

## Christianity in India: A Focus on Inculturation

Antonysamy Sagayaraj

### Keywords

Materiality, material culture, things, inculturation, Christian Ashrams

### Introduction

This paper focuses on the concept of materiality or material culture such as vernacular architecture, religious artifacts and religious performances and displays that are used in religious rituals, their symbolic meaning and how materiality becomes instrumental in the process of inculturation of Christianity in India. These religious cultural “things” are not just ornaments that are kept for the sake of keeping tradition; rather, they are seen on the one hand, as effective medium that are used to express one’s religious belief, and on the other hand, they serve as a concrete manifestation of one’s culture in its effort to accommodate a foreign religion. The relationship of things to value systems, cosmologies, beliefs and emotions, more broadly to personal and social identities ... aims to illustrate the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity in the constitution of the meanings and significances of things. It then moves on to consider the manner in which things and their meanings become transformed in performative context and issues of time (Tilley 2006: 4-5). These cultural things, then, become very effective instruments for inculturation as they become the concrete embodiment of the Christian belief expressed in the ‘things’ that are indigenous to Indian religion and religious practice, most especially Hinduism.

Of course, one could say that the concept of religious materiality has developed systematically within the religions of Buddhism and Hinduism, while theology has always been centered upon the critique of materiality. At its simplest Hinduism, for example, rests upon the concept of *maya*, which proclaims the illusory nature of the material world. The aim of life is to transcend the apparently obvious: the stone we stub our toe against, or the body as the core of our sensuous existence. Truth comes from our apprehension that this is mere illusion. Nevertheless, paradoxically, material culture has been of considerable consequence as the means of expressing this conviction. The merely vestigial forms at the centre of a temple may be contrasted with the massive gates at the periphery. The faded pastels of an elderly woman are in stark contrast with the bright and sensual colors of the bride precisely in order to express in material form

the goal of transcending our attachment to material life (Banerjee & Miller 2003: 137-147).

It is in this particular context that one would understand the existence of Christian ashrams in India, for here, the fusion of Indian and Christian religious materiality is seen in its most vibrant manifestation. Christianity remains a foreign religion despite the fact that it has already been in India since the European missionaries introduced it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As an effort to lessen the clash of cultures between Christianity and Hinduism, Christian ashrams were and are built. These ashrams try to depict the Christian religion through the cultural symbolisms that could be found in traditional Indian religions. These ashrams, then, are initially built with not only the Indian Christian converts in mind so that they would still feel close to their traditional religion; but, of equal importance is the consideration that these ashrams are built for Hindus as well so that they will not see Christianity as a totally alien religion. This effort for inculturation, however, did not produce the desired effects: instead of attracting more Indians, it poses a greater threat to the possibility of losing one's identity precisely because of the confusion that is often the result of fusing two different religious traditions and leading to the criticism of "Hinduization" of Christianity. Nevertheless, the efforts at inculturation are not really wasted. Ironically, the new cultural manifestations of Christian ashrams attract a good number of foreigners, who, in their own respective countries, already belong to the category of both practicing and non-practicing Christians, though most of them belong to the latter category.

As has been pointed out, the present existence of Christianity in India is primarily due to the efforts of evangelization of the European missionaries from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Christianity in India has always been marked by the constant effort to try to make Christianity more understandable to the local citizens by expressing it through India's local symbolisms. The efforts of both Indian Christians and missionaries, then, have always been directed in finding sense in a foreign religion in the context of Indian local religious traditions. This makes the attraction of foreigners to Indian Christianity more understandable. A foreigner from either America or Europe, who has already been saturated by the traditional practices of Christianity in his/her respective country, is always in for a good surprise as he/she visits the Christian ashrams in India. Precisely because of the fusion of the rich cultural traditions of Christianity and Hinduism, Christianity, as it can be experienced in a Christian ashram, would be seen from a totally different light. This overwhelming experience causes an eventual, if not at all radical, change to the visiting foreigner; and the process of the religious cultural exchange begins from this.

After experiencing Christianity anew, these foreigners will go back to their respective countries, possessing in them a new religious experience that has to be shared. Because of this, Indian Christian ashrams are replicated in foreign countries

with the aim of sharing the uniqueness of Christian religion, expressed in local symbols and cultural “things”, which one has experienced in a foreign country. These foreigners even go as far as inviting Indian gurus from Christian ashrams in India to give talks, teach yoga, give spiritual guidance, and help these foreigners find enlightenment. Some of these foreigners would even go back to India to make a more in depth study Christian ashrams so that they could gain more ideas that could help them improve what they have already started in their own countries. The Christian ashrams, which are initially a concrete manifestation of the efforts of Christian missionaries to inculcate Christianity in the religious traditions of India, served a purpose that is quite different from its original intent. Instead of attracting local Indians through these inculturation efforts, it draws foreigners more, thereby, giving them a unique avenue to see their faith from a totally new perspective; these foreigners from Christian countries receive evangelization from India.

This particular reality points one to the fact that a circulation<sup>1</sup> of faith happens in and through cultural “things” that serve as concrete expression of one’s faith, and the people who are involve in the rituals of religious expression. It is here that one can witness not only the movement of culture influencing each other, but also, the beautiful exchange that happens between the former evangelizers as they take the role of receiving evangelization from the former recipients of faith. This dynamic movement of faith has also been the picture of the Church in general. Asia and Africa are no longer the passive recipients of evangelization; they now take active role of sending religious missionaries who are going to European countries and the US, to preach the good news of Christianity. It is in this context that the Society of the Divine Word’s *Overseas Training Program (OTP)*, or *Cross Cultural Program*, OTP’s counterpart in the US, bears witness to the continuous process of the Church’ growth through inculturation. The seminarians who are sent abroad through the OTP are given the opportunity not only to learn from the culture of the people of the country that they visit; they are also given the chance to experience Christianity through the members of their own society in another culture. As these seminarians go back to their respective countries, they become good agents for change as they enrich their own communities with their own experiences.

The first part of this paper will, then, be a discussion of what inculturation is, to be followed by a brief historical account of inculturation that happened in the Asian Churches during the missionary activities of some of the most effective missionaries of the church, in the second part. The third part of the paper will be a historical account of the coming of Christianity in India, the fourth part of the paper will be an exposition of a Christian ashram called *Shantivanam*, which is considered as the ‘Mother’ of all

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<sup>1</sup> Connected with Bede’s legacy is the Bede Griffiths Sangha, Russill Paul, Sr. Pascaline Coff OSB, Wayne Teasdale, the New Monk Project.

ashrams in India and abroad, that has been the bulwark of Christian evangelization in India. And finally, the controversial efforts of the Vatican to censor the inculturation efforts of the Church in India and the criticism from the conservative traditionalists who brand the ashram movement as NEW AGE movement is narrated in the fifth part.

## 1. Inculturation

In general the word culture brings to one's mind things of the past. If a city is called a city of culture it conjures up its ancient architecture, painting etc. not its industrial developments, not its social habits. Culture must be regarded in a wider sense, as the way we feel and think, love and worship (Gnanapragasam 1988: 171).

“Culture denotes”, says Clifford Geertz, “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life” (Gnanapragasam 1988: 172).

To make this definition clearer let us note the distinction between the allied terms: enculturation, acculturation, transculturation and inculturation.

Enculturation is the process by which an individual becomes inserted into his own culture, which is a life-long process. For, unlike animals, human beings are helpless from the moment of birth and through relatively a long time and in need of training in almost all aspects of life. This “learning experience, which marks off humans from other creatures and by means of which, initially and in later life, they achieve competence in their culture, may be called enculturation” (Gnanapragasam 1988: 172).

Acculturation designates the phenomenon resulting from the contact between two cultures or between a person and a culture not his own. It indicates the mutual influences of both, the reactions that may be to the advantage or otherwise of a culture. If, for instance, a new rite of burial is adopted from one culture by another, this rite may be to the advantage of some craftsmen's skill or to the disadvantage of some religious specialists (Gnanapragasam 1988: 172).

Transculturation is the transference of the traits, meanings, values of a specific culture to almost all other cultures, without the parent culture being influenced by other cultures (Marcello 1982: 7-8).

Finally inculturation is the dynamic relation between the Christian message and a particular culture, an insertion of the Christian life in a cultural community where it takes root and produces new riches. It is not just a strategy, a temporal adjustment or an attempt at propaganda. It is not a translation from one language to another or an adoption of a few symbols or gestures, the result of which will be a Christian community, which has a superficial layer of folklore but is deep down alien to its own culture. True inculturation will see the Christian experience express itself through the native culture in its own elements and become a source of inspiration,

action and new creations (Gnanapragasam 1988: 172). Other words suggested to designate the same process are indigenization and contextualization.

### **1-1. The Incarnation - the Perfect Inculturation**

The 'incarnation' is the inculturation of God "... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself into the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil.2: 6,7), thus Jesus inculturated himself into the form of a man. The incarnation of the son is the primary motivation and perfect pattern for inculturation. The central idea and model of inculturation is seen in the incarnation of the eternal word. The only difference in the case of Jesus and man is sin... This is the perfect inculturation (Komonchak & Dermot 1994: 512). Thus, inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context.

### **1-2. Inculturation in the Church's Tradition**

Jesus, the head of the church, died "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (JN.11: 52). Saldanha asserts that "the motive and model for inculturation may be traced back to the very origin of the church; the redemptive incarnation of the eternal word" (Saldanha 1987: 11). So, we can see that the very origin of the church begins with inculturation. This was continued through the apostles and the other disciples. The faith was lived in the different cultural context of the world like Palestinian, Aramaic, Diaspora and Hellenistic etc. (Saldanha 1987: 17).

#### **i). The Transition from Jewish to Hellenistic Christianity**

Christianity was born in a world, which had already its own religious, cultural, social and political structures of Judaism. The early Christians were Jewish Christians who were basically Jews who went to the synagogues and received the rites of circumcision. But Christianity was not meant to be only for Jews; but for others as well. Hence, there was a movement from Jewish to Hellenistic Christianity. The chief proponent of this shift was Paul, the very first agent of inculturation, who made a paradigm shift in Christianity, i.e., the famous Jerusalem council in 50 AD (Acts 15). There was an argument between Peter and Paul in which Paul wins his bid and becomes instrumental in changing the Jewish face of Christianity. It was in Antioch that for the first time three followers of Christ were called Christians (Acts 10, Cornelius' episode).

For many centuries this continued. But when Christianity became the official religion of Christendom, the Greco-Roman culture became the culture of Christianity, especially after the conversion of Constantine (Kavunkal & Hrangkhuma 1994: 7). Then on, evangelization was dominated by western culture leading to considering other cultures incompatible with Gospel message and giving an impression that Christianity

was a foreign religion.

## **ii). Church and Cultures**

By viewing a way of life as a society's design for living, we mean that culture is (1) a plan (2) consisting of a set of norms, standards, and associated notions and beliefs (3) for coping with the various demands of life, (4) shared by a social group, (5) learned by the individual from the society, and (6) organized into a dynamic (7) system of control (Luzbetak 1988: 156). The church, as a society of human beings, is no different. It is, then, not surprising why inculturation has always been the route by which the church incorporates itself in the culture of the people who have welcomed it.

The church is a robe of many colors of the cultural variety of the one pilgrim people of God. We belong to the local church and to the universal church at the same time. The church is not an institution outside the world; but a communion in the world. She cannot be away from the cultural realities of different parts of the world. Pope John Paul II says, "The church is a communion of churches, and indirectly a communion of nations, languages and cultures. Each of these brings its gift to the whole" (Bevans & Schroeder 1991: 139). So, the church and the cultures go hand in hand. One cannot be separated from the other.

In church, it will not always be easy to determine that which is specifically Christian and that which a cultural contribution is. The Church adapted the culture of the particular region where it was spread, especially in the early centuries. The culture of the church, then, differs from place to place. We also can see that in the early days, the culture of the church as different from the culture of today. The Church adapts the changes according to the changes of the time and culture. All the cultures are subjected to new developments. So, we cannot point out one culture as the culture of the church. Because, the church is a communion, which joins diversity and unity, it takes all the positive values from all cultures. It should not be only an external adaptation but integration in Christianity (Bevans & Schroeder 1991: 120).

Today, the church understands that "the building up of the Kingdom of God cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures". The best example for this is that the initiative of the church for inculturation. "Inculturation is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures" (Bevans & Schroeder 1991: 94-97).

The church and the cultures go hand in hand. The relation between the church and the cultures results in mutual enrichment; culture receives a new dynamism and fresh ways of understanding and living the Christian faith are opened up to the social and cultural realities of people (Saldanha 1987: 9).

## **iii). Inculturation and Evangelization**

Inculturation is mostly related to the evangelization. Evangelization is the

spreading of the Gospel till the ends of the world. Rayan defines inculturation as, "An insertion of the faith into the life stream of peoples and the expressions of the faith-life in terms of concrete historical existence, as well as the insertion of people's life into the faith at levels deeper than and of its particular expressions" (Peter 1980: 12). This shows that the inculturation should be the method of evangelization in today's world. People understand better what is filtered through their culture. Hence the Gospel has to be spread through the cultural idiom of the people (Kavunkal & Hrangkhuma 1994: 8).

The famous Theologian, Karl Rahner says, "The actual concrete activity of the church in its relation to the world outside of Europe was in fact the activity of an export firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the considered superior"(Rahner 1977: 717).

#### **iv). Role of Bible Translations**

Bible translations and liturgy have an important place in spreading the Gospel, i.e. evangelization; leading to inculturation. Today the message of Christ is spread mainly through the Sacred Scriptures. Scripture has to be spread in the daily life situations of the people. Liturgy brings the people closer to the church. But it has to be more related to the life situation of the people and to the culture of the region. Let us see the significance of the Bible translation and liturgy in inculturation.

In the early centuries, there were very few Bible translations. So, the people were not able to understand the real message of the gospel. They got the message only through the words of the missionaries. But later many local translations of the Bible emerged, which helped the ordinary people to grasp the real message of the Gospel. "There is also a wider translation of the message by expressing it in artistic, dramatic, liturgical and above all in relational terms which are appropriate to convey the authentically indigenous, often through the theologically tested use of the symbols and concepts of a particular community" (Komonchak 1994: 15). The Bible is written in a particular place with a particular cultural context.

## **2. Models of Mission of the Catholic Church in Asia**

The Christian missions have always been engaged in what is today called the process of inculturation or contextualization. Some of the great figures in the church's history are those who have in some way taken seriously and treated with respect the context in which the gospel has been witnessed to and proclaimed: Peter and Paul, Justin Martyr, Origen, Benedict, Boniface, Leoba, Francis of Assisi, Clare, Ramon Lull, Matteo ricci, Bartolome de las Casas, Vincent Lebbe, Charles de Foucauld, Lesslie Newbigin, Mother Teresa, William J. Seymour. In the sixth century, Gregory the Great wrote to Augustine of Canterbury in Britain, instructing him not to destroy the local shrines completely but rather to adapt them to Christian worship; in the ninth century

Cyril and Methodius preached the gospel in the language of the Slavs and invented an alphabet in order to translate the scriptures; at the beginning of the modern era, Martin Luther and the Reformers saw the urgent need for accessible scriptures in local languages; and the newly established SCPF in Rome spoke of how foolish it would be to transport France, Spain or Italy to China – missionaries were called to bring not European culture but the faith. There is no doubt that missionaries in the past also imposed European culture and disparaged local culture; the so-called *tabula rasa* approach<sup>2</sup> is very much in evidence throughout the church's history (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 385-386).

### 2-1. Francis Xavier

During the first part of his missionary career, Xavier stressed the importance of translation, which is already a form of adaptation. Andrew Ross points out that “Xavier’s insistence on the translation of prayers and hymns into the local languages broke with the situation hitherto of having, in practice, to accept Portuguese language and culture along with the faith” (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 184-185).

### 2-2. Alessandro Valignano

Over the next twenty years, Valignano would develop a model of mission founded upon *il modo soave*. Beginning in Japan, he insisted on the importance of preparing and accepting Japanese for priesthood; translating the scripture, catechisms, and prayers into the local languages, a practice that had been initiated by Xavier; and accommodating the style of the mission and church in terms of architecture, clothing, diet and social formalities.

Rather than making decisions too hastily regarding translation, he insisted that the Jesuit missionaries begin with an in-depth study of the language, religion, culture and politics of China. Eventually, for example, the Confucian term for God was chosen. This accommodational approach of Valignano, which shaped the mission model of the sixteenth-century Jesuits in China, was based on the Society’s principle that “a Jesuit be open and responsive to the situation to which he was called” (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 186).

### 2-3. Matteo Ricci

In 1583, Ruggieri was joined by Matteo Ricci, who would become the most prominent Jesuit missionary in China during this period. At first, they adopted the dress and lifestyle of a Buddhist monk (bonze), since this seemed to be the most appropriate identification in Chinese society to reflect the religious nature of their

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<sup>2</sup> The missionaries followed a *tabula rasa* approach; that is, people could become Christian only if their cultural-religious beliefs and practices were first destroyed, sometimes but not always by force.



presence.

Ricci had the “opportunity to lay the foundation for the same sort of marriage between a philosophy, Confucianism, and the Christian faith as Thomas Aquinas had performed with Aristotelianism” (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 187).

#### **2-4. Robert de Nobili**

In 1606, Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili arrived in Madurai in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Gonzalvo Fernandez was ministering there with people from the pearl-fishery coast, where Francis Xavier had worked some years earlier. De Nobili discovered that becoming Christian was equated with becoming a foreigner, that is, following the Portuguese way of life, eating meat and so on. Fernandez considered Indian customs superstitions and therefore contrary to the gospel (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 189; Baierlein 1995: 113-119).

In the spirit of Valignano and Ricci, de Nobili believed that being Indian and being Christian were not incompatible, and he needed to adapt himself to Indian society. As for the latter point, he was over time able to master the state and local languages of Tamil and Telugu, as well as Sanskrit, the language of the sacred Hindu writings. He took on the austere lifestyle of an Indian holy person (*sannyasi*)-dressing in the saffron robes, living on alms, and devoting himself to a life of meditation and prayer. He became known as a spiritual master of the “true religion” (Christianity) (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 189; Baierlein 1995: 113-119).

De Nobili allowed Indian Christians to continue with their customs and habits of dress, for example, the tuft of hair and the sacred cotton thread that he considered cultural rather than religious. Furthermore, he accepted the ancient caste system, with its social discrimination and strict separation. The consequence of this, since he associated primarily with the Brahmins and upper castes, was that he had to cut himself off more and more from the other castes and even from fellow Europeans. However, de Nobili never lost sight of the lower castes, and he eventually formed two groups of missionaries – the *Brahmanasannyasis* for the upper castes and the *Pandaraswamis* for the lower (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 189-190; Baierlein 1995: 113-119).

By learning Sanskrit – the first European to do so – and by studying and discussing many of the sacred Hindu texts, de Nobili was able to begin to understand the depths of the Hindu world of thought. Although his dream was not realized, he proposed establishing a seminary in India and teaching Christian dogma based on certain principles of Hindu philosophy. In addition to his writings in European languages, his extensive philosophical and theological works in three Indian languages further established him as a scholar (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 190; Baierlein 1995: 113-119).

Since, in Nobili’s day, caste was a basic category of Indian thought, the first

thing that had been asked about the Portuguese when they arrived in India was “To what caste do they belong?” The Indians watched their behavior, how many times they washed daily, how they treated women and, in particular, what and how they ate. The Indians soon concluded that the Portuguese observed no caste and untouchables. To the beef-eating outcastes in foreign dress the Indian gave the name of Parangis, a derogatory term that suggests meat-eating, wine-drinking, loose-living, arrogant persons whose manners were so far removed from Indian propriety that social intercourse with them was unthinkable. Fernandez was a Parangi; and it was the first name given to Nobili in Madurai (Cronin 1959: 42, Antony 2007: 79).

Francisco Ros, Archbishops of Cranganore, following the precedent of the St Thomas Christians, who had used sandal from time immemorial, approved the use of sandal-paste as an ornament of the forehead, composed a special formula for blessing it and issued to wear his rectangular sandal-mark, which he compared to the pompom on the hat sported by teachers in Portugal, and the toga and gloves worn in Italy (Cronin 1959: 120).

Although he had the approval of his Jesuit provincial, Albert Laerzio, and the archbishop of Cranganore, Francis Ros, de Nobili's approach was often attacked by others, both by some within the church and by some Brahmins. In 1623, Pope Gregory XV approved de Nobili's methods, but they would eventually be condemned under the Rites Controversy. Even though the number of Brahmin converts to Christianity was small, de Nobili succeeded in witnessing the Christian faith to them in a way that has not been duplicated. Since his time, those becoming Christian have come mainly from the lower social groups – “tribal” people, who are outside the caste system, and Dalits, so-called untouchables of the lowest caste. Today, Dalits represent 60 percent of India's sixteen million Roman Catholics, 90 percent of the membership of the Protestant Church of North India and approximately 50 percent of the Church of South India (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 190; Baierlein 1995: 113-119).

## **2-5. Alexandre de Rhodes**

Alexandre de Rhodes, who entered Vietnam in 1624, would become the founder of Vietnamese Christianity (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 190).

Building upon his excellent linguistic skills and the work of several other Jesuits, de Rhode developed a system for writing Vietnamese with Roman alphabetization, which is the national script today (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 190).

To avoid having Christianity equated with a foreign culture, he attempted to build upon and transform elements of Vietnamese culture, as long as he did not consider them totally unacceptable to the Christian faith. For example, de Rhodes gave Christian meaning to the important celebration of lunar New Year by having a crucifix attached to the central bamboo pole and dedicating the three days of New Year to the Trinity (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 190-191).

### 3. Christianity Comes to India

Of the religions that originated outside but found a home in India, Christianity is the oldest. If tradition is to be believed, it was brought to Kerala by St Thomas, the Apostle, under the auspices of the Nestorian Church. Written records testify to the presence of Christians in India from the sixth century onwards. The Thomas Christians are also known as Syrian Christians in India for, originally, their liturgy was in Syria and they acknowledged the jurisdiction of the Syrian Patriarch of the East in Damascus (Syria). Conversions seem to have been made locally among upper-caste Hindus only. The community has remained confined to Kerala (Madan 2011: 213).

The St. Thomas Christians (Syrian Orthodox) and the Catholics believe that the apostle came to India in 52 A.D. Many people were converted after hearing him preach. Thomas, then, travelled to the east coast and preached in the area now known as *Mylapore*, a suburb of Madras (now known as Chennai). The continued success of his preaching led to increasing hostility from orthodox Hindus. In 72 A.D. he was attacked while hiding in a cave in Little Mount. From there he was chased for three kilometers to the top of the hill, which is now called St. Thomas Mount. He was speared to death while he knelt in prayer. His body was buried in San Thome (Mylapore) where the Catholic Cathedral now stands (Anthonysamy 2009: 74-90).

The missionary activity gained momentum only after the arrival of the Churches that came with the traders from Europe. Many of the early trade routes from Asia to Europe were overland. Three such routes from Asia met in Constantinople. Arab merchants who brought goods from India and other Asian countries sold them to European traders here. So, Constantinople was not only the centre of the Eastern or Orthodox Church, it was also a great trading centre. Then in 1453 disaster struck; Constantinople was captured by the Turks. Trade with India almost ceased. Without spices from the East, people in Europe found their food tasteless. But how to get the necessary spices? The land routes were blocked. The answer was via the sea. At that time in history sailors from Europe, with bigger and better ships and new instruments for navigation being developed, were beginning to explore the world and now they had a new goal for their explorations. Tasteless food and loss of luxury goods drove them East looking for the "Spice Islands". The King of Spain sent Christopher Columbus westward; he believed Columbus could sail around the world and come to the land of spices. He got as far as America! The Portuguese sailed south and found a route around South Africa. Vasco da Gama sailed into Kozhikode (Calicut) harbor in May 1498. He took back to Portugal large quantities of pepper, ginger, precious jewels and other goods. A new trade route between India and Europe had been opened (Walpole 1993: 20-21).

Until this time the Arab merchants had been the main traders in India. Now, the Portuguese defeated them in battle and for over 100 years controlled the sea routes

to India and further East. They built trading centres in Goa, Kochi, Tuticorin, San Thome, as well as in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Traders and soldiers and their families settled in these centres. Their main purpose of being in India was to trade. But their presence in the country meant that more Christians were settling here (Walpole 1993: 21).

In the middle of the sixteenth century Jesuit missionaries made Goa their base after it became a part of the Portuguese colonial empire, and spread out to other parts of south India and Sri Lanka and even ventured north. Inevitably, they encountered the Thomas Christians who were asked to sever ties with the Nestorian Church and come under the jurisdiction of Rome. This led to a split among them: while about one-half of the community complied, the rest resisted, and reaffirmed their loyalty to the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch. A long-lasting issue causing dissension among the Thomas Christians as well as the Jesuits was whether missionary activity was to be confined among the upper castes, and whether caste was to be deemed a religious institution and abolished, or only a secular social arrangement and therefore tolerated (Madan 2011: 213).

The Portuguese were Roman Catholics. So, the congregations they established for themselves in their trading centres followed the rites and practices of the Catholic missionaries. Francis Xavier came in 1542. He spent several years with the fishermen on the Coromandel Coast. Thousands of people were baptized by him. Some years later, Robert de Nobili worked with these people before going on to Madurai. He felt that the Portuguese had made their Christian converts too westernized. So, wanting the Church to be more Indianised, he lived like an India *Sannyasi* – Guru. Gradually, the Catholic Church spread throughout India. Today it is the biggest Church in the country (Walpole 1993: 22).

For over hundred years Portugal was a powerful country. Her navy controlled the trade routes to the East. Then a change of power came in Europe; England, France, Holland and Denmark all wanted a share in the wealth of Asia. Gradually, they also, established trading centres in India. When the English East India Company was formed in 1600 Anglican chaplains were appointed to the trading ships and later in the trading centres. St. Mary's Church in Fort St. George, the oldest Protestant church, built in 1680, is a witness to the coming of Anglican Church to Madras. In 1620 Denmark started a trading centre in Tarangambadi (Tranquebar). Danish colony was established. Most of the Danish were Lutherans; the Danish Company built a small church for them and provided Lutheran chaplains.<sup>3</sup> Now all the three main branches of the Church, namely, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Protestant Church were

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<sup>3</sup> Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, one of the first missionaries sent by the Danish King Frederick, arrived at Tarangambadi in July, 1706. He translated the New Testament into Tamil, first Indian language Bible, and printed it in 1715, with the Tamil press, a first of its kind, sent from Germany in 1713.

represented in India. But of the three Churches only the Catholic Church showed interest in the spiritual welfare of Indians. It was nearly 100 years before the Lutheran Church, the first Protestant Church to send missionaries to work in India, became interested in missionary work (Walpole 1993: 23).

#### **4. Shantivanam – A Christian Ashram**

Among the gifts given by God to India, the greatest was seen to be that of interiority: the awareness of the presence of God dwelling in the heart of every human person and of every creature, which is fostered by prayer and meditation, by contemplative silence and the practice of yoga and *Sannyasa*. “These values” it was said, “belong to Christ and are a positive help to an authentic Christian life”. Consequently it was said: “Ashrams where authentic incarnational Christian spirituality is lived, be established, be open to non-Christians so that they may experience genuine Christian fellowship”. The aim of ashram is to bring into the Christian life the riches of Indian spirituality, to share in that profound experience of God, which originated in the Vedas, was developed in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, and has come down to us today through a continual succession of sages and holy men and women. From this experience of God, lived in the context of an authentic Christian life, it is hoped that people will be assisted in the growth of a genuine Indian, Christian liturgy and theology.

Shantivanam, the ashram in Tamil Nadu dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity (hence the name in Sanskrit: *Saccidananda*), had been founded in 1950 by two French priests: Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri Le Saux, who had been the pioneers in the attempt to adapt monastic life in India to the traditional forms of Indian life and prayer. They called the ashram ‘*Saccidananda Ashram*’, *Saccidananda* being the Hindu name for the Godhead as Being, Knowledge and Bliss, which they took as a symbol of the Christian Trinity, the Father as Being, the Son or Word of God as the Knowledge of the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the Bliss of Love, which unites Father and Son. They themselves took the names of Parama Arubi Ananda, The Bliss of the Supreme Spirit, and Abhishiktananda, the Bliss of Christ. Thus they sought to identify themselves with the Hindu tradition of *Sannyasa*, the renunciation of the world in order to experience the bliss of the divine life. But this was much more than a matter of names. They sought by the study of Yoga and Vedanta to integrate the whole spiritual tradition of India into their lives as Christians, whole spiritual tradition of India into their lives as Christians, thus working towards that unity of religion which is the goal of mankind (Griffiths 1982a: 17-18).

Unfortunately Father Monchanin died after a few years and Father Le Saux finally settled in the Himalayas as hermit, where he wrote several books in which he showed the most profound insight into the relation of the Hindu to the Christian

tradition. When he left Shantivanam he invited us to take it over and I came there with two other monks from Kurisumala Ashram, in Kerala to continue his work. Here we were able to start our monastic life again in a more radical way. The Benedictine life, to which I had been accustomed, was that of a community of monks sharing a common life, of prayer and study, supporting themselves by the work of their hands. But now I embarked on something different (Griffiths 1982a: 18).

His highness, the Dalai Lama, in his foreword to the book “The marriage” by Fr. Bede Griffiths (figure 1) states “Every culture finds its deepest values in its religious and spiritual traditions and it is from this point of view that each religion makes a contribution to the global family. Fr. Bede takes the idea of a meeting of cultures even further referring not just to a meeting but to a marriage. The place of this marriage is within the human person, so he is not talking about the impossible, the establishment of a global religion, but of a global spiritual friendship. Fr. Bede’s own life exemplified this. He left England after twenty-five years as a Christian monk there to live out his next forty years in India. By entering so deeply into Indian culture and religion his own Christian faith, far from being weakened, was in fact strengthened and universalized” (Griffiths 1982a).

The aim was to follow the customs of the Hindu *sannyasi*, one who renounces the world to seek for God, to make a study of the Hindu doctrine of Vedanta and to follow Hindu methods of prayer and meditation by the practice of Yoga. In externals the community follows the customs of a Hindu ashram, wearing the ‘kavi’ habit of a *sannyasi*, going barefoot, sitting on the floor both for prayers and for meals and eating with the hand. In this way it is sought to preserve the character of poverty and simplicity, which has always been the mark of a *sannyasi* in India (Griffiths 1985: 46-47).

Thus, in 1968, Fr. Bede Griffiths arrived at Shantivanam from Kurismala with two other monks and again immersed himself in the study of Indian thought, attempting to relate it to Christian theology. He went on pilgrimage and studied Hinduism with Raimundo Panikkar. Under Fr. Bede’s guidance, Shantivanam became a centre of contemplative life, inculturation and interreligious dialogue. He contributed greatly to the development of Indian Christian Theology. In 1973 he published *Vedanta and the Christian Faith*. The first copies of *Return to the Centre* arrived in time to be the centrepiece in the temple *kolam* for Father Bede’s 70th birthday, December 17, 1976.

The ashram is one of the oldest institutions in India, though it cannot properly be called an institution; it is rather a way of life. Its origin is to be sought in the time of the *Aranyakas*, the Forest-Books in the first millennium before Christ, when the Rishis retired into the forest to meditate and disciples gathered around them to share their meditation and to learn the way to experience God. This remains the essential character of an ashram. It is a place where disciples gather round a master of guru to learn his

way of prayer and meditation and to seek for God. Ashrams have existed in India from the earliest times to the present day, but it is only recently that Christian ashrams have come into being (Griffiths 1985: 46).

The foundation of Catholic Ashrams by the Catholic Church of India was with the intention of inculturated Indian Christian way of life and worship that would find mass appeal, and remove the impression that has been created that Christianity is a 'foreign' religion, in a country where just over 2% of the population has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

#### **4-1. The Need for Inculturation in India**

The Indian Church has to undergo a radical transformation, if it is ever to respond to the needs of the Indian people. It has to rethink its organization to Indian instead of Greek terms, and to adapt its organization in Indian instead of Greek terms, and to adapt its organization to Indian instead of Roman models. Even its Semitic base cannot go untouched. Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam a Semitic structure of language and thought. It has to learn to see this Semitic tradition with all its unique values in the light of the Oriental tradition, to learn what Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have to teach it. Then only will the 'marriage' take place in the Church as in the world between East and West (Griffiths 1982a: 7).

The liturgy or the way of worship also helps the people to know Jesus and His church. People are more comfortable with the local liturgy, i.e. local rituals, local way of praying, local symbols, local vestments etc. Unfortunately, Christianity is following mainly Western liturgy, which makes the people feel that Christianity is a foreign religion. Liturgy reveals the mystery of the church. So, liturgy is having an eminent place in the daily life of the church. Liturgy will be more acceptable, if it is practiced in the indigenous methods. "If liturgy is the supreme manifestation of the mystery of the church and the most efficacious means of fulfilling her mission.... it follows that the mission of the church and inculturation which are carried out, through the day in various sphere should reach their culmination in the celebration of the liturgy in indigenous and deepest forms. Hence liturgy should be the most indigenous and deepest form of inculturation" (Fernando 1980: 15).

"Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among the non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values" (Bevans & Schroeder 1991: 182). In the process of inculturation and witnessing Christ we should be faithful to the specificity of the revelation in Jesus Christ and the specificity of a culture to which the Gospel is addressed. Ultimately, this faithfulness is the faithfulness to the incarnation (Kavunkal & Hrangkhuma 1994: 58).

The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, declared that "the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," and

encouraged Catholics to “recognize, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral values as well as the social and cultural values to be found among them”. Following this direction, the All-Indian Seminar in 1969, which was attended by whole of the hierarchy and representatives of the whole Catholic Church in India, spoke of the “Wealth of truth, goodness and beauty in India’s religious tradition” as “God’s gift to our nation from ancient times”. The Seminar showed the need of a liturgy “closely related to the Indian cultural tradition,” and a theology “lived and pondered in the vital context of the Indian spiritual tradition”. In particular, the need was expressed “to establish authentic forms of monastic life in keeping with the best traditions of the church and the spiritual heritage of India”.

#### 4-2. A place of Prayer

Shantivanam, the forest of Peace, was inaugurated on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1950, the feast of St. Benedict “with the blessing and approval” of Bishop Mendonca of Trichy who said it was “the beginning of a new era in the history of religious life in India.” The Ashram brochure states that “the ashram is a community of spiritual seekers and a monastic community is in charge of the ashram. It is dedicated for contemplative life in the Benedictine tradition.”

The aim of the ashram remains to establish way of contemplative life, based alike on the traditions of Christian monasticism and of Hindu *Sannyas*. Hinduism has a tradition of *Sannyasa*, renunciation of the world in order to seek God or in Hindu terms, “liberation” which goes back many centuries before the birth of Christ and has continued to the present day. Our aim at Shantivanam is to unite ourselves with this tradition as Christian sannyasis. Our life is based on the Rule of Saint Benedict, the patriarch of Western monasticism, and on the teaching of the monastic Fathers of the Church, but we also study Hindu doctrine (Vedanta) and make use of Hindu methods of prayer and meditations (Yoga). In this way, we hope to assist in the meeting of these two great traditions of spiritual life by bringing them together in own experience of prayer and contemplation (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 3).

In externals the community follows the customs of a Hindu ashram, wearing the saffron-coloured robe (*kavi*) of the sannyasi, sitting on the floor and eating with the hand. In this way we seek to preserve the character of poverty and simplicity, which has always been the mark of the sannyasi in India. A distinctive feature of the life is that each monk lives in a small thatched hut, which gives opportunity for prayer and meditation and creates an atmosphere of solitude and silence. There are two hours specially set apart for meditation, the hours of sunrise and sunset, which are traditional times for prayer and meditation in India. The community meets for prayer in common three times a day, in the morning after mediation, when the prayer is followed by the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, at midday and in the evening. At our prayer we have readings from the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita as well as from Tamil



classics and other Scriptures, together with psalms and readings from the Bible, and we make use of Sanskrit and Tamil songs (*bhajans*) accompanied by drums and symbols. We also make use of “*arati*”, waving of lights before the Blessed Sacrament, and other Indian customs, which are now generally accepted in the Church in India. In this way we hope to assist in the growth of an Indian liturgy according to the mind of Church today (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 4).

#### **4-3. A Place of Meeting**

The ashram seeks to be a place of meeting for Hindus and Christians and people of all religious or none, who are genuinely seeking God. For this purpose a guesthouse has been built, where both men and women can be accommodated for retreat and recollection and for religious dialogue and discussion. There is a good library, which is intended to serve as a study center. It contains not only books on the Bible and Christian philosophy and theology but also a representative selection of books on Hinduism and Buddhism and other religions and a general section on Comparative Religion. We have many visitors from many parts of India and from all over the world, who are seeking God by way of different religious traditions, and we seek to respond to the need for a spiritual center where such people can come and find an atmosphere of calm and quiet for study and meditation. No charge is made, but guests can make an offering to cover their expenses (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 4-5).

As for the food at Shantivanam, everyone meets outside the dining hall and greets each other with the clasped hands and a bow and proceeds to enter, having first removed the shoes or sandals. At all meals (figure 2), everyone sits on floor mats and eats one’s portions of food without the use of spoons or forks. The monks and guests share, in silence, the simple but delicious vegetarian breakfast, lunch and dinner. When finished each one takes the metal plate and cup outside and around the back to wash, rinse, and place them on a wooden rack to dry. As you pass the cow barn on the way to the dish washing, anything uneaten on one’s plate is put in the manger for the cows to eat. Each morning and afternoon tea (figure 3) is served in a gazebo in the centre of the ashram. This is an opportunity to meet new arrivals and to socialize with fellow ashramites as this is the only place where one is allowed to talk.

For those who seek to become permanent members of the community, there are three stages of commitment to the life of the ashram. The first is that of *sadhaka*, that is, “seeker” or aspirant. The second is that of *brahmachari*, that is one who has committed himself to the search for God but need not remain permanently attached to the ashram. The third is that of *sannyasi*, that is one who has made a final and total dedication, when the *kavi* habit is given and he is committed for life to search for God in renunciation of the world, of family ties and of himself. This however need not involve a permanent stay in the ashram but in accordance with Indian traditions the *sannyasi* is free to wander or go elsewhere as the spirit lead him (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 5).

The ashram is also concerned to help the people in the neighboring villages. Though the ashram's primary call is to discover the kingdom of God within, it also takes seriously the words of Jesus "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters that you do unto me." Hence the ashram is also concerned to help the people in the neighboring villages. The ashram runs a tailoring center where around twenty-five young women are trained every year in tailoring and are given a free sewing machine at the end of their training. The ashram also started a stitching unit in order to provide employment to young men and women of the area. There are around thirty-six persons getting employment in this unit. The ashram also runs a home for the aged and the destitute. There are around 25 persons in this home where they are given free boarding, lodging and medical care. The ashram is very concerned with the education of the children in the neighboring villages. The ashram has distributed free notebooks and uniforms to the poor and deserving children. It is providing eggs twice a week to 450 children and plans to distribute free milk to the children in the age group below three years. The ashram also builds houses to the poor and provides medical help to the poor. The ashram welcomes the generous offerings from the people who would like to support these welfare activities. The ashram supports itself partly by cultivating the eight acres of land in its possession, together with a small herd of cows, and partly by contributions from the visitors and well-wishers elsewhere. But in all work, which is undertaken for the needs of the ashram or for others we have constantly to keep in mind that what people need above everything, more than food or clothing or medicine or education, is the knowledge of God. An ashram must above all be a place of prayer, where people can find God; where they can experience the reality of the presence of God in their lives and know that they were created not merely for this world but for eternal life (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 5-6). Next let us look at the everyday life in the Ashram with special reference to prayer.

#### 4-4. Prayer at Shantivanam

The three common acts of worship at Shantivanam, our *Sandhya Vandana*<sup>4</sup>, correspond to the monastic offices of Lauds, Sext, and Vespers. Hence they are based primarily on songs and readings from the Bible, according to the Syrian Christian and Latin Benedictine traditions. But the Christian prayer is always preceded by chanting in Sanskrit, and by readings from the Scriptures of Hinduism.

In Shantivanam, we each have a small a thatched hut among the trees in which we live and pray, and we meet together for prayer three times a day, not for the formal prayer of the liturgy as at Kurisumala, but for a more informal prayer in which

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<sup>4</sup> Vandana means chants of praise and worship, Sandhyaa literally means "holding together, union, juncture, meeting point." Here it is the meeting point of day and night, darkness and light, morning and evening twilight, hence also the juncture of the three divisions of the day: dawn, noon, and sunset (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 4).

there are readings from the scriptures of different religions as well as psalms and readings from the Bible. In the morning we read from the Vedas, at midday from the Koran and the Granth Sahib of the Sikhs, and in the evening from the devotional poets, especially those of Tamil Nadu the great Tamil mystic, Manikkavasagar. We are thus confronted day by day in our prayer with the question of the relationship between the different religions (Griffiths 1982a: 18-19).

Description of a typical day at *Saccidananda Ashram*. The ashramites rise at 5:00 a.m. as the Angelus prayer announces the call to “wake up,” signaled by the bell that also rings for midday and evening prayer. Morning meditation begins at 5:20 at sunrise. The evening meditation is from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00, at sunset.

When the mind in meditation goes beyond images and concepts, beyond reason and will to the ultimate Ground of its consciousness, it experiences itself in this time-less and space-less unity of Being, and this is expressed in the ‘great sayings’ of the Upanishads: “*Aham Brahmasmi*” - ‘I am Brahman’, “*Tatuvam Asi*” - ‘Thou Art That’... The Ultimate is experienced in the depth of the soul, in the substance or Center of its consciousness, as its own Ground or Source, as its very being of Self (Atman). This experience of God is summed up in the word *Saccidananda*. God or Ultimate Reality is experienced as absolute being (*sat*), known in pure consciousness (*cit*), communicating absolute bliss (*ananda*) (Griffiths 1982a: 21).

#### **i). Morning Prayer**

The early Morning Prayer begins at 6:30 a.m. As the songs and Psalms are prayed; a sandalwood paste is passed around to everyone. Each person dips a finger into the container and places it on the forehead or hands as a sign of purification and consecration of the whole body to God. It is seen as a symbol of divinity or divine grace. It is also a symbol of the unconditional love of God as it gives its fragrance even to the axe that cuts it. We are called to radiate the unconditional love of God in our daily living. The Eucharistic celebration follows directly, in an informal setting with dignity and beauty. The Roman rite is followed with the addition of meaningful elements native to India (Saccidananda Ashram 2011b: 6).

#### **ii). Midday Prayer**

At the Midday prayer we use the purple powder known as *Kumkumum*. This is placed on the space between the eyebrows and is a symbol of the ‘Third eye’. The third eye is the eye of wisdom. Whereas the two eyes are the eyes of duality, which see the outer world and the outer self, the third eye is the inner eye which sees the inner light according to the Gospel, if thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. This single eye is the third eye, which was often marked on Greek ikons of Christ, and is thus a universal symbol. In India the red color is considered to be feminine, the mark of mother goddess. We consider that it symbolizes the feminine wisdom, received from

above and apply it to Our Lady of wisdom. It should be observed that the Midday prayer is a wisdom prayer consisting of Wisdom Psalm 118 of the Old Testament and a reading from one of the books of Wisdom.

### iii). Evening Prayer

At the evening prayer, which begins at 7:00 p.m., we use ashes (*Vibhuti*). The symbolism here is not merely that of Ash Wednesday, “Dust thou art and dust thou shall return,” but has a deeper meaning. Ash is a matter from which the impurities have been burnt away. Placing the ashes on the forehead signifies that our sins and impurities have been burnt away and the ashes represent the purified self. The Psalms, readings and songs are likewise part of the evening prayer (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 7).

At the *Arati* ritual (called the waving of the lights), a flame is lit in a bowl before the dark place where the Blessed Sacrament resides. Then the flame is carried around to everyone present. Those present extend their hands briefly over the flame and then touch their eyes (or forehead). The ashram explains it in this manner: “At each of the three communal prayer services, the *arati* is offered at the beginning of the service. It consists in the waving of light or incense, as a sign of honor or worship performed before any sacred thing or person. The root meaning of *arati* before the central shrine of a temple (which is always kept dark) signifies the dwelling of God in the cave of the heart. When lights are waved before it, it reveals, as it were, the hidden God. The waving of lights before the Blessed Sacrament and the whole congregation manifests, as it were, the hidden Christ.” Other features of the three communal prayer services are the readings from the Veda, the Upanishads, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. There may also be readings from the Tamil classics and other Scriptures, together with psalms and readings from the Bible (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 7).

## 4-5. Symbols and symbolic things used in the Liturgy

During the Prayers, they make use of various symbols drawn from Hindu tradition, in order to adapt the Christian prayer and worship to Indian traditions and customs according to the mind of the church today.

At the offertory of the Mass we make an offering of the four elements: Water, earth, air and fire. Every Hindu *puja* consists in the offering of the elements to God, as a sign of the offering of the creation to God. In the offertory therefore, we offer the four elements as a sign that the whole creation is being offered to God through Christ as a cosmic sacrifice. We first sprinkle water round the altar. Then we sprinkle water on the people to purify the people. The priest then takes a sip of water to purify himself within, we then offer the fruits of the earth as the prayer of the offertory says, the bread and the wine, and then eight flowers which are placed around the ‘*tali*’ on which the gifts are offered (figure 4). The eight flowers, which are offered with Sanskrit chants, represent the eight directions of space and signify that the Mass is offered in the ‘center’ of the

universe thus relating it to the whole creation. We then do *arati* with incense (figure 5); representing the air and then with camphor representing the fire. Thus the mass is seen to be a cosmic sacrifice in which the whole creation together with all humanity is offered through Christ to the Father (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 7-8).

In our daily prayer we make constant use of the sacred syllable OM. This word has no specific meaning. It seems to have been originally a form of affirmation rather like the Hebrew Amen used as a form of solemn assertion as when in the Gospel Jesus says; "Amen, I say to you." Thus it came to be conceived as the primordial sound, the original word, from which the whole creation came. In this it is akin to the Word of St. John's Gospel, of which it is said that it was in the beginning with God and without it nothing was made. In the Upanishads it came to be identified with the highest Brahman that is with the supreme reality. Thus it is said: "I will tell you the Word which all the Vedas glorify, all self-sacrifice expresses, all sacred studies and holy life seek". That word is OM, that word is the everlasting Brahman, that Word is the highest end. When that sacred word is known all longings are fulfilled, it is the supreme means of salvation, it is the help supreme. When that great word is known one is great in the heaven of Brahman. "For a Christian": of course, that Word is Christ.

#### **4-6. The Architecture of the Temple:**

In Shantivanam, which is hailed as the "mother house" of catholic ashrams in India and abroad, the Church is built in the style of a South Indian temple. At the entrance is a '*gopuram*' or gateway (figure 6) on which is shown an image of the Holy Trinity in the form a '*trimurti*', a three headed figure, which according to Hindu tradition represents the three aspects of the Godhead, as Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of the universe. This takes as a symbol of the three Persons in one God of the Christian Trinity. The figure is shown emerging from a cross to show that the mystery of the Trinity is revealed to us through the cross of Christ (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 8-9).

Between the gateway and the temple is a cosmic cross (figure 7), the ashram's log, made of stone and mounted on an inverted lotus, a Hindu symbol of purity and divine love. The cross symbolizes the union of male and female, mind and matter. In its centre is the Sanskrit inscription "*Om*" representing Christ as the Divine Word, as Logos, or *Shabda Brahman* - the soundless sound that echoes in all of creation. The wheel represents *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, which we must all break through to achieve *moksha* meaning liberation (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 9).

In the '*mandapam*' or outer court of the temple, where the congregation assembles, there is a similar cross having the words '*Saccidanandaya namah*' written on it in Sanskrit, that is 'worship to *Saccidananda*'. *Saccidananda* is the name for the Godhead in Hindu tradition as Being, knowledge and Bliss. This is taken as a symbol of the Christian Trinity as Sat, Absolute Being, the source of being in the Godhead and in

creation; as Cit – Absolute Consciousness expressed in the Word, the image of the Godhead the self manifestation of the One; as *Ananda* Bliss the expression of the Joy of God, the fruit of Love (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 9).

The temple is absolutely gorgeous and serene, eight-sided South Indian *Shaivite* style, pink with beautiful white woodwork soaring to a '*gopuram*' central peak. Six large round windows open to the outside world, and beautiful grillwork shows Christ as a Hindu guru (figure 8), his pierced hands held in traditional Hindu postures of welcome and peace. Outside, statues of men and women meditating, musical instruments (figure 9) at their backs, sit at each corner.

Over the doors which give access to the inner sanctuary or '*mulasthanam*' there is an inscription in Sanskrit taken from the Upanishads; "*Paramarth stavam evaikonananyosti jagatapate*" which means: 'You are alone the supreme Being; there is no other Lord of the world'. Under this are the words '*Kurios* Christos' the Lord Christ in Greek letters.

In the inner sanctuary or '*garbagriha*' (figure 10), which is always kept dark to signify that God dwell in the darkness, the 'cave of the heart', there is a stone altar with a tabernacle, in which the Blessed Sacrament, the sign of the real presence of Christ, is preserved. The Sacrament signifies the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, through which the worshipper is able to pass through death to resurrection and experience the new birth to eternal life. Through the resurrection, an ascent is made to the 'new creation'. This represented by the '*vimana*' (figure 11) above the sanctuary. At the base of the *vimana* are the figures of the four beats of the Apocalypse, the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle, (Rev. 4:7), which represents the whole creation redeemed by Christ. Above them are four figures of saints representing redeemed humanity, and above them four figures of Christ in different postures seated on a royal throne-*simhasana* and surrounded by angels. Towards the east is the figure of Christ as king in the royal posture and beneath him the figure of the Virgin Mary, as Queen of heaven clothed with the sun and with the moon and stars at her feet (Rev. 12: 1) treading on the serpent. The serpent has different meanings. If it raises its hood it is the symbol of human consciousness in harmony with God; it is crawling on the ground it is the symbol of human consciousness, which has fallen from the eternity into time. It is the symbol of the ego. A virgin is one who stops this movement of the ego and opens it to the divine consciousness. Towards the north is the Christ as Priest in the '*abhaya*' mudra taking away fear and conferring grace and beneath him St. Peter with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. To the south is Christ as prophet or teacher in the posture of Guru and beneath him St. Paul as teacher of the nations. Finally to the west is Christ as Contemplative in the posture of '*dhyana*' of meditation and beneath him St. Benedict, the father of monks and founder of contemplative life in the west (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 9-10).

Above these figure of Christ and the saints is the throne of God, represented by

the dome covered with peacock feathers and above this again the lotus, symbols of purity supporting the '*Kalsa*' an ancient symbol of the four elements earth, water, air and fire, pointing upwards to the '*akasa*' the infinite space, in which God dwells in inaccessible light. Thus at the entrance of the temple the mind is directed to the mystery of the Godhead as three persons adored by angels. Then through the mystery of the Cross and the resurrection it is drawn to contemplate the "new heaven and the new earth", which is the destiny of man, and beyond this the mind is finally turned to the ineffable mystery of the Godhead beyond name and form to which all earthly images are intended to lead us (Saccidananda Ashram 2011a: 10).

At the centre of the circular, pillared, thatched meditation hall, where yoga is also practiced, open all around, is a statue of Jesus in the Lotus (figure 12), like a yogi. Four adjoined statues face the four cardinal directions sitting knee-to-knee in the classic lotus (*padmasana*) posture. They are situated in a large black lotus, and even Jesus is black, like the black Madonna, signifying that this is a divinity of the earth (Website 1).

At the foot of the banyan tree is a statue of Jesus seated on a snake or *naga* (figure 13) symbolizing an invisible energy called *kundalini*. According to the philosophy of yoga, *kundalini* is represented by a serpent asleep, coiled on the first chakra, at the base of the spine. That energy is said to climb vertically through the vertebral spine and to "feed" the brain, modulating its activity. It is said to be an evaluative energy, and according to its level of activation, it could condition the state of consciousness of the individual. According to oriental religions, when a human being achieves the maximum development and activation of that energy, he/she would achieve illumination, an evolved state that transcends the self and attains the supraconscience and universal love. Some experts in psychoanalysis and psychology – influenced by Carl G. Jung – believe that *shakti kundalini* can be interpreted as what is known as libido.

In the garden, there is a statue of Mother Mary, in Sari (figure 14), with Child Jesus seated like a typical Indian village lady with a child, on a lotus in the *padmasana* posture of yoga.

## 5. The Controversy

### 5-1. The Rites Controversy and the Decline in Missionary Activity

A variety of factors in both Asia and Europe contributed to the context of the confrontation that would become known as the Rites Controversy. In terms of jurisdiction, the Portuguese were in opposition to the French, the *patronatus* system to the SCPF (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith), and the Jesuits to the MEP. Regarding the models of mission, the accommodational approach, primarily represented by the Jesuits, was in tension with the *tabula rasa* approach of many members of other missionary orders. The Jesuits thought that the others had no regard

for non-Western cultures, while the others thought that the Jesuits had “sold out” and compromised Christianity (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 192).

The primary mission approach in Asia was accommodation, that is, *il modo soave* of Valignano. In this light, William Burrows rightfully suggests that this model, which he calls a “Catholic inculturation paradigm,” should be added to those paradigms presented in David Bosch’s monumental work *Transforming Mission*. This image of the missionary as guru, scholar and dialogue partner would disappear after the Rites Controversy (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 195).

### 5-2. 'Responsible' role for Indian theologians discussed

Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, leading a Vatican delegation, on Jan. 16, 2011 began a seven-day closed-door colloquium in Bangalore with 28 bishops and 26 leading theologians from India, to discuss the role of Indian theologians in the context of global theology. “We are discussing the role of the Indian theologians as responsible theologians,” said Cardinal Oswald Gracias, president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India. The basis for the discussion is *Donum Veritatis*, the 1990 Vatican instruction on the role of theologians in the Church, the cardinal explained. He said their discussions included topics such as inculturation and pluralism. “The pluralistic theologians have begun to dilute Christianity as one of the many religions to go to God. In this context, such a colloquium could become an alerting occasion” (Website 2).

### 5-3. Some Critical Remarks:

As we will see later the Catholic ashrams have become sources of controversy with Hindus and Catholics. The controversy lies on the accusation that the ashrams embrace a theology that deifies the self, saying: “We are gods.”

The ashram movement promoters, by denying sin, justify their claims that “we are gods”. Vandana Mataji quotes Swami Vivekananda who says, “We are the greatest gods... Most Christians cannot easily think of man becoming god... to enable people to become God by entering into silence, is this not the *raison d’etre* of an ashram?” asks Vandana. Confirms Sr. Pascaline Coff OSB, “Bede often said ‘the aim of an ashram is to realize the Self - and then you know God’... This is the real call of the ashram.”

Bro. Martin recommends chanting OM as “This experience communicates with the famous utterance: ‘*Aham Brahma Asmi*’, I am Brahman, I am God.” One can say, “My real ‘I is God’ or ‘I am God’.” Or, becoming enough enlightened, declare “the second great statement ‘*Tattvamasī*’ which means ‘You are that’ or ‘You are God’,” [and] realize that “God and human beings are ultimately one.” “There is no ultimate truth in the religions and their doctrines. Truth is the human person. Human being is the way, the truth and the life,” says Bro. Martin. Whereas the teaching of the church is as follows: The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) explains that originally “created in a state



of holiness, man was destined to be fully "divinized" by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to "be like God" (Gen 3,5). Only Jesus Christ says: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14,6).

Despite all attempts made by the Catholic gurus and *acharyas*<sup>5</sup> to adopt forms of Indian culture, worship, liturgy, and philosophical and theological concepts, most traditional Hindu leaders are unable to accept them as one of their own.

To these orthodox Hindus, the Catholic gurus are still Christians preaching Christianity thinly veiled as Hinduism, with an agenda of conversion in a new approach that has been approved by Rome, which is a wrong assessment. Most traditional Catholics, at least those who have not been accustomed to these ashrams and by the priests, nuns and lay persons associated with them, do not accept these centers and their protagonists as being truly representative of Christian expressions of faith. They view these places and people as having been subverted by *Brahmanic* Hinduism.

#### **5-4. Christian Ashrams – NEW AGE Movement: A Critique**

The ashrams are inter-linked with each other and with a network of New Age individuals and organizations. The consorting of ashramites with New Agers is not simply on an intellectual or academic level but on a personal one as exemplified in Bede, Swami Sachidananda, Russill Paul and others. Thus, there is taking place an "osmosis" as hoped for by Le Saux, Painadath and Vandana, between Christianity on the one hand and New Age and Eastern spirituality on the other, resulting in an unacceptable syncretism (Prabhu 2005: 84-85).

The ashramites' numerous teachings contradict those of the Church and Biblical revelation. Further influenced by Jungian thought and anchored in *advaitic* philosophy, they lead to many abuses, errors, aberrations and evils including religious pluralism, the rejection of the unicity of Jesus and a 'sacramental Church', the primacy of contemplative meditation over the Real Presence in the Eucharist and the Blessed Sacrament, the impersonalization of God, a view of the Holy Spirit as a divine 'energy', the deification of nature and the self, the unrestricted distribution of the Holy Communion at Mass and the institution of such practices as yogic meditation, which is the bane of the Indian Church and the Ashram Movement. Modern developments are a Yogic celebration of the Eucharist, courtesy the late Swami Amaldas of Shantivanam, and not a few other priests including Fr. Gilbert Carlos SVD who even celebrated Yoga Healing Masses as reported to me by friends in Australia (Prabhu 2005: 85).

A great many of the ashram teachings are New Age and are refuted by the Vatican Documents on the New Age and Christian Meditation, and by *Ecclesia in Asia*. These very documents are directly attacked and criticized by ashram founders Bede, Vandana, Painadath and others. They also "reinterpret" the Gospel as the Church is

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<sup>5</sup> Acharyas are spiritual teachers.

accused of preaching only “Half the Gospel”. One of the greatest casualties of ashram theology is Evangelization. The Ashram movement, while focusing on Dialogue, abhors the very idea of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the very reason for the existence of the missionary Church. Genuine ‘Inter-religious Dialogue’, according to Church teaching does NOT preclude evangelization (Prabhu 2005: 85). But this kind of censorship and regulation for doctrinal examination and being criticized for inculturation initiatives is nothing new, as we have seen, in the history of inculturation in the Church since the time of the great missionaries.

## Conclusion

Be this as it may, inculturation in Christian India is still an undeniable fact. And despite the feared ‘excesses’ that ashrams, like the Shantivanam ashram, have gotten themselves into, the church still continues to grow as the faithful tries to live a Christian life within the context of their cultural background. The use of *mangal sutra* or *thali* instead of rings, and the use of white veils with the traditional *saris* during wedding ceremonies, the absence of any festive celebration during lent, and the wearing of *kavi sari* during pilgrimage to Marian shrines instead of the traditional blue recommended by the local church leaders, are a few examples of inculturation by the laity in India. These and other practices in the ashrams are just a few of the manifestations that religious materiality, or the ‘things’ of a particular culture used in rituals become the very expression of the faith of a particular culture, and can never be limited to the dictates of orthodoxy. Christianity has always been at the forefront of change, and it will not stop now. Inculturation will happen precisely because it is the only way for a religion to respond to the growth that is initiated by the undying movement of the Holy Spirit. If the church is to be a living church, it cannot isolate itself from the ever-moving circulation of faith—in this regard, the Indian Christian Church is truly alive.

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