarship that they produced.<sup>68</sup>

A lot was at stake were this consensus to crumble. If there were nations without religion then it

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<sup>67</sup> BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. ., *The Heathen in his Blindness...": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, 1994, pg. 53.

<sup>68</sup> DE ROOVER, Jakob. Incurably Religious? Consensus Gentium and the Cultural Universality of Religion. *Numen (Brill)*. 2014, **61**(1), 5–32. ISSN 0029-5973.

would be imperative to revise the entire discipline of anthropology, which would require a re-assessment of the matrix of most things we have learnt about human nature, beliefs, encounters and behaviour. De Roover shows how despite attempts that were made to question the universality of religion, because of the overwhelming opposition towards them, these questions were finally dismissed on accounts of the questioners' lack of sophisticated field work, errors in them and sometimes even the credibility of the people, who had raised these doubts. The result was that by the end, this question was completely repudiated and the consensus on religion being a cultural universal was saved. He shows how 'incurably religious' the West has been in its description of the world and of itself, despite the claim that anthropology and the academics at large, was divorced from theological leanings. The conclusions that were arrived at, found their basis in the framework of Christian theology.

India and other Asian cultures are similar to ancient Rome. When confronted by missionaries, who preached to them the truth of the message of Christ, Indians did not understand why they were saying that Christianity was better than their religion. Here is how a learned brahmin responded to an Englishman's claim that Christianity is the better doctrine of all:

Leave to us *the religion of our fathers*, and our children shall revere you as ourselves! When the Athenians consulted Pythias, which religion they should hold in the greatest estimation, did not the Oracle reply, That which was most venerated by their ancestors?...Thus narrates the immortal Cicero. But it is not the Roman orator alone, who pleads for respecting the religion of the vanquished. Athens and Rome have each maintained the wisdom of leaving undisturbed the religions of the earth. *Have not Pythagoras and Plato taught, like Brama, that the most sacred of duties is, to be faithful to the religion in which we have been reared?* How shall we unlearn this holy maxim?<sup>69</sup> (italics mine)

In the matter of doctrines and its role within Asian tradition, many scholars have intuitively felt the same:

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<sup>69</sup> PROPRIETOR OF EAST INDIA STOCK. An Enquiry Into the Causes which Oppose the Conversion of the Hindus of India to Christianity, and render the attempt to accomplish it extremely hazardous to the interests of the East India Company, and the nation, and to the personal safety of Englishmen in India, particularly the Civil Servants of the Company. *Cadell*. 1808, **3**, pg. 33.

We are repeatedly told, especially of the Chinese and the Japanese (but one can safely extend it to all other peoples which adhere to one of the naturalist religions), that they have a deep-rooted indifference towards dogma and doctrinal differences. In the Roman Empire, it was the same.<sup>70</sup>

Yet, the importance of doctrines in different religions is retained in the social sciences and is now acknowledged, and repeated by even those who are not from the West, because with the current state of academics, it is in the very nature of the discipline, to enable its student to talk about and experience the world, in this particular way.

### **In the Name of Mixing**

Robert Baird, a notable name among scholars on syncretism, defines the term as “a concept that not only merely points to the encounter of one religious complex with another, but it is itself a part of that encounter.”<sup>71</sup> Michael Pye defines it as “the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern.”<sup>72</sup> Earlier, we discussed that having definitions of a particular concept is not going to help us understand a concept. However, it would be worthwhile to take a look at how scholars have formulated the concept. The above two are among the few definitions available on the same. In all these definitions, there is one thing common. They all agree that syncretism involves a mixing of certain elements (compatible or incompatible) from different religious complexes/ traditions/patterns.

Mixing is a problematic term when we consider the entities that are mixed in this context. Should we automatically assume that the notion of “mixing” can only be in place, when there is an involvement of elements from “pure” streams that have come together? It in turn gives rise to questions such as what is pure and what is not. Or, we could have another problem, which is, the

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<sup>70</sup> KRAEMER, Hendrik. Syncretism. In: *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. B.m.: Harper and Brothers, 1938, s. 201.

<sup>71</sup> BAIRD, Robert. Syncretism and the History of Religions. *Essays in the History of Religions: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.* 1991, 59–71.

<sup>72</sup> PYE, Michael. Syncretism and Ambiguity. *Numen (Brill)*. 1971, **18**, 83–89.



elements that are about to mix with others, could already be a mix of some or the other things. For example, when looking at syncretism in Christianity, there are different denominations of the religion that we have to take into consideration. That does not take away from the fact that, at the core, Christianity is a religion that has its own doctrine that demands that its practices be embodiments of it. But, these are not interesting issues for our purpose because they do not help us raise questions that would shed light on the concept of syncretism.

Scholars ascertain that a syncretism is possible if some course of Christianity picks up practices that are native to the place, where it has tried to lay its foundation. If these practices can be justified to become embodiments of Christian faith then, here, Christianity manages to include and back them up as new practices. However, in the case that these practices cannot be justified to do so and are still practiced, it shows that despite the Christian faith, the adherents of this stream of Christianity continue to engage in practices that are divorced from Christian faith. In either of these cases, Christianity is encountering a different set of practices. If it gets justified and included in the Christian fold, they are continued to be practiced. If they do not get justified and included in the Christian fold, then also they continue to be practiced in many sections. Which of these can be considered to be syncretic practices? What exactly qualifies one to be a syncretic practice? Take this example, where the syncretism in Santal Christians is spoken about-

As a collective response to the dialectic of change and continuity, Santal Catholic syncretism reflects the convergence of several syncretic patterns. In some instances, indigenous assumptions (Santal, tribal, and/or Hindu) are expressed through Catholic symbols and rites, and vice versa, while in other cases, the indigenous, especially tribal, rites are preserved minus their tribal assumptions that are replaced by Catholic assumptions and beliefs. In still other cases, indigenous rites and symbols survive in the Catholic ritual system after some careful modifications. Finally, indigenous rites may simply coexist with Catholic rites.<sup>73</sup>

The author is correctly pointing out that there are several ways in which Santals express themselves

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<sup>73</sup> RAJ, Selva J. *The Ganges, The Jordan, and the Mountain: The Three Strands of Santal Popular Catholicism*. In: *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the lines*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pgs. 47-48.

as Catholics. But is it enough to call them all syncretic patterns? In some of these patterns some practices merely coexist with each other. So where is the mixing happening? Is mixing here simply a state of different practices coexisting within the same group of people?

We have already spoken of Asian culture, where practices are not rooted in doctrines. What we must also know is that traditions are fluid. There is no central doctrine that dictates which rituals can be practiced within a particular tradition and which cannot. There are rituals that are considered good and then there could be those that overtime can be seen to be as unnecessary or harmful in which case they are repudiated. Although, all traditions have their own set of practices, they can adapt from other traditions and make it part of their own. This generally happens without conflict because, keep in mind, they are just rituals that are not attached to beliefs. It is even normal for such exchange of practices to happen. Our scholars from the West acknowledge that as well. Speaking about this very tendency among the “naturalistic religions” of India, China and Japan, Kraemer says:

Syncretism and religious pragmatism are necessary and normal traits in the religions that live on the primitive apprehension of existence. In view of the fundamental nature and structure of these religions, it is nothing capricious or unprincipled; it is consistency itself. It would be abnormal if this were not so.<sup>74</sup>

Ritualistic practices can be adapted or rejected depending on the evolution of these traditions. So, on one hand, we have traditions where ritualistic practices are fluid and free-flowing. On the other hand, we have religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam where practices are embodiments of beliefs and where attempts to add new rituals or incorporate rituals from outside these religions are questioned. Let us look at two possible scenarios and see what happens in each of these cases.<sup>75</sup>

*Scenario 1: When a tradition meets a tradition.* What exactly happens when different traditions encounter each other is a big research question in itself and we are not at a point to talk about it with clarity. However, what we have are observations and intuitions of both scholars and

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<sup>74</sup> KRAEMER, Hendrik. Syncretism. In: *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. B.m.: Harper and Brothers, 1938, pg. 202.

<sup>75</sup> There is also a third possible scenario where a religion meets religion. For an explication for what happens when conflicting beliefs meet, see, VROOM, Hendrik M. Syncretism and Dialogue: A Philosophical Analysis. In: *Syncretism in Religion*. New York: Routledge, 1989, pgs. 106–109.

practitioners of these traditions who at the moment, do not see it as something that causes conflicts. Many a times is even deemed normal for different traditions to have identical or similar practices. As this question is not of immediate relevance to our discussion, we have to leave it at that.

*Scenario 2: When a religion meets a tradition* either of the two can happen:

1. The religion incorporates some rituals of the tradition by giving these rituals meanings that can be accommodated by its doctrines. In this way, this religion acquires new traditions and rituals that necessarily embody some or the other belief within that religion, yet its doctrines and beliefs still take the central position. Or,
2. The tradition incorporates the religion by taking over its practices and making them additions to its own set of practices. Here, the doctrines of the religion take a backseat and sometimes even becomes insignificant and it is irrelevant whether this new entity goes by the name of the religion or the tradition that has made this adaptation, as what matters is the new set of practices that gives structure to this entity.

The latter in the second scenario is what happened when a religion like Christianity found its way into Indian culture, where practices predominate over doctrines or beliefs.<sup>76</sup>

It is now time for us to come back to a goal we had set for ourselves, namely, find an instance of what scholars deem to be religious syncretism. We will pick out instances of syncretism that scholars have written about in order to understand what syncretism is. The first is of marriage among the Santals, who are one of the largest scheduled tribe<sup>77</sup> communities of India living in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Assam.

Ordinarily, most Santal Catholics observe two distinct sets of marriage ceremonies, a Church ceremony (*girja bapla*) and a village ceremony (*ato bapla*). The Church ceremony, which satisfies the canonical requirement, is viewed by Church officials as the primary marriage rite. However, Santal Catholics and the traditional Santal society consider the village ceremony and its associated rituals as the central marriage rite. It not only satisfies their tribal, cultural, and

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<sup>76</sup> We will locate more evidence to support this in the following chapters.

<sup>77</sup> Indigenous people who are officially designated as people of social, historical, economic and political disadvantage and were given Reservation status after India's independence

psychological sensibilities, but also ratifies and completes the Church ceremony. <sup>78</sup>

The second is the description of a Feast celebration at a popular Church in south India.

Yet, the same seeming paradox is here as in Velankanni: there are more signs of Christian-Hindu confluence than I saw in rural Avur. The festival begins, just like ones in nearby Hindu temples, with the raising of the flag- the white and gold of Our Lady of Health. Worshippers, as in a Hindu festival, touch this flagpole and tie the traditional holy strings dipped in turmeric powder around the pole as a pledge attend the festival to its end. Long lines of devotees wait at the entrance to the chapel to offer various gifts to our Lady. Among these are wax candles that are exclusively Christian, but I also see brass trays with a broken coconut, jasmine flowers, and a banana, which is similar to Hindu offerings. Missing from the trays are camphor, betel nut, and red vermilion. Apparitions of Robert de Nobili are here in the forms of saffron-robed mendicants, men and women, carrying rosaries! The parish priest told me earlier that he is pleased that Hindus also worship here. I cannot distinguish easily whether the devotees are in fact Christian or Hindu and somehow, in the atmosphere of the moment, this identification seems not to matter. <sup>79</sup>

Both these instances fall under the second scenario that we just mentioned. Take Santals for instance. They profess to be believers of Jesus, yet they have their set of non-Christian practices, which is their way of going about in the world. They do not abandon one for the other and they do not find anything odd about simultaneously having their Christian “beliefs” and practising Santal rituals. It is the scholars who have picked it out as an instance of “syncretism” and raised amazement/ amusement/ surprise at the coexistence of all kinds of practices among Santal Catholics. In the Indian sphere, it is the most natural thing to happen, because the structure of learning that is peculiar to this culture is such that, it generates in them the need to practice their

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<sup>78</sup> RAJ, Selva J. a Corinne G. DEMPSEY, ed. *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*. USA: State University of New York Press, 2002, pg. 44.

<sup>79</sup> WAGHORNE, Joanne Punzo. Chariots of the God/s: Riding the Line Between Hindu and Christian. *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*. 2002, pg. 28.

rituals appropriately, in order to be members of their community. In their case, by virtue of being Santals, they find it a given that they should practice their age-old traditions in addition to the ones they have acquired by converting to Christianity.

As mentioned, beliefs take a back seat in this kind of a cultural setup. The second example, which is a scene at the Church festival of Velankanni is an example of that. The observer could not make out the difference between a Hindu devotee and a Christian devotee at the Church.<sup>80</sup> A converted Christian might have shifted his belief from his previous god to the Christian God. However, his way of relating to this entity has not made shifts. Until attempts are made at making this person discontinue his old practices, in all likelihood he would continue doing those practices (to the new object of his devotion), along with the new ones that he gets by being a devotee of Christ. This is an observation that has been made by missionaries during their efforts in the last few centuries.

## **A Dead End**

In the beginning of *Syncretism in Religion- A Reader*, which is perhaps one of the few anthologies that is dedicated solely to the subject, the editor, Anita Leopold, writes about how she got interested in the topic of syncretism. The reasons were, her being of mixed race and her beloved dog, who she felt deeply for because of their shared status of being “mixed” being labeled a “mongrel”. She says:

This has become a particularly apparent problem in multicultural societies, or where the political power is in the hands of one particular religious or ethnic group of people, fighting against another group of people, a way of life or a religion. In short, we construct meaningful borders, such as those of religious or national traditions around others and ourselves by way of the myth of belonging to a particular history. Syncretism confronts our certainty of belonging. This makes it such a controversial category to deal with socially, as well as

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<sup>80</sup> For more such examples, see, RAJ, Selva J. Transgressing Boundaries, Transcending Turner: The Pilgrimage Tradition at the Shrine of St. John de Britto. In: *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pgs. 85–111.

psychologically, but on the other hand, it also makes it so attractive to study because of its creative and transformative potentiality that may redirect and reformulate and cultural, religious and individual mode of belonging... That is why it is important to preserve the category of syncretism: to continue the discussion on the many relevant issues concerning the human invention and re-invention of religion, culture and identity.

She is not the only one who feels so. Syncretism, she feels is the result of what happens when differing ideologies and histories meet giving rise to questions with regard to politics and identity. However syncretism as a concept began to be used only in the last few centuries and only within a certain context, namely religion. Its scope and meaning has been stretched to accommodate many other issues, which has resulted in syncretism no longer remaining a coherent and stable concept, that is of any productivity.

We began this chapter by analysing syncretism in its historical context. From the debates and discussions that have arisen on the matter, we can see that the source of these discussions is Christianity. The notion of mixing is not posed as a question outside of Christianity.

This peculiar conception of syncretism could only grow in a Christian atmosphere, and has actually grown there, for the word and the concept are a result of theological controversies in seventeenth-century Protestant theology—where it is legitimate and obligatory to speak about illegitimate mingling, because an absolute standard of reference is implicitly assumed. From the standpoint of the naturalist religions, however, it is not correct to speak of syncretism as an illegitimate and unexpected proceeding, because it is just what one should expect to happen...it is as natural as breathing.”<sup>81</sup>

From what notable scholars in the field have said, it seems that mixing, many a times happens without being questioned, is not seen as an issue causing disturbance or is treated as a normally accepted part of a tradition in a culture like India’s. Further, we have seen that India does not have native religions.<sup>82</sup> We have shown how the term “syncretism” is used to explain what happens

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<sup>81</sup> KRAEMER, Hendrik. Syncretism. In: *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. B.m.: Harper and Brothers, 1938, s. 202.

<sup>82</sup> More on this will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

when tradition meets tradition, and religion encounters tradition without any distinctions.

Initially, Christians had all kinds of problems, which they systematically worked on providing answers for, that developed into theology. These questions made sense within the particular framework. The concerns of early church fathers were taken into consideration by these scholars, who studied other cultures. When modern anthropologists started to develop ideas on the topic, what happened to this theological framework? They were convinced they were doing science. They started to use the same concept, but did they really manage to separate it from this theological framework? What can we derive from the way they are using it? The questions that are asked about religious syncretic systems even today are the same questions that Church fathers had formulated centuries ago. It can only mean that they have built their ideas of syncretism on theological assumptions. These theological assumptions have now become scientific neutral concepts.

Another problem that one encounters when studying syncretism is the inconsistency with which different anthropologists are trying to deal with the concept. There is an attempt to remove the evaluative effect of the term. Does this simply mean that we agree that we do not use the term as an abuse any more, or that we do not mean anything wrong by calling something syncretic? What difference does removing the evaluative value make? It does not take away from the fact that it is based on a theological background that produces theological question. When anthropologists try to get rid of the Christian framework from syncretism, they called it ‘mixing’. It trivialises what the concept is. Anything could be mixed for that matter. Furthermore, it does not explain what mixes, how it mixes and what the result of the mixing is. While within the Christian framework, it made perfect sense, but, in anthropology, syncretism has become an absurd word that can be stretched and bent to describe many things.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, these days, this concept is used while talking about religions in the non-western world.<sup>84</sup> But, when you use it for India, what is it that really happens? What is mixed with what here:

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<sup>83</sup> See EVANGELISTA, Mytch. *Religious Syncretism of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Animism in Cambodian Traditional Music*. B.m.: World Music and Ethnomusicology. 2016; BERK, Gerald a Dennis GALVAN. How People Experience and Change Institutions: A Field Guide to Creative Syncretism. *Springer*. 2009, **38**(6), 543–580, as examples of how syncretism has become a taken for granted phenomenon and used to describe anything.

<sup>84</sup> South Asian scholars use the term very frequently now in their descriptive studies of religious practices of Asia. For examples, see, MIR, Farina. Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 2006, **48**(3), 727–758;

practices with practices, beliefs with beliefs, or beliefs with practices? These were original Christian concerns. How do we apply it to India? How do we find out what Indian beliefs are? How do we distinguish them? And, how do we know which of the distinctions are relevant or not? Indian Christianity is known for being syncretic. That does not help us understand anything about it. It does not tell us why Indian Christians continue to have Indian practices while claiming to be believers of Christ. It does not tell us what changes came over Christianity when it migrated to India. Is there an alternative way of looking at this that gives us some answers on how to understand the result of such encounters?

The problem with using syncretism as an umbrella term for explaining consequences of any kind of encounter is that it ends up being a dead end. So what if we have identified these consequences as instances of syncretism? Where do we go from here? Does it explain anything about the entities that are involved in these encounters or give us an idea of what to expect when these entities encounter each other or predict the way in which the consequences of these encounters would manifest themselves? Hardly. This term functions as a blanket under which all these nuances of cultural interactions are swept under. When we remove this blanket, what we open for ourselves is an avenue where we can classify and discuss these different kinds of encounters. For example, when a religion like Christianity takes root in a culture, where traditional practices take precedence over doctrines, it goes through fundamental changes not just in terms of the practices that are incorporated or modified, but also in terms of what happens to the doctrines that it brings along.

In one of the interviews conducted for this work, a priest talked about this issue. Here is what he said:

*This is my basic experience, my story and I remain a Catholic priest and am privileged in saying that I am a Hindu Catholic. Of course, sometimes they say it is syncretism. Well, these are only the terms with which they (the West) know to address these kinds of issues. That is why I said in the beginning that the understanding of religion is different in the West and*

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TOGAWA, Masahiko. Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Sainly Cult in Bengal. *Numen (Brill)*. 2008, **55**(1), 27–43.



*the East. The so called religious reality that we find here in India cannot be explained in terms of the category of religion as we understand it in the West. But we need categories to start talking so we use it. So, Hinduism here, today although it presents itself as a political religion or as an exclusive religion, such is not the case. Before it became a religion, it was and it is a culture. The very names India and Hindu, are geographical specifications. There is nothing specifically religious about it as Christianity.*

Christian theology is rife with concepts that make sense within the cultural matrix of where it comes from, but when it is transferred to another culture through conversions or translations of these concepts into local languages and superimposed on to the cultural matrix of the host culture, they undergo substantial distortions, wherein these concepts come to be understood in ways that the host culture enables its populace to understand. In the following chapters, we will see how deep these distortions go and how differently these concepts end up being understood by these people from what is established in theology. This is a rewarding path to take because it helps us map cultural differences by looking at the pattern in which these distortions are made.

## **Chapter 3**

### **THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE**

#### **Setting the Ground**

Previously, we were made aware of the fact that sweeping instances of intercultural mingling under the term of syncretism presents us with certain consequences. I also suggested that discarding this concept will enable us to explore what happens when differing cultures meet. In this chapter, we will take this one step further by providing instances where cultural exchanges have happened and analysing the outcomes of these exchanges.

It was argued in the previous chapter that in a culture like that of ancient Rome, practices took dominance over dogma. To be a practitioner of a certain *religio* entailed participating or engaging in the rituals and rites of the particular tradition. With the coming of Christianity, this was overturned. The emphasis was placed on doctrine, and practices were to be embodiments of these doctrines. This became the distinctive nature of Christianity- one that it has tried strenuously to maintain. During the course of its history, Christianity travelled to many parts of the world. One of the homes it found is India where this dynamic between doctrine and practices was in stark difference to what Christianity had striven to establish. Christians were a small group in India that are likely to have been living in this subcontinent since the 4th century, if many sources are to be believed. The 4th century was a time when most of the well-established doctrines of today were beginning to be in the making after Christianity's long drawn battle to establish itself both in the West (Rome) and the East (Asia Minor, Middle-East and Eastern Europe). Verifiable sources say that it is at this time that Christianity was brought to India by a group of traders who then made settlements in southern India. With still emerging body of doctrine to bank on, these settlers allowed themselves to be absorbed into the cultural matrix of the culture within which they had settled. That is not to say that they discarded their traditions or the fervour in belief that Christianity invoked in its practitioners but that over generations of being in India, the group visibly imbibed

many of the cultural aspects that India had to offer. Now we need to see if this imbibing only included Indian customs or if the nuances of this host culture were imbibed as well. How do we do that? We ask the Indian Christians, of course. Available to us is a considerably sized body of responses taken from the missionary works and studies of the Portuguese and the English from colonial times to interviews conducted on several lay people, nuns and priests from the last few years on what Indian Christians have said regarding their belief, practices to even their general outlook of society. We will see if we get clues from these that will help us progress in a productive direction.

It is said that the cultural root of the West lies in Christianity. It is further said that Christian morals and values form the attitudes of westerners even if they are self-proclaimed agnostics or atheists. Such is the reach of Christian values. If Christianity has managed to do that to a culture wherein its peoples exhibit these attitudes, the same should be the case with people who call themselves Christians or ascendants of Christians in other cultures as well. But is that the case? India has had its share of Christians as well. For our purpose, we need to ascertain if these attitudes are exhibited by these Christians. Instinctively we may be tempted to say that Indian Christians are moulded by Indian culture which gives this stream of Christianity its unique flavour. But first, we need to show if that is indeed the case or not, for which we need to assess the “Christian-ness” of Indian Christianity. This includes assessing how much of Christian doctrines and values have seeped into the formation of the Indian Christian way of going about in the world. There can be many ways of doing that but the one I have chosen for the purpose is by showing how Indians understand Christian concepts, how they apply it to their faith and how that helps them live.

Before we get into this task we must take a direction that would help us assess the information we have about Indian Christians- a conceptual path that will help us analyse and map the way Indians understand Christianity. Practitioners of the faith use either local languages or English for liturgical purposes. We will try and understand what happens in both cases. In the former, concepts are translated into these local languages. This process of translating Christian doctrines into other

Indian languages has gone through many steps and has seen some debates and amendments<sup>85</sup>. Owing to the missionaries who invested a great deal of work into finding the closest possible words in meaning, in local languages, to interpret Christian concepts and sometimes even making up new words in order to accommodate Christian concepts in local vocabulary, we today have a fairly standard set of terms in local languages we use to denote a majority of key concepts that are pertinent to Christianity. However, such translations also come with problems of their own. They result in something called “conceptual distortion”. Let us see what this distortion is.

My use of this term does not have any normative or pejorative connotation; “distortion” is used as a technical term. When today’s scholars and their readers discuss the subject of religion in languages like English, they invoke all kinds of common ideas. For instance, they usually assume that each people or culture has some form of religion and that “belief” and “worship” are central to religion, that religions can have one God or many gods, and that this corresponds to the distinction between “monotheism” and “polytheism.” Some of these commonplaces have their origin in Christian theological discourse, others in modern philosophy. Many have been elaborated into theories about religion or systematic descriptions of the different “religions” of humanity.<sup>86</sup>

Every society has its commonplace ideas. Some of these ideas may be universal, some are not. For example, earlier we already discussed how religion is an idea that is typical of a particular culture. When the same idea is imposed on another culture where religion is not a pre-existing entity, distortions occur in terms of how this culture is interpreted. This distortion occurs because religion is not an entity that stands on its own. It is an entity that is supported and strengthened by a cluster of many ideas that hold value within the former culture. When we suppose that religion is an entity that occurs in the latter culture we observe abnormalities in the “religion” we focus on. This is because the cluster of ideas that make a commonplace idea within the first culture is absent from the other. We will explore how this happens in India with regard to Christian theology.

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<sup>85</sup> YOUNG, Richard Fox. *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*. Vienna: Indological Institute University Of Vienna, 1981. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library.

<sup>86</sup> CLAERHOUT, Sarah. *Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality of Religions: More Experiments with Truth*. *Numen (Brill)*. 2014, pg. 56.

A common area of contention among missionaries of the last few centuries has been that it has been difficult to convey the message of Christianity to Indians. While some gave up, many continued with their missionary activities only so that Indians could at least have the hope of salvation.

He (St. Francis Xavier) would have believed in conversions if it had been possible to do so; but after baptising tens of thousands, he left the country disappointed and heartsick, openly declaring that there was no further need of his services, and advising his sovereign to make the conversion of the heathen the business of civil magistrates, that is, to be satisfied with compelling Hindus to adopt the name and forms of the religion of Rome, since their missionaries had no power among them to change their hearts and lives.<sup>87</sup>

It is understandable that missionaries had a difficult time conveying the Christian message to Indians. Not only did they have to talk about Jesus, why he is important but also various other vital interrelated concepts like salvation, trinity, sin, God's will and such which had no parallels in Indian culture making it difficult for Indians to grasp the message of Christ. Through various stages of translations, we now have words in Indian languages that accommodate these concepts into local liturgical uses but who is to say that when Indians use these native words, they do not distort the meanings of these concepts? It is likely that the native words that they use are parts of different interrelated networks of ideas that make different commonplace ideas within an Indian context. So, it is possible that the meanings that these Indian words express could be far from what the concepts really are meant to convey. Even those who use English for liturgical purposes come from a long tradition of having used local languages. It is possible that even their understanding of the concepts, despite being accustomed to using English could be more similar to the understanding of the user of native language than the English speaker of the West. These however are just possibilities and now we have the task of checking if this really is the case.

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<sup>87</sup> TINLING, James F.B. *Early Roman Catholic Missions to India with Sketches of Jesuitism, Hindu Philosophy, and The Christianity of the Ancient Indo- Syrian Church of Malabar*. London: S. W. Partridge And Co., 1871, pg. 92.

I have picked a few concepts that are not only vital to Christianity but also through the time I have spent with Christians of the West, have come to see as concepts that practitioners of Indian Christianity have troubles developing coherent ideas about. To show that these difficulties are not those of a single person, I have interviewed several Indian Christians. It is true that many Christians of the West have difficulties formulating ideas about these concepts as well. I will address this at another point of time. However, the difficulties faced by Indian Christians, although they are varied, exhibit certain tendencies and patterns that are more or less uniform. In addition, to show that this peculiar way of formulating theological concepts is not a result of an ignorant mass of practitioners, I also interviewed priests and nuns who teach theology in seminaries in India. These are theologians trained in Rome, Paris and Leuven, among other places, where there are centres of theological importance. It is to show how despite being trained in the West, the recurrent pattern aforementioned, is also present in the way they formulate these concepts. Included in this task, is also an attempt to assess and give reasons for these patterns of distortions. The goal is to see if through the understanding of these patterns we can rationalise “abnormalities” attributed to Indian Christians and make these predictable and not a matter of curiosity or surprise to the rest of the world. Additionally, it is also to examine if what missionaries have often expressed about Indians, that they cannot fully fathom the message of Christianity is true or not.

Each of these concepts will be analysed in three steps. First, we will look at what the concept is. All of them have been debated over for centuries, hence have volumes written on them. We will not go deep into what theology says about each of these concepts, because there are differences in the way certain denominations theologize them. Therefore, we will take mainly the salient features that is agreed upon across denominations. This step also includes getting acquainted with the ideas forming the building blocks of these concepts and understanding the framework that it generates. Second, we will see how Indians describe these concepts beginning with what lay people say about it, and moving on to what our Indian teachers of theology say about it. We will use excerpts from both native and English speakers. We will see how they are used in the Indian context and how they make sense within the framework of this culture. These two steps will show us the difference in the two frameworks and the inapplicability of using a particular concept from one culture which has the baggage of an entire framework to denote a word from the languages of another culture which has its own conceptual framework. In the third step, we

will account for the responses that have been collected and map the source of their ideas. What this process will do is to enable us to see the pattern of distortion (if there is any) that Indian Christians are likely to make. At this point, a discussion on these distortions and why it is crucial to this thesis should ensue, because we need to show if Indians, whether they use a vernacular, or the English language, which they have skilfully learnt to use, manage to understand the depth of the theological notions that they think they know or do they interpret them in random ways. And if they do interpret them in random ways we need to see if there is a systematic pattern to the way they do so.

## **The Only Way**

In Christianity, the relationship between God and man is of utmost importance. When God made the Earth and its inhabitants, everything was good and perfect. However, man committed the one deed that God had commanded him not to (which is eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge), that led to the fall of mankind and his banishment from paradise. However, the forgiving God promised that one day he would send a messiah who would deliver man from this sin. Throughout the Old Testament, the coming of the Messiah is a recurring theme. Christians believe that Jesus was this promised Messiah. Consequently, they believed that it is only through this Messiah that they can attain their ultimate goal, which is salvation.<sup>88</sup> The Apostle Peter said “And there is no salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, by which it is necessary for us to be saved.”<sup>89</sup> Accepting Jesus as the only way is only the first step to becoming a Christian. It then includes a series of measures to be taken beginning with baptism. Despite knowing that Jesus is the only way, if one does not get baptised and become a member of the Church then it implies that the person is damning his soul to dire consequences.

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<sup>88</sup> For my theological understanding, I have chiefly referred to the volumes of the Catholic Encyclopedia. HERBERMANN, PH.D., LL.D., Charles G., Edward A. PACE PH.D., Conde B. PALLAN, PH.D., LL.D., Thomas J. SHAHAN, D.D. a John J. WYNNE, S.J.D.D. *Original Catholic Encyclopaedia*. First. 1909.

<sup>89</sup> Acts 4:12

Typical of the practitioners of this religion, is the belief that it is their duty to spread the message of this Messiah. That includes bringing the non-believers to this faith, in order to ensure that salvation is available to them as well, because Jesus's sacrifice was made for the whole of humankind. In the case of India, there were many reasons behind the arduous measures taken to convert locals besides to deliver them to salvation. One among them was that the missionaries encountered many heinous and abhorrent practices in the Indian society, and they were convinced that only by bringing the locals to the Christian faith could they bring order and dispel the superstitions and blasphemous practices of the local people.

We do not hesitate to say, that our *principal* obligation to communicate Christianity to the Hindus is founded upon the *malignant and pernicious character of that superstition of which they are victims.* (italics mine)<sup>90</sup>

They believed that if Indians could be rid of their superstitious and immoral faith, it could lead to the building of a better nation of people with a strong moral ground. Spreading Christianity was regarded as an honourable duty. It is true that some missionaries did find semblances of a moral code among Indian texts that they deemed were of importance to Indians, and therefore followed. Some were even impressed by the behaviour of Indians and expressed that Indians did not lack morality as was professed by many missionaries.

With the remarks are blended some extracts from the Hindoo Code of Laws , and other Works of Indian Celebrity; thus introduced, for the purpose of evincing, that, if the Hindoos are not already bless with the virtues of Morality, it can in no wise be attributed to the want of an ample system of Moral Ordinances, for the regulation of their conduct in society; and that, consequently, they have less need of the improving aid of Christianity, than is commonly imagined by those pious zealots who inconsiderately annex the idea of barbarism, to every religious system, not blessed with the sacred light of Gospel dispensation.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> CUNNINGHAM, A.M., J.W. *Christianity in India: An Essay on the Duty, Means, and Consequences, of Introducing The Christian Religion among the Native Inhabitants of the British Dominions in the East.* London: J. Hatchard, bookseller to Her Majesty, 1808, pg. 8.

<sup>91</sup> STUART, Charles. *Vindication of the Hindoos.* London: printed for R. and J. Rodwell, 1808, pg. 2



This goes along with the idea that God had implanted a sense of divinity among all peoples and it is only natural that parts of this godliness be found among cultures everywhere that were still unaware of the phenomenon of Jesus. However, Jesus had come, and it was about time that these ancient cultures took note of that, and accept him as the fulfilment of the promise that was made, the promise that Christians believed in.

We will discuss more about salvation and what it implies in Christianity in the next section. For now, what is important for us is to note that, for a Christian, there is something such as salvation that is to be attained and the only way of attaining it is through Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is the *only* way. By a Christian's logic, there is only one category of ways that does not involve Jesus. This category is classified as the wrong way. By this very logic, most Indians were (and are) on the wrong way because they have not accepted Jesus. There is a fundamental problem with this reasoning. Earlier I mentioned how every concept comes with a web of associated ideas that support and fuel each other. In the Christian framework, there are some fundamental concepts and ideas that are interlinked and quite meaningless without each other. For example, the idea of *Jesus* is linked to other ideas such as the *truth*, the *revelation* and *salvation* just to name a few. Take any of these out of the context and it ceases to make sense. This context was absent in Indian culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that Indians had difficulties understanding what missionaries were talking about. This lack of context was something that even missionaries recognized and hence were forced to introduce and explicate for the benefit of potential converts.

Think of an Indian who is not privy to the idea of salvation, much less, the importance of it. To them the idea that Jesus is the only way is absurd. It begs for questions such as “Why is salvation so important when our ancestors lived well without the knowledge of its existence?”, “If there is a salvation, who is to say that Jesus is the only answer to it?” “How can there be only one way of attaining salvation?”, “Are there no other alternatives to salvation?”.<sup>92</sup> The further such questions are raised, the more we see how ill-developed their grasp on the subject is. So, in a context where the grasp over something as fundamental to Christianity as salvation is unclear, one can only surmise how the idea that Jesus is the only way will make no sense. Since the mission's earliest days, our missionaries, with all their good intentions, were at pains to set this context up for

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<sup>92</sup> These are real questions raised by Indians (some of them Christians) even today.

Indians.<sup>93</sup> As already mentioned, they deemed it their duty as Christians to impart this exclusive opportunity to get saved to the Indians. Of this duty, a British officer writes thus-

“To acknowledge Christianity, is to admit that this Religion is exclusive, or that if this is true, all others are false. It is to allow that of all Religions, it is best suited to apply the wants of man, and to guard the well being of society. It is to acknowledge, that this system alone provides any security for the eternal happiness of its followers; -that whilst the salvation of the real Christian is certain, the salvation of the Heathen is a contingency;- that the last has no ground for anticipating the same enjoyments in kind or degree, which are pledged to the Christian by the unchangeable promise of God.”<sup>94</sup>

In India, it is common knowledge that there are many traditions with its adherents. There was a small group of Christians who had been in India centuries before Europeans brought their strain of the religion to the subcontinent. Disregarding that group provisionally, let us focus on when Europeans started out on their missionary works in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, Christianity was seen as a new tradition that could be added to the plethora of Indian traditions. However, its slow progress with conversion and the inability of people to grasp the exclusivity of this religion were direct consequences of the overpowering idea that, it is not necessary that the same god-figure be revered across all communities. Christianity deems that there is only one God and Jesus is the revelation of that God. However, the notion of revelation, the way it manifests in the Semitic religions is unknown in Indian culture. None of the Indian gods or goddesses are considered as revelations and it becomes difficult to think of Jesus as one. To assert that Jesus was the revelation of God, one had to first set grounds where the very idea of revelation had some significance. In addition, Indians had several gods whom they revered. Some of them were popular and revered

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<sup>93</sup> Some like Roberto de Nobili went to extreme lengths by adopting many elements from Indian society like language, clothing, etc., to make Christianity appear as less foreign to the Indians as possible. NOBILI, Roberto De. *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises*. University of Michigan: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000.

<sup>94</sup> CUNNINGHAM, A.M., J.W. *Christianity in India: An Essay on the Duty, Means, and Consequences, of Introducing The Christian Religion among the Native Inhabitants of the British Dominions in the East*. London: J. Hatchard, bookseller to Her Majesty, 1808, pg. 1.

across many communities while there were some that were known and revered only in certain groups. In all, India had no dearth of gods and goddesses. Accepting Jesus for Indians would not have been a big problem but there were two things that prevented that. *One*, seeing him as the only god.

“When I told them that in cold countries it would be impossible to observe their law during the winter, which showed that it was nothing but a pure invention of men, they gave me this rather amusing reply: that they were not claiming that their law was universal, but that God had made it for them alone, ... that moreover, they were not in the least claiming that our religion was false, but that it might be good for us and that *God might have made several different paths to heaven*; but *they would not agree that as ours was general for the whole world*, theirs could be but fable and pure invention. (my italics)<sup>95</sup>

*Two*, baffling as it was to the missionaries, was the matter regarding the “truth” of this God. The one question that Indians did not conceive of regarding gods was whether they were true or not. Before delving into this, let us look at what the idea of truth in Christianity is. There are many dimensions to “truth” in Christianity. First, there is the matter of historicity. The coming of Jesus to earth was a historical fact, a real occurrence. Therefore, irrespective of whether he was the fulfilment of the prophesy or not, he existed as a human being. In that sense, he was a real human being who existed on earth. Second, the idea of “true God” was a theme that had been in existence in Judaism before it was appropriated by Christianity. What does this mean? It can mean more than one thing actually. Looking at the Bible, we can at the very least say that this God is the “living” God as opposed to the other gods who did not exist.<sup>96</sup> Or, considering what some scholars say the Old Testament inclines towards, we can say that this was the true (and good) God as opposed to the other (possible) gods as odious as they might have been.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, Christianity expressly states that the presence of other gods is a testament to Satan’s works and that whoever is guilty of revering them is partaking in devil worship.<sup>98</sup> With this in the picture, we can see why this God

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<sup>95</sup> Quoted in DUMONT, Louis. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. B.m.: Oxford University Press, 1970, pg. 402-403

<sup>96</sup> Psalm 115:4-8, Deuteronomy 4:35, 39

<sup>97</sup> Exodus 20:2-3, Exodus 34:13-14, 2 Kings 17:35

<sup>98</sup> 1 John 4:1, 2 John 1:9-11

was the true God and why other gods were undesirable and deserved absolute abhorrence. We are now beginning to see why the matter of “truth” is of such importance in Christianity. What does the notion of truth mean in a culture like India’s?<sup>99</sup> Let us look at this excerpt from a missionary’s records to begin to make sense of this.

A young Balinese became my primary teacher. One day I asked him if he believed that the history of Prince Rama – one of the holy books of the Hindus – is true. Without hesitation, he answered it with “Yes”. “So you believe that the Prince Rama lived somewhere and somewhen?” “I do not know if he lived”, he said. “Then it is a story?” “Yes, it is a story.” “Then someone wrote this story – I mean: a human being wrote it?” “Certainly some human being wrote it”, he said. “Then some human being could have also invented it”, I answered and felt triumphant, when I thought that I had convinced him. But he said: “It is quite possible that somebody invented this story. But true it is, in any case.” “Then it is the case that Prince Rama did not live on this earth?” “What is it that you want to know?” he asked. “Do you want to know whether the story is true, or merely whether it occurred?” “The Christians believe that their God Jesus Christ was also on earth”, I said, “in the New Testament, it has been so described by human beings. But the Christians believe that this is the description of the reality. Their God was also really on Earth.”

My Balinese friend thought it over and said: “I had been already so informed. I do not understand why it is important that your God was on earth, but it does strike me that the Europeans are not pious. Is that correct?”

“Yes, it is”, I said.<sup>100</sup>

Note the question “Do you want to know whether the story is true, or merely whether it occurred?”. From what the Balinese says it is clear that he sees a distinction between what is true and what has occurred. At the moment, we do not know what he sees as something that is “true”. What we do know is that it may not have to do with historicity. Furthermore, he says, “I do not understand why

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<sup>99</sup> Let it be noted that although the excerpts I draw upon in order to illustrate my argument are from historical texts, they correlate with what my interviewees have said as will be demonstrated in due course.

<sup>100</sup> Translation quoted from Bichsel, 1982, in S. N. BALAGANGADHARA. „*The Heathen in his Blindness...*”: *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. B.m.: E. J. Brill, pg. 368.

it is important that your God was on earth...”. This means that, to him, the fact that Jesus was on earth does not make this God any “truer” than his god/gods or that the fact that his god/gods could have been inventions does not render them less unworthy of reverence than Jesus. Certainly, there is great value attached to the notion of what is “true” in the case of the Balinese as well as the missionary. However, it is clear that “truth” for both of them is different.<sup>101</sup>

This conversation with the Balinese is one that does not stand out. This indifference towards “truth” is one that was often observed among Indians. We can now take the first step towards understanding what Indian Christians make of the notion of “truth”. There are clear indications that they prescribe to both but in a strange way. While many point out that Jesus was a real human (therefore true) and other gods were just inventions, they also shy away from saying that the other gods are false. It is in the details of how they do so that will enable us to trace a pattern

### **Truth claims**

A truth claim is a statement that is held to be true. It is said that a truth claim is a “hypothesis that has not been verified by experience”.<sup>102</sup> It presents itself as incontrovertible and is vital to the discussion that it is a part of. It is a term commonly used in philosophy, in discussions of various kinds, however in the matter of religion, truth claims hold an important status. Christianity is built on a number of truth claims. That the Bible is the literal word of God is a truth claim. That Jesus is God’s revelation is another truth claim. It is a network of these truth claims that sustains Christianity and produces answers to questions that are generated within this network. We have no means of proving whether the above-mentioned truth claims are true or not but they are the building blocks of Christianity without which it has no leg to stand on. Truth claims are also, not flexible. We cannot say that Jesus is one of God’s revelations. It would imply that God was revealed through

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<sup>101</sup> See also, BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. What Do Indians Need, a History or the Past? A challenge or two to Indian historians, Parts I and II. *Dialogue*. 2010, **12**(1). How Indians struggle with the western notion of truth is dealt with here.

<sup>102</sup> Random House Dictionary

others too, which would take away from the importance placed on Jesus, and would discredit Christianity as the true religion as such. Truth claims in this religion, are therefore written in stone.

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>103</sup> is perhaps one of the most quoted verses from the Bible, and rightly so, because it is the fundamental principle that Christianity stands on. It is a truth claim. Without going into the depths of what theology says about this statement, what we can clearly glean from it is, *one*, Jesus is the *only* true living son of God, *two*, he is the *only* way that God has provided for humans and *three* that it is *only* in Jesus that one can find eternal life. For a Christian, it is vital that s/he believes this truth claim in its entirety. Is there a way other than that of Jesus? Surely there is. It is the way of sin, the way to the Devil, the way to eternal damnation. So, there are only two ways possible. One is the right way which is the way shown by Jesus and the other is the wrong way which takes one away from Jesus.

Let us examine some of the responses of our interviewees when asked what they understood from this statement. Here are some commonly said things-

I pray to him because I was born into this way. He is my way because I was brought up in this faith.<sup>104</sup>

This response shows that the reason they follow the way of Jesus is because they were born into and brought up in that faith. Which implies that if they were brought up as say, a Hindu or a Muslim, they would have been following those ways. Whether Jesus is the true revelation of God, is not a matter that they give thought to at first, when asked about this statement, until pushed. Their focus is on the ‘way’, namely, the fact that they are Christians. But Christians are supposed to believe that there is only one way and all other ways are supposed to be damning. For the Indian, that is not how it is. They do not conceive of Jesus’s way as the only one. There can be other ways, ways that they do not know of because they were born as Christians. They consider Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and so on as other ways.

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<sup>103</sup> John 14:6

<sup>104</sup> This was said by a majority of the interviewed lay people.

“I don’t think he meant he is the *only* way. He is *one of the ways*. But considering I was never given that option of exploring other ways, I took Jesus as the only way.”<sup>105</sup>

This response brings to the fore many aspects of the attitude that Indian Christians have. First, the respondent finds it implausible that Jesus could have really meant that He is the only way. The next sentence makes it clear why. She assumes that there are many ways among which one is that of Jesus. Therefore, it does not make sense to consider Jesus’ way as the only one. It would be important to understand why she assumes that there are other ways. But let us keep that thought on hold for now and proceed to the last and very important part of the response. She says she was never given the option of exploring other ways. This is so, because she was born into a Christian family, and never had the opportunity to understand the way of the Hindus or Muslims, except for being aware of the commonly known customs, practices and mentalities of these people, acquired through interactions with them. She also did not take a keen interest at studying other ways enough, to follow them, which is why she was left with just one option, which is to follow the way that her family showed her. Given the ease with which she says why she took Jesus as the only way, we can see that she has taken for granted the ‘way’ into which she was born and has not questioned why it is so or why she should understand or join other ways.

Another kind of answer that was commonly said, has to do with the quality of the way. These answers were given by those who went beyond the idea that they were meant to follow a way merely by virtue of being born into it. They were the ones who practiced their faith with more rigour than their peers, and were in the habit of questioning things that they felt pertained to their faith. It is assumed by them that there are many ‘ways’ but they made it clear that they chose to continue to follow this way because it seemed to be the better way for many reasons.

“Jesus, the son of God died for the sins of human beings and resurrected and gave our salvation. No Hindu Gods ever did anything close to that.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> #14, 30/01/14.

<sup>106</sup> #40, 31/1/2014

“The way of Jesus is that of love, forgiveness and sacrifice- values that are considered to be good unlike the violence or ambiguity of the Mahabharata or Ramayana. Therefore, it is the best way.”<sup>107</sup>

His is not the only way but it is the right one because it makes more sense than the rest.<sup>108</sup>

“The Bible, unlike the religious texts of the Hindus clearly states what commandments one must follow in order to reach the destination. When it comes to Hindu texts, the commandments are vague and subject to interpretation. Therefore, the Christian way is the easiest way.”<sup>109</sup>

These respondents hold their ‘way’ in higher regard because they find it better than the rest. For some it is the vagueness that religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism provides that makes them unable to understand how they are supposed follow them. To the others, it is the virtues about their Christian way and God that the other ways and their gods lack. It is the same feeling that guided the conversion of many Indians during the days of missionary zeal in pre-independent India. Here is the testimony of a man on why he converted to Christianity-

The Christians also told me that Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, was the saviour of sinners. I thought that in Hinduism there were ten incarnations, surely among the ten I would find one was a Saviour, so I read again very carefully the accounts of these incarnations; but I could not find that one had descended from heaven to save men from their sins. These incarnations had all appeared to save certain men from the tyranny of powerful kings or demons. Hinduism said, “Take the name of these incarnations and you will be saved,” but I felt it was useless as they never professed to be saviours. I turned to Christ and found that He had

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<sup>107</sup> #1, on 12/12/2013

<sup>108</sup> Commonly said.

<sup>109</sup> #2, 16/12/2014



offered Himself as an atonement for my sins and He plainly said, “He that believeth in Me hath everlasting life.”<sup>110</sup>

As far as this person is concerned, he chose Jesus over the other incarnations because Jesus claimed to be the saviour of all sinners unlike the other incarnations he knew of, who had only appeared in order to be the saviour of specific people, from the terror of kings and demons. For him, Jesus was the best option among the ones he had. Note, he does not say that the other gods were ‘false’ and therefore undeserving of reverence. This is the case with my interviewees as well. There was only one person of the lot who explicitly said that the Indian gods were false, hence their way was the way of the devil and that they had no means of being saved because of that. The select few who did mention the non-existence and non-historicity of Indian gods, did not in any way imply that they thought that the ways of other Indians were wrong or that they lead to the devil.

Let us take stock of the implications we have been able to glean so far. It is definite that Indian Christians do not think of Jesus as the only way for everyone. They see it as the only way for them for reasons such as being born into this tradition and because it works better for them than the rest. They do think that there are other ways. Unlike the Christians of the West, they do not think that the way other than that of Jesus leads to damnation. The other ways are those, such as the ones Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., follow, or even the one where people do not follow anything. To them these are all valid ways with their own set of customs, practices and values just like Christianity.

There is however, an obscurity that is exhibited in their usage of the word ‘way’. It seems that they are not clear on what the ‘way’ is. On first impression, it is easy to assume that they use ‘way’ to indicate a religion or tradition but it goes deeper than that. And the deeper it goes the more muddled it gets. Many respondents said, “all religions are true”, “all religions lead to the same goal” or that all religions preach good values that one must follow. So, on one hand perhaps we were right in assuming that they meant “religions” while saying “ways” but on the other hand this is a

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<sup>110</sup> Edward A. Annett. *Conversion in India. A Study in Religious Psychology*. Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1920, pg.: 23

problematic way of concluding the matter. In Christianity, there is only ‘way’ and if that ‘way’ is not followed then one is in the wrong. However, for Indians, it seems like a given that there would be many ‘ways’, or paths as they often like to say. While all these paths are valid, *none of them are wrong*. Of course, there are ways one can be wrong while pursuing one of these paths, but that is a matter of the internal subtleties of following a particular path.

To say that all religions are essentially the same is something that has come into vogue in the postmodern era but much before the dawn of this age Indians had been known for saying the same. This is where we can look for clues, to understanding what Indians mean when they say that all religions have the same goal. It is not just the Hindu who said so, it is something that Indian Christians repeat to this date- a sentiment that is mirrored across Indians, irrespective of which religion they belong to. At this point let me draw upon Gandhi who used the term “religion” in peculiar ways throughout his career as a builder of the young Indian nation. Perhaps it will throw light on what to gather when an Indian talks about religion.

“My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God, but all are imperfect because they have come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality”.<sup>111</sup> “In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals”.<sup>112</sup> “I do not share the belief that there can or will be on earth one religion”.<sup>113</sup>

Scholars on Gandhi have tried to interpret his views for decades. The interpretations are many, as noted by Sarah Claerhout, and sometimes, at odds with each other. This is because of the idiosyncratic ways in which Gandhi uses these English terms. Weeding out the views of one Indian who distorts the concept in a way that Indians do, for the benefit of those who know what religion is by virtue of belonging to a culture that religion is native to, through deep analysis, she comes to a conclusion as to what religion could have meant for Gandhi. For him, religion is the “traditions

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<sup>111</sup> Young India, 29 May 1924.

<sup>112</sup> GANDHI, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1909, pg. 45.

<sup>113</sup> Young India. 31 July 1924.

of a particular community or people” that is “not just ancestral practices but also action heuristics that instructs one on how to become a better human being”, that has “practical instructions handed down by a community” and that which can be “modified, changed or rejected”.<sup>114</sup>

While it would be foolish for us to assume that all Indians are capable of articulating this view on “religion” with such finesse, it would be amiss if we do not acknowledge that the responses we have, correspond to these very sentiments as to what religion is.

“No. it is one of the many faiths. There are all good. I guess it has more to do with personal opinion and faith. I’m born Catholic so I’ve grown up praying to a form that is Jesus Christ, but I see other religions worshipping the same or similar set of values in different physical forms and calling them by different names. Religion is man made, so it seems only fair that there would be regional differences in the interpretation of the God force.”<sup>115</sup>

Why would he be the only way? Everyone has their own way of leading life in the right way. No one’s wrong. It’s just different versions of the same thing”<sup>116</sup>

For a majority of Indian Christians, all religions are essentially things that exist for the same purpose- to guide one’s going about in the world and it is something that is generally inherited. Non-Christians, to them, are not those condemned to damnation. In fact, it is yet to be seen how much Indian Christians understand what damnation is. They merely see non-Christians as followers of other ways and according to many, the right way of living, is living life according to what your way says.

Everyone has their own faith, and according to that they must live their life doing good things. It is not up to anyone to decide which way to be born in, but *whatever you get you must follow it well*.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> CLAERHOUT, Sarah. Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality of Religions: More Experiments with Truth. *Numen (Brill)*. 2014, pg. 73–76.

<sup>115</sup> #45, 7/9/2014

<sup>116</sup> #13, 6/1/2014

<sup>117</sup> #79, 17/7/2014

I follow mine (religion) because I have been brought up in that faith. Following the path shown to you during childhood makes it easier to achieve spirituality, or the path to find refuge in God. So, a Hindu's faith should suit him or her just like a Christian's faith suits them.<sup>118</sup>

That one must follow the guidelines of their way as best as they can, is considered to be a sign of good living. It is not uncommon for an elderly or wiser person in India to instruct a child who might be a follower of another way according to the path that the child is used to follow. For example, say a Hindu child has committed an act that is inappropriate, it would not be strange for a Christian or Muslim person to tell him/her a story from the *puraanas* and instruct the child to follow the example of the people in the story and vice versa. This kind of a sentiment is something that surprised colonials. One of the missionaries during the early days of Protestant missions in India remarked this when he observed a prince admonishing the Christians of his land-

...there seem to have been spots of almost heathen darkness among the Churches of Malabar; as on one occasion the native prince, himself an idolater, rebuked them sharply for their neglect of their own religion; ...<sup>119</sup>

The Rajah of Travancore is known to have admonished Syrian Christians on several occasions for not carrying out their religious duties properly.<sup>120</sup> To not carry out one's duty towards the traditions of his/her community was seen as bad practice. Note, engaging in the practices of one's traditions was not a doctrinal duty, it was merely the seen as good practice that made one's behaviour acceptable or appropriate.

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<sup>118</sup> #7, 16/2/2014

<sup>119</sup> TINLING, James F.B. *Early Roman Catholic Missions to India with Sketches of Jesuitism, Hindu Philosophy, and The Christianity of the Ancient Indo-Syrian Church of Malabar*. London: S. W. Partridge And Co., 1871, pg. 16

<sup>120</sup> DUBOIS, Abbe J. A. *Letters on the State of Christianity In India in which The Conversion of the Hindus is Considered as Impracticable*. 2nd vyd. New Delhi: J. Jetley for Asian Educational Services, 1995.

When asked the question “Why are you a Christian?” there is a difference in the way a westerner answers the question and an Indian does. To the westerner, the reasons for being a Christian is important. The reasons can vary from being a believer of Jesus, to accepting that this is the only way that leads to salvation, to believing that Christianity is the most sophisticated and superior form of religion in the world. For most Indians however, the simple answer is “...because I was born into a Christian family”. It is true that this might have been one of the reasons for the westerner a few centuries ago before atheism, agnosticism and such came into the scene. But today, the westerner has the freedom to choose if he wants to be a Christian or not, as does the Indian. But even today, it is difficult to find Indian Christians who have completely divorced themselves from what their religion entails in their lives. To them, it is a way of upbringing. To ask them “Why are you a Christian?” is akin to asking them “Why were you born?”. There are those who have in recent past gone through conversion who would have answers that are different, but they account for a small number in the population of those who identify themselves as Christians in India.

In India, as we can begin to gather, belonging to a particular tradition or religion, primarily, is not about harbouring a certain kind of faith towards some god or deity. It is about being born in a community, continuing in the path paved by previous generations, reassessing, adding to it and modifying it for the generations to come. This path consists of customs, practices and cultural intuitions that form these traditions. The very act of going to the temple or Church is a practice that forms part of these traditions. Interfering with one’s tradition is not considered appropriate.

### **The Instructors Speak (I)**

So far, we have looked at what lay Christians have had to say. Their opinions on the matter and the atypical Christian sentiments that they reflect can be attributed to ignorance by a harsh critic, because it is possible that these Indians were not given proper education on the matter of their religion. But surely this must not be the case with people belonging to religious orders who have had to devote many years into studying the religion. In addition to being religiously educated, most

of them who were interviewed have also been educated in prestigious theological institutions of the western world. It would therefore be interesting to see how they expand on the same ideas that the lay people were questioned on and observe if despite their training there are elements to their explications that could intrigue us.

We started with the most basic question which was “Why are you a Christian?”. It was a question that elicited a few puzzled looks at first. The first sentence of the answer of every respondent was almost identical. They said they were Christians because they were born into and brought up in a Christian family. Some even said that the right question to ask would be about why they continued to be a Christian.

“See, anyone born in a Christian family is Christian. It is not something that you can decide on your own. *It is an inheritance that you get as a result of being born in your family.*”<sup>121</sup>

They talk about the status of being a Christian as an inheritance. It is a given that one is a Christian if born into a Christian family. There are no more qualifiers needed to become a Christian. That does not include new converts. It is accepted that they become Christians by virtue of having received baptism. As for the rest, one is a Christian if born into a Christian family. One striking aspect of their answer to the question is this- it seems that there is an involvement of the society around them that influenced them to enter religious orders. Of course, we cannot discount the influence that a person’s surroundings has on what becomes of them. However, among these Indian priests and nuns, it seems that the decision to enter religious orders was a joint decision taken by the larger family, their communities, their model priests or nuns. Many of them spoke of the “calling” they received but it cannot be equated to the idea of a calling expressed by many exemplary Christians through the course of Christian history. Here when they use the term “calling” it can mean any number of things. In most cases as observed, the calling meant the deep sense of duty they felt towards the profession because either their parents wanted it (and raised them accordingly) or because they had always exhibited a penchant for the profession which was then nurtured and encouraged by their peer groups. Of all the priests and nuns who were

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<sup>121</sup> Sr. Sabrina Cheruvilil, 20/1/2016.

interviewed, only one nun spoke of having faced mild opposition in wanting to join the convent because her father was unwilling to let her leave the family.<sup>122</sup> On one hand it may look like they had no choice but to enter religious orders. However, that is not the case. They are, since childhood, at liberty to reject it if they wish to, and there are many such cases where that has happened. On the other hand, it appears that them having entered these orders is a decision that while ultimately theirs, something that their communities also had a big hand in. We will see communities playing a big role not just in decision making, but also in colouring their perception of theological concepts and how they apply them as we go further in this essay. Once we have a clearer idea, we might be able to discuss it in greater length.

Moving on, the priests and nuns were asked if they believed that Christianity is the true religion. Unanimously they all said yes. However, the next question “Does that mean that the other religions are false?” produced interesting answers. More or less, the answers they arrived at were the same but they gave varied reasons for those answers. Let us look at the ones that explained them the best.

“No, they are not wrong (false). They (non-Christians) believe in whatever they follow. People belonging to different religions find their own ways of getting raksha (salvation). For me, Jesus is my Way. Everyone reaches God through their own ways. As Christians, we are supposed to go make people Christians... Whether they accept what we say or not is not up to us but it is our responsibility to show them the way. I respect God’s presence in others. In our culture why do we do Namaste with our head bowed? We are adoring Jesus in you, or God in you. We respect others. This is our culture.”<sup>123</sup>

This nun states that everyone has their way of reaching the goal laid out by their own religions. For her, Jesus is the way while he is not the same for others. As a Christian, it is her duty to take the message of Jesus to non-Christians, but she knows that people may not accept her faith. However, she cannot say that they are wrong because of that. She talks about how she cannot help but respect others no matter which religion they belong to. This may not be a simple case of respecting

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<sup>122</sup> Unlike for priests, for nuns, joining a convent involves cutting ties from her family which many families are known to mourn for.

<sup>123</sup> Sr. Tessa Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

everyone and their choices as it looks at first glance. Talking about the gesture of Namaste by which one bows with folded hands to another, she says it is part of her cultural upbringing which expects her to have this kind of an attitude towards fellow human beings.

Many times, they evoked teachings of the Church to justify their stance by calling on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1965) was the most recently held council of the Catholic Church. It addressed the relationship of the Catholic Church to the modern world. Its tenth document titled *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* advocated the cause of treating people of other religions with respect because “Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence.”<sup>124</sup> Iconic in the history of the Catholic Church for its friendlier stance towards people of all faiths, this document has found favour among Indians. This has only added to the free rein they have in explaining how they see the people of different religions.

“I think that the teaching of the Church is very clear about it. There is a beautiful document written by the previous Pope Ratzinger that says that just because Jesus is the saviour of the world does not prevent other mediations of salvation from existing. It is called participatory mediation. It does not deny rather gives rise to manifold co-operation in the mediation of salvation. So, because Jesus is the unique redeemer of the world, it gives rise to manifold co-operations of that mediation. The Church does not deny that there can be other mediations. So as far as a Christian is concerned, *the so-called gods and goddesses in the Hindu or any other religions are all playing a role of mediation*. Christ can mediate his grace to those people in those religions through their prophets *so far as their teachings are in conformity with those of Jesus*. So, a Hindu or even an atheist who acts according to his conscience conforms to the spirit of the Holy spirit and is a Christian.”<sup>125</sup>

It is interesting that this priest says that the Church does not deny that there can be other mediations. The Church however, does deny other mediations what it does not deny is that there are all kinds

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<sup>124</sup> Nostra Aetate (Vatican Council II), subsection 1.

<sup>125</sup> Fr. Ignatious Thengummoottil, 19/1/2016.



of people who make use of these mediations. It is respect for these people that the Catholic Church advocates for and not acknowledgement for these other mediations as valid forms of mediation for salvation. It then appears that they call on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council as a happy endorsement to their view on this matter but this view is not in alignment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican council

There is something interesting that many of them said which was not said by any of the lay people. While both parties said that there is nothing wrong in the Hindu following their way as the Christian does theirs, the priests and nuns took it one step further. They said that while it is ideal to follow Jesus, it does not matter which god one follows because ultimately salvation is attained only through Jesus whether they are aware of it or not.

“All other ways, all other religions are in some way or the other enlightened by God. Because they are all humans, children of God. But even they, according to the teachings of (our) faith, and even my own conviction is that, (for) those who believe in other religions, finally it is through Jesus Christ that they go to the Father for eternal life.”<sup>126</sup>

“Other religions are not wrong. A Hindu-born girl grows up as a Hindu. If they know Jesus, they will come to our religion. Their ways are not false. *They just do not know that Jesus is the only Way.* Now even if Hindus live according to what is right for them, after their death it is through Jesus that they go to heaven.”<sup>127</sup>

Are they saying that it is inconsequential whether one is a Christian or not? It can appear so. Does this mean *any* Hindu or a Muslim is saved by Jesus? No. They say it will only happen “*if Hindus (or people) live according to what is right for them*”. This is something that all respondents have been saying repeatedly. One needs to live according to what their path guides them to do. That, they say, is the good way of living. Their answers also reflected what this point can be assumed to be a very Indian kind of reasoning.

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<sup>126</sup> Fr. Abraham Mattapally, 17/01/2016.

<sup>127</sup> Sr. Sabrina Cheruvellil, 20/1/2016

“I believe that he is the only way to heaven. See, when I say that I love somebody, it does not mean that I hate others. So, for me, He is the only way. *But it is not an exclusive way.* It does not mean that those who do not go through Jesus cannot reach heaven. *For me, I believe He is the only way.* No certainly not. *It is not an exclusive way.* Just because something is true it doesn't mean that the other things are wrong. There is a gradation of truth. This way is the fullness of truth. The other religions have elements of the truth.”<sup>128</sup>

A clear majority of the lay respondents also said that their religion being true does not make the others false. Although none of the clergy said that the other religions are false, some of them did say that that Christianity is the truest religion. While there were elements of truth and goodness in all religions, it was in Christianity that truth was achieved in full extent. While many missionaries have also been known for saying that there are elements of truth in all peoples because after all, God had imbibed a sense of divinity in all humans, what they said is in stark contrast to what our priests and nuns have said. While it is acknowledged that these elements of truth existed among all peoples, these missionaries never said that the other religions are not wrong or false. They said that despite other people's reverence for false gods there was some sense of goodness in those people which reaffirmed their belief of the presence of divinity among all peoples and their potential to be brought to the right path by becoming Christians. This is not the case with our priests and nuns. While they agree with and profess to everything that the missionaries said, they also maintain that the other religions are not false. They say that other religions are different versions of the same truth that God is. Therefore, people on these paths, although they look like paths different to the one laid out by Christianity, are all traveling towards the same goal, which is reaching God. Christianity has always been known for being an exclusive religion. This is not news to these priests. They know about it yet do not talk about it in that way at one instance even calling the exclusive way “fundamentalist”.

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<sup>128</sup> Fr. Mathew Parekkattu, 20/1/2016

Since all interviewees stated that them being born as Christians was their reason for being Christian, they were additionally asked if they thought they would have been attracted to Christianity had they been born as a Hindu, Sikh or Muslim. Most of them said they were not sure if they would have been attracted to Christianity, not because they do not find Christianity attractive but because they doubt they would have been curious enough to want to know about another religion if they were being brought up as a Hindu. They said that it is one's upbringing and the traditions of their family that makes one do the things they do. Many of them recounted their younger days before they had decided to choose a religious life or before some of them felt that they had got the calling. They talk of going to Church with their family, celebrating Christmas, in a nun's case- something as simple as being envious of the nuns getting a special seating section to pray during mass, or in another case observing that the local priest was looked at with great respect and admiration and wanting the same someday, as the reasons for choosing the religious life, while the other recounted their tales of how they felt they had got the calling. From their stories one can only agree with them and say that their upbringing was indeed the reason behind them becoming, and then continuing as a Christian. One of the priests, who is a revolutionary by his own right, gave a very interesting answer. He said that while him or for that matter any of his peers being a Christian was an accident of birth, a person's nature is what determines what he becomes. When asked what if he was born in a Hindu family, he said-

“I would have been a very staunch Hindu. A person who is zealous in a religion, he would be as zealous if he was born in another religion. If I was born Hindu I would have perhaps been a radical Hindu, maybe in the line of Sree Narayana Guru or somebody who is much influenced by him. If I was a Marxist, also then definitely I would have been a rebel in the Marxist party which has become so corrupt.”<sup>129</sup>

We have so far seen how despite being educated in all the faculties that western theological institutions can provide, the responses of the priests and nuns only affirm and even puts into perspective the responses of lay people. The inherent Indian attitudes in both parties is hard to miss, and this has enabled us to take our first steps in extracting the pattern in which Indians see people

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<sup>129</sup> Fr. Ignatious Thengummoottil, 19/1/2016.

of other communities. Before the end of this section let us hear from a priest who gives us a few pointers to mull over, regarding the precarious state of being a theologian in a culture that he thinks only adds to his knowledge of Christ and Christianity.

“Yes, Jesus is the only way. But I can see that the thorn of that question is ‘only’. The point is if Jesus is the only way then one doesn’t even need to talk about it. If there is to be only one house that house will not have walls. Why do we have walls? Because we need to separate this room from the others. If there is only one room, it doesn’t need boundaries. Jesus is such a reality. Now we are phrasing this question in a context where we already have the idea of many saviours and that is why we are asking (this question), we are forcing that question actually. When we say: Jesus is *the way, the truth, the life*, we must remember even that sequence. The problem is concerning the truth and *there are other truths*. Before we start talking about the truth and life, Jesus has to be the way. One who is on the way to Jesus will never be a threat to anyone. Rather if I do theology from here without ever paying attention to living in the way of Jesus then I can only do harm to Christian theology and other theologies by saying that your god is wrong, your theology is wrong. That is not what Jesus meant. The moment you start living the life of God in Jesus, that opens up the question in a different way. So, there is no doubt, for me, that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. But of course, and there I go in line completely with the second Vatican Council teaching: wherever there is truth and holiness the church is open to that. When we talk about other religions, whatever that is true and holy in other religions, is accepted, appreciated by the Catholic Church. You know these two categories are very solid, very important ones: truth and holiness. John says: Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ. So, what is in scripture reserved to Jesus is now opened up saying, if there is truth and holiness (Holiness and grace is the same thing) and grace in other tradition. What does that mean? Christ is not an exclusive property of Christianity. He can be present in all different traditions, all different religions, all different walks of life and wherever you recognise that you should be open to accept that. But what we theologians do not know is how does that works. We don’t know. It is not revealed. Because the central source of theology is revelation. We can only reason about what has been revealed and there the church

simply says in ways God alone knows God is saving his people. But as far as Christians are concerned we know for certain how it is done especially in reference to the sacraments and so on. We can say how this person (Christian) is saved but how about other people? I know whoever is saved is saved through Christ. But how? I do not know. That is why theology of religion is still such a wonderful topic for fresh studies. Nowadays my project is this- (seeking) the truth and holiness in Indian traditions... what I have been doing is reading a text from Aurobindo Ghosh. A group of priests, religious and one or two lay people, together we are reading Yogic Sadhana and every week they tell me and I myself feel that we are edified by what Aurobindo is saying... *the question of uniqueness of Jesus Christ is not a question for Indian theologians*. They don't even consider that as a very relevant question for theological discussion because they say, well if you don't accept Christ as the way the truth and the life, the unique saviour then there is no point in being a Christian. Our concern is how is it being done. That is the work of the theologian but the western theologians sometimes have misunderstandings about Indian theologians on this point. They think we are pluralists. No, Indian theologians, as far as I know, are not pluralists but they accept plurality. Acceptance of plurality and holding pluralism are two different things. Plurality is a matter of fact. Pluralism is an *ism*, a doctrine... We recognise plurality- *we recognise difference*. Like: one mountain, many ways. No, that isn't what we are saying. There is only one way but we don't know how this is done."

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## **Tolerance**

It has been implied by missionaries, colonials and a few scholars on the matter that with Indianisation the proselytising drive of native Christians might have become muted. Owing to this, we do not have many records of proselytising works undertaken before the arrival of European Christianity in India. Conversion began in large numbers with the coming of Jesuits after the Portuguese established themselves in India in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the last couple of decades India has had a few cases of violence against Christians and Christian establishments.

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<sup>130</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.

The earlier of these cases began with opposition to conversion. The topic of conversion is a battlefield of debates in Indian society, politics and even in academic research. Conversion has created unique problems in India that we have not been able to find solutions to.<sup>131</sup> Without getting into the debate of conversion much, let me explain one facet of this conversation debate that is of significance to us. The constitution of India gives one the right to practice their faith with full freedom. In the Christian's case being able to exercise one's religion includes being able to propagate it. But that is against the grain of Indian traditions that does not interfere with the practices and dynamics of other traditions. So, being interfered by Christian groups is unjust to the non-Christian groups, while being banned from proselytising is against the constitutional rights of Christians. We do not have records of such resistance towards Christian activities before the arrival of European Christianity in India. What is it about the missionary activities of Europeans that made the Indians resist? Even some colonisers were aware of the unrest caused by missionary activities among the natives of India.

Those Missionaries therefore, who have been at the pains to translate the Bible into the Bengal language, and who circulate addresses among the people, condemning their errors and their idolatry, would do well, to look a little into their manners, and to reflect whether those publications have not some tendency to disturb the peace and order of society.<sup>132</sup>

Toleration as we see it now, is an attitude of forbearance that one has towards another in a situation where one does not agree with the other but still accepts them. The term itself however is not known to have been used before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>133</sup> Since tolerance as a political and social practice is only five centuries old, it makes one question if the notion of tolerance can be applied to ancient Rome since differences in Roman society was a given. To understand what tolerance is and when and how it came to be used as a social tool, we would have to go back a few centuries in Europe

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<sup>131</sup> The debate has been tackled in CLAERHOUT, Sarah. *LOSING MY TRADITION Conversion, Secularism and Religious Freedom in India*. Ghent, Belgium., 2010. Gent University.

<sup>132</sup> STUART, Charles. *Vindication of the Hindoos*. London: printed for R. and J. Rodwell, 1808, pg. 17

<sup>133</sup> DRAKE, H. A. *Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance* [online]. B.m.: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society, 1996, pg. 8.

when it was facing a plethora of religio-political conflicts that followed the Reformation. Due to rising conflicts between Catholic and Protestant groups and the persecution of both by the other, it became necessary to bring into place, measures where these groups could coexist without decimating each other. The conflicts were put at considerable rest with the laws passed at the time and since then “tolerance” has been a vital concept in the philosophical and political sphere of Europe.

It is well known that India, for centuries, has been the refuge for groups across the world. Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian groups among others, have over time set base in India. Not only were they not ostracised, but in fact they showed varyingly high degrees of success in integrating into India’s cultural system. Is it that Indians are inherently accepting of new groups? We do not know. We also do not know if the question of “acceptance”, the way we know it, was even raised. The only way of explaining this attitude that existed between Indian communities is, by seeing it as a kind of indifference, for lack of a better word. When we speak of “indifference” in the English language, there are a few negative connotations attached to it. Various dictionaries define it as a lack of interest or a cold attitude shown towards something. But indifference in the case of India is an attitude that *one*, assumes that there are many ways of going about things and *two*, not wanting to particularly engage in the other’s way of going about them. A group has a specific way of going about things. Other groups are simply assumed to have other ways of doing the same.

To conclude this part, it is largely the attitude of Indian communities even today. Every community is indifferent in this particular sense, to the workings of another community, and interference in the other’s is not seen as an ethical thing to do unless special circumstances ask for it. So, to use the term ‘tolerance’ to indicate the attitude of Indian communities towards each other would perhaps be an error. We can only think of it in terms of indifference in which communities assume that other communities function differently than them. Of course, that also means that communities can be highly critical of each other but not in a way that they would find their community superior or rightful. The general sentiment is, as is also gleaned from the responses of the interviewees, one must simply live according to the customs of the community they were born in. What matters is that one way of thought should not interfere with another way of thought.

Moving on, we began by talking about truth claims. Christian theology dictates that there is no way other than that of Jesus's, and all others are 'wrong' or 'false' ways. In other words, that Jesus is the only way is a truth claim. However, it does not seem to remain a truth claim among Indian Christians. Not only do they interpret it in multiple ways, they also break this phrase in such a way that the statement in its entirety can mean something else altogether. For example, it can mean "Jesus is *the* truth, *a* way and *a* life. The "a" and "the" can be interchangeable in any permutation and combination. They also break the statement in such a way that each word means something and each word needs to be analysed separately.

Let us analyse the words 'Jesus', 'Truth' and 'Way'. Every time the religious experience of converts has been discussed, there has been a fleeting suspicion that the process of conversion for them has involved only replacing their gods with Jesus. Given that, we have two kinds of Christians- those who have been converted in the last few generations and those who come from a background where the religion has been handed down by many generations over centuries. For the first, let us provisionally assume that when they accept Jesus it simply means displacing Ganesha/ Shiva with Jesus. Of course, we will not take this for granted without more investigation but this is what missionaries have expressed. On the other hand, for the second group following Jesus (and no other gods) comes naturally. Many respondents said that Jesus to them is what Krishna, Allah and Shiva are to their friends. They explain this by saying just the names of the gods are different. What they stand for and what they encourage their followers to do is the important part. From such responses it is evident that 'Jesus' for them stands for good things like love, sacrifice, forgiveness and such. It might give the impression that all Indian Christians can substitute Jesus with any other god or goddess who stands for these good values. But no, that is not the case. It could be true that their attachment to Jesus is like any Hindu's attachment to his or her deity but here is where the similarity ends. While it is perfectly normal for a Hindu to bow, or pay reverence to Jesus, a Christian generally does not do the same to any of the Hindu gods. A Christian believes that Jesus is the only living God and most importantly, the only God for them. All other deities are those that they must not associate with and their reasons for this can vary. It can be that Hindu gods do not have historicity as is told to them at all possible instances. It can also be simply that as a Christian they are taught not to revere any other god- as a Hindu is not discouraged to revere as many gods



as s/he prefers. The reason can be any but the result is that Christians generally keep their reverence for the one God who they have always been encouraged to revere. That they should not revere other gods is a rule they follow (most often unconditionally). Yet at the same time a Hindu worshipping their god or goddess is irrelevant and makes absolutely no difference to them. In other words, bringing this in perspective of the truth claim we began with, an Indian Christian accepts it (in their own Indian way as we have seen) but is also atypically indifferent to the ways of the rest. This also puts them in the unique position of not questioning their faith as is commonly observed among the believers of the West. To not question an object of belief is something that is not seen in good light, especially today. But it is not seen in a negative light in a culture like India where Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism and all other *isms* are traditions inherited by people- an action heuristics that instructs people on how to live their lives. As we discussed before, there is no reason to continue with a tradition. A tradition is continued simply because it is a tradition.

This raises the question as to why there are people converting to other sects of Christianity among Indian Christians and as to why generally conversions between religions are happening in India now. Speaking only of conversions related to Christianity, we cannot account for whether there were conversions happening before the 15<sup>th</sup> century and if they were, how they occurred and what was the process that went into bringing people into the Christian fold. However, we can take some educated guesses on why conversions happened after missionary works began in India. Some reasons are obvious and written down in the annals of history. There were mass missionary drives famous among which was the Goan Inquisition proposed by St. Francis Xavier. Systems were put in place whereby it became beneficial to convert or revert to Christianity. But let us keep aside these events and look at the kind of discussions the missionaries had with the natives in order to make them see why they should convert to Christianity. The diligent missionaries learnt the local languages to communicate with the people better. They brought in a new narrative where concepts such as “truth” “salvation” “soul” “sin” were introduced in a manner that clearly conveyed the superiority of the coloniser’s culture and religion because of the knowledge they had on the “true” religion. Words from local languages were appropriated for denoting these concepts. This was not just a matter of translation gone wrong. This was a matter of a culture’s intuitions and sensibilities being broken down and dismissed by another culture that deemed itself superior by all means. Terms like “truth” which stood for something else now came to have to do with historicity, the

mere property of an event that happened to have occurred in the world. This is just one of the words among the several that were dispensed into the Indian consciousness through education, politics and every single faculty of if life for an Indian. It affected people and groups in many ways. Following a tradition for tradition's sake came to be frowned upon. It continued but with some sense of shame or embarrassment. For Christianity in particular, the people of the old (in many ways autonomous) Church of India started questioning their faith and their defencelessness against the foreign Catholic Church. Some groups sought help from their Eastern Oriental counterparts in the Middle East while some groups bent the knee to the Catholics while still others joined Protestant banners because the Protestants stood more for the "truth" than the rest. The Indian Christian community was never at rest after European missionary intrusion. Schism after schism and theological differences became the order of the day. The present state of Indian churches is marked with confusion that is a result of a people guided by the intuitions of a tradition rather than a religion, trying to wage a religious combat.

There are still two concepts that we are yet to get clarity on. The notion of "truth" and "way". In Christianity, truth is absolute as can be deduced from the phrase "the truth". There are many aspects to this truth but in totality they make one formidable notion of truth. Anything outside it is a threat or deception or both. But in Indian culture one would be at pains trying to find a principle that is deemed to be "the truth". Let us recall the words of the Balinese. He says that the story of prince Rama is true. He does not say that it is the truth or that Prince Rama is the truth. He merely attributes the quality of the story to be true. Why is it true? The Balinese stresses that it is true despite it having no historicity. Then what is it that he could mean when he says it is true? Let us look at some of the terms used in Indian languages to denote the same such as "sat", "satya" and "sach". It is not uncommon for the phrase "satya-vachan" to be ascribed to a nugget of good instruction or advice. In these instances, the term "sat" stands for something that is good, useful or valuable. What is it valuable for? One guess would be, for conducting one through the world. The utility of this piece of instruction stands on specific problems or difficulties one may encounter in navigating oneself. The difficulty one encounters may be different from the difficulty another encounters. So for as many difficulties in the world, there can be as many instructions of value that the person can use. These are all "sat". Together they do not form a single "sat" that can be equated to the magnanimity of the status that *the* truth has in Christianity. To put it in perspective, it is "this is

true” as opposed to “this is the truth”. If we accept this difference, we can account for why most Indian Christians see Christianity as true and simultaneously say that the other religions are true as well. It also accounts for why many of them also say that all these ways are different ways of reaching the goal.

The next confusion we can have, is regarding the “way”. We have seen that most Indian Christians agree that it is optimal if one follows the way they were born into, to the best of their abilities. They say is it not wrong for others to follow other ways because the end goal is the same. Interestingly quite a number of them also said that the end goal for the Hindus and Buddhists was different.

“Hinduism talks about a circle of life...they lead a life for a better reincarnation. That is their way. I don’t know if there are any destinations for other religions. The way is unique to each destination”<sup>134</sup>

“He is the only way because what he teaches is the same thing all other religions teach- showing people how to be good but the only way because for me, he was a real man who died for my sins. We all teach the same end goal- love. Except maybe Buddhists are more into enlightenment”<sup>135</sup>

So, it is acknowledged that the Christian seeks salvation, (they suspect) that the Hindu is seeking to be a better incarnation and the Buddhist is seeking to be enlightened. If the destination of each of this way is different, why do all the respondents speak of the same goal? Again, we can only make educated guesses. The first guess would be that the destination is not the goal but rather the very act of following one’s way diligently is. It is perfectly understandable to think of one’s goal as living life according to the path that one is subscribed to. The second guess is this- many respondents said that the ultimate goal is love, humanity, goodness and such. Possibly they assume that all paths imbibe and encourage these qualities. Consequently, following one’s path or way makes them exude these qualities. To show these qualities, irrespective of the destination of each of these paths, is the goal. Again, if we subscribe to this explanation, it accounts for what the

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<sup>134</sup> #1, 12/12/2013

<sup>135</sup> #30, 9/11/2014

respondents have said and saves the responses of these people from becoming a confused mass of incoherent ideas.

To sum up what we have learnt so far, -

- Indians follow the path they are born into
- Christianity is the only way for an Indian Christian. But it does not have to be the way for someone who was not born into a Christian family.
- Indian Christians feel that theirs is the easiest way to follow because the Bible gives clear instructions on how to do it unlike other religions.
- One must live according to the path they follow.
- It is not a good practice to coerce others into following a path.

Speaking of destinations, and because it is so close to the topic we just tackled, let us move on to the topic of Salvation.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Salvation**

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

*-John 3:16- 18*

The concept of salvation is perhaps the most vital of all theological concepts. If one were to ask why theological debates have been vehemently discussed and correct interpretations have been sought in the course of the history of Christianity, the simplest of answers one can arrive at is that it was because of the belief that not having clarity on these matters would prevent the followers of Christ from getting salvation. Here is an example of one such question that was tackled in the early years, when theology was in the forming. The question of the nature of Jesus — whether he was part human, part God, full human or full God — became a matter of such strong contention that by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, there were three councils held — 336, 394 and 449 AD — to resolve the issue and eliminate heretical teachings that certain Bishops were dispensing on the matter. Some of the ensuing arguments that were raised due to the lack of consensus on of the nature of Jesus were: i) If Jesus died as a human and not God, then why was his sacrifice significant for the salvation of mankind? The sacrifice of a human was not in the least a novelty after all. ii) If He was God, how could he die? iii) If He was God, who had adopted only a body, then God didn't suffer the way a human does. In this case, the claim of the scripture that God sent his son to his people as a human gets contradicted.

Soteriology is the branch of theology that deals with Salvation and it tries to answer these and other related questions. In the plain sense, salvation encompasses all of God's work through which he redeems men. Salvation is the redemptive consequence of the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>136</sup> Therefore, for a Christian, it is important to believe that Jesus is the only true son of God and that he died so that our sins may be forgiven.

### **Salvation through the ages**

The Old Testament of the Bible, among others, is chiefly a collection of events about the struggles of a group of people, who were chosen by God as His own. Included in these struggles were migrations, the exodus of Israelites from Egypt and plagues. Through each of them God saved his people. This shows that God is the one entity, who most importantly 'saves' among other things. The word salvation mostly appears in the Old Testament of the Bible.<sup>137</sup> Given the contexts in which the word is used, it appears as if it could have been used to either mean "to be liberated", "to be protected" or "to be saved". Irrespective of how it is used, it is clear that God is the only goal of salvation. The evolution of the term starts henceforth, and the New Testament acts as the chief agent in fuelling this concept with a body of doctrines. Although, fundamentally, the meaning of salvation has not changed from how it was used in the Old Testament, its implications have broadened with time. The Old Testament testifies to the trials and tribulations of the Jews who lived for centuries, enslaved or in exile, and were continually brought to places of safety. The New Testament bears testimony to Jesus's claim that he is the Son of God, the one sent by God as was promised to the Jews. Though he makes no direct indication that he was sent for the salvation of the whole humankind, he does make statements such as, "I am the truth, the Way and the Light"<sup>138</sup> and "Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved."<sup>139</sup> It is implied here for his disciples and the later church fathers to interpret them as the confirmation for Jesus being the only way to God. Therefore, Christians claim that Jesus came not just to deliver the Jews, but also

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<sup>136</sup> HERBERMANN, PH.D., LL.D., Charles G., Edward A. PACE, PH.D., John J. D.D. WYNNE, S.J. a Conde B. PALLEEN, PH.D., LL.D. *Original Catholic Encyclopaedia*. Volume XIII. First. 1909.

<sup>137</sup> Psalm 31:15, Jonah 2:9, Micah 7:7, Psalm 34:6

<sup>138</sup> John 14: 6.

<sup>139</sup> John 10: 9.

the rest of humankind and he did so by taking upon himself the sins of mankind and giving up his life on the cross for the sake of the same.

Let us take note of the difference in the way Salvation is talked about in the Old and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God saves, he is the protector. Indian Christians describe Salvation in a particular way. If not identical, their interpretation of salvation is similar to the Old Testament's notion of it. In many ways, Indian Christians see God as the protector. In fact, one of the words used as a translation for saviour is *rakshakan*, which in Malayalam means "protector". Some of them even describe salvation as God saving someone from troubles.

Salvation is a concept that different denominations of Christianity do not agree upon with each having its own tenets about how to attain it. It is also a concept that draws upon few other important doctrines such as Predestination<sup>140</sup>, Total Depravity<sup>141</sup> and Atonement<sup>142</sup> among others. Attaining salvation is not something humans can do on their own. They can do deeds whereby they strive to become worthy of being saved. They can also be saved through having faith. However, salvation is a gift of God given by his mercy and while humans can do their part to be worthy of it, it depends entirely upon God and his grace to determine who gets saved and who does not. The key thing to be noted here is that it is not enough to do good deeds to get saved. One must do those good deeds having accepted Jesus as the saviour and then working on being worthy of attaining salvation. Therefore, it is deemed important that one converts or accepts the path of Jesus, as all good deeds without Jesus in the midst is futile. This brings us to question the salvation of those who are unaware of Jesus. Despite their exemplary good lives, it is a matter of contention whether they can get saved or not. Again, the different denominations answer this question differently. However, they all agree upon one aspect, which is that salvation is given by the grace of God. It is by the

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<sup>140</sup> A form of predeterminism wherein God has already willed the fate of a human soul. It is often at odds with the doctrine of Free Will where God has given man choice to exercise his will that will determine whether he is worthy of salvation or not.

<sup>141</sup> The doctrine arising from the Augustine's doctrine of the Original Sin. It results from the fall of man following Adam and Eve's rebellion in the garden of Eden after which every human born was born into sin. It is this sin that prevents man from following the law of God that renders him unworthy of attaining salvation. It is only God's grace (unmerited mercy) that allows man to keep away from evil and make salvation attainable.

<sup>142</sup> The pardoning of sins, especially original sin through the sacrifice of Jesus. This enables the reconciliation between man and God.

same grace that even grave sinners get saved. Therefore, God's grace takes a much higher precedence over human deeds, good or bad.

The pattern of distortions that Indians make is most visible in the way they think about salvation. It must be noted that there is a distinction in the way people think of salvation in the northern parts of the western coastal belt, compared to those in the southern part. This has to do with the languages used by Christians in these parts. A good majority of Christians in the northern coastal belt use Konkani or English. The former has a word for salvation, which is 'salvasaun' taken from the Portuguese for it, which is 'salvação'. It however, needs to be seen if they understand it like salvation is conceived of in theology or if they have only adopted the word, while ascribing it to Indian connotations. We will see that in the following sections. Konkani is not as popular in the southern part, where other local languages are used for liturgical purposes. The word in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu for salvation is *moksha* and sometimes *swarga* or *raksha*, depending on the context in which it is spoken of. Technically, all three of them have different meanings. Textbook definitions tell us that *moksha* is a state attained wherein one is liberated or enlightened. While *raksha* literally means protection or to be saved even in a non-theological context, *swarga* is a loose translation of 'heaven'. The context in which *swarga* is used is such that although it is sometimes used as a substitute for salvation, it indicates the destination of a good Christian. So, in a way, the notions of salvation and heaven get mixed up because both are seen as the destination of Christian life. Or, in other words, to reach heaven is salvation.

The commonly used term for salvation in south Indian languages is *moksha*, which in turn is also called *mukti*. Salvation and moksha are not the same. Yet, how these Indian terms came to be appropriated by the missionaries to be used as translations is something that needs to be looked into. William Hodge Mill was one of the key translators when the Bible was first translated into Indian languages. *Mukti* was the word the missionary chose to translate salvation in the early days of translating Christian theology. Richard Fox Young (1981) referring to Mill explains the reason thus:

In reference to utilizing mukti, his defense was as follows: "It is no objection to the use of this word, that the Mukti or Salvation which the Hindu devotees profess to seek, consists in the absorption of individual existence in the One Eternal Essence of



the Deity and is expressly distinguished by them from what they deem the lower (and perishable) reward of individual happiness in the heaven of Indra. The circumstance of this being the proper word for salvation — and the only one for Eternal salvation decides us to take this: and the right idea of it will follow to the converted Hindu" (1828: 7).<sup>143</sup>

Let us try to figure out why he equated *mukti* with Salvation. Here is a calculated guess; he says that *mukti* is what the Hindu devotee professes to seek, explaining it as the absorption of his/her individual existence into the “one eternal essence” of the deity. If *mukti* is what a Hindu seeks then it can be taken as the end goal to a Hindu life. While it is not explicitly said that salvation is the goal of a Christian life in the Bible, it is abundantly implied through the scriptures, especially when Jesus talks of the Kingdom of God. Salvation on a basic level is understood to be the entrance into this Kingdom. Then, this should mean that salvation is the goal of a Christian life. While Mill was aware that there are differences between *mukti* and salvation, considering both were end goals of their respective systems, Mill equated Christian salvation with the Indian word for the “Hindu” end goal so as to be able to educate the natives on what constitutes to seeking an end goal that is Christian.

The western missionary first anointed *mukti* and then *moksha* as an apt word for salvation and a native Christian seemed to understand what salvation is by knowing it as *moksha*. But the question is, did either party understand that there is a difference between how the first conceived of it and how the latter conceptualized it. As we will soon see, it seems that neither of the two understood that in the process of translating, a conceptual distortion had occurred, which resulted in the native, mostly south Indian Christians having inaccurate ideas on what salvation really is and how it is placed in the original Christian framework. Their cultural intuition compelled them to think about it in ways that show that the basic roots of those thoughts lie in the Indian conception of *mukti* mixed with distorted ideas that they had received from the new religion.

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<sup>143</sup> YOUNG, Richard Fox. *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*. Vienna: Indological Institute University Of Vienna, 1981. Publications of the De Nobili Research, pg. 41.

Extracting information about salvation from respondents was not an easy task. There are some reasons for it; the first of which is, their admittance that their knowledge in the area was lacking. Secondly, they felt uncomfortable with their responses because many of them were convinced that how they formulated the concept was in contradiction to what they thought the Church said about it. In many cases, they said they found the view of the Church very exclusive in this matter.

What *moksha* is, is something that most Indians cannot articulate. However, it appears that a large number of respondents, despite being Christians, had a sense of what it meant both in the “Hindu” context (and more clearly in the Christian context), which was made clear by their understanding that it is more than mere ‘liberation’ from the materialistic world for the Hindu. Salvation, on the other hand, the way Indian Christians speak of it, seems to have more to do with *moksha* than the theological notion of it. For example, salvation is something that happens after a person dies.<sup>144</sup> A surprising number of respondents think that it is not necessary for one to die to get saved. Some even said that death prevents one from getting salvation. These respondents believed that salvation is something that you attain, while you are alive.

“What’s the point in getting salvation after death? It’s no use to anybody.”<sup>145</sup>

In order to get saved, one had to truly believe in it and work towards it by looking into oneself and by being a better human being. They said that salvation is rather a state of mind as illustrated by the response below:

“(salvation is) The moment you feel you can conquer all with God in your life. Through your experiences through life you get a realization, a peace.”<sup>146</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to state that Indian Christians show a disinterest in being informed of what they are supposed to believe in and if theirs is the right way of believing. This happens despite them being regular Church-goers or calling themselves proper practitioners of the faith. The

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<sup>144</sup> Unless Judgement Day happens while one is alive in which case one is taken up into the heavens along with the dead who are raised in Christ. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

<sup>145</sup> #14, 30/1/2014

<sup>146</sup> #25, 27/1/2014

reasons for this can at this stage only be guessed, but I would try to speculate on the matter at a later point in this essay. This lack of knowledge or understanding on theological matters is evident by their blatant ignorance on basic things about theological issues. Of course, one may argue that many practising Christians in the West are ignorant as well. However, there is a difference here. Despite their ignorance, if an attempt is made at making a western Christian understand a theological concept, it is likely that they will be able to make sense of it or at the very least be capable of distinguishing between a thought that seems right and that which might be heretic as was evident from the responses of the few Western atheists, whom I interviewed. One important thing to note here is that not being informed of what a concept means in this context is seen as ignorance. This ignorance can be eliminated by learning about it. However, this is not the case among Indians. *One*, they generally do not seek to understand what these concepts mean. If they do, they believe that it is normal to infer whatever understanding of the concept they can, if it makes the concept intelligible to them and relevant to their understanding of the faith. *Two*, the question of a potential heretic thought does not arise, at least not for the lay people (and as we will soon see, for many priests and nuns either). So, there is no structure (if one has to look at it from a theological point of view) in the way these Indian Christians conceptualise any Christian concept. We know that in India there is no central authority to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism that dictates what their tenets should be. In a culture where it is understood that there are multiple ways of understanding something, the same attitude is reflected among Indian Christians, who have been shaped by this culture despite acknowledging their central authorities such as the Roman Pope or the Eastern Patriarch. This could be the reason why they give seemingly absurd explanations of what salvation is such as below:

“Freedom from everything, like sin, bad karmas, suffering, etc. etc.”<sup>147</sup>

“Being saved from rebirth.”<sup>148</sup>

“I think salvation starts with forgiving oneself”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> #61, 12/9/2014.

<sup>148</sup> #73, 11/10/2014.

<sup>149</sup> #17, 20/1/2014.

It is surprising to see that for the notion of karma and rebirth to occur in the responses of lay Indian Christians is not uncommon. Karma is mostly talked about in matters of sin and its consequences, while rebirth is spoken about when these respondents talk about what happens after death. On the issue of salvation and the confusion caused by the usage of the word moksha, only a very small number of people (5) knew for sure that moksha and salvation are different things. One-fifth of the respondents (most of who were speakers of native languages) believed that both were the same, while a large majority remained unclear on what moksha is. It is interesting to note through some responses that despite not being clear on the difference or similarity of the two, these respondents think that salvation is possible for anyone, only the nature of salvation changes according to the “way” they belong to.

“Salvation and Moksha are the same thing. Hindus and Jains just think you get many chances. For Christians, salvation is possible because Jesus died for our sins.”<sup>150</sup>

“Salvation is being free from evil things. Moksha is also freedom, but from different things. It (the latter) is for non-Catholics.”<sup>151</sup>

It is clear from the first quote that the respondent thinks that salvation and moksha are the same thing, only that it happens in different ways for different people. Because rebirth is a facet that is considered typical to Hinduism and Jainism, the respondent believes that they get multiple chances to attain it. For Christians, however, because they do not get reborn, they have only one chance. For them, salvation is possible because Jesus made sure of its possibility by giving up his life for the atonement of their sins. The second respondent acknowledges the difference between salvation and moksha. For him, while both being different, they are the end goal to the path of a Hindu and a Christian respectively. He understands that the goal of each path is different and that salvation is applicable to only Catholics.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> #30, 9/11/2014.

<sup>151</sup> #98, 16/9/2014.

<sup>152</sup> Salvation is the end goal for Catholics and not Hindus. By saying this he does not mean that Salvation is not available for Protestants or other kinds of non-Catholic Christians. It is a manner of speaking that Catholics in Mumbai have adopted to distinguish themselves from the Hindus.

What theology tells us is that salvation is not guaranteed to everyone, who follows Christ. It is given by the grace of God. By this reasoning, it is agreed that while salvation is difficult, it is also possible for those, who are not Christians because God is merciful and he can bestow his grace upon anyone he wills. Therefore, salvation is not necessarily contingent on someone being a Christian. The respondents are of the same opinion, but the way they arrive at this conclusion is different. The “grace” of God is seldom mentioned, in fact it is something that many do not even understand. Grace is simply understood as kindness or mercy and not in terms of something that is unmerited. Yet, they are convinced that salvation is possible for everyone, irrespective of which religion they belong to.

“I don’t know how to attain it, but all can attain it, *including Hindus and Muslims.*”

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“May be, when the soul is free of anything materialistic from life on earth is when you can say salvation is attained. But, *I don't think that following anything in particular or not following will decide our fate on whether salvation is ours.*”<sup>154</sup>

Despite the degree of knowledge that they have on what salvation is, every one of them is convinced that salvation is attained through good deeds.

“Salvation is the peace you get in world, *when you do good things.*”<sup>155</sup>

“You need to encounter Jesus, who will help you to become a worthy child of God and living your life the way he wants you to. If you have not had a Jesus encounter, then God will look at *your life and your deeds* and make the decision”

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<sup>153</sup> #90, 11/9/2014.

<sup>154</sup> #15, 9/1/2014.

<sup>155</sup> #26, 8/1/2014.

<sup>156</sup> #41, 27/7/2014.

However, salvation is not attained through good deeds. Good deeds do not mean a thing until they are done through Christ. In the Bible, good deeds on their own have been equated to “filthy rags”.<sup>157</sup> The Bible says that faith alone is what saves one, which Protestants take literally. Their criticism of the Catholic Church is that the latter places more importance to good deeds, which is not accurate. St. Augustine wrote thus, about faith and works:

Unintelligent persons, however, with regard to the apostle’s statement: “We conclude that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law,” [Romans 3:28] have thought him to mean that faith suffices to a man, even if he leads a bad life, and has no good works. Impossible is it that such a character should be deemed “a vessel of election” by the apostle, who, after declaring that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision,” [Galatians 5:6] adds at once, “but faith which worketh by love.” It is such faith which severs God’s faithful from unclean demons, -for even these “believe and tremble,” [James 2:19] as the Apostle James says; but they do not do well. Therefore they possess not the faith by which the just man lives, -the faith which works by love in such wise, that God recompenses it according to its works with eternal life. But in as much as we have even our good works from God, from whom likewise comes our faith and our love, therefore the self same great teacher of the Gentiles [apostle Paul] has designated “eternal life” itself as His gracious “gift.” [Romans 6:23]<sup>158</sup>

Augustine said that faith alone did not save, but it needed to be accompanied by acts of love. This is what the Catholic Church teaches. Not all denominations say that good deeds are not enough, however, it is a difficult discussion that is theological in nature.

Certain liberal churches are blamed for holding the belief that good deeds are enough, but the criticism towards them comes from the fact that their theologies are watered down to accommodate believers, who do not hold the strict views that is demanded of them by Christian theology. According to some of these watered-down theologies, good deeds can even be considered a precursor to forgiveness of sins. Appeasing God is done through having faith in him and not

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<sup>157</sup> But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. – Isaiah 64: 6

<sup>158</sup> AURELIUS, Augustine. *A Treatise on Grace and Free Will*. 426n. 1, Chapter 18.

through good deeds. That does not mean that good deeds are not important.<sup>159</sup> A follower is called to be holy and not sin. What is important for us to know is that good deeds do not promise forgiveness of sins, but it is the natural result of having God's grace. So, good deeds do not make one a Christian. Good deeds happen *because* one is a Christian. It is a growing tendency among liberal groups to profess their watered-down ideology, especially in the wake of an inclusive brand of Christianity that is deemed to be the need of the hour. They are accused of having a wrong view of Jesus and the value that being a Christian confers on a follower of Christ, thus, by extension they are deemed to have a wrong view of salvation. These denominations that have watered-down theology are appreciated for their more tolerant attitudes. One can in a similar fashion appreciate the tolerant views of the Indian Christian, but these two are different from each other. This tolerant view of liberal denominations is a new development, while for Indian Christians this has always been the case because the importance placed on theology in Indian Christianity is very little compared to the same in the West.

## **The Instructors Speak (II)**

We will now look at how those belonging to religious orders speak about the concept of salvation. The gist of what they say on the topic is much closer to their peers in the West compared to their responses to other topics. However, as in the case of lay people, the way they arrive at their answers provides us interesting insights into the thought process of these priests and nuns and how culture might be a significant component in shaping this thought process. Let us begin with the translational issues mentioned earlier. Moksha, for Christians who use native languages, means *swarga* or *swargam*, which in English would loosely be "heaven". The priests and nuns were very clear on this matter.

"In English, we call it heaven. It happens after death. The just people will be with God. It is that state and it is called moksha"<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. – 1 Thessalonians 4:7

<sup>160</sup> Fr. Mathew Parekkattu, 20/1/2016.

So, if for them *moksha* is *swargam* and if *swargam* is where they assume the just Christians go to, then does it mean that heaven is what they equate to salvation? This becomes confusing when we take into account that there is already something that is understood as *moksha* and it is not connected to the notion of going to heaven. The following excerpt may help us understand how these Christians make the distinction.

“That (Christian) *moksha* is different. It is not salvation. *Moksham* in Malayalam means heaven (*swargam*). The Hindu word *moksha* is different from *moksham*. (The difference is that) Hindu *Moksha* is equal to salvation. (Christian) *moksham* is heaven. That is why Jesus is called *mokshathin-rajavu* (king of heaven).”<sup>161</sup>

According to this, there is a difference between the Hindu *moksha* and the Christian *moksha*. But, this complicates matters for us. So far, we were led to believe that *moksha* and salvation were the end goal of Hinduism and Christianity, respectively. But, if the Christian *moksha* is *swargam* and not salvation (as some of the priests said) and if *swargam* is the end goal of Christian life, then where does that leave salvation for Christians? To put this issue at rest, we could do either of the two. *One*, we could say that salvation and *swargam* are interchangeable notions for these Christians, which would account for the lax manner in which even priests, who are supposed to have clarity on theological matters, use the terms. Or, *two*, that conceptually there is simply no equivalent to salvation in Indian languages. This would show that Mill’s appropriation of *moksha* as the Indian term for salvation was a failure. In addition, it would help us put the matter at rest, if we are to accept that *moksha* is used differently by non-Christian Indians and by Christian Indians. The latter, while occasionally and sometimes frequently drawing from the Hindu notion of *moksha*, also pick aspects that they draw from Christian theology to their interpretation of *moksha*. Thus, we can account for why the term *raksha* (to be saved) is also used in association with the Christian *moksha* because to be saved (not taking into account from what) is an idea that can be transmitted here, despite the linguistic and cultural barrier. However, the point here is not to examine what exactly these priests and nuns mean when they use these different terms. The point is that there is no discipline in the way these words are used, which leads to confusion. So, either they use these words inconsistently or the priests and nuns simply not clear on what these words imply.

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<sup>161</sup> Fr. Cyril Mannamplackal, 19/1/2016



If the matter of translation and its cultural transmission have been laid to rest, we can proceed to look at how these people understand the notion of salvation. I just stipulated that while Christian moksha draws from the notion of Indian moksha, it also adds to it aspects that it has received from Christian theology. Which means, very often we will find words picked from theology used to talk about ideas that are inherently Indian and this manner of talking also seems perfectly intelligible to Indians. For example, let us see what a priest said on the matter.

“There are different notions of it (salvation). For example, some people think salvation is life with God. For some, it is being able to enjoy all the blessings of God. For some people, it is liberation. For me, it is to reach the ultimate God. *It starts from here, but the final fulfilment is after death.* Salvation is the reality now. In the Christian understanding salvation is to be in heaven, that is, to be with Jesus. But, that process has to start here. Heaven is neither here nor in the world to come... We are controlled by the desires of the world. It is not right to say that we are in heaven... We (have to) make heaven a reality. For example, a family can experience heaven by doing things together like communion. Sometimes we really feel like we are in hell and exclaim, “get me out of this hell!”. There can be animosity and many other things that make us feel that we are in hell. When these things are not there, we experience heaven. Moksha is that state of salvation. It means we are being liberated to that goal. Moksha is the state that happens here (on earth). It is a liberation, which is the ultimate goal. In eschatology, we also have the final decisive intervention of God. Moksha is the eternal salvation, which happens here, in the world but the final fulfilment will be in the eschatological times, which is the last day.”<sup>162</sup>

Firstly, let us note that he says that salvation can mean all kinds of things to different people. What is important for us here is that he doesn't delve into telling us what salvation as a concept is. Instead, he clearly begins to talk about his idea of it by saying “for me, it is...”. Which is an acknowledgement of his idea that what salvation to him is, may be different for someone else. This reaffirms what I said earlier, which is that generally an Indian Christian feels that they are at liberty

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<sup>162</sup> Fr. George Karippaparambil, 22/1/2016.

to make sense of a theological concept in whatever way they find it lends intelligibility to their understanding of Christianity. Secondly, his idea of heaven is not a place where one is with God as other interviewees said. It is something we have to make into a reality, where we are. Heaven for him, as we can see through his example, is an experience of togetherness, while doing something that is good (if that is what he meant by communion) and a general state of being happy. This is in opposition to hell, which is a state that is created out of unpleasantness caused by animosity, for example. It is in the absence of all the things that constitutes to making hell that heaven is experienced. To put it simply, heaven and hell are simply states of experience. Next, it is quite interesting to see how this priest applies his understanding of the notion of *moksha* to his narrative of salvation. There are two stages. Moksha, by now we know is *swarga* or heaven. *Moksha* is the first stage, which happens while we are on earth. He calls it the “ultimate goal”. It is the state of tranquillity, which liberates us, thus, allowing entry into the second stage that happens during eschatological time or in other words, on the last day when the final Judgement is supposed to take place. There are two things to note here: the first is that despite moksha being understood as *swargam*, it is still associated with liberation, which is what the Indian *moksha* is associated with. Second, he has endorsed his idea of moksha with eschatology<sup>163</sup>, which theologically speaking is quite absurd, but to this Indian it makes sense.

Let us not assume that such a way of thinking about salvation is exceptional. While not articulating it with such details, some other priests shared the opinion that salvation is a process that begins on earth before one dies and this stage is vital to what is to come next. For example, one of them even said:

“If it does not happen before you die it will never happen after your death.”<sup>164</sup>

Moving on, the priests and nuns were asked if salvation was something everyone could be given irrespective of one’s religion or beliefs. This part of their responses is the closest to their western peers. They conceded that salvation was a possibility for everyone and not just a monopoly of Christians. They also conceded that salvation happens only through Christ. Yet, again, the thought

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<sup>163</sup> The branch of theology dealing with last things to happen such as death, judgement and the destiny of the soul and humankind.

<sup>164</sup> Fr. Steven Mannamplackal, 10/1/2016.

process that went into them coming to such a conclusion has many interesting aspects. Here is an excerpt from an interview with which we will begin our analysis:

“Yes, there is an explanation. See, every person has a moral obligation to make a search. A rightful search after the truth. Every person. That means *if you understand yourself as a creature created by god then you are morally obliged to make a rightful search after this truth* — the creator and to understand who God is and what it means... (Suppose) he is a sincere man, a conscientious person, and if the search tells him, well you are a Hindu and what Hinduism teaches you is the right thing, you hold on it. This is called the freedom of conscience. *This is approved by the Catholic Church*. And then you proceed to... I won't say claim because salvation is a gift of god, before god you are justified. But at the same time, if this search tells you that well this is not the one, the other one is the right one, *you have the moral obligation to espouse or accept the other one*. They are really acting according to the conscience. That's what they suspected. I should follow my conscience, but the conscience has to be properly informed. It is for that (that) you make a study or do research or make a quest after the truth. But, some people say that (if) I think that by killing somebody I will be saved and he will be saved. There the point is you have not made a proper study. It is out of your ignorance. That is why I said you have to open the horizon, make studies and after all this if you feel in your conscience, you realize that what you are doing is the right thing, then that's it. (If you want to) follow Hinduism, end it (the search), you follow it, you are entitled to salvation. The church also teaches that, the freedom of conscience. And suppose you as a Catholic and I talk to somebody about Christ and all those things. And ...he says I have my world, studies and other things and I feel that my religion is right, then I have no right to force him to become a Christian or Catholic. I think that is wrong.”<sup>165</sup>

Before delving into an explanation of the above excerpt I must state that he is not the only one who talks about a search that we humans should do. The search for the truth is one that has been espoused by many doctors of the Church. It is this search that brings one to God because God is the truth. Our Indians of the religious orders also talked of this search. However, their search seems

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<sup>165</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikaran, 22/1/2016.

to have strange parameters. According to this priest, the search is conditional only to those who believe themselves to be created by God. The rest are perhaps excluded then. So, who gets to make this search and who does not depends on whether one wants to make this search. And, if one holds this belief s/he has the moral obligation to pursue that search. The priest lays emphasis on making a rightful search. A rightful search, he says, is one that is free of prejudice. One cannot begin the search by assuming that Jesus is one s/he should arrive at in the end. If the search tells the person that following Hinduism is the right thing for them, then, again, they have a moral obligation to follow that path. Till the point where the priest was talking about the search for truth, he was in agreement with his peers of the West. However, his belief that once a person has found a path (even if it has nothing to do with Jesus) s/he must stick to it, is unprecedented. It shows us that the priest thinks that the search can lead to different kinds of path. Unlike the Christian who has two paths — one that leads to Jesus and one that takes him away from Jesus (which is the wrong path) — this Indian Christian talks of other paths as not right or wrong, but merely as different paths that different people can espouse. The priest, however, says that walking on a path has to be a conscientious and well-informed decision and when he talks of a moral obligation to espouse the path one has chosen, the only way of making sense of it is this way — a person, who through their conscientious decision has chosen a path errs if s/he does not espouse that path and does not do the things the path requires them to do. In other words, Hinduism, Buddhism or any other ism are different paths that one is free to take. None of them are wrong. They are merely paths that they find is most suited for them. He speaks of freedom of conscience as one in which a person should have the freedom to choose their path. We can talk to them about our path, but the person should not be imposed upon us to follow the path we deem right. He feels it is a wrong thing to do. Let us see how another priest describes how salvation works for people of all religions.

“See, we believe in the fatherhood of God. God is the Father of all mankind and many may not realise that. There is a concept of the unknown Christ. If the Hindus — even if they do not profess Christianity — sincerely believe that Hinduism is the true religion, then we believe that such people will be saved. A Muslim also, if he sincerely believes that Islam is the way for him, can be saved. Provided Buddha and Gandhi sincerely believe that God was with them, they could be saved. Suppose they had a chance to know Christ and they wilfully denied Him then they would have had no chance. But, they sincerely believe that Hinduism

was their way to God and there are so many good people among the Hindus, not only Christians. I believe that they are also sons and daughters of God. Gandhi was a Christian at heart. So then surely, he could have been saved. See, being saved is conditional for anyone. It is the work of God. Provided he sincerely believes that he has chosen the right way, God will give him eternal life.”<sup>166</sup>

Christianity’s mission is to take the message of Christ to the ends of the world, so that no one is deprived of the salvation that has been made a possibility because of Jesus. Within the Church there have been questions regarding what happens to those who have not had the opportunity to know about Jesus in their lifetimes. This priest addresses that issue. He says that salvation is not a possibility to anyone who denies Jesus. However, if they truly believe that Hinduism (or Islam) is the “true” religion and follow it sincerely then they would be saved. The crux of the argument is that they have to truly believe that theirs is the right path. So, what matters here is not the path they have chosen, but how they follow it. If they follow it well, then they get saved. He does not say that there is a possibility of them getting saved, he is sure about it. How does he know that they will get saved? One of the criterion he picks for getting saved is by being good. He says that there are many good people among Hindus, not just Christians. Being good makes one a Christian at heart according to him. That is what saves them. So then being good, doing good deeds is what he sees as the qualifying factor for getting saved besides believing in one’s path. So, next, we move on to the value these nuns and priests confer to good deeds. A nun was asked what salvation is and she said it is *raksha* (protection). Protection from what, we may ask. *Raksha* makes one go to heaven. So, a lack of *raksha* prevents one from going to heaven. What according to her is the way of getting *raksha*? Let us see:

“(Salvation is) *raksha*. Depending on how you live on earth, God gives you a deserving experience after you die. If you live well, you will end up being a rightful heir of heaven. *If we live a sinful life disregarding God’s laws we will not get raksha*. The experience of *raksha* is available to people of all religions. That’s why Hindus say that if you haven’t lived your life well enough, you will have to take rebirth to do so. Even Muslims have their own code of law.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Fr. Mathew Parekkattu, 20/1/2016.

<sup>167</sup> Sr. Tessa Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

It is clear that the nun believes that living well, that is, living according to the laws of God gives you *raksha*. She does not think that there is another way of getting *raksha*. So, the deeds of a person is what determines whether one goes to heaven or not. Moreover, she said something that our lay respondents repeated over and over again. It does not matter which religion one belongs to, *raksha* is something that everyone can avail. She justifies it by giving an example of Hinduism and why they talk about rebirth. According to her, the way Hindus believe in rebirths is such that a Hindu stops getting reborn, if they do enough good deeds in their current life. What she is saying is that everyone has their own way of attaining *raksha* depending on the path they follow, but the only way of attaining it is living according to what one's path says.

When we started the discussion on the Christian understanding of salvation, we saw how good deeds is not the means to salvation. Yet, most of our priests and nuns profess the same. In addition to that, they also say that salvation is something that is granted to everyone irrespective of religion provided they do good deeds. It is interesting to see how they explain this.

“They (all) go the heaven. He (Jesus) is the truth. Suppose there is only one flight... to Chicago, but it is from Delhi. There is no flight from Cochin to Delhi. So, what do we do? I will take an Indian flight and they will give me a connecting flight. I can go only through American flight to America, but I don't know about American (flights) so I take Air India and they give me tickets. Air India has connection with American (flights) and they have given me a seat. The same way everyone who does good works is saved. But, that saving is only through Jesus as he is the only truth.”<sup>168</sup>

This priest has no doubts that salvation happens only through Christ but his explanation of how it happens is interesting. He explains it by using a metaphor. He says that if his goal is to reach Chicago, but the only flight to Chicago is from Delhi he will not be able to go to Chicago because he lives in Kochi. Only a flight from Kochi to Delhi, will enable him to board that flight to Chicago from Delhi. Through this metaphor, he is trying to show that the Christian way is the flight from

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<sup>168</sup> Fr. Joseph Kunnapally, 16/1/2016.

Delhi to Chicago, in other words, salvation is attainable only through Christ. But, there are people living in Kochi (that is, people following other ways), who can access that flight from Delhi. Which means, although one may be from any tradition, as long as they do good works, they will be saved through Christ.

When told that it appeared to me as if only good deeds were necessary to get saved, I asked the priests and nuns what was the point in becoming a Christian. Through our deeds, whether we know and accept Jesus or not, if we are going to get saved by him, then why must we get baptised and practice Christianity? The core of their answers can be best shown through the following response:

“See, I cannot categorically say that (only Christians can get saved) because if a person has never known about Christ, but is living according to the values and conscience of that person, God will be just and merciful.

And even if the person has heard of Jesus, has lived a very good life but is not a Christian, has the duty to seek the truth. And finally, he has to decide. I cannot judge. But, *once we receive baptism we commit to signs of Christ. And, Christ is the perfect model for Christians.* If you are going away from that, there is something going away from you. If the others live according to the values they have and according to their conscience, then God will judge them also. According to the knowledge they have, God will be graceful to them.”<sup>169</sup>

This priest emphasises the duty conferred on Christians through baptism. He says that once baptised into becoming a Christian (which is what he means by committing to signs of Christ) one enters a commitment to Christianity. This commitment is what is important. For a Christian (note, not necessarily for others), Christ is the perfect model. If one does not fulfil their commitment to it, they lose something. Similarly, others also have a commitment to what they follow. If they follow it, the way their path shows, God will judge and be graceful to them accordingly.

In conclusion to this part, I would like to quote a theologian, who is well-known for his knowledge of Indian traditions. He talks about *moksha*, what it means in Hinduism, how it applies to Christianity and how Christianity takes it a few steps further, which completes the process of

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<sup>169</sup> Fr. Abraham Mattapally, 17/1/2016.

salvation.

“*Moksha* is comparable with what we call *moksham* in Malayalam also, but you know it is a very, very, very loaded word in Hinduism because since ancient times we find that the word appeared in Hindu culture. Earlier, in the Vedic times, they had the idea of *swarga*, heaven, but later during the Shravana movement from which Jainism and Buddhism also came out, people began to talk about liberation and that is how *moksha* comes in. But in *moksha*, at the conceptual level, one is leaving all bondage and the final bondage is that of the body and the self becomes one with the absolute self. That is what is happening. I mean from a systematic, theological point of view something similar is the case with Christianity too. But, the difference, *very important difference*, is personal immortality. Belief in personal immortality in Christianity — which isn’t there in Hinduism — when we consider *moksha* as the ultimate idea, but with *swarga* and other things (such as) cycle of birth and rebirth within that personal migration, transformation is there, but once you get out of this cycle there is no personal immortality in Hindu culture. There you become one with everything. That is why people want their ashes to be spread everywhere and become one. But, that is not the case with Christianity. A David will be David in heaven too. So, except for this difference, you’d say salvation and *moksha* are the same thing. The concepts that we use here is different in the sense of what the experience of *Moksha* is — seeing God face to face, a beatific vision that is the Christian understanding of salvation, seeing God face to face. In order to see God face to face, one needs eyes senses and so on. That kind of discourse is totally meaningless as far as (Hindu) *moksha* is concerned because even the senses, everything transcends in order to attain (Hindu) *moksha*. These (Hindu, Christian) are less significant labels. Christ himself did not take that very seriously. These labels do not help us. Christianity doesn’t save, Christ saves.”<sup>170</sup>

Here, we yet again have an exemplary case of how Indians combine cultural intuitions with their understandings of theological concepts. *Moksha*, both Christian and Hindu, are similar except for one major difference — personal immortality. The Hindu *moksha* has no place for the sense of an

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<sup>170</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.



‘I’, a personal agency, or any significance attached to experiences that include being able to see or feel or hear a being, while the Christian *moksha* guarantees a face to face meeting with God. One can see him and perhaps what the priest is implying is that one can feel him through other sensory means. The person, who has attained Christian *moksha* does not become one with the absolute, but remains the same person, who encounters and experiences God. It is difficult for us to decipher what he means when he says that the labels of Christian or Hindu are not significant considering he made a clear distinction between Hindu and Christian *moksha*. However, the final statement about the salvific property of Christ and not Christianity may indicate what he wants to say as — being Christian does not make one have a higher chance of getting saved. But, we cannot be sure about it, at the moment.

It is very important to understand the nuances of what these priests are saying. These are not doubts that these priests are expressing or mere speculations. Considering all the priests and nuns are repeating the same thing in different words, we can see a pattern emerging wherein it is clear that those, who were interviewed professed something in the best way that lent intelligibility to their understanding of Christian theology. One can say that they are misled or misinformed about these theological issues. It could be true, but then how do we account for the fact that their explanations of Christian theology that they individually paint is almost identically construed? They were not educated in the same institutions, but they were educated in the best theological institutions of Rome, Paris and Belgium. How is it that their account of Christian theology exhibits the same pattern of distortions, distortions that would be considered problematic at best or even utterly wrong in the West if looked through the authoritarian lens of theology?

To sum up:

- Salvation has no equivalent in Indian languages. The translated words that are used make the Indian distort theological concepts. The distortions that occur get shown in various ways, such as many people believe that salvation happens before death and not after.
- Salvation, most Indians think, is possible for everyone to attain if they follow their respective paths rightly. Not just that, they believe that the kind of salvation one attains depends on which path they follow.
- They do not see salvation as something that is unmerited. They are sure that salvation can be

attained by everyone who work towards it.

- Deeds are given the primary position in the factors that constitute to whether a person attains salvation or not — not belief in God. Salvation for most Indian Christians is the result of doing good deeds on earth. The result is that one attains an entry into heaven and enjoys God's presence.

So far, we discussed what constitutes to one attaining salvation. Now, we will move the discussion to what constitutes to one not attaining salvation for Indian Christians. If good deeds are what lead to salvation, then the opposite of that must be what prevents one from attaining salvation.

Let us now enter the domain of sin and see how it is related to the notion of salvation for these Indian Christians.

## Chapter 5

### **Sin**

*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. - 1 John 1:7-9*

In the words of St. Augustine, sin is "an utterance, a deed, or a desire" contrary to the eternal law.<sup>171</sup> In simple terms, it can be defined as breaking the law of God. Sin has many categories. It can be classified based on the virtues they oppose, the commandments they break, whether it is committed against someone, oneself or God. They can be carnal in nature or those of thoughts, deeds, words or even omission of what the Church describes as duty.

Standard textbooks<sup>172</sup> tell us the following about sin. Depending on degree, sin can be classified into two. They are mortal and venial. While the former completely severs the link between man and God, the latter only weakens it. For a sin to be mortal, three criteria must be met. First, it should violate one of the Ten Commandments, which are considered to be the most important laws of Christianity. Second, it must be committed with the full knowledge of the person committing it. It cannot be unintentional. Finally, it must be committed with deliberate consent, which presumes that it cannot be a mortal sin if one is forced to commit it. Venial sin, on the other hand, is sins of a lesser degree. It is an action, which is committed with full knowledge, and consent, but is not

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<sup>171</sup> St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22: PL 42, 418

<sup>172</sup> HERBERMANN, PH.D., LL.D., Charles G., Edward A. PACE, PH.D., John J. D.D. WYNNE, S.J. and Conde B. PALLEEN, PH.D., LL.D. *Original Catholic Encyclopaedia*. Volume XIV. First. 1909.

grave. Here is an example that would demonstrate how a sin can be classified as mortal or venial. As mentioned, for a sin to be mortal, a grave sin of breaking one among the Ten commandments, must be committed. To honour your father and mother is a commandment. So, to dishonour one's parents is a mortal sin. On the other hand, dishonouring strangers is a venial sin because no commandment exists where it is said that one must honour strangers. This puts it in the category of a lesser sin. The most important sin of all, however, is the Original Sin that every human being is born with. It is the sin that Adam committed by disobeying God's only command, which resulted in the fall of mankind and the loss of Paradise as Adam got banished from the Garden of Eden. As children of Adam, the human race inherited this sin from him. There is only one way of removing this sin, which is through baptism. And, due to this, baptism is the primary step one takes towards being a Christian.

The fruit of sin is believed to be death.<sup>173</sup> Once touched by sin, man will die. Therefore, since he is born with Original Sin he is not immortal and is doomed to die. The Original Sin is a matter of debate and most Christian denominations have their interpretations and ideas of the Original Sin. The Catholic Church believes that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was born without Original Sin, which is why the idea of the "immaculate conception" of Mary is an important concept within the Catholic Church. Since she was untouched by sin, the Catholic Church postulates that instead of dying, she was directly assumed into heaven. The Original Sin is washed away through baptism, and once that is done, it is man's duty to stay away from sinning further. In Christianity, it is believed that humans have an inherent tendency to sin. The Catholic Church, therefore, has the sacrament of confession, which is a provision by which man can maintain his relationship with God by having his sins washed away. Confession is a powerful sacrament that is believed to have the capacity to wash away any kind of sins, even mortal sins. While there are several debates on the nature of sin, all denominations of Christianity unanimously agree that sin is absolute. In theology, sin is classified in numerous ways and whether they are committed for good or for evil, they remain an offence against God that one must be cleansed of.

In the Indian languages, sin is translated as *paapa*. To understand what *paapa* means in India, one can look to the maharishis or the gurus of this culture, who, simply put, describe *paapa* as an

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<sup>173</sup> Romans 6:23

obstacle to getting enlightened. Taking this route needs us to develop a deep understanding of what Indian enlightenment is, so as to determine what kind of actions can be classified as *paapa*. It is beyond the scope of this essay. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we will try to make sense of the regular usage of the word as used by Indians. In other words, we will try to make sense of the experience of *paapa*. To get a basic picture, some Hindus were asked some questions to see what their understanding of *paapa* is. This was then compared with how Indian Christians talked about it. For example, a Hindu from Orissa explained that for a Christian, eating beef was alright because they came from a family that eats beef, while for her, it was a *paapa* because she does not hail from a beef-eating family. Another Hindu from Kerala said that beef eating is not a sin for them, because they have been consuming beef for generations. However, eating beef or any other kind of meat becomes *paapa* on special days for her, when they are required to stick to a vegetarian diet. Exceptions are made when there is a death in the family or during special festivals.<sup>174</sup> Another instance that they commonly gave of *paapa* is when one does something to harm or hurt someone innocent of any fault. It need not necessarily even have to be harm done upon a human. For example, in rural parts of India, it is not uncommon to hear stories such as that of misery befalling a person because he cut a tree that had been of some significance to the people of the village. The action of cutting a tree is not *paapa* in itself, but to cut a tree that held value to the people of that village is. These people would say that misery has come upon the person, who cut it because he committed a *paapa*.

Not surprisingly, there was hardly any difference in the way Hindus and Christians thought of sin. Most of them said that *paapa* is a deed that is perceived as inappropriate for a situation. *Paapa* then, is not an absolute. Therefore, what becomes clear is that an action in itself is not *paapa*. It becomes a *paapa* if one does an action when it is inappropriate to do so. What determines whether it is appropriate or inappropriate is the situation when it happens or when it is against the values circumscribed by the path they follow.

Indian Christians often give the act of lying as an example of sin. It is what they are taught through

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<sup>174</sup> For more such examples see, BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. *Reconceptualizing India Studies*. India: Oxford University Press, 2012, pgs. 49-51.

catechism as children, which only gets reinforced by their continued associations with the church. They often speak of lying as an absolute, but when questioned about it, a few things become clear. Although they consider lying a sin, they confess that they think it becomes a sin only when it is said to cause misery to someone. The idea of causing harm is what is mostly associated with sin by Indian Christians. And interviewee said, “Anything that you do or say or think that can in turn put someone else in trouble or difficulty (is a sin). If lying leads to it, then it is a sin, otherwise not.” Many interviewees made similar statements. From this, it becomes clear that lying on occasions, when it spares someone hurt or harm is considered to be an appropriate action and therefore, not a sin. In other words, lying is not an absolute sin and sometimes, it is deemed necessary.

In Christianity, to deem what is sinful and what is not, there should be a body of law against which an act can be assessed. In the absence of this law, there is no sin. However, Christianity does have a body of law and therefore, there is something against, which an act can be assessed. The Bible talks of this in this manner:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, *I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.* For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”<sup>[a]</sup> But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. *For apart from the law, sin was dead.* Once I was alive apart from the law; *but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life* and I died (italics mine).<sup>175</sup>

Let us compare this against Indian traditions. There is no code of law that determines which actions are sinful and which are not. In the absence of such a body of laws, Indians do not see actions as sinful or not. However, these traditions also instill a kind of understanding in its people about the appropriateness of any action at a given time. So, if put it in biblical terms, “sin does not spring into life” for them. It would seem that the only thing that “springs” is the understanding that their action has been inappropriate or harmful.

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<sup>175</sup> Romans 7:7-9

Of the two, namely knowledge of sin and the intention behind committing it, knowledge of what sin is, is the factor that would stand more relevant if we were to delve into the area of conversion. We can assume that conversions have been happening in India since Christianity came to the country in the early centuries of *Anno Domini*. We do not know the fervour with which they were carried out, as records on the matter from those times are scanty. We do, however, have accounts of missionaries and records of conversions that took place when Europe started spreading its brand of Christianity in the subcontinent. These accounts opens our eyes to the way missionaries made use of this knowledge of sin as a tool to converting Indian natives.

If we look at the testimonies of Christian saints and converts, we would notice that a big part of what was involved in moving them into converting to Christianity was acquiring the knowledge of how sinful their lives had been. The recurrent pattern of missionary work features pointing out the sinful nature of everyday aspects of potential converts as can be seen from the various accounts of converts from Asia. Let us look at one such example. There was an interesting survey held at the beginning of the 20th century by Edward A. Annette, who was an English missionary. One of the few surveys of this nature, the author notes down his observations with remarkable clarity on matters concerning conversion among Indians. From the accounts of the interviewees, we can glean that one of the primary steps involved in converting a person to Christianity was making the person aware of what sin is and then making him understand the sinful nature of his life. This was then followed by repentance that ultimately led to conversion. Following is the response of one of the respondents that Annette makes a mention of:

‘I was greatly offended with the Christians,’ he says, ‘because they tried to convince me of my very sinfulness. I was conceited and thought myself sinless having a strong, moral character and being earnest at finding the truth, and was a brahman of the highest order.

‘All of a sudden the Indian missionary that came with the European missionary called over to my place and advised me to pray to God to guide me to the Truth. I prayed — and right earnestly too — that I might be given light and I received the answer in various ways too many to enumerate here. I became convinced that the greatest sinner that ever lived was I and Christ Jesus only could effect my

salvation.<sup>176</sup>

It seems reasonable as to why it was deemed that the knowledge of sin would be a good entry point to Christianity, not just for the natives, but also for potential converts everywhere since the beginning. It is a necessary turn for any Christian to identify the sinful nature of their life. For the natives, the missionaries initially considered their tasks easier because they daily witnessed that the Indian society was steeped in idolatry, false practices and worshipping of demonic gods of all, which were sinful acts. With the slightest interest that the native showed in knowing what Christianity is, the missionaries could point out the many facets of their lives, which were sinful with a reasoning that they well understood. These reasoning often left the native annoyed and uncomfortable, as can be gleaned from scores of accounts of interactions between Indians and missionaries. Sometimes these Indians began to feel mistrust towards their own traditions and sometimes, there were some courageous enough to accept this alien notion of sin, which often led to a fierce rejection of the traditions they came from.

For the Indian, the path of rejecting one's tradition and accepting a new one came with hardships of its own. The ones who accepted this new faith were ostracised by their community. Those who feared ostracisation remained within their own communities, while being constantly at unease because the faith they wanted to accept did not allow them to continue to accept or perform the duties they were expected to, within those communities. Yet, they had to continue engaging in rituals of their community, while not wanting to do it. This is where the unease came from:

‘After I had come to believe,’ says M. N. Bose, ‘I felt a strong desire to obey God in everything; but the cross seemed too heavy for my little strength. *To cast off all, and to be cast off by all those who were bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, seemed a difficult task.* At the same time, willfully to neglect to confess Christ before men was sinful. Besides, *for a Christian to live in Hindu home was not*

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<sup>176</sup> ANNETT, Edward A. *Conversion in India. A Study in Religious Psychology*. Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1920, pg. 20



*agreeable, for everything was connected with idolatry; and if he would keep himself from idols he must maintain a constant warfare (italics mine).*<sup>177</sup>

The convert M. N. Bose is one among many voices, who talk about the difficulties of being a Christian, while remaining within their communities. Missionaries have noted that due to the fear of ostracisation many converts reverted to their “sinful” ways and lives. Many of these ex-converts, however, had to revert to a life with the knowledge of the sinfulness with which they would be spending the rest of their days. Since the conception of Christianity, the Apostles talked of the price one pays for being a Christian. In the case of these Indians, sadly, the price they had to pay came in a different form. Unfortunately, it looks like missionaries did not follow up on the lives of these ex-converts as sources on this is unavailable. It might have been interesting to see if in reverting to their traditions, they eventually ended up letting go of the notion of sin and if they did so, how they managed it.

While rejecting their traditions was a difficult task, many did so. As a result, we have Christians in India converted by European missionaries, who could cautiously be assumed to be 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> generation Christians. It is not that they are completely ignorant of the Christian conception of sin. For example, one of the interviewees said that “committing sin is the easiest thing for a human mind. It comes naturally to us without any compulsion.” It reverberates the Christian sentiment that we are born sinners, therefore, sinning is innate to human nature. Within the same line of reasoning, another interviewee said that even “thinking about an evil action is automatically creating a sin at that time.” Christianity does say that sinning is in the nature of a human and sinful acts originate from sinful thoughts. Therefore, having sinful thoughts is also a sin. Jesus himself after all affirmed it.<sup>178</sup>

However, these kinds of answers were few. Many felt that sin is something that one’s religion said was wrong. For example, one interviewee said, “we are conditioned to think of certain things as

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<sup>177</sup> ANNETT, Edward A. *Conversion in India. A Study in Religious Psychology*. Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1920, pg. 50.

<sup>178</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. - Matthew 5:28

sin. It all depends on conditioning.”<sup>179</sup> He went on to add that the way we are conditioned depends on the religion or path we follow. If one’s religion deemed an action as wrong, then it was a sin. So, whether an action is a sin or not, *depends* on what the person’s path says. It is evident by this kind of reasoning that these people did not think of sin as an absolute. What can be a sin for them, may not be a sin for another, who follows a different path. As an example, for this, many called upon the act of going to Church. Many felt that it is wrong to not go to church on Sundays. As an interviewee said, “As a Catholic, I’ve been taught that not going to church every Sunday is a sin.” But, the omission of this act is a sin for only those, who follow the Catholic faith. For other Christians like the Protestants, they say it is not a sin because they do not have a Sunday Mass that they must be a part of. Further, they said that Protestants might have something that is an equivalent of the Holy Mass that is deemed mandatory by their congregation, in that case, not attending that event is a sin for them. When asked whether a Hindu commits a sin by not going to the temple, they said “no” because it is not mandatory for a Hindu to go to the temple. Therefore, not going to the temple is not a sin. However, omission of doing things that their particular Hindu tradition deems important may be a sin. Further, they said that going to church was important because they had been taught to do the same by their families. But, in addition to that they said that they felt it was their duty as Catholics to do so. They equated this duty to the duties a Hindu may have, such as participating in a *pooja*. This sense of duty is felt universally among most Indians. To partake in the traditions that their families partake of is considered to be appropriate behaviour. So, it is unclear whether they placed importance on going to Church because it is a sign of partaking in the blood and flesh of Christ, or for other reasons that a proper Christian or a Christian from the West does. It is, however, clear that they do it because it is what they feel they should do, as a result of belonging to a Catholic community. It would not be a stretch to say that faith here takes a backseat and the sense of obligation is what guides this action. Let us take a look at this statement from one of the interviewees: “I feel like it is a sin to not attend mass on Sundays because it is our duty to give some time for God.” At first glance we can easily think that our assumption that faith takes a backseat in the act of church-going is wrong because this person talks of the duty to give time to God. She makes no mention of doing it out of some familial obligation. However, on closer look, we would see that she talks of going to Church as a duty that she must fulfil. Most people in India, who are raised as Catholics, are from a young age instilled with the duty of going to Church. Many

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<sup>179</sup> #83- 20/7/2014.

of them say things such as “I go to Church because that is what we do as Catholics” or “We have been going to Church every Sunday for generations. I see no reason to stop doing it.” Therefore, most of them have been instilled with the duty of going to Church. Not doing it, to them, feels like a breach of that duty. So, in a way, the duty is not towards God, but towards familial tradition. That does not disregard the fact that many go to Church with the sincere desire to partake in the body of Christ. However, from the interviews it is evident that the foremost reason for why they go to Church is because it is simply something they do as Catholics. In other words, it is tradition. On the surface this looks similar to what some individuals do in the West. It is not uncommon to find individuals here in Europe, who would go to Church with their grandparents. However, here they do it out of a sense of duty towards their elders. It means something to their grandparents or for whomever they do these duties. But it ends at duty and it is likelier that they might not encourage this with their future generations. For the Indian, the duty is not just towards their parents or grandparents, but towards their tradition, which is instilled in their minds. They go to Church not because they are drawn to this custom as believers, but because going to Church and engaging in other Christian customs of theirs is what makes them a Christian. So, yes, the faith is there, but it is the practices that occupy a more important role here. It is also likely that these Indian Christians will encourage their future generations to do the same, as some respondents explicitly said.

Next, we move on to the matter of confession. Confession is an important sacrament in the Catholic Church. While Indian Christians, too, are taught that it is obligatory to have a confession periodically, many do not do it. I was unable to find out if this is a rising trend only among the Catholics alive today. From the little information that I got, it seems that they generally confess once a year. Among the younger interviewees, many said they have not done a confession in years. Irrespective of age, from their answers it looked like they do not deem confession as important as the Catholic Church would like them to. In fact, in retreat centres, priests are often found giving sermons on confession, its importance and the abominable kind of confessions they generally listen to. They say that people do not take confessions seriously, because they do not truly understand the power of a good confession. It is evident from the responses that even the elderly (who are fairly regular with confessions) give. One responder said “I do not often go for confessions. You do not have to confess small sins. Just the big ones like murder and adultery. I have not committed them, so I do not see the point in confessing.” She was among the many elderly to have said so.

They were asked about what made them think that only certain kinds of sins needed to be confessed. To that they had no answer. Indian Catholics seem to have an attitude towards confession that borders on indifference.

There is an interesting category of answers that was received to a set of questions about sins and forgiveness from younger respondents. Not many of them believed in making confessions. A respondent said, “I don’t think sins are forgiven. You have to pay for them.” A believer of confession said, “The priest can forgive your sins, but you still have to pay for them.” On pushing these respondents (there were more who said the same) on what they meant by “paying for”, they said that karma plays a role in who pays what and for the actions they commit. Some mentioned the *karma-phalam*<sup>180</sup> that one always gets irrespective of having been absolved of sins by a priest. I shall refrain from getting into a discussion about karma, because it is not important to this thesis. Regardless of that, it is interesting and perhaps not surprising that Indian Catholics too talk of karma.

We can see where the problem lies. Sin was translated as *paapa* in Indian languages.<sup>181</sup> Indian natives already had a notion of *paapa*. In a way, one can say that the notion of sin almost failed to permeate Indian understanding. Indian Christians’ understanding and usage of the concept “sin” is almost identical to that of the Indian understanding of *paapa*.

### **The Instructors Speak (III)**

Now, let us see how the priests and nuns talked about sin. Our first priest who was questioned has a unique take on what sin is.

“But, everything we speak about as sin is not actually sin. For example, when you are teasing somebody or making fun of someone, it is a mistake, but you cannot say it is sin as such. When you say sin, it is a conscious act that separates the

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<sup>180</sup> Fruit of karma

<sup>181</sup> Konkani uses “*paatkan*”, “*paatok*” and “*gunah*,” while Malayalam additionally uses “*dosham*”.

creature from its creator. It will take you away from the love of God. Suppose I beat my father or mother or speak ill of your father and mother. God has said love your father and mother, honour your father and mother, by doing this you are loving me. (Doing) anything against this (is) you saying, “I don’t want God. I don’t want to love this god. I will try to be independent.” There you are going away from God. That’s the way it becomes a sin. There is a way of speaking about mortal sin and venial sin. Mortal sin is the main thing you say when you come for confession. (Committing a) mortal sin means (you are saying) “I don’t want god. I don’t have anything to do with him. I don’t mind the existence of God. I don’t want his help. I become *independent* of God.”<sup>182</sup>

This priest talks of sin as something that separates one from God. But, then he also talks of another set of actions that are not good. He calls them “mistakes” and insists that they are not classified as sins. On first appearance, it looks like what priests and nuns say about sin is fundamentally different from how lay people understand *paapa*. However, a closer look at their responses makes us realise that their answers are simply more elaborate, practiced and refined versions of those of their lay counterparts. Unlike the concept of salvation where many of them could point out the difference between salvation and moksha, there is absolutely no doubt in their minds that sin and *paapa* are the same. Yet, while their answers start out as descriptions of sin in the way theology prescribes it, they soon move into the territory of describing them as actions that are deemed appropriate or inappropriate. Let us further dissect their responses to see how they do so. Since they explain sin through examples, this section will mostly contain illustrations of how a sin is committed. There are two things that are common in all their responses. One, they say that sin is turning away from God. Two, that sin is absolute. These are unanimously the starting statements of each of these priests and nuns. However, when you question them deeper, you realise that when they say that sin is absolute, it can mean any number of things.

It appears that this priest is saying that venial sins are lesser important sins too confess because they are not grave and do not take you away from God. The only kind of sins that separates you from God are mortal sins and they are the ones that mainly need to be confessed. His implication

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<sup>182</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.

is that venial sins are not sins as such. It is clear when he says that not everything we consider a sin is a sin. Some are just mistakes. This is a clear case of not taking theology's tenets on sin literally. Also, we can see that the idea that only mortal or serious sins need to be confessed is present amongst the priests too. When asked how we can know if a sin is serious or not, he says:

“Murder is a sin and it is written in the Ten Commandments. Lying is also a sin. You need to understand what lie is. There are white lies, things you lie about for fun. But, a real lie is something when a person asks you for an information, which he is qualified to know and if you deny and give the wrong information, that is a sin. Suppose a terrorist comes and wants to know where a person is, he has no business to know therefore, you must not tell him. Then that is not a lie. For example, if my father asks me whether I went to church today, and I say yes, though I did not go, that is a lie. But, if a passer-by asks me the same thing, I may say yes or no. He has no right to collect this information from me. So, it depends on the relationship. That person might have asked me this question because he has something on his mind. Out of this information he might be able to harm somebody or me. He has no right to ask. Suppose there is a gathering and I cook up a story and everybody has a nice laugh about it, then it is not lie. If I cook up a story that affects someone's good name, that is a sin. I am doing it at the expense of somebody else to harm him, that is against charity. Simply making up stories is enjoyable. Everyone has a good time. And, very often, people around know that these are cooked up stories for the moment and the moment you disperse, it is over.”<sup>183</sup>

He starts off by saying that lying is a sin. However, not all kinds of lies are sins. Lying to someone, who does not deserve to know the truth (like a terrorist or a passer-by who has no business asking you questions about you) is not a sin. It only becomes a sin if you lie to someone, who deserves to know the truth (like your parent) or, if you lie at the cost of causing harm to someone. In other words, he thinks that it is the result of an action in relation to a context or one's relationship to the person on whom the action has been committed that determines whether the action is a sin or not. Here, is an example of a priest saying that sin is absolute, but his response shows that he believes

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<sup>183</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.

the opposite.

As mentioned earlier, knowledge of sin is important. To be aware of sin helps one not to commit it again. What about when one commits a sin that they are not aware of? Is it still considered a sin? Yes. The Bible supports this fact.<sup>184</sup> However, some priests and nuns said that if one is not aware of the sin they have committed, they are not committing a sin.

“It depends on the circumstance. If you lie knowing that what you are saying is a lie then it is a sin. If you lie unknowingly, then it is not. Like for example, you may pass off wrong information because you forgot the real or the correct information. A sin is a sin if you are aware of having committed it. It is a moral theology issue. There are certain moments where lying is absolutely necessary. Then it is not a sin. (If) it is to save your life. Suppose a terrorist comes in search of a person and it is absolutely certain that he is going to kill him. In order to save his life, you can lie. Lying becomes a sin, according to the situation. If it is absolutely necessary then it is not a sin. There are certain moments where you have to break the law. You cannot generalise. Neither can you justify any action saying it is for a good cause. Each case should be analysed separately.”<sup>185</sup>

This is another instance of when they said that sins are absolute, but when questioned deeper on a sin like lying, they said each act of “sin” should be analysed separately. According to them, there is no one law by which a set of actions can be determined as sin. This is contrary to what theology says. It is true that Christianity recognises degrees of sin, wherein some sins are darker than others, but sin remains a sin. However, when Indian priests and nuns talk about degrees of sin, they do it in a different manner. Let us see how one priest described it:

“You have to relativise. Lying for my achievement is definitely a serious sin. In my morality, it is like that. Of course, if you have to save somebody whom you consider innocent or even a feeble person, then it is not. There are different

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<sup>184</sup> If anyone sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands, even though they do not know it, they are guilty and will be held responsible. – Leviticus 5:17

<sup>185</sup> Sr. Tessy Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

degrees to lying. If the person in front of you has done something very cruel to the society and I lie to save him, then it is not good. If someone is a victim of the society and if they commit some problems (problematic activities), then you have to help them. But, if you lie for your advantage then it is a very serious sin, because it is in your interest to lie. *For an action to become a sin, it depends on the context.* I think we have some general universal principle but the line between life and death, truth and untruth and sanctity and sinful is very thin and *depends on your attitude.* I think Jesus was like that. Prostitution is wrong, but when it is compared with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, it was not a greater sin. And of course, she could not sin alone. There were men behind her sin. So, *Jesus relativised the concept of sin, which existed in the society then.*<sup>186</sup>

As we can see, his description of degrees of sin is similar to how theology explains it. However, the difference lies in the fact that in his description some sins get considered as not sins, because of the reason they were committed. For example, if a lie is said to save the life of someone, it is not a sin. Similarly, other sinful acts, when committed for a good cause do not remain a sin. This of course does not mean that killing for a good cause is not a sin, which the priests and nuns clearly specify.

Even though all respondents specified that killing is always a sin, a priest gave an example, where there is a bus driver, who is responsible for the 50 people, who are in the bus he drives. In a situation where he has to choose to run over someone on the street in order to save the people on his bus, he has to make the decision as to which is more important- saving the person on the street or the 50 people inside the bus. The priest says that the lives of 50 people is more important compared to one and therefore, the driver should make the decision of saving the people on his bus. His decision will, however, cost a life. Despite his action of having killed a man, because it was a necessary thing to do, he has not committed a murder and therefore, he is innocent of the sin of murder. In a situation where one causes harm to someone and has to commit an act, which theology deems a sin in order to do something good, this action cannot be a sin. As one of them said, “You do not commit *paapam* for a good cause. You have done it for a good cause, so, it is not a sin.” Some of the priests talked of the intentions behind acts.

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<sup>186</sup> Fr. Ignatius Thengummoottil, 19/1/2016.



“There is something called *uddesha-shuddhi* (purity of intention). Now, if I tell my mother superior that I want to keep a fast, she may not give me permission for it because she does not know why I want to keep the fast. It could be to lose weight!<sup>187</sup> So, she must take into consideration the reason why I intend to keep the fast. What must be taken into consideration is your intention.”<sup>188</sup>

While this statement is not about sins, the nun was trying to explain the importance of intentions that gives value to an action. It is this that makes an act into a sin or not. Among the priests and nuns who were interviewed, only two remained adamant about sin being absolute. They said that a sin remains a sin irrespective of the cause behind it, and that it was necessary to be absolved of it.

There were some, who also gave an interesting explanation of what sin is:

“It means that I do not have any connection with God. Not having intimacy with God by not doing and attending the religious rituals that are there. That means I do not visit God, do not make use of the occasions and chances to make a relationship with God. That I reject all those things. That itself is a sin for me. It can create a lot of problems in the community that I live in. Towards nature, for instance, if I do not respect nature, simply destroy or exploit nature by throwing plastic everywhere, I feel it is a sin. Rash driving is a sin. Also, not obeying traffic rules. It means you do not have respect for others. It means I am going away from others. I am selfish. These are sins for me.”<sup>189</sup>

According to this explanation, sin is something that sets one away from society and one’s community. It sounds almost comic that rash driving, littering with plastic can be classified as sins,

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<sup>187</sup> The nun was referring to the fast that she had been observing for a few days leading to St. Sebastian’s Feast, which held special significance to her. Nuns in most convents must take permission from their Mother Superior before doing most things. This nun had to take permission for keeping the fast and state the reasons for it. Losing weight for non-health reasons constitutes to vanity, which the nun will not get permission for. However, if she explains the fast’s importance to her, she might get permitted to do it.

<sup>188</sup> Sr. Sabrina Cheruvellil, 20/1/2016.

<sup>189</sup> Fr. George Karippaparambil, 22/1/2016.

but the underlying point here is that sin is when someone is “selfish”, does not think about the community one lives in and causes harm to it. This also includes not participating in activities related to the Church that the community participates in.

“Sin is ultimately ego-centrism. 'I don't need anybody to complete myself 'I don't want anybody to guide me' 'I don't accept anybody superior to me', these are sins. I think to live in holiness it to say that the whole society is more important than me. To sin is when you find yourself supreme and prime than the other. That is sin. Holiness is just the reverse of it. You find that you are less important and the community is more important.”<sup>190</sup>

Let us first address the fact that according to this priest, sin is being centred on oneself, to think that one does not need guidance or other things that one's society provides them. Elsewhere, this priest also states that such behaviour is harmful for society and is therefore, a sin. The opposite of that is holiness, where one gives more importance to society. Firstly, let it be clear that holiness is not putting community above oneself. Indians have unique ideas of what constitutes to being holy, which we will soon look into, in the next section. Secondly, here, it may look like holiness is equated to the state of being selfless. However, I would suggest that it goes much deeper than that. Putting society above oneself is a theme that was often revisited during these interviews, especially when these priests and nuns were asked about Free Will. Being part of society and participating in one's communal activities were implied to be virtues, while being individualistic, “independent” and to give equal if not more consideration to one's own needs above society's as vices. This point will become clearer when we deal with Free Will in one of the following sections.

Let us gather what we have found out so far in this section:

- Indians do not consider an action in itself a sin or *paapa* as they like to say. One of the parameters for an action to take the form of *paapa* is for the action to have caused harm in some way.
- Confessions are deemed necessary only for grave sins.
- Confessions are not given much importance. A majority of confessors do it because it is

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<sup>190</sup> Fr. Ignatius Thengummoottil, 19/1/2016.

required of them. Many also feel that confessions do not help and that with or without confessions people would suffer the consequences of their actions.

One's community plays a significant role in the assessment of when something is a *paapa* and when something is not. By no means is *paapa* then an equivalent to sin, the way western civilisation conceives it.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Holy Spirit**

So far, we have discussed three theological concepts and seen the many ways in which they are distorted by Indian Christians. As it is a big task to go through every concept in theology, and analyse the distortion that occurs when Indians talk about them, I would, in this section, discuss and analyse one more concept (Holy Spirit), and briefly touch upon the concepts of the soul and Free Will.

The Holy Spirit is perhaps one of the most difficult areas in theology. St. Augustine said thus about it: “In no other subject is the danger of erring so great, or the progress so difficult, or the fruit of a careful study so appreciable”.<sup>191</sup> The simplest way of describing the Holy Spirit, is to say that it is the one of the three substances of God. The term most commonly used is ‘person’, when referring to what this substance is. It forms part of the Holy Trinity, that consists of the Father (God), Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a distinct person in the Trinity. There is a supposition that the Holy Spirit has been spoken of, since the earliest of times in the Bible, that is, throughout the Old Testament. However, this is not the case. Although the ‘spirit’ is mentioned in the Old Testament, it refers to the spirit of God, unlike in the New Testament, where the spirit is given the distinction of being a person, that proceeds from God.<sup>192</sup> The question of the person of Jesus, sparked one of the major debates in Christendom, that lead to schisms in the Church. Part of this debate included, the question of whether the Holy Spirit was an inferior entity, compared to the Father and the Son, or did it have an equal status. Many denominations of the Church have arrived at their own conclusion regarding the matter. Despite the status that these churches have

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<sup>191</sup> De Trinitate, I, iii, 5

<sup>192</sup> HERBERMANN, PH.D., LL.D., Charles G., Edward A. PACE PH.D., Conde B. PALLLEN, PH.D., LL.D., Thomas J. SHAHAN, D.D. a John J. WYNNE, S.J.D.D. *Original Catholic Encyclopaedia*. First. 1909.

given to the Holy Spirit, the Bible holds it in supreme esteem. It says that God will neither tolerate nor forgive any profanity against the Holy Spirit.<sup>193</sup> Irrespective of its status, the most common association of the Holy Spirit is with giving humans abilities or gifts that enhance one's experience of God. After Jesus's departure he left his disciples with a promise of sending an advocate who would help them in their course and be with them forever. His apostles thereafter received the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire.<sup>194</sup>

Catholic stories are full of testimonies of saints, of how the Holy Spirit gave them the courage to face the world, and face situations of sure death. This means that the Holy Spirit gives one the courage to do works of God that other people do not possess. This leads us into asking what the qualifications for acquiring the Holy Spirit are. In trying to answer this question, we will see how this concept fits into the network of theological concepts. We will also be able to see the importance it lends to other concepts, especially baptism. The Bible has clearly pointed out that, one must be a Christian, a believer of Jesus, to receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>195</sup> Jesus himself said "...even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." (John 14:17). He makes it clear that only those who follow him will know of it and experience it. To follow Jesus means, to be baptized as a Christian because baptism is the entry point into a Christian life. Jesus receives the Holy Spirit when he is baptised by John the Baptist, an event in which, the Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove and anoints him.

Athanasius of Alexandria in his interpretation of the Trinity describes the role of baptism thus: "When baptism is given, whom the Father baptizes, him the Son baptizes; and whom the Son

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<sup>193</sup> Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin. – Mark 3:28-29

<sup>194</sup> When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. - Acts 2:1-4

<sup>195</sup> Romans 8:7-9, 1 Corinthians 2:14

baptizes, he is consecrated with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>196</sup> The connection between the Holy Spirit and baptism is very strong. Athanasius said that “to reject this or to misinterpret it, is to stake salvation itself.”<sup>197</sup> This shows that not only is it important to acknowledge the significance of the Holy Spirit but it is also crucial to know of its link to baptism because of its relevance to the cause of salvation. His supporter, Basil of Caesarea was further convinced that, “Not only the gift of baptism, but the baptismal formula itself constituted a proof. Without the name of the Holy Spirit the formula would be incomplete and therefore the baptism invalid.”<sup>198</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit is what makes a baptism happen. This is the baptismal formula. The Holy Spirit is also held responsible for keeping man in abidance with God by moving him to live according to the Word of God. This is what is granted to a human through the gift of baptism.

As mentioned, Holy Spirit is one of the most difficult themes in theology and for a long time in the beginning of theology formation, it was one of the less explored topics. This is not because the Holy Spirit was seen to have less significance in this period but there were more pressing issues and concepts to be debated upon at a time when the church was waging a battle with heresies of all kinds, Arianism and Nestorianism to name a few. Even when it came into the attention of theological debates, there were many aspects of its nature that were attributed as a mystery owing to which it was not possible for us humans to understand the full extent of the scope of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it is tricky to even frame questions regarding this concept, in order to elicit any kind of answers from people, so that we can analyse how they understand it. Yet I tried to find out how ordinary people understand the Holy Spirit. One way Indians did it, is by giving stories and anecdotes, that showed their understanding of it. Westerners tried to explain their understanding of it, the resultant ideas of which did not coincide with what the Indians said. In either case, these explanations are at best, vague. An interesting fact presents itself when you question either party

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<sup>196</sup> PELIKAN, Jaroslav. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 1, Pg. 216.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> PELIKAN, Jaroslav. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 1, Pg. 217.

about the Holy Spirit. A group of Europeans that includes Catholics, atheists, neo-pagans and agnostics were asked what the Holy Spirit is. Many of them were strongly opposed to the institution of religion, especially the Christian one, and asserted that they had never received knowledge on Christian matters. Some of them gave what they thought were insufficient explanations for it. Their mostly obscure explanations were much sharper and closer to theological descriptions than what the highly religious and churchgoing Indian Christians managed to come up with. For example, two of the respondents from Europe described the Holy Spirit thus:

“It is the closest to what God’s material would be. One of the substances of God, a tool through which God can operate in the world, through which we can experience God. Like a loving hand of a mother that is tender.”<sup>199</sup>

“It is part of God through whom we can communicate with him. Every mystery in the world is done through the Spirit. When you are a devoted believer the Holy Spirit comes to you and teaches you how to be better. How will you sense God without the Holy Spirit? Jesus leads the way. You have to trust him but you experience him is through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>200</sup>

Next, a question to the effect of the following was asked- if the Holy Spirit is what makes one experience Jesus and God, can a Hindu or a Muslim or anyone else experience the Spirit and if yes, how do we account for them continuing in their own faith and not accept Jesus? To this, the second respondent said,

“You can be touched by the Holy Spirit but still don’t get the right message. You corrupt the message.”<sup>201</sup>

From these two responses, it is clear that they think (even though they are not Christians) that the Holy Spirit enables one to experience God- a description that is true to theology. One thing is clear though from this, even though it is possible for anyone to experience God through the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>199</sup> #117, 17/11/2014.

<sup>200</sup> #118, 18/2/2018.

<sup>201</sup> #120, 18/2/2018.

it is still possible that people who experience it might not get the truth of the message, in other words, they may not accept Jesus. And if they do not, then their chances of getting salvation is slim. We thus see how within the western mind, the notion of salvation, acceptance of Jesus and the Holy Spirit's role in it are inter connected.

Many western respondents expressed discomfort with the question "How can one acquire the Holy Spirit?". While they could not point exactly at what their problem with it was, they could not see how one could acquire or "possess" the Holy Spirit. One respondent explained it thus-

"Holy Spirit in Christianity is a being which is like air. It is everywhere but only the members of the church have full access to it because they were baptised and confirmed. It is not possible to 'have' the Holy Spirit. You can only be in touch with it."<sup>202</sup>

Now we have to see how Indians connect the Holy Spirit to these other components of Christian theology. Indians associate the Holy Spirit primarily with knowledge, intelligence and wisdom besides these there are also associations made with guidance and protection. Children especially are taught to pray to the Holy Spirit at the start of an academic year or before an examination.

Before we get into the analysis, it should be mentioned that most of the respondents, from India, who are regular Church-goers, hence consider themselves dutiful Christians, admitted that they had never before, thought about the properties or role of the Holy Spirit, until confronted with the questions of the interview. Therefore, obtaining responses on this issue, was much more difficult than for the rest of the concepts. The first thing we would notice about the way they talk about the Holy Spirit is, as if it is something that one can be in possession of. This explains why initially in my interviews I (as an Indian) found it natural to ask the question "What should you do to acquire the Holy Spirit?" So, they begin by reasoning that the Holy Spirit is the spirit or soul of God. Once acquired, it makes one do the works of God. Before his ascension Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ..." (John 14:15-16). It is evident from their responses that Indian

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<sup>202</sup> #119, 17/11/2014.



Christians take this verse to literally mean that this Spirit is something that God gives them. While they understand that the Spirit proceeds from God, very few implied that it is part of God himself. It is rather seen as a gift from God. In Christianity, the Holy Spirit is an instrument through which God makes himself known. The Holy Spirit, in other words, can be considered to be God's agency. However, many Indians talk about it as an entity God gives you that has an agency of its own and can do things independently of God even if it only encourages people to do God's work. See what a respondent said that sums up this feeling-

"I regard the Holy Spirit as something like God's minion. I especially think of it, pray to it when I am in need of help with regard to something intellectual. I mean, studies, a presentation at work, etc." <sup>203</sup>

From many of their responses it seemed that, they think the Holy Spirit is something that can be in someone. However, there were two groups of people among them. The first was convinced that the Holy Spirit is something you are born with, but one that remains dormant within you until you work on strengthening its potential.

"Everybody is already born with it. You just have to realize its potential, not leave it dormant." <sup>204</sup>

"The Holy spirit exists in all of us and we can invoke it by praising the Lord, by surrendering to God and by being virtuous." <sup>205</sup>

Then there is the other group that said that the Spirit is something one can acquire through certain things that one does. The ways of acquiring the Spirit is many according to them. One said, "You need to be really holy and engrossed in your prayers to have the Holy Spirit", another said, "We ask Jesus to send down his Holy Spirit when we praise him", still another respondent said, "We get it formally through baptism, later through confirmation" or, "We receive it in the form of bread and wine." While all these responses sound very Christian, we should keep in mind that these

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<sup>203</sup> #8, 9/12/2013.

<sup>204</sup> #49, 12/8/2014.

<sup>205</sup> #40, 31/1/2014.

respondents think of the Spirit as something they can have and doing the above things ensures that they will come in possession of it. In addition, there is no doubt in their minds that they will acquire the Holy Spirit if they please God in the manners they mentioned. Again, as we saw in our discussion about Salvation, the question of unmerited grace of God does not arise. Their conviction is that they will receive the Holy Spirit from God as a gift because they have merited it by worshipping him.

So, whether these respondents said that the Holy Spirit was received or “awakened”, they agreed on ways by which one could ensure that either of these things took place. One of the ways that was commonly mentioned is by being “holy”. On further questioning it turned out that being holy entails doing good acts or having goodness of heart. We will talk about this Indian notion of being holy at a later point in this section.

What does the Church say about who can experience the Holy Spirit? Minimally it says that anyone can be touched by the Holy Spirit but how it happens, is a mystery. There is no way one can know for sure how the Holy Spirit works and who it might inspire. The conversion of Saul, a zealous persecutor of Christians, into becoming Paul, one of the strongest driving forces that helped Christianity get established in the Roman Empire, is often given as a testimony to this. It is also believed that it was the Holy Spirit that moved Emperors into allowing Christianity to be legally practiced in Rome. So, any person, irrespective of whether they are followers of Christ or not, can be touched by the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? It means that both the Church and Indian Christians believe that the Holy Spirit can touch anyone. The difference lies in the way both talk about how it happens.

Consulting westerners on the matter, produces the same kind of responses that Indian Christians gave. They know that it can happen but because of the mysterious ways it happens, they cannot say for sure how. Similarly, for Indian Christians, the Holy Spirit can touch anybody. They do not even need to profess the faith of Christians. They can continue to be Hindus or Muslims, and even be unaware of the entity of the Holy Spirit, but still do the works that the Spirit enables one to do. This means that these respondents who think that anyone can be touched by the Holy Spirit do not think of it as an entity confined by Christian beliefs. Now, as they start describing how the Holy

Spirit works, is where we begin to see differences in the way they understand it, from the westerners.

There are two aspects to the Indian Christian's way of thinking about the Holy Spirit. *First*, is their belief that God is beyond religion therefore he is not partial to Christians. So, what Christians get, Muslims and Hindus get from him too.

“Just like the sun and the rain are given to everyone freely, the same is the case with God's spirit too.”<sup>206</sup>

“It (Holy Spirit) has something to do with the one and only God or higher power! So, Hindus and Muslims have it.”<sup>207</sup>

It is common for Indians to say that people of all religions have the same God. Most Christians of India are no different. This sentiment is best expressed through the words of Gandhi-

The Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the Ishwara of Hindus. Even as there are numerous names of God in Hinduism, there are as many names of God in Islam. The names do not indicate individuality but attributes, and little man has tried in his humble way to describe mighty God by giving Him attributes, though He is above all attributes, Indescribable, Inconceivable, Immeasurable. Living faith in this God means acceptance of the brotherhood of the mankind. It also means equal respect for all religions.<sup>208</sup>

Most of the interviewees expressed the same view while some also added a very commonly said thing in India, which is that all religions are part of the same truth which is why all religions propagate good values. In an earlier section, we had discussed that when Indians talk about truth in a religion, they mean to indicate the goodness in it and not the historicity of it. It is this same truth that is talked of here. The association between the Holy Spirit and the goodness in people was often made by the respondents. Some said that is it the Holy Spirit that makes people be good.

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<sup>206</sup> #37, 11/7/2014.

<sup>207</sup> #7, 6/2/2014.

<sup>208</sup> Harijan, 14-5-'38

Because of this, they reasoned that since goodness could be found in Hindus and Muslims, they too are touched by the Holy Spirit.

Now, let us focus on the importance that Indians place on goodness and good deeds which can be seen across the responses obtained for all the concepts they were questioned on. It looks like Indian Christians place primary importance to deeds among the criteria of things through which one can reap the benefits of being Christian. The gift of the Holy Spirit bears no exception to this rule either. So, the more the good deeds one does, the more they get qualified to receive the Holy Spirit. Some feel it is the vice versa- that the Holy Spirit is what makes you do good deeds.

“It (Holy Spirit) is the positive quality in every human being. It’s the goodness in everyone”<sup>209</sup>

“Where there is good, there is the Holy Spirit.”<sup>210</sup>

“If there’s good in people they have the Holy Spirit.”<sup>211</sup>

Next, doing good deeds is not something that is limited to Christians. Hindus and Muslims do them too. So, what does it mean when Indian Christians say that Hindus and Muslims have the Holy Spirit too because of their good deeds? It means that while, like the Church, they say that anyone can be touched by the Holy Spirit, they are sure that they know how this happens, unlike the westerners. That is the difference. Indian Christians exhibit a confidence in the ability of a person to be touched by the Holy Spirit that westerners do not.

There is another difference in the way they think that the Holy Spirit touches them or a person can acquire it. And there are two ways in which they talk about it. The first group believes that everyone is born with the Holy Spirit. By that logic, Hindus and Muslims are born with it too, but because of the religion they follow, that has no place for the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit in them lays dormant. But Christians, whose religion the concept of the Holy Spirit belongs to, teaches its

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<sup>209</sup> #26, 8/1/2014.

<sup>210</sup> #79, 17/7/2014.

<sup>211</sup> #91, 14/8/2014.

followers on how to acquire it. Therefore, they have the opportunity of awakening this dormant Spirit because they know of it. The only thing one probably needs is, to have faith in the entity of the Holy Spirit and that gives them access to it.

“I think everyone has the Holy Spirit in them. Depends on whether we choose to listen to it or ignore it.”<sup>212</sup>

The other group does not believe that everyone is born with it. They say that you need to do certain things to have it, like placing faith in it, praying to it or doing good deeds. Once they do these things, they can acquire the Holy Spirit.

“According to my understanding you need to have faith in the Holy Spirit to obtain it. Why would Hindus and Muslims place their faith in it? If they do anyway, then sure I guess, they can have the Holy Spirit.”<sup>213</sup>

*Second*, interviewees were asked how the Hindus and Muslims could possibly have the Holy Spirit when their religion had no place for such a concept. The answers that many gave were yet again identical. The commonly given answer was that everyone has it in different forms. The forms are dictated by who they believe in or which religion they follow. When asked to give examples for the forms the Holy Spirit presented itself in in other religions this was one among the many similar responses given-

Hindus and Muslims have it in different forms according to their beliefs. They are in the form of Krishna, the Prophet, etc.”<sup>214</sup>

One thing is clear here. Whatever Indian Christians think the Holy Spirit is, they are confident that it is something that people of all religions can have and experience. Not only that, people of other religions have it in other forms or versions that are typical to their belief systems. This only leads us to one conclusion- Indian Christians do not understand what the Holy Spirit is and are unable to place

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<sup>212</sup> #49, 12/8/2014.

<sup>213</sup> #13, 6/1/2014.

<sup>214</sup> #6, 16/12/2014.

it in the network of interconnected concepts that form the body of Christian theology. So far with the other concepts, we saw how these people had some knowledge of what they theologically meant and twisted it by adding their Indian ideas to them but in the case of the Holy Spirit they do not do the same. With the Holy Spirit, while on the surface it looks like they formulate the function of the Holy Spirit in the same way as theology does, but the deeper one goes, the more blaring are the differences. To them, the Holy Spirit is reduced to a minion of God, the goodness in people, a state of mind, one that helps with cognitive abilities, something to do with the conscience, source of knowledge and of gifts, among many other roles that they can think of. It seems that the way Indian Christians talk about the Holy Spirit is not very different from the way Hindus talk about different avatars of Vishnu.

“Like in the Hindu religion there are many incarnations, in a similar manner, Jesus is the incarnation of God and so is the Holy Spirit. In a manner of speaking, we all have bits of it within us but we need to concentrate on it in order to enhance it. Religious doctrine of course talks about acquiring the Holy Spirit so if you do some sort of a comparison (in Indian traditions) you are looking at the term enlightenment. Acquisition of the Holy Spirit is equal to enlightenment. Buddha acquired enlightenment by sitting under a tree.”<sup>215</sup>

This leads to an interesting idea that these responses generated, that needs to be mentioned. Because many people said that Holy Spirit is what makes one a good human being they were asked if Gandhi and Buddha had the Holy Spirit too. Of all the people who were interviewed, only five said that only Christians can have the Holy Spirit, therefore, Gandhi and Buddha did not have it while the rest said the opposite. However, a significant number of people added that it was the Holy Spirit that enabled Buddha to attain enlightenment! One went as far as to say, “Buddha is the Holy Spirit embodied.” Many of them believe that enlightenment is the way through which the Holy Spirit manifests itself in Buddhism. And it was not simply Buddha. Gandhi, Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and all those people who did good things for the world, were guided by the Holy Spirit, irrespective of the religion they belonged to.

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<sup>215</sup> #93, 23/9/2014.

Let us take two ideas that we have learnt by now. *First*, Indian Christians say that no matter which religion one belongs to, they can attain fulfilment that their path promises. *Second*, Buddha was guided by the Holy Spirit to achieve self-realisation. What we see happening here is that while Indian Christians do not connect the Holy Spirit with other concepts in the framework of theology, there is a pattern in which their understanding of it finds a place in the interconnectedness of different ideas in their Indian framework. Within this pattern, it is the Holy Spirit that guides one into doing good deeds and being true to one's path. This allows them to adhere to the path that they have been born into, or at some point of time chosen to follow. Adhering to one's path properly will lead to the goal that the path promises. In the Christian's case it is salvation, in the case of the Hindu, it is self-realisation or enlightenment, and they do not know where it leads the Muslim but surely to the goal that Islam talks about. In other words, the Holy Spirit is what helps one reach the fulfilment of their path.

“God's Spirit is the very breath of our lives; it sustains us and helps us to unite ourselves to God.”<sup>216</sup>

### **The Instructors Speak- (IV)**

After explaining what the Holy Spirit is, our respondents of the religious orders listed its properties and functions as “the representation of the Father and Son's love”, “the source of love”, “the sanctifier”, “what inspires us to do good”, “guide”, “protector” and “comforter”. While many of these are catechistic answers to what the Holy Spirit is, I will now delve into what they say about how the Spirit works, to see if distortions occur when they speak about this concept.

I would first draw attention to what these priests and nuns said about the Spirit's agency. Unlike laypeople, there was no doubt in their minds regarding the nature of the Spirit. It is not the goodness within a human being, neither is it the conscience. The Spirit according to them is one of the three persons of God which forms part of the Holy Trinity. They say it is a mystery.

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<sup>216</sup> #41, 27/7/2014.

They also, like the Church, say that the Holy Spirit can touch anyone irrespective of whether they are Christians or not. It is until here that what they say is in accordance with theology. When they elucidate on it further is when we start seeing the distortions they make.

“It (the Holy Spirit) is everywhere. It is not expressed so much in Islam but in Hinduism they talk about the *trimurti*<sup>217</sup> where there are three people. The more we learn about religions the more we realize that the source of all of them is the same. So, all of us just practice it in different ways. That is what I have understood from my experience. We (as Christians) realize it because Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us for that purpose. So, although the rest do not realize it but the presence of the Holy Spirit is still in them.”<sup>218</sup>

Although they say that the workings of the Holy Spirit is a mystery, how one comes to be touched by it is something that they admitted they did not know. However, they did mention ways in which one might succeed at it. Further they say that not only can anybody have it, but every person’s religion has its own version of it. In the case of non-Christians who do not have the notion of the Spirit, they have it but do not realise it because of the religions they follow. Many other priests and nuns said the same. Here is an example of how one of them broke it down-

“... they (non-Christians) didn’t fully benefit from the spirit because they were unaware of Jesus. They couldn’t enter the Church and become part of Jesus but they could do a lot because of the Spirit. For example, (let us say) a child is traveling with his parents from Aluva to Calicut. He travels with his parents to Calicut but he is unaware of the power of the train. So, suppose the train is going (all the way) to Delhi, the child is unaware of the power of it. He gets down in Calicut. He could go till Delhi if he can get the ticket. But he is unaware. He doesn’t know the power of the train. The same way the Holy Spirit was guiding Buddha (and other non-Christians), but they were unaware of its power.”<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> The triad of the more important gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in Hinduism.

<sup>218</sup> Sr. Tessy Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

<sup>219</sup> Fr. Joseph Kunnapally, 16/1/2016.



Our priests and nuns do not tire of using traveling and destinations as metaphors for different religions and their goals. The problem with such analogies is that one can understand it in many ways. In this particular analogy, the power of the Holy Spirit is symbolised through the energy of a train that fuels it to run. However, a train journey can have many destinations. Delhi, Calcutta, Calicut, etc. The last destination is Delhi but the priest does not indicate that Delhi is the only or most desirable destination. Delhi just becomes the final destination for one if they want to make full use of the “power” of the train. One who chooses not to, gets down at one of the earlier destinations. For instance, it could mean that a traveller is at liberty to get down at any destination of his choice. It could one does not need to travel all the way to another destination when one’s destination is much closer. No matter how we interpret it, we cannot say that this priest’s analogy indicates that the power of the train can be used to reach only one destination. Bits and parts of this power can be used to one’s desired destination even if it is not the one where the train finally ends its journey. A similar analogy was used to talk about Salvation. That analogy also mentioned different destinations. From how they discuss destinations in any of these analogies, it does not seem that these priests and nuns consider any destination more desirable than another one. This is important for us because, while they say that the Christian destination is the best for them, they do not say that the same destination is the most desirable for others. This reinforces the pattern that we have seen already and this way of thinking about Christianity takes away from the uniqueness of it.

Speaking outside metaphors, what this priest is saying is that, if one uses the Holy Spirit completely, one reaches the final destination which is the Christian salvation. However, different people have different goals, and it is the Holy Spirit that “powers” them to walk the path towards their goals. This leads us to ask, if they think, that the Holy Spirit can lead one to be a good Hindu or a good Muslim. We cannot say for sure, but it certainly looks like a possibility, considering what they said about salvation- that it is something that is shown by the path that one follows, and different paths could have different notions of salvation. So it looks likely that they could be saying that the Holy Spirit is what makes one reach their “salvation” according to the path they follow.

Now that the priests and nuns have said that the Holy Spirit powers people of all paths, we need to know how it does so according to them. Here they expressed that how it works is actually a mystery.

“The working of the spirit is not known to everybody. The problem with some people, especially who go fanatical is that they prescribe Christ to everybody including the Holy Spirit. It is a mistake we do. God has different ways of saving the people. God is beyond all these things, all our categories and calculations. It is like the coming of the wind. We don’t know from where it comes and to where it goes. It is also (mentioned) in the gospels of Christ. So how can you trace it other than feel it? So, this is for everybody and not just for Christians.”<sup>220</sup>

Although this priest says that the workings of the Spirit is a mystery he has no doubt that it works through people of all religions. In fact, he goes further to say that people who prescribe Christ to everybody, meaning, to all mankind are fanatic! The very message of Christ is that he came to earth to save the whole of mankind. The Christian must believe the exclusivity of Christ’s salvific mission for it is on its basis that Christianity stands. Not just that, it is the Christian’s duty to spread the message of Christ to everyone. However, the priest, though he elsewhere says that Christ is the only way of getting saved, contradicts his statement by calling prescribers of Christ to the whole of mankind fanatic! This appears to be a mixing of contradictory thoughts here. If one priest says it, we can assume that he is wrong and holds erroneous beliefs. If many priests and nuns hold the same belief that Christ cannot be compelled on everyone, there must be some way of accounting for why they say so.

Let us take these two statements “those who prescribe Christ to everybody are fanatics” and “salvation can happen only through Christ”. These are contradictory statements. However, they do not appear as contradictory statements to those who say them. To this confusing contradiction, let us bring another kind of statement made by the nuns and priests: “if you are a Hindu or a Muslim and you live according to what your path tells you, you will get saved in ways determined by your path.” So, what they are saying is that, getting saved can happen to anyone, provided they live according to what their path says. By that logic, a Christian can get saved if they live according to the path shown by Christ. Which means, for a Christian, salvation can happen only through Christ which is not the case for a Hindu or a Muslim. Therefore, those who prescribe Christ to everyone, including Hindus and Muslims are fanatics because not everyone follows the path of Christ.

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<sup>220</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.

These two statements are contradictory because they negate each other. To find these statements contradictory we have to be working within a framework that sets them in contrast to each other. However, when we remove ourselves from that framework and place ourselves within the Indian framework, we see that not only are they not contradictory statements, in fact, they can coexist together. This is because, *one*, coercing someone into following a particular path is interference and, *two*, of course salvation can happen only through Christ because the person who said it is a Christian and for him salvation can only happen through Christ. This accounts for why these priests repeat these sentiments repeatedly.

There is one more aspect to this story. Some priests and nuns said that in order to experience the Holy Spirit one needed to pray for it. They said that this applied to Hindus and Muslims as much as Christians. “They can pray to the Holy Spirit and they can get the help of spirit.” Here, again we see that the Indian Christian is confident that they will receive the fruits of the efforts they make. This makes it appear as if the Holy Spirit can simply be experienced by praying for it. Which means that, it is completely upon a person to choose to experience the Holy Spirit and if they make the necessary efforts, they are convinced that they will experience it. This kind of confidence cannot be found in westerners who consider the experience of the Holy Spirit as something rare. Westerners also do not think that the Holy Spirit can be experienced through human efforts, as it is a gift of God and can be experienced only through his grace.

Next, if these priests and nuns think that the Holy Spirit can be experienced by everyone, there must be something that made them feel so. The direction I want to take is by looking into what they think the Holy Spirit does. A priest said this about the Holy Spirit: “It gives us inspiration to do good things.”

“Good things” can be anything. It can be finding money on the streets and giving it to the poor or helping a lost tourist find a place they might want to get to. To find out more, necessary questions were asked about the kind of “good things” that the Holy Spirit makes one do. One priest said:

“The particularity of the Holy Spirit is that we do not know from where it comes

and where it goes. And the Holy Spirit has been active *outside the confines of the Church*. That is what the Bible says. It is the same Holy Spirit I believe who had inspired the *rishis* and sages of India. And the *rishis* and sages of China like Confucius, *whoever had been religious and had the capacity to go to the essentials*. They were all revealed to by the same God. There is only one God. The God of Israel, the God of Christians, the God of Hindus and the so-called *God of those so-called unbelievers when they do something good*. So, there is no question of Christians alone being saved. As the famous Malayalee singer Yesudas said, ‘if in the heaven that we know of, there are only Christians, then I would rather not go there’.<sup>221</sup>

There is a contradiction in what he says. First, he says that the Spirit inspires anyone who is “religious and had the capacity to go to the essentials”. Then he says that God is the same for everyone whether it be Hindus, Muslims or even non-believers when they do something good. Which means that doing anything good amounts to doing the work of God. And he has already said that the Holy Spirit inspires people to do good things in the world. At first, he said that it inspires the religious and then he said that it inspires the non-religious too but for the latter it happens when they do something good. Which means that essentially the Holy Spirit is what makes people do good. Next, he says that the Spirit inspired the *rishis* and sages of India and China. The question is, what did it inspire them to do? Many *rishis* go off to meditate in the quest to attain enlightenment. Does it mean that the Holy Spirit is what prompted people like Buddha to attain enlightenment? We cannot disagree. The Holy Spirit, after all, works in mysterious ways.

“(Holy Spirit is) One that motivates us to do good things. One that tells us to stop when we are about to do something bad. All human beings have it, not just Christians. All people are given the ability to decide what is right and wrong. It is this spirit that enables humans to do so. It was present in Gandhi, Buddha and everyone who did good. The only difference between them and us Christians is that we receive the Holy Spirit through Communion and Confirmation. The rest do not receive it in the form of any sacraments but it is present in them.”<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Fr. Ignatius Thengummootil, 19/1/2016.

<sup>222</sup> Sr. Sabrina Cheruvelil, 20/1/2016.

The easy manner in which it is mentioned that Buddha and Gandhi were inspired by the Holy Spirit shows that this particular idea is taken for granted. Why do Indian Christians feel so confident making such a statement when their western peers or even the Church would minimally be wary of coming to such a conclusion? This again points to the difference in which Indian Christians conceive of the function of the Holy Spirit. Repeatedly we are told that both Buddha and Gandhi were guided by the Spirit but let's look at what these two personalities were known for. The first left everything he had in search for answers about suffering. The other led a non-violent movement against colonisers in the struggle for India's freedom. For an Indian, what they both did, although completely different from one another, are seen as good things. The first paved a new path for reflection while the latter became the symbol of something that Indians desired- namely independence through "his passive resistance" as one priest put it. Indian Christians perhaps credit their works to the abilities that they assume the Spirit gives to someone. This does not make sense within the Christian framework. However, within Indian thinking, it does, because the Spirit is what makes anyone do things that are deemed necessary or desirable. So, as far as they are concerned, Buddha, Gandhi and even Obama (if one believes he did some good) was led by the Spirit. To sum it up, as a priest said-

"It is the Holy Spirit that inspires us. So even though we don't see the fully realised Spirit in these two (Hinduism and Islam), it is the Holy Spirit that made them do good."<sup>223</sup>

So, it really does not matter if one is Christian or if one even knows of the Spirit's existence, whatever good or desirable deed one does, is because of the Holy Spirit. What we see happening here is that by ascribing just about any quality to the Spirit and making it an entity that is common to everyone, Indian Christians distort the notion of the Holy Spirit completely. It becomes distorted because they make it out to be an entity that has no semblance to what Christian doctrines say about the Spirit and; it becomes vague, because a person who does good things may do it for any number of reasons like perhaps they were taught to be kind to the poor by their parents or some life experience taught them to be good to animals. Then anything and everything like one's parents' upbringing or one's life experience can be thought to be an act of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>223</sup> Sr. Tessa Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

Moving on, let us address an issue that not just many lay people but also some priests and nuns said.

“It is the Holy Spirit that is continuing the work of Jesus in the world. Jesus had said that after He is gone He would send His spirit upon the earth. It is because of the Spirit’s presence that *we get the strength to do what Jesus did while He was on Earth.*”<sup>224</sup>

Some people said that the Holy Spirit enables us to do deeds that Jesus did or that it makes us like Jesus. This thought alone raises the question on how Indian Christians view the uniqueness of Christ. It is true that the Spirit is known for giving special gifts to believers.<sup>225</sup> But it does not make us “like Jesus”. While the Christian is taught to emulate Jesus, it is blasphemy to think that one can be like Jesus. Jesus is unique because he is the Son of God. No one can be like him. To say that one can be like him is to say that one is the son or daughter of God in the same way that Jesus is the son of God which is an idea that is heretic because it takes away from the uniqueness of Christ.

It is common to speak in terms of familial relationships in mission work. One can often hear the phrase “brothers and sister *in* Christ” but it is never said that one is brother or sister *of* Christ. Yet, Indian Christians say it because nothing is deemed wrong in thinking that one can be like Jesus through their work or actions. In India, it can be said that if one takes the necessary measures, one can become Buddha or Brahma. Importance is not attributed to uniqueness of Buddha or Brahma but the path one undertakes to become them. I posit that the Indian Christian views Jesus the same way. The uniqueness is not in his person but the works that he did. In Christianity, Jesus is God himself, part of the Holy Trinity. He is unique for this reason and his mission adds to his persona of being the son of God. For the Indian, it is quite the opposite. To put it crudely, he became the person they worship and see as saviour because of his mission and works. Perhaps we can go even as far as to say that for an Indian Christian, he could have

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<sup>224</sup> Sr. Tessa Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

<sup>225</sup> 1 Corinthians 12

been any man who did great things and preached good messages. Here we would again see the importance placed on one's deeds. It is after all what made Jesus, their God, according to them.

Next, these priests and nuns were asked if the Holy Spirit was accessible to people of all religions why did only Christianity talk about it? They were also asked that if the Holy Spirit existed in different religions under different names, did followers of those religions know about it. The answers were vague, but I will now try to make sense of them:

“In every religion, everybody feels the presence. For example, the Spirit of God is there in the Hindu understanding too. They have that notion of the spirit. But in Christianity it is present systematically. But Islam does not have such a trinitarian concept of God. They have only one God and they say that the spirit promised by Jesus, according to them is, Prophet Mohammed. But all agree that the spirit, presence of God is covering over everybody and the whole of Creation. The Christian understanding of God is trinitarian. So, the role of these three is explained in a systematic manner. But other religions also believe that the Spirit of God is present there but they may not have it systematically laid down. In theology, there is a branch that is dedicated to the Holy Spirit- Pneumatology. But other religions do not have this.”<sup>226</sup>

First, although this priest says that Hinduism has something of a trinity model, he does not say which of the entities in that trinity is an equivalent to the Christian Holy Spirit. Like many others, he has accepted that the trinity models of both Christianity and Hinduism are the same. Next, he says that Islam believes in one God but for them the Spirit is in the form of Prophet Mohammed. How is it even possible to compare the Holy Spirit with Prophet Mohammed one may ask. The former is one of the persons of God while the latter is the Prophet who brought the message of Allah to people. There is no thread of similarity between them. As an Indian I can perhaps say that both functioned as emissaries of God in capacities of different degrees but that would be mere speculation that I do not want to get into.

Next, he says that all religions agree that the Spirit covers the whole of humanity. We could ask

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<sup>226</sup> Fr. George Karippaparambil, 22/1/2016.

where he got this idea from? That the Holy Spirit can be experienced by anyone, is an idea that we have come many times now. But all religions do not agree on the same. We do not even know if all religions have similar concepts in them. Further he says that, Christians have the best knowledge of the Holy Spirit because it is explained in a systematic manner in Christianity, so much so that there is an entire branch in theology that is dedicated to its study. Perhaps Christian theology has a branch dedicated to this study because only Christianity has the concept of Holy Spirit. Other religions do not have a branch of study dedicated to this because as far as they are concerned, something such as the Holy Spirit does not exist. However, that is not how the priest thinks of it.

There is something we should notice here. The above way of thinking is unique and brings together two kinds of thinking models. The first is the Christian way of thinking, which universalises its elements. The other is the Indian way of thinking, which recognises that, how one group thinks of certain elements in a particular tradition, could be completely different from how another group, thinks of the same. When you bring both these different thinking models together, you have the above way of thinking, where one can ascribe universality to something, and be completely indifferent to how others may view this universality.

We would often find priests telling stories from the Bible to show that the Holy Spirit or any aspect of Christianity is not exclusive to Christians alone like the instance below-

“Yes, generally, but we find in the Bible, especially in 1 Corinthians 10, St. Peter was preaching to the Corinthians, not Jews, they were pagans. They had a desire to listen to the Word of God. There was a centurion who assembled his family to listen to him. At the time that they were listening to the word of God, the Holy Spirit anointed them. Even before receiving baptism. Anybody can receive it *but according to the teaching of the Church, it is generally the Christians who receive it*. But for any person to distinguish between good and evil, there needs to be the guidance of the Holy Spirit, no doubt. The difference is, those who receive the sacraments, the Church teaches, the Holy Spirit is willing. Whereas, for example, let us look at the moon. The moon also has light but the light is not coming from itself. It is reflected from the Sun. In the same way the Holy Spirit, even if not in



the person can influence and motivate the person, even from outside.”<sup>227</sup>

Although the priest admits that, the Church says that the Holy Spirit can be experienced only by believers of Christ, he has no doubts that a non-believer can also experience it. That the non-believers are able to distinguish between good and evil testifies to his belief. He then makes a distinction. He says that for Christians, the Holy Spirit is “willing” which is not the case for non-believers. So even if it is unwilling, the Holy Spirit works through the non-believers too. I do not know what it means for the Holy Spirit to be “willing” but what I gather from this statement is that, it works readily for Christians because they are Christians but not so readily for non-believers because they do not follow Christ. Yet, the latter can also experience the Holy Spirit. It is strange to talk about the willing or unwilling nature of the Holy Spirit. It makes one think that Holy Spirit is an independent entity that decides whom to touch and whom to ignore. Through the metaphor of the moon, the point he has made is that non-believers are like the moon that has no light of itself, and perhaps the sun, which has light of its own, could be symbolic of a Christian.

Either way, the Holy Spirit works through both believers and non-believers, and the light that comes off them, is symbolic of the abilities that come, because of having an experience of the Holy Spirit. Despite talking about stories from the Bible and knowing what the Church says about the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, the priest accommodates it within his narrative. This is done by most Indian priests I interviewed, when asked about the fate of non-believers. Stories like the one above, about a centurion, end up becoming easy endorsements for these priests to prove their point. According to the priest, although Christianity is the religion for everyone, unless one is a Christian, they cannot reap the benefits of being Christian. Yet, non-believers can experience the Holy Spirit. And note, all priests who talked about non-believers being touched by the Holy Spirit said that, it is manifested in the good deeds they do. Not one of them mentioned that the Spirit can move them into becoming followers of Christ.

There are some priests who know that there is a clear distinction between what theology says about the Holy Spirit and its actual applicability in India. This priest in particular, explained the

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<sup>227</sup> Fr. Abraham Mattapally, 17/1/2016.

## Indian notion of enlightenment through it.

“That is the difference. Theology is all about something that has happened so we cannot raise a hypothetical question. Now the basis of (your) question is what if we don’t have the Holy Spirit? There is no such thing. God has poured out the spirit onto us, to the nature and if God hasn’t done that then we would not have existed. So, all that exists, forget about the labels of religion and culture, human beings and nature and so on, they all exist in the spirit. The Holy Spirit is already there. Then what are we to do? It is about realising the already given. No one can ask “Can I acquire Holy Spirit?” You already have it, you don’t realise it. It is about realising, and that is why in India, the word ‘realisation’ is very important, even salvation is understood as realisation. When I teach my students I simply play with that word. I write “real-I-sation”. Realisation is finding the real I. Which is the real I? The God in me. Holy Spirit is right there inside of us. Maybe it is like a thurible that you might have seen used for incense with all kinds of charcoal in it. When you look into it, we will find some bits of charcoal but just blow and it burns. What we need to do is to activate the spirit. How to do that? *By doing good things*. Just do it then you realise that it is right there in everyone. If that wasn’t there then good life would be impossible. If spirit was something that could have been given to somebody the world would have found some technology to give that to everybody. That is not the case, it is in everyone even the worst criminal. The thing is that he should be trained to realise it”<sup>228</sup>

This priest, although aware that there is a particular way theology talks about Christian concepts, admitted in another part of the interview, that being an Indian and a “Hindu Christian” helps him understand Christ and his message better. When going through his interview, one can say that maybe he has given an Indian interpretation of theology. But what he actually did was, interpret theology in a way, that would make sense within the culture that he is from. This shows us that the way he distorts theology with Indian ideas is exemplary of how Indians do it. Theology cannot be interpreted in this or that way. It frames strict guidelines under which an understanding of concepts can be formulated and meaningful discussions can be had about it.

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<sup>228</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.

However, in his interpretation, this priest converts the Holy Spirit into something that is inherent in everyone and one that only needs to be realised. Of course, meaningful discussions can happen here too, but these discussions will not make any sense within the theological framework. The way this priest talks about the Holy Spirit is akin to how Indian enlightenment is talked about. It is in everyone to realise the Spirit, he says and this process of realisation is necessary for everyone to activate the God within them. Self-realisation is something Indian traditions talk about. As the priest puts it, finding out the real “I” is the way to being self-realised. The question of “Who am I?” is what the sages of India have been looking for and found answers to.

Further, the priest says that God is in us. This is something that Indians often say. It is not common in Christianity to say that God is in us. They say, “God is *with* us” or “God is *for* us” but not “God is in us.” There are, however, people in the mission in the West who have said so, but when they say it, they could mean something completely different from what an Indian means when they say it. At best, what they could possibly mean is “I am doing everything that God wants me to do” or “I am a good Christian”. When the Indian says, “God is in me”, they could mean something different. While an Indian Christian will not say that “God is in me therefore I can become God”, the origin of their thoughts regarding this, could come from the idea that the path of realisation takes you to being one with Brahma. So, not only does one end up having god in them, they become it. Of course, Indian Christians do not think that they become Brahma (or god) because of their faith that has made them reject Hindu elements as much as they can. Yet, the idea that God is in me still exists. We cannot assert the above without further evidence. What I am trying to point out is that, we should not take these statements at face value, as we might run the risk of not identifying the differences that lay underneath these statements when both parties make them.

How closely connected these ideas are, is shown through the excerpt from Fr. Ottaplackal’s interview. This is not mere speculation because the priest goes on to say-

“Holy spirit is the *aatman* inside all of us, inside everything. You can discern the workings of the Holy Spirit but you cannot point to it and say ‘this is the spirit’. Here in India it is not very difficult to explain the Holy Spirit because we already have the concept of *aatman* here. So, everybody believes the same *brahman*, the

ever expanding reality, is residing in everyone in the subjective individual form *aatman* and this *aatman* is *brahman*. So, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of God walking in me apart from my own spirit.”<sup>229</sup>

First, let me point out that, in Malayalam, the Holy Spirit is translated as *parishuddh aatmaavu*. In Hindi, it is *paavan aatma*. The use of the word *aatmaavu/ aatma* is problematic because, here, it is used to translate “spirit”. The same word is used as the translation for soul. So, the Holy Spirit can be easily thought of as the spirit or soul of God. And we see the priest doing exactly that in the above excerpt. Because of this confusing translation, it is likely that Indian Christians think that the Holy Spirit and the soul of a human are of the same substance, because the words used in translations for both are the same. Here, we can see that, though the priest is using the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit, he is actually talking about Indian enlightenment. This could be another case of endorsing Christian concepts to explain elements of Indian philosophy. Moving on, according to him, the one way of beginning to realise or activating this Spirit is through doing good deeds. Let us see if the other priests agree with him too.

The question asked next was, since it was established that non-believers exhibited fruits of the Spirit through their behaviour how could a Christian acquire or experience the Holy Spirit. Only one of the interviewed priests and nuns said that it is not acquired and that it is a gift of God given when prayed for it. The rest said that the Holy Spirit can be acquired and they listed a few ways of how to do so. They first gave due importance to the sacraments of baptism and confirmation which enables one to receive the Holy Spirit. But the rest of the points they discussed had to do with doing good deeds.

While some of the priests and nuns said that doing good deeds allows us to receive the Holy Spirit, the others said that the already present Holy Spirit in us enables us to do good deeds. The more the good deeds one does, the stronger the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. But what are these good deeds one may ask. Do they apply only when one’s deeds are beneficial to others like helping the poor, feeding the hungry or can they also include other kinds of deeds. A priest answered my question thus-

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<sup>229</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.

“(The Holy Spirit enables you to do) All kinds of good things, everything that is worthy and good, not only the so called spiritual things and religious things.. So, if I water some plants I believe the spirit is working in me. The love for nature, love for the poor and the committed work on something. If I sit down for hours and read a book I cannot do that without the help of the spirit. That is already a very good thing that one could do. And even prayer – no one can pray in a proper manner unless he or she is assisted from within by the spirit.”<sup>230</sup>

According to this priest, even watering plants (so that they do not die), having love for nature or reading a book (which in most cases is a desirable deed) can be considered as good deeds. To the Indian mind, to put it simply, what is good is good. And these must be deeds that originate from or lead to God. So, the Holy Spirit can move someone to do the simplest of things like watering plants or read good books. There were more ways of receiving the Spirit as they stated. However, going through those answers will bring our attention to an important distortion they make.

Many priests and nuns talked of the importance of being holy in order to receive the gifts of God. However, how can one be holy? In Christianity, one can be considered holy when one becomes a saint. Not only is a saint considered holy, but also their remnants on earth. The Bible talks about striving to be holy and how to achieve it. Being holy involves, among other things, being able to exhibit powers that God gives one. But is it possible for ordinary people like us to be holy? St. Augustine, in his prayer to the Holy Spirit says thus-

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy. Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy. Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy. Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy. Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy. Amen.

We can see that Augustine here is asking the Holy Spirit to guide him to be holy. He sees holiness as something to strive for. The verses in the New Testament that speak of holiness, are talking

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<sup>230</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.

about the same.<sup>231</sup> Holiness is not conferred on people, but only spoken of, as a state one must reach. The Old Testament however, confers the state of holiness on people but to understand it, we have to look into the Jewish notion of holiness which is beyond our purview. A cursory reading of the Old Testament on matters of holiness indicates that it is linked to the purity that Jews are expected to keep. The way holiness is talked about in the New Testament is different from the way it is talked about in the Old Testament and for our purposes we will consider only how the New Testament conceives of the idea. Let us compare what these priests mean when they talk about keeping oneself Holy.

“What the Bible says is that you are the *body and it is holy*. It is the spirit of the God that dwells in you. Don’t make it unholy. To feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, *you have to keep yourself holy*. Keep your heart, pure, clean and holy, so it becomes the dwelling place of the spirit. And then you will feel the power of the spirit.”<sup>232</sup>

First, what Christianity tells us is that, we are not just the body. We are body and soul. The body is not holy. In fact, it is what leads to sin.<sup>233</sup> This priest is talking about keeping the body pure, which could imply that, it should be free of carnal sins, gluttony, vanity and other sins that the Bible talks of. He also describes keeping oneself holy, by keeping one’s heart clean, and devoid of impurity. Then perhaps, what they are doing is, using the words purity and holiness synonymously. If not, it gives us scope to speculate why they might think that it is possible to be holy.

## **The Soul and Free Will**

We will now steer to the concept of soul because there were many connections that Indian Christians made between the soul and the Holy Spirit. The words ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ were often interchanged and some described the Holy Spirit as God’s spirit or soul. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the word used for translating both is *aatmaavu/ aatma*, depending on which

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<sup>231</sup> 1 Peter 1:16, Hebrews 12:14

<sup>232</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.

<sup>233</sup> 1 John 2:15-17, Galatians 5:19-21, Romans 8:7

language it is translated into, is the same. An in-depth reiteration of what the soul is and how it is different from spirit is not what I will be doing. One of the reasons is that, I find that I have failed to understand the notion of soul, except for identifying its implication and relevance, to the concept of salvation and God's final judgement.

The reason why this topic has been brought to the table is to show the ambiguous ways in which Indian Christians conceive of the notion of soul. An in-depth study of the subject is a task for a future project. As of now, I would simply present my interviewees' thoughts on it and show how they connect it to the Holy Spirit.

First, it has to be mentioned that some of them believed that rebirth is a possibility and said that it is a process in which a soul sheds its body and takes up a new one. Needless to say, rebirth is not a concept that Christianity accepts. Next, many interviewees suspected that animals had souls too. The Catholic Church does teach about the presence of souls in animals and vegetation but it differentiates between the soul of animals and trees from the soul of a human. While the former is material the latter is spiritual and capable of rationality which animals and trees are not.<sup>234</sup> Of the Indian Christians who said that animals and trees have souls, some expressed that there might be a difference but most made no such differentiations. As far as they are concerned, animals and trees (vegetation in general) have life and the presence of life is a testament to the presence of a soul. The ones who said that animals have souls made clear distinctions between what kind of animals had them. Dogs were the favourite among them, and they agreed that dogs, cats and other pets have souls. But they admitted that the thought of rodents and bugs having souls, did not resonate with them. At this point, we can speculate that the reason why Indians tend to think that all living creatures have souls is because many Indian traditions talk about the *atma* of animals and trees.

There is a connection that these interviewees made between the Holy Spirit and the soul. They said that who or whatever has a soul is capable of having the Holy Spirit. Which means that they agreed that animals and trees can experience the Holy Spirit too. One interviewee exclaimed that this is reason why the Holy Spirit is symbolised in the form of a dove. To her, it was evidence that animals can have the Holy Spirit too. There was only a tiny percentage of people who said that, trees and

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<sup>234</sup> [www.catholic.com/qa/do-animals-have-souls-like-human-beings](http://www.catholic.com/qa/do-animals-have-souls-like-human-beings)

animals could not have the Holy Spirit. It should be stated that, at first, most interviewees were undecided on the matter. However, they had to reason that animals and trees had souls too, only because they were hesitant to say that animals that are ‘loving’ and trees that appear so ‘wholesome’, could be devoid of souls. And since they had already admitted that anything that has a soul, can have the Holy Spirit too, they concluded that animals and trees have the Holy Spirit too. However, what is most surprising is that some of the priests and nuns agreed with this.

We can see that the way Indian Christians conceive of Christian concepts is very different from how it is in Christianity. It is not that Indian Christians are completely unaware of this. Some of them even say that it is important for us to think differently on these matters, because we live in a culture that has all kinds of traditions that have vast differences. Some say that it is natural for us to assimilate local cultural elements into Christianity

“We are here in Kerala. So, this has something to do with the culture of the people here. See, the Apostles went to many continents. They assimilated the culture of the place but the faith content remained intact. It assimilates the cultural elements of the place in which it is planted.”<sup>235</sup>

Therefore, it becomes necessary for Indians to shape their understanding of Christian thoughts in a way that accommodates these cultural differences. The priests are the ones who articulate this need for a different understanding in the most eloquent way. And this is most evident in the way they talk about Free Will.

Free Will, another vital concept in theology, is the freedom given to a human, to willingly choose to follow God. In theological discussions, it often clashes with Predestination, wherein the fate of everyone is already willed by God. Surprisingly, this concept is almost absent from discussions in Indian Churches. Priests rarely allude to it during sermons, in catechism classes it is taught to children but never delved into. Very importantly, there is no equivalent or even a misguided translation of it in Indian languages. One can, of course, come up with translations on the spot, as our priests and nuns did. They gave it different names such as *manaswatantryam* and *iccha shakti*

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<sup>235</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.



(roughly translated as “freedom of mind” and “the power of will”, respectively). When lay Indian Christians were asked what they thought Free Will meant, a majority of them said that it is the freedom to choose which religion to follow. Many of them even added that it is one of the fundamental rights granted by the Indian constitution to Indian citizens. Not a single person linked it to Christianity and the choice they have to follow God. Their ignorance is not surprising because Free Will is just not a concept that is used in common liturgical currency in India.

One would wonder why such an important theological idea is ignored in Indian Churches. The interviewed priests and nuns had answers to this. While they made it clear why it has not found its place in discussions of Christianity in India, their answers to questions on Free Will also showed the blatant distortions Indians made while talking about Free Will. The distortion is very similar to the one that lay Christians made. Many of them stated that Free Will is the freedom to choose the right God. When questioned deeper on the issue, they said that it is the right to follow whichever religion they think is right for them. Some clearly said that they did not know about it.

“Probably it is *some terminology that their culture has produced*. Of what use it is to us I do not know. I have not heard about it before.”<sup>236</sup>

In fact, there was only one priest who knew what Free Will is, and gave an adequate answer for it. Seeing the trend in which they answered, I changed my question to “Why is it that we do not know about or talk of Free Will in India?” The answers given had more clarity than the ones given for other concepts.

“The point is *we have a more wholistic view of things*. That is one of the advantages of the eastern philosophy. ‘Aham brahmasmi’ meaning I am one with God. Whereas *in the West, they take things threadbare, that is analyse and take it part by part*. Here we consider human beings as one entity. And therefore, we cannot say that one part (one human) is taking decision.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Sr. Tessa Kuttamperoor, 18/1/2016.

<sup>237</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikkaran, 22/1/2016.

This response is unclear. However, two things are of importance here. One is that the West understands things by dissecting and analysing them. What he means by this, will become clearer from the other responses. Next, he says that those of eastern philosophical traditions have a wholistic way of living. Human beings form one entity and therefore it is not productive to think in terms of each person making decisions for themselves.

“That (nobody seems to know about the concept of Free Will here) is because we are enjoying it. In the West, people have personal views. Their personal freedom is very important for them. But here the concept of freedom is different from the West. Freedom is not the freedom to do anything you want. It is choosing the good.”<sup>238</sup>

Every priest, without fail mentioned that in the West, people are individualists, and that their personal freedom of choice is very important. Strangely, he says that in India we do not need to talk about it because we are already enjoying it. He does not explain how that happens, except for saying that freedom means something completely different in the East- that it is a choice between doing good or not. Doing good merely refers to doing good deeds. It was a given among other priests and nuns too that Indians enjoy freedom. As a nun put it-

“Generally, there is no need of using that word. Freedom is a fact. *It is taken for granted here*, that is why (we do not use it). When certain things are taken for granted why should we mention it excessively?”<sup>239</sup>

One begins to wonder what these priests and nuns mean when they talk about freedom. It could be that, they are talking about the right that the constitution of India grants its citizens, to choose any religion they wish to follow. In that case, it would make sense as to why they say that there is no point in talking about it. Because this freedom is already granted to Indians. In some instances, when they talk of westerners who have excessive freedom, it sounds like they do not think of freedom as a good thing. It seems as if, they are implying that, this individualistic freedom takes

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<sup>238</sup> Fr. George Karippaparambil, 22/1/2016.

<sup>239</sup> Fr. Abraham Mattapally, 17/1/2016.

one away from society, and makes them unable to be part of a community. The next priest makes matters more confusing for us.

“In India, they don’t ask this because they understand in the sense that freedom is not a matter of choice but quite often it is understood as a matter of choice and right in the West. Freedom means the freedom, the power to do good, not to choose between good and evil. To choose between good and evil- there is a choice. Freedom is the inner power to do good and that is given by the Spirit. So, one who is led by the spirit will naturally want to choose to do good things. Then others say, “wow, you habitually do good things, you don’t have the freedom.” No, I habitually do good things precisely because I have the freedom given by god.”<sup>240</sup>

This priest also stresses that, freedom is doing good deeds. However, he also says that freedom is not a choice between good and bad. It is the power to do good, which comes from God. So, from what can be understood from what this priest says, freedom does not signify a choice between choosing to follow God or not. It is merely the power to do good. He is, of course, talking about India. He can clearly see that there is a difference in the West with how freedom is understood. All the priests made it a point to mention that, because of the culture we come from, it is not possible for Indians to view Christian concepts, the way the believers in the West do. So, the understanding of Christianity that Indians have, is not an evidence of ignorance but rather the way Indians are culturally inclined to think.

On a final note, I would like to add this. In a conversation with a priest when I expressed my inability to grasp theological concepts with the ease that is possible among my western peers, the priest explained the problem thus, and it is telling of what the real issue is:

“What they mean to say is that you don’t rationalize. That you have inherited the faith your parents and family gave you, and you simply subscribed to it without rationalising. That is their point. But you know what happens in the West because of this rationalisation. The tree is known by its fruits. You should have certain

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<sup>240</sup> Fr. Steven Ottaplackal, 16/1/2016.

beliefs. I can rationalise and ask myself why I should have those beliefs. See you can never say that you are the product of your own will. If I don't have control over my birth, my existence, then what can I do? There is always dependence. There should be some beliefs. You may say that I am not dependent on anything, that I am a product of my own Will. But you are in fact a product of the contributions of so many people, your parents, siblings, neighbours, and teachers. You are the final product of all of these and you are indebted to them. You are not totally free in that sense. Once you have the feeling of dependence, it makes you socially committed. Commitment to God also will come from there. Then you are balanced. Otherwise you are not.”<sup>241</sup>

This excerpt shows why Indian Christians are fundamentally different from their peers in the West. Freedom and Free Will are largely insignificant to people who are dependent on their communities and thrive in this dependency. Freedom, if anything, is seen as something that puts hurdles in the way of being part of a community. It seems that according to these priests and nuns, freedom constitutes to a person taking decisions for him or herself without giving thought to how it would affect the lives of people around them, which is not a good way of living and leaves the person unbalanced. The priest above says that we have no control over the circumstances of our birth. Neither do we have control over the group of people we are born amongst. Therefore, whatever we are, is a product of the people who have shaped our lives. How we live our lives also depends on our circumstances, which again, we have no control over. In other words, we have no control over most of the things we do. It is important for us to notice, not just the difference in the way Indians see themselves in their society, but also explore this nature of relating to the community one is from. It is possible that further research on this will show us how Indians form and sustain relationships within their communities. Perhaps it might have something that the West can learn from.

Christian stories, papal cyclical and other nuggets of theology, are endorsements that these Indian Christians make, to fit within the narrative of their own reasoning. This has only added more dimensions to their Indian-ness but has not changed it.

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<sup>241</sup> Fr. Thomas Thadikaran, 22/1/2016.

From this chapter we learnt that according to Indian Christians, :

- The Holy Spirit is what enables one to do good deeds.
- Every religion has its own version of the Holy Spirit.
- Most respondents believe that since most living things have a soul, they also can have the Holy Spirit. This includes animals and trees too.
- Finally, Free Will is a concept not used in Indian churches because it is felt that it has no significance to the its culture.

## CONCLUSION

We began this thesis by pointing out a fundamental issue in the study of Indian Christianity that has been ignored, which is, how did Indian culture transform Christianity when it took root in Indian soil. More precisely, we tried to examine how Indian people understand the important claims of Christian teachings.

First, we saw how problematic a concept syncretism is. Its meaning has changed over centuries, and the way we understand it now, is as a mixing of diverse religious beliefs and practices. We then saw how certain movements within Christianity imposed a specific connotation on syncretism. Syncretism thus became a question that theology raised. In the subsequent centuries, owing to the adoption of this term into the different domains of social sciences, syncretism became an entity that got broadened to accommodate many things that occurred as a result of cultural interactions. Social scientists believed that syncretism was no longer in the theological domain, and that it had now become a neutral concept. However, through our scrutiny, we saw that Syncretism still raises the questions that theology did, and hence it is not a neutral scientific concept. Moreover, there is no theory of syncretism that can guide us to use the concept in a productive way. As of now, syncretism is a loosely used term, that can be used to address a range of things that happen, when cultural interactions take place.

While we tackled the concept of syncretism, we looked at the dynamics of Indian traditions, and saw how practices take precedence in them. This is where we got our first cue that Indian Christians, like other Indians, may not place the kind of importance on doctrines that is deemed a must in Christianity. This was demonstrated throughout the rest of the thesis. First, we began with an idea that is fundamental to Christianity, which is that, Jesus is the *only* way. We saw how Indian Christians agree that Jesus is indeed the only way, but, for only them. For those who were not born in Christian families, Jesus need not be the way. One's way is determined by the traditions and

practices that are followed in the community that one is born into. Interference with the ways of others, is not seen as a good practice.

We also saw that Indian Christians think that Christianity is the true religion. But, they also say that, Christianity being the true religion does not render other religions false. From this, we delved briefly into what the notion of truth could mean to Indians. Indians make their own distortions of the notion, because of the vernacular words that are used in translations for it. We found that when Indians talk about the truth of a religion, the closest way of expressing it in English, is to say that they are talking about the goodness in these religions. From there it leads to the idea that all religions have truth (goodness) in them.

For Christians, Jesus is the only way because he is the one through whom salvation can be attained. In the next chapter, we saw that there is a big confusion among Indian Christians on how salvation works. This is firstly, because of the different vernacular words that are used as translations. Next, we saw that not only is their idea of salvation ill-conceived, it is often combined with elements from the idea of *moksha*. The result is that their idea of salvation resonates neither with the Christian salvation, nor the Hindu *moksha*, and what we have is a strange blend of ideas. While this blend of ideas is strange, there is a clear pattern in the way they mix the ideas they have. They said that each path has its own salvation and that each of these salvations can be different from each other. So, the Hindu salvation is different from the Christian salvation and as long as one properly follows the path that they belong to, they will get the salvation that their path promises. Moreover, deeds are given the primary importance when it comes to one's qualification to attain salvation. Unlike what Christianity says, Indian Christians believe that if one does good deeds, they will surely attain salvation. The idea that salvation is an unmerited gift of God is absent.

Then we moved on to the concept of sin. While distortions with this concept occurs again, because of the words used in the vernacular, we can see that when Indian Christians talk of sin, they use Indian ideas about *paapa*. We saw how they, in most cases, do not consider an action in itself as a sin. It becomes a sin when it harms others, or is inappropriate. Another key feature that determines whether an action is a sin or not is determined by the path that one follows. What is *paapa* to a person from one path, may not be *paapa* to another. We also saw that some Indian Christians also

connect the notion of karma to matters regarding the forgiveness of sins. Sin is one of the concepts where the ideas that they use is mostly Indian and not Christian.

The Holy Spirit was the most difficult concept that was dealt with, in this thesis. The difficulty lies in the fact that in Christianity, it is granted that the functioning of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. We saw that while both Indian and western Christians, on the surface, say the same things about it, it is when Indian Christians describe what the Holy Spirit is, and how it works that we see the distortions that they make which does not resonate with Christian teachings. Some of the blatant distortions were that, they believe that it is the Holy Spirit that enables one to do good deeds, therefore be proper adherents to their paths. Here we again see the importance placed on deeds. Christianity teaches us that the Holy Spirit can touch anyone despite which religion one belongs to. But when Indians distort this, they say that this happens because every religion has its own version of the Holy Spirit. We also see distortions happen when Indian Christians connect the Holy Spirit to the soul because in Indian languages, the same words are used as translations for spirit and soul. This makes Indian Christians think that both of these are of the same substance, which leads to further distortions.

Through the interviews conducted, and the analysis of responses procured, we have seen that Christianity has indeed been transformed in India. The reader must have noticed a repetition in the conclusions drawn from each of these analyses. These repetitions are a testament to the fact that Indians do not distort theological concepts in any which way. There is a systematic pattern in the way they distort and understand these concepts. These patterns act as blueprints for us if we want to understand Indian Christianity.

With the discussion on Free Will, we came to know that Indian Christians are aware of the impact that their culture has played on their understanding, formulation and use of theological concepts. There is also a self-awareness that, as a result of this, Indian Christianity is different from the Christianity practiced in the West. In addition, from what we have seen, these believers see their faith, as what has been given to them by birth. They see others as being part of their own groups owing to the same reason. Because of this, most Indian Christians do not see their religion as an exclusive or special religion, but as just one among the many that they think are practiced in the



country. All these analyses of the distortions made, give us cause to re-examine Indian Christianity and ascertain its nature.

As I said in the beginning, what I wanted to do through this thesis was to show that we have ignored certain crucial aspects of Indian Christianity while studying it. What I have laid down here is the first steps to rethinking about this entity. This opens to us a new way of understanding this group, that does not dismiss many features of Indian Christianity as atypical properties, but accounts for them. The kind of work that has been undertaken to do this research helps us not just understand Christianity and its transformation in India. It gives us insight into the culture that has made this transformation happen.

There are many aspects of Indian Christianity that I believe need re-examinations. For example, among the many kinds of literature available on Indian Christianity, there is one that needs a special mention. The common conception about the Indian society is that there is a social system of hierarchy according to which people are positioned in society called the caste system. While it is generally appropriated as a social standing given at birth by Hinduism, it is interesting to note that if that is so, then we should be seeing the presence of this system only among Hindus. But such is not the case. The issue of caste has been addressed among all the communities in India such as those of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. If the caste system originates from Hinduism, we should not be able to find it among Indians who practice Christianity, but that is not the case. Not only are we shown many instances of the caste system being practiced among Christians, we can also see that the clergy of Indian churches, instead of rejecting this system, fight for the special privileges that are given to people of lower castes, for converted Christians. So, despite wanting to discard the system of caste, what Indian Christians end up doing is espouse the system. It would be fruitful to look into why this happens.

So, on a final note, where should Indian Christianity head if people of the faith get convinced that they are not Christians in the “proper” sense? Should they strive to be proper Christians? No. Indians will never be the kind of Christians that western Christianity expects. It is not a matter of whether they have the capability of being so, we are yet to say anything about that for sure. But having the attitudes and worldview like that of a Christian from the West is going to make it

difficult for them to live in Indian culture. Is there any value in the Christian tradition that is followed in India, that it can show to the rest of Christianity? In one of the interviews, a priest said that Hinduism is not a religion but, it is what Indian culture is. If that is so, in this excerpt from his interview that immediately followed this statement, I have replaced Hindu with Indian. Now let us see what he said:

Indian culture is an open search. It belongs to humanity. So, if I don't take advantage of the Indian texts, Indian practices, Indian worldview here, I think my Lord will blame me for that, because it is a great gift from God – that incessant search for the Divine, however they call it, different epithets that they use: truth, light, beauty, all kinds of things. So, one cannot but be an Indian Christian here, for example, even a Muslim has to be an Indian Muslim. One has to be an Indian. It is not a choice that we make. Rather here in India, one finds himself or herself within that culture: the thought, the structures, preferences, lifestyle, customs, and very much the language, that is all deeply internal. When Christianity got rooted here, it got rooted through the roots of Indian culture. Of course, Indian culture also has evolved. It is a dynamic reality – things change. Well, so to be an Indian Catholic, means to be a Catholic who thinks in Indian terms, Indian categories, Indian concepts. The thinking style is most important. The thinking style here in India and in the West, are different. And I believe that Indian Christianity has a lot to offer to World Christianity...”

Indeed, Indian Christianity has a lot to offer to the world. The question is, are we now ready to understand the subtleties in which it is practiced and believed, or do we still want to continue in the tradition that academics has shown so far? In this thesis, I have only dealt with a few concepts of Christian theology. A lot has come to light, despite the fact that I have only reached the tip of the differences between Indian Christianity and the Christianity practiced in the West. But the work has only begun, and this is the first step we have taken to rethinking Christianity in India.

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## **Appendix I**

### **Overview of Interviews Conducted**

For this thesis 130 lay people were interviewed. They belonged to the Latin Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Jakoba communities. The youngest people to be interviewed were 16 while the oldest were above 80 years old. 50% of the interviews were done in Kerala among Malayalees while the other 50% were held in Mumbai. The groups of people interviewed in Mumbai were varied. They were the East Indians of Mumbai, Goans and Mangloreans chiefly, and there were some Kannadigas and Tamilians too. Only 30 of these interviews were taken in the form of surveys where participants had to fill out questionnaires. The rest were verbal interviews that lasted between 20 minutes to over one hour.

There were 9 priests and 2 nuns who were interviewed as well. The interviews were held in the St. Joseph's Pontifical Seminary, in Mangalapuzha, near Cochin. The seminary was chosen because of its heritage and long tradition of training priests. It was established in Verapoly in 1764 and shifted to its current location in 1932. The interviewees are teachers of theology in the seminary, the majority of whom, were trained in the theological institutes of Paris, Rome and Leuven. Some of them have also taught theology in Rome and Leuven. All of these interviews were biographical in nature. Each interview was over one hour long, some being as long as 2-3 hours. It is my wish to soon make transcriptions of these interviews public, for future use for those who wish to do research in this field.

As per the request of most interviewees, their anonymity has been maintained. The names used for the analyses have been changed in the case of the priests and nuns, followed by the date on which the interviews were conducted. The laypeople have been indicated by the number assigned to them as interviews progressed., followed by the date on which the interviews were conducted.

## **Appendix II**

### **Questions for lay people**

This questionnaire has undergone changes through the period that interviews were conducted. Some original questions had to be eliminated while some were added. Questions 8-13 were added later. However, questions regarding the concepts that have been dealt with in this thesis were asked to all the interviewees.

Name:

Age:

Which denomination of Christianity do you belong to?

1.

- a) Do you go to Church? (If yes, how often?)
- b) State your reason for going (or not going) to Church.
- c) Have you been going to Church for a long time? If so, what encouraged and made you do so?
- d) What is the difference between you going to the Church and a Hindu going to a temple?
- e) Is there a difference between the Christian God and Hindu gods? (If yes) What are they?

2.

- a) How are sins forgiven?
- b) (For Catholics) When was the last time you went for confession?
- c) (For Catholics) How often do you go for confession?
- d) (For Catholics) Is this sacrament important? Reason for your answer

3.

- a) What is the Soul?
- b) Is it the same as the aatma?
- c) If no, what is the difference?
- d) Do all people have it (Hindus, Muslims, etc.)?
- e) Do animals have it?
- f) Do trees have it?

4.

- a) What is a sin?
- b) Is lying a sin?
- c) Give another example of a sin.

5.

- a) Who all are a part of the Holy Trinity?
- b) What is the Holy Spirit?  
A Ghost/ God's Spirit/ Other \_\_\_\_
- c) What does it do?
- d) What are the criteria for acquiring it?
- e) Did it exist before Jesus came?
- f) Do all people and have it?
- g) Hindus and Muslims and other non-Christians too? (Give reasons)
- h) Did Buddha have it?

6. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

- a) Is Jesus the only Way to Heaven?
- b) (If not) What are the other ways?
- c) Can Hindus and Muslims go to heaven too?
- d) Does one necessarily need to be a Christian to go to Heaven?
- e) What do you need to do to enter heaven?

7.

- a) What is Salvation?
- b) How does one attain it?
- c) Is it necessary to be a Christian to attain it?
- d) Can people of other religions attain it too?
- e) Is it the same as Moksha?

8.

- a) Why do we give each other 'peace' before Communion?
- b) What is its significance?
- c) Are you or is your community/ family devoted to any entities other than the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit like Mother Mary, St. Anthony, St. George, St. Jude, etc.,? If so, mention who.
- d) Who do you prefer praying to, Mother Mary (or your favourite saint) OR Jesus?
- e) What does one have to do in life to become a saint?
- f) Is there a difference in the way a Hindu becomes a saint from a Christian who becomes a saint?

9.

- a) Will doing good things and being an exemplary human being take you to heaven even if you are not a baptised Christian?
- b) If doing good things is all it takes then why be a Christian? Why go through the trouble of getting yourself and your children baptised?

10.

- a) Have you heard of Free Will?
- b) What is it?

11.

- a) What is resurrection?
- b) Is it the same as reincarnation?

- c) Can you cite other examples of reincarnation?
- d) Is it possible that resurrection happened somewhere in India as well?
- e) Will we also be resurrected someday after we die?
- f) After death why do we bury bodies and not cremate (burn) them?

12.

- a) Who is Satan?
- b) Do you know any stories about the Satan?
- c) Do you know of Satan troubling or possessing someone in your town/village?
- d) How do people exorcise that person?
- e) Do they take help of Hindu babas to do this?
- f) If not, why not?
- g) Is Satan the same as *bhoot*<sup>242</sup> or *chudail*<sup>243</sup>?
- h) If not, what is the difference?

13.

- a) What festivals do you celebrate?
- b) Do Hindus join you in your celebrations?
- c) Do you join them in their festivals? If yes, which festivals and what do you do? If no, why not?

14.

- a) Do you think Christianity is the true religion?
- b) What makes it true?

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<sup>242</sup> Ghost

<sup>243</sup> Witch/ banshee



## Appendix III

### Questions for priests and nuns

These were the questions asked to all priests and nuns. Additional questions were asked depending on the direction the interviews took.

1.

- a) Why are you a Christian?
- b) Do you believe in Jesus? What do you mean when you say that you believe in Jesus?
- c) What makes you a Christian?
- d) Would you have believed in Jesus even if you were not born into a Christian family?

2.

- a) What is a sin?
- b) Is lying a sin?
- c) Give another example of a sin.
- d) How are sins forgiven?

3.

- a) What is the Soul?
- b) Is it the same as the aatma? [If no, what is the difference?]
- c) Do all people have it (Hindus, Muslims, etc.)?
- d) Do animals have it?
- e) Do trees have it?

4.

- a) Who all are a part of the Holy Trinity?
- b) What is the Holy Spirit?
- c) What does it do?
- d) How can you acquire it?

- e) Did it exist before Jesus came?
- f) Do all people have it?
- g) Hindus and Muslims and other non-Christians too? (If no, give reasons)
- h) Did Buddha have it?

5. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

- a) Is Jesus the only Way to Heaven?
- b) (If not) What are the other ways?
- c) Can Hindus and Muslims go to heaven too?
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- e) What do you need to do to enter heaven?

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- a) What is Salvation?
- b) How does one attain it?
- c) Is it necessary to be a Christian to attain it?
- d) Can people of other religions attain it too?
- e) Is it the same as Moksha?

7.

- a) Are you or is your community/ family devoted to any entities other than the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit like Mother Mary, St. Anthony, St. George, St. Jude, etc.,? If so, mention who.
- b) Who do you prefer praying to, Mother Mary (or your favourite saint) OR Jesus?
- c) What does one have to do in life to become a saint?
- d) Is there a difference in the way a Hindu becomes a saint from a Christian who becomes a saint?

8.

- a) Will doing good things and being an exemplary human being take you to heaven even if you are not a baptised Christian?
- b) If doing good things is all it takes then why be a Christian? Why go through the trouble of getting yourself and your children baptised?
- c) Why convert other people and not just teach them to be good?

9.

- c) Have you heard of Free Will?
- d) What is it?

10.

- g) What is resurrection?
- h) Is it the same as reincarnation?
- i) Can you cite other examples of reincarnation?
- j) Is it possible that resurrection happened somewhere in India as well?
- k) Will we also be resurrected someday after we die?

12.

- d) Do you celebrate Diwali, Holi, Onam (any local festival)?
- e) Are they Christian festivals?
- f) Why do you celebrate them if they are not?

13.

- c) Do you think Christianity is the true religion?
- d) (If yes) What makes it true?
- e) Are the other religions false?
- f) What makes them false?

14.

- a) What is idolatry?
- b) Are we idolators?

15.

- a) Is the caste system practiced among Christians in India?
- b) What about Syrian Christians? They are supposed to be of higher caste than Latin Christians.
- c) Why are converted Dalits demanding for reservations if Christianity opposes the caste system?
- d) Why are priests supporting their demands? Is the Church afraid that it would not get converts from these groups, if these converts will not be allowed to demand rights according to what their caste status demands?