

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN CULTURES

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In the Indian history, Christian symbolization has wielded considerable influence and effected changes in the religious belief systems, political thought, and social systems. The Christian faith continues to challenge and transform Indian cultures, religious thought, and religious affiliations. This paper is an attempt to delineate the influence and the impact of Christian symbolization on the cultures of India. Along with a brief historical overview of Indian Christianity, we explain the concept of symbolization, hermeneutics of symbolization from a Christian perspective, and the process of Christian symbolization carried out especially by Indian Christians and Indian Hindus. Finally we delineate the influences of Christian symbolization on Indian cultures and describe its contribution to the Indian polity.

Keywords: Christian symbolization, Indian Christianity, hermeneutics of symbolization, symbolized transformation, socio-cultural influence, ethos transformation

Symbols speak. They make meaning. Human communication depends on them. Symbols as elements of communication exist in a culture. Symbols can be said to live wherever culture is found. In a way, symbols can be even said to create culture; they transform it; they reshape it. Meanwhile, culture in turn creates symbols. When new meanings are found, new symbols are articulated. New realities and meanings are discovered, understood, accepted,

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and communicated using transformed symbols or new ones. Symbols in themselves are transforming. Thus, there is a bidirectional dynamism between symbols and cultures.

What happened and what happens in the cultures of the Indian subcontinent is no different. Cultures and different religious symbolisms shared common dynamism, and effected profound influence in shaping the Indian society. Christian symbolization is one of these processes that keep shaping various aspects of the Indian cultures, society, polity, and ethos.

The concept of one Indian Culture is problematized by scholars and cultural activists. An Indian culture does not exist inasmuch as we can say a language called 'Indian' does not exist. We can speak of 'cultures' of the Indian sub-continent and only in the plural. Jyoti Sahi, along with Michael Amaladoss, questions whether we can speak of a single 'Indian culture.' Sahi contends that "we have to be aware of the whole dynamics of cross-cultural processes which exist within our own Indian Cultural reality" (1987, p. 133). The awareness of the variety of cultural assortment in this subcontinent is a recent one, because cultures have begun to meet and mingle in higher frequency in the recent decades. So we speak of *the cultures* of the Indian peninsula.

Cultures do not just coexist. They intermarry and interpenetrate. This is because each culture finds meaning in the elements of the other. Human being searches for meaning. If one finds a new meaning, the meaning and its meaningfulness are accepted even if it is found to belong to another culture. As mentioned earlier, meanings are expressed through symbols. Symbolization—whether at the personal level, social level, or at the conscious or subconscious or collective conscious level—is an all pervading reality of the meaning-seeking human life.

We witness to similar dynamics of symbolization when Christianity, as a new set of principles, a way of life, a belief system, and a religion, appeared in India. In this paper, we argue that Christianity has had its say in the reshaping of cultures in India. We explore the extent to which Christian symbolization brought new meaning and set the tenor of life for both the believers and the non-believers alike. We begin by discussing various aspects of symbolization, especially with regard to Christian symbolization, in the Indian context. This will help in explaining the ways in which Christian symbolization had

its influence on Indian cultures and understand the same by specifying the contribution of Christian symbols and symbolization in the cultural, societal, and religious spheres of India.

Symbolization

The process of symbol formation can be called symbolization. Here, we are referring to symbols in a broad sense, accommodating conventions, material symbols, linguistic symbols, myths, rites, and legends. Symbolization is inherent to any group of human beings bound by common bonds of religious beliefs and culture. For the present study we can define symbolization as follows: Symbolization is the process of formulation of conventions, symbols, myths, rites, and legends, meant for an interchange of reinterpretable substantive information in the realm of conscious human existence. Interchange implies give-and-take, a mutual understanding, appreciation, acceptance, and esteem for what another holds to be valuable and true. This interchange is taken to exist among individuals of communities, and between individual communities from a larger perspective.

Information is reinterpretable inasmuch as symbolization is a continuous process where information processed varies over factors of time, place, character, and modes of approach while preserving relevance and unity of information. Information is substantive in that what we care about is important because it comes to us as something presented to our senses and perception as real and existent and only a symbolism can continue its existence in our mind and being.

Symbols are meant for making meaning. But symbols do not merely make meaning but they can also be said to contain the realities that they point to. They are not mere signs. As Paul Tillich states, “every symbol points beyond itself to a reality for which it stands,” and “symbols, although they are not the same as that which they symbolize, participate in its meaning and power” (1964, p. 54). Symbolization or symbol-making would be the process in which a symbol is attributed meaning and power of truth or reality. Thus, symbolization can make the potent symbols to represent an experience of the truth.

From a metaphysical perspective, symbols are ontological referentials.³

³ We call it “ontological referential,” because symbolization as a process both supersedes the particular symbols themselves and the particular processes of enculturation of faith elements, and has to be viewed as belonging to every human culture. It is this very reason that makes us capable as the authors of this article to visualize what is happening in every symbol formation and to speak from a common perspective.

Symbolization in every culture must be viewed thus. This metaphysical perspective as it occurs in a culture holds good also for the symbolization of the Christian faith, and the eventual evolution of a Christian culture. Further, we need to speak of 'Christian cultures' in plural, because, every faith encounter by any culture produces its own style of expressions and symbols.

By Christian symbolization we do not refer to the material symbols used in Christianity though they are parts and products of the process. In a metaphysical sense, symbolization pervades all areas of the existence of Christianity as a religion. It is manifest in the action and being of the Christian Church but is a hidden working principle directing its existence.

From a broader perspective again, symbolization has to be understood not as a formulation of symbols meant for mere communication of unrelated ideas. A Jungian interpretation of symbols may state them to have been evolved or be symbolized from archetypes and may also refer to the preconscious and the instinctual (Jung, 1968). A similar *post factum* visualization of realities and interpretation may be said to belong to the world of dreams and the unconscious. The scope of this paper does not permit us to delve more into such an understanding of symbolization from its psychological or its spiritual dimensions.

Therefore in this paper, symbols are understood not merely as material symbols, but include all those which have the ability to point to the truth and its realities while making them available for meaningful experience. The category of symbols thus includes material symbols, linguistic and thought symbols, myths, rites, and legends.

Symbolization in the Indian Context

In the Indian context both the religious and the cultural cannot be separated into water-tight compartments. Cultural expressions and symbols are intertwined with religions and often possess religious significance. This fact might be universally true as well. Yet in the multi-cultural Indian context, each culture is invariably related to a particular belief system. Each of these cultures and religions mutually contribute to the formation and the evolution of symbols.

A religious symbol taken out of its cultural context loses its original relevance and vice versa. In the Indian context for example, the *Sūryanamakāra*

(saluting the sun) may remain a mere *āsana* (a bodily posture) meant for physical exercise and may not signify any salutation of a creator god or the sun god to a non-believer. A rich man depositing a few kilograms of gold in a temple *hundial* (offering box) may not seem meaningful to an Indian socialist. The ceremony of the Sacred Thread with seven strands will make sense to the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas, but not to others. Throwing ashes of the dead into the Ganges may purify the souls of the deceased for a Hindu believer, but not so for an ecologist. So everyone can be said to own the validity of symbolization which cannot be deprived of by another's disbelief.

One of the symbolization processes is the formation of literature around the faith expressions. *The Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Purānās* which date back to many centuries, are examples of the literature that carry within them the reality of the sacred. Whether written or oral, they carry within them sacred symbolisms. Kenneth Burke affirms this truth by saying, “any verbal act, is to be considered as a ‘symbolic action’ ” (1974, p. 8). But many a time these sacred symbolisms were lived out and were only orally passed on but never had written records. Now those cultures with only oral traditions have begun to record their myths, legends, and religious rites and the literature keeps growing. These can be called the linguistic symbolizations of faith experiences and are linguistic faith expressions.

Inasmuch as cultures contain symbolizations, language forms an important part of that culture. Languages are formed within a culture, but they themselves later shape culture. As Tillich rightly says, “the form of religion is culture. This is especially obvious in the language used by religion” (1964, p. 47). Thus, we can understand the reason why much of Indian classical literature until recent times had been religious in nature. The numerous languages spoken in India have shaped cultures and religious beliefs.⁴

When a person tries to express one's faith or a truth one has encountered, that person ends up using similes, metaphors, allegories, imageries, analogies, and other figures of speech. Though human language itself is limited, it enables a person to express a particular experience in a limited way. The use

⁴ The 2011 Census of India has identified more than 19,569 mother tongues spoken of which 1,369 are rationalized mother tongues and 1,474 are treated as ‘unclassified.’ The total number of languages recognized is 121 each with more than 10,000 speakers. About 96 percent of the population speaks the 22 scheduled languages. Cf. Office of the Registrar General, India, Census of India, 2011, p. 4.

of linguistic devices aids symbolization and it represents to another human being or to another group the information about the person's experience or encounter. Symbolization can draw the other into a similar experience or enable one to further articulate or refine the expressions, and help codify the experience into a commonly acceptable idiom. This trend is often observed in the narration of mythical stories. "Myth itself is a ritual act that is uttered, an oral event taking place within the milieu of a living society" (Dhavamony, 1973, p. 178). Myth may later give rise to rituals or in many cases an existing ritual may also be accounted for by the creation of a myth (p. 176).

Apart from linguistic symbolizations, symbolizations do occur in worship and ritual, art, architecture, dress codes, food habits, personal behaviour, personal activities, community activities, societal stratifications and interactions, political perceptions, astrology, powers of nature, superstitious behaviour, and magic. For example, in the area of worship there is "the cultic re-presentation of religious experience" which is "central to the life of the religious group" (Dhavamony, 1973, p. 158). These symbolizations may be identified separately but they need to be understood and interpreted as belonging to a single whole.

The Hermeneutics of Symbolization

A proper hermeneutics of the process of symbolization is essential to progress in the understanding of cultures and religions. This can also facilitate dialogue and interactions among cultures and religions. Yet, it will only be wise on the part of the hermeneut to be wary of applying principles of one's own tradition, whether cultural or religious, to that of another. For any hermeneut it will never remain a futile exercise to understand the process of symbolization in a culture or a religion. We try to enrich ourselves by understanding the past by basing in our present a degree of awareness (see Panikkar, 1979, p. 9). Similarly, when a Christian involves oneself in such an effort, that person draws from the riches of the symbolizing past of one's own traditions as well as that of another. While strengthening oneself in the symbolizing tradition, the person's effort will bring about openness towards another tradition, deepen the meaning of one's own belief system, and increase the possibility of the ways of sharing the religious experience.

When we state that human life is meaningful, we mean we are in a continuous process of making meaning of our lives, interpreting our

existence, and our actions. Panikkar speaks of interpretation, which is “inbuilt in Man’s very nature” (1979, p.10). A Christian religious experience prompts the Christian believer to interpret one’s life and that of others in the light of one’s own experience of revelation. The experience of revelation takes place amidst human experience of fallenness, suffering, and pain; in short, amid human problems and in the search for causalities and meanings. But explaining human problems cannot be monopolized by any religion or philosophy (Panikkar, 1979). Every religion thus develops its own myths to understand the realities of human existence.

Christianity has its own symbols and their interpretations. Certain meaning is made in a Christian context or, in other words, amidst a Christian culture. As Tillich states, “Christian symbols are not absurdities, unacceptable for the questioning mind of our period, but that they point to that which alone is of ultimate concern, the ground and meaning of our existence and of existence generally” (1964, p. 50).

Then symbolizations must necessarily be identified and interpretations must be carried out *in loco*. A symbol removed from its original time and place demotes itself into a mere sign. When a Christian or for that matter anyone who is a believer in one particular faith tradition attempts to interpret the symbolization of another, that person will end up dislodging the meaning embedded in the original symbolization. This is because symbolization does not belong to the experience of that person who interprets and is factually far removed from that person’s actual context.

Does it then mean that interpreting or understanding symbolization of another is an impossibility? It need not be so. For example, language is a possibility of expression but with limitedness. When a language does express something, it simultaneously fails to express other things. Yet we do not refrain from employing language. The door that closes is also the possibility of openness: symbolization, though limiting, becomes a mode of making present the truths of belief to a non-believer or to a potential believer.

Symbolization is substantive because, it firmly bases itself in a reality considered important to a community. Therefore, when interpreting the symbolization of a community it should be remembered that, symbolization occurs not merely within a human person but in a community and in its existential context. Consequently, interpretation of symbolization of another

becomes an immersion into that symbolizing community thus implying give-and-take, mutual understanding, appreciation, acceptance, and esteem for what another holds to be valuable and true.

Revelation and religious experience can be said to belong to every human being and every human group on this planet, but in varied ways. And every revelation and religious experience results in the symbolization of that experience and from it are articulated symbols, myths, rites, and legends.

Christian Hermeneutics

A Christian who actively encounters persons of other faiths and their belief systems employs hermeneutics. The process entails not merely an interpretation of another's belief system and symbolization but simultaneously an interpretation of one's own faith and revelation too. This is a kind of intrapersonal dialogue which can be presumed to precede an interreligious dialogue.

In the Indian context, history does not witness to Christians employing hermeneutics actively in a multi-religious context until colonization began. We can only conjecture infrequent and accidental theological or interreligious encounters to have occurred before the Europeans came. Christianity itself seems to have merely 'existed' in South India from the time of its entry two thousand years ago. But in contrast, today we find numerous active hermeneutic engagements culminating in interreligious dialogue.

In the recent times, Christianity has been looked upon as a religion foreign to India even though it shares geographical proximity with its origins. This could be so because, while the nascent Christianity contained Asian perspectives and Semitic culture and thought, it had its reincarnation and re-inculturation in the western world. After flourishing in the West with its western garb, Christianity had a 'pseudo-second coming' to India during the European conquests. But this pseudo-second coming blatantly contrasted with its earlier coming. It lacked the commingling of faith tradition with native culture the way it had occurred two thousand years ago. The western Christianity now nourished judgemental attitudes of condemnation for the natives with their religion and culture. It exhibited cultural imperialism. Of course, the primary aim of those who came to India was trade, and not dialogue or ecumenism, and certainly not a sincere hermeneutics of native symbolization of Indian cultures and religions.

But there were exceptions. Among those who came from the West were indeed some who desired to share their experience of the transcendence and the divinity which they had experienced in Jesus Christ. They were not determined by their cultural ascendancy or feelings of superiority. After their arrival they began to engage themselves in a process of re-symbolization. This meant re-interpretation of their religious experience in the light of the new context of the other religious groups and of re-visualizing existing symbols. Thus, they attempted to adapt existing symbolisms and tried to re-articulate them with newer meanings.

Some remarkable personages who engaged themselves in these new efforts were some Jesuits such as Thomas Stevens (1549-1619), Roberto de Nobili (1579-1656), Jean Venance Bouchet (1655-1732), Constantine Beschi (1680-1747), Jean Calmette (1692-1740), and G. L. Coeurdoux (1691-1777) (Clooney, 2010). Clooney portrays their effort and writes, “[They] all studied Hinduism in relative depth and wrote articulately about it, increasingly with an eye toward similarities and differences from Christianity” (pp. 27-28). They attempted to adopt the native symbolizations of the existing religions. The motive in brief was to present the Gospel to the natives in the natives’ own symbolic language. This involved re-symbolization or re-interpretation of existing symbolisms to suit the Gospel presentation. It was not only a critiquing or an apologetic process but was for them a learning process as well.

Hindu Symbolization by Indian Christians

In the early centuries, the manner in which Christian faith met the natives in India to a great extent determined how the message was received. The earliest reception of the Christian faith was from St. Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ. There are no recorded historical accounts of how it was preached except for some oral traditions which point to the existence of some Christian communities on the Malabar Coast and on its east. Some folk songs like *Ramban Pattu*, *Veeradiyan Pattu*, and *Margam Kalippattu*, which narrated the evangelical activities of St. Thomas, witness to the presence of Christian communities that had preserved their faith.

The western missionaries on their arrival found such Christian communities already present in India. They found them to be different from them and even heretical. St. Francis Xavier, for example, found the native Christian

communities poorly instructed in their faith. But they were glad to accept his instructions (Coleridge, 1881). Urged on by the missionary, they began a process of re-symbolization of their faith. They accepted the latinized trend of prayers, worship, and liturgy (though in their native tongues), while also distancing themselves from local deities. There then occurred an East-West marriage of symbolization and it was syncretic.

The Jesuit missionaries from the West had tried to promote indigenization until their society was suppressed. Meanwhile the native Catholics had not continued the trend of inculturation or symbolization according to their contextual milieu. Kenneth Ingham observes that “conversions to Christianity were proportionately few, but the influence of missionaries upon social conditions was outstanding” (1956, p. 1).

It was only the converts to the Christian faith in the last two centuries—neither those of the traditional St. Thomas Christians nor the catholic neophytes—who plunged themselves into symbolization of their new faith in the light of philosophies and cosmogonies of Indian origin. These later converts did not reject or ignore their continued existence in a milieu of varied Hindu philosophies and faith.

Sara Grant speaks of the spirituality of a person engaged in the *diakonia* of total immersion in the Hindu milieu. That person’s spirituality

will consist in the reactions in his consciousness and in his whole way of living to his experience of the confluence in his own person of the mystery of Christ with the mystery enshrined in the Hindu cultural and spiritual tradition in and through which he seeks to live his Gospel commitment. (Grant, 1987, p. 70)

It was this sort of commitment – arising out of the confluence of the mystery of Christ in their persons with the mystery enshrined in the cultural and spiritual traditions of India – that made the native evangelical Christian converts embark on reformation. They themselves were stirred up by the western evangelical and baptist missionaries such as William Carey and Alexander Duff (Ingham, 1956).

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), baptized as an Anglican who later became a Catholic, understood that for Christianity to take roots in India it needed to be indigenized using Hindu categories. He believed and counted

on Śankara's *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy to re-symbolize and indigenize the Christian faith. As Clooney observes, “even after baptism that his Christian identity was still that of an Indian devoted to his own culture and zealous for the freedom and renewal of his country” (1999, pp. 41-42). He thus called himself a Hindu-Christian. His re-symbolization included holistic freedom, not merely his own inner freedom but that of his people too. His biographer Animananda describes him as the “first man in our political history to suggest complete independence for India” (Sebastian, 2008, p. 51). Another Indian Christian who with his Christian ideals similarly devoted himself to the nationalist independent movement was Vengal Chakkarai.⁵

There were also other ventures undertaken by Indian Christians in making alive the Hindu philosophies and symbolisms to ‘reincarnate’ the Christian message. For example, along with Henry H. Presler, R. C. Das initiated the movement to form the Christian Society for the Study of Hinduism. The Indian Christian theologian Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy was part of this society. But as Hivner says, “[Aiyadurai] did not promote Christ as the fulfilment of all aspects of Hinduism” (2010, p. 206).

Christian Symbolization by Indian Hindus

In contrast to the above section we shall examine briefly the attitudes and approaches of some prominent Hindu reformers who came into contact with Christianity: the way the religion of Christianity appeared or appealed to them.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, known as the founder of the Universal Religion, was a multifaceted personality. His activities in social, political, and religious fields manifest his all-embracing understanding of reality and its interpretation (Rushbrook, 1999). He was a reformer par excellence especially in the field of religion. He abhorred idolatry, superstition, and nameless ritualism and believed that Vedanta could abolish all these. He desired to revive “the unidolatrous Hindu monotheism of old” (Rushbrook, 1999, p. 496). His re-symbolization of religious truths did not stop with Hinduism. He discovered that the beauty of the truth he was seeking was present also in Christianity, in that he even tried translating the four Gospels. But re-symbolization and his vocalizing the Gospels resulted in controversies with Christian missionaries.

⁵ An elaborate listing and study on Indian Christian theologians can be found in the book *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective* by Sunand Sumithra (2002).

This was because, he attempted to strip Christian belief system of its dogmas and miracles and he compiled the essential teachings of Jesus as, 'The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness.' Besides, his endeavour also smacked of unitarianism.

Ram Mohan Roy's ideal of worship of the One-without-a-second resulted in the formation of Brahma Samaj movement (Rushbrook, 1999). *The Hindus' Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* speaks of Brahma Samaj as a movement which was "largely inspired by Christianity" (Farquhar, 2000, p. 386). But in this movement too we can witness a transformation, a transformation that was symbolized in the Samaj. Ram Mohan Roy's immediate follower Debendra Nath Tagore believed that "India had no need of Christ" (p. 387). However later, Keshab Chandra Sen inspired Debendra and the Samaj movement, "to follow the example of Christian Philanthropy [*sic*] and gathered money and food for the famine stricken" (p. 389).

Christian Symbolization and Transformation

If God reveals, and if only God can reveal the Supreme Truth, it means all that a human being can do is hermeneutics of that revelation in space and time. Hermeneutics requires symbolization. But symbolizations are not uniform because perceptions differ, understandings differ, and basically human beings differ and their groupings differ, and the resultant cultures differ.

If the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith for the believers, then the Christ of faith has transcended the Jesus of history and culture. Jesus of history contained within him a reality and represented that reality. He was and is a "real symbol" (Olson, 2009, p. 278) for a believer. When he is the symbolization of the Transcendent Redeeming Reality he becomes available for believers of all times and places as the Christ of faith.

What is revealed to a person or to a group is that which becomes immanent. Thus, that which is Transcendent, reveals; but, that which is revealed as immanent is that which is transformed and that which transforms. This is true in a Christian context because immanent transcendence is not an idle idol, but that which actively transforms.

Transformation implies acquiring a new way of existence both in form and nature. Thus, whenever and wherever the Truth of Jesus Christ was revealed

and accepted, we witness transformation taking place. Transformation is painful, because it requires change in structure, form, and nature.

Proto-symbolization occurs in the salvation history of the Christians when Jesus empties himself (Philippians 2:7) to become the ‘Word-made-flesh’ (John 1:14). Emptying is transformation, and as we have said, it is a painful process and for Jesus it was taking the human form. The ‘Word,’ the Symbol of the Father, was the message to the human race. Jesus says, “He who sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45, *Revised Standard Version*).

Symbolization of the message of God in the person of Jesus occurs within a human culture and history. What Luke narrates in his gospel about the birth of Jesus can be taken as an allegory. The new-born baby Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7). Swaddling clothes do not inspire aesthetics. The baby just needs to be wrapped. A culture usually does not design a specific style of clothing for a new-born baby, much less concentrate on the aesthetics. Rather the focus is on the recreation of the protective conditions of the womb. Thus, we can say the cultural Hebraic garb of Jesus is a later addition to the message and is of secondary importance. Similarly, the stripping of the historical Jesus at his crucifixion is symbolic. That too was a painful process, but he had to be stripped, and be emptied of that cultural garb. He was beaten so much that he had “no stately form nor splendour” (Isaiah 53:2). His own body had to be stripped of that human life to put on that divine life. Finally we find that at the resurrection Jesus is transformed and becomes transforming.

Christian symbolization can be said to possess a special pattern: a regular recognizable pattern according to which the Christian faith is accepted. The Christian faith, while it is being accepted, expects a self-emptying *not on the part of the recipient or culture that receives it, but on the part of the person or culture that communicates*. The recipient maintains the pattern of re-incarnated symbolization. In this sense, the process of symbolization and the symbolic patterns and actions belong wholly to the recipient. If there be some acceptance or accommodation of certain symbolisms of the communicator, they have to be understood as having been accommodated only inasmuch as the recipient has symbolized it for oneself.⁶ This is a pattern which can be

⁶ In this sense, in the symbolized liturgical adaptations of Christians, we cannot speak of a ‘latinized’ liturgy or a ‘hinduized’ liturgy. There can only be a ‘re-incarnated’ and ‘re-symbolized’ liturgy appropriated and wholly owned by the recipient.

understood to have taken place through the centuries in different places. Any other pattern would have resulted in poor acceptance or rejection, or if it was forced upon, it would have resulted in cultural aggression.

However, for the recipient, the primary encounter of the message, the re-symbolization and acceptance are parts of a painful process of transformation. This is because the core value system and working principles of belief and practice may be questioned and transformation expected.

Christian Symbolization as a Challenge to the Indian Cultural Milieu

Besides the glories of the past, the goodness of the present, and the beauty of variety, certain negative characteristics mark and mar Indian cultures. In the words of Somen Das,

India continues to be a tradition-bound and caste-ridden culture. We remain prisoners of the past and victims of socialization and internalisation of our religio-cultural norms, customs, and inhibitions. It is a divisive culture based on caste, community and religion. The Indian culture continues to be characterised by elitism, hierarchy and submission. (1987, p. 9)

Besides these, as Das observes, obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition, and fatalism are yet to be gotten rid of. These negative characteristics are exhibited in one way or another by many of the cultures in the subcontinent. But the current situation is only a product of the past. Thus, we need to keep in mind the historical factors too.

In the Indian context when the native religions encountered the Christian faith, the native faiths were challenged. It was not just because the new faith was a competitor foraying into the stable, secure, and structured communities, but the new faith can be said to have prompted the discomfort of introspection. Transformation was not to be from the outside but became a felt necessity from the inside. This is what we witness to in our Indian history and the comparative confrontations and conflict of interests which had taken place when Christianity met other religions.

Encountering a reality or truth is not a jugglery of the concepts in the mind, rather a tangible symbolization which inspires re-symbolization and a change of course of life. The Indian cultural milieu, where such symbolizations and re-symbolizations took place or continue to take place, varies according

to the religious, geographical, political, social, and economic contexts. We can delineate various areas of encounters and their types according to the influences and the changes that the new Christian belief system brought about and classify them accordingly. But these divisions are not strictly separate from one another; they often overlap.

Further, the Indian cultural milieu with its inseparable religious systems of belief can also be broadly classified into religions with highly pronounced philosophical foundations and those with less pronounced philosophical foundations. The former are exemplified by the so-called high religions grouped under the banner of Hinduism, including Jainism and Buddhism. The dynamics of encounter between these religions and Christianity is different from that of encounter with the lesser known native and tribal religions.

Keeping in mind the above dynamics of encounter and the openness of each religious culture towards Christianity, we can understand the way Christian symbolization influenced the cultures of the Indian subcontinent as well as the degree of such influence. Broadly, we can see the influence to have taken place in the areas of religious belief systems, political thought and social systems, and in the attitudes of people.

Influence in the Religious Belief Systems

Cultures and belief systems of a group influence those of another in a process of give and take. Primarily Christianity's symbolization itself was marked by native cultural and religious influences. We can only conjecture that having been confined to South India in the early centuries, the native tongues determined the linguistic symbolization of the Christian faith. This must also have been the trend for the liturgical practices and the way of life which were not different from those of other faiths. After the fourth century, liturgical symbolizations reflected Chaldean influence whereas social symbolizations like that of marriage covenants remained native (Pulikkan, 2010). As Pulikkan observes, "we do not have many evidences of the early liturgical period Especially after the Synod of Diamper in 1599, a number of ancient liturgical books and manuscripts were burned, after being alleged of heresy" (2010, p. 69). Though in the colonial period western cultural affiliations to symbolization was expected, the catholic church represented by the *Propaganda Fide* seems to have been more open to inculturizing attitudes. For example, a 1659 directive of Propaganda Fide reads thus: "Do not in any

case attempt to persuade those peoples to change their rites, customs and ways, provided they are not very manifestly contrary to religion and morals” (as quoted in Pulikkan, 2010, p. 70).

But in this essay we shall not further deal with how the other belief systems of the Indian subcontinent influenced the Christian faith in its symbolization of faith, though we may need to consider the mutual influence. Rather, our task here is to understand how the other religious belief systems were affected when they encountered Christianity and how the course of their symbolization was redefined. The influences of Christianity in the early centuries on native religions are difficult to state for want of evidences; but that of recorded history we are able to analyse.

If Christianity before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 CE could be treated as a native religion, then we first need to understand the influence of the western Christianity on its religious bearings on this native Christianity. Syrian Christianity and Nestorianism existed side by side before the Portuguese came. From the fourth century onwards there were visitors and settlers from West Asia and Persia (Augustine, 1999). The declining faith of the native Christians was strengthened by Thomas of Cana, and by the bishops who were brought from Syria to shepherd them.

From the time of the missionaries who came from the West to India, the native religions including that of native Christianity began to be influenced in their respective belief systems. Nestorianism was subdued to a great extent or done away with completely by the new conquerors. The European clergy were, as Augustine observes, “bent on reducing the local Christians to subjection on the plea of uniformity in church discipline and worship” (1999, p. 82). The latinization process received its official approval in the Synod of Diamper in 1599 (Augustine, 1999).

The motivation of early western missionaries was more of proselytising than a true proclamation of the Gospel. This need not necessarily mean that the missionaries themselves lacked in their genuineness though it could be said that their political and cultural affiliations affected their projects. Several of them such as De Nobili and Beschi attempted inculturation and dialogue. Their efforts did bring about changes to the religious attitudes of the Brahmins and other Hindus. Though the missionaries were considered *parangis* belonging to a meat-eating low caste, later the validity of Christian

perspectives began to bring into the natives openness to a 'foreign' faith. For the Hindus, Christianity became another 'dialogue-able' faith.

Later, when the freedom movement was taking shape in India, the frequent contacts with Christianity and its adherents changed the perception of the natives about Christianity. Christian tenets appealed to the natives of the Indian subcontinent in varying degrees. It varied from voluntarily embracing the Christian faith expressing it in their own cultural terms, through just accepting the value system and hybridizing it into a new belief system and causing syncretism, to initiating reform movements prompted by the religious values of Christianity. Among the tribal religions many of them seemed to have taken the view of the 'fulfilment' theory and by an analogical understanding accepted the Christian experience of faith without much complicated philosophical discussions. The missionary movements in the Northeast India bear witness to such wide acceptance of the Christian faith.

In the Indian subcontinent, which was not yet a single nation called India until 1947, various movements with religious fervour of different sorts evolved when the native intellectuals encountered the Christian faith. The symbolization process was new and unique. D' Silva speaks of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya who desired a Christian interpretation of Hindu texts. D' Silva remarks that "for Upadhya[*siz*], Christ revealed himself through Hindu religion and culture" (1985, p. 190). The Hindu identity was not to be replaced and the physical and mental constitution was to remain the same. The symbolization of their *weltanschauung* was that of a Hindu-Catholic. Similarly Sadhu Sunder Singh, A. J. Appasamy, Vengal Chakkarai, and Pandipeddi Chenchiah were Christocentric and adopted a theology of *bhakti-mārga* (D' Silva, 1985).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was influenced by what Christianity symbolized to him. He became the founder of the Universal Religion and desired to incorporate the religious truth embedded in Christianity. He thus wanted a Hinduism which was un-idolatrous and which at the same time was monotheistic (Williams, 1999). Similarly, religious missionary movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission were inspired by Christian symbolization and its missionary call to go and proclaim.

There were also several Hindu painters who were influenced by the themes symbolized by the Christian faith and revelation. Nandalal Bose of

Santiniketan, Jamini Roy, A. M. Davierwalla, K. C. S. Panikar, S. Paramasivam, Satish Gujral, Arup Das, A. N. Narayanan, and several others re-symbolized literally on their painting canvas the Christian religious sentiments that influenced them (D' Silva, 1985).

Today the Christian faith symbolizes not merely a system of worship but healing as well. Spiritual healing sessions in charismatic retreats are also attended by non-believers. Many non-Christians make pilgrimages to the shrines of Blessed Mary at Velankanni and Bandel, to the shrines of St. Antony, and experience physical healing besides receiving other consolations. Thus, pilgrim centres and Christian churches of worship for many believers of other faiths symbolize peace and well-being.

The Ashram movements symbolize for the native believers the possibility of accepting and living the Christian faith without much foreignness, as a faith that can be appropriated and re-symbolized and to be lived as a way of seeking both individual and community salvation. Sara Grant documents the Ashram tradition and the recent adaptation of this tradition by Christians (1987).

Influences in the Political Thought and Social Systems

Demographically, Christians form a tiny percentage of the total population in the Indian subcontinent. This has been the fact even when the western powers ruled India. But the influence Christianity exerted in the political arena and in reshaping the social systems is remarkable. However, the recognition of the contribution of the Christian community is sometimes blocked or deliberately played down by narrow-minded nationalism, which wants to maintain an unjust political and social structure.

The Christian community's influence on the rest of the cultures and communities in the subcontinent arises not only from its faith experience and life, but in the force of the Christian ethic (D' Silva, 1985): "It was the Christian ethical spirit, encouraged undoubtedly by support from the enlightened section of the non-Christian world, that placed on the statute book of India measures of social reform of far-reaching import" (p. 49).

It was this ethical spirit that helped suppress the custom of *sati*—an act in which a widow would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Such ethical spirit similarly helped reform the Indian penal code, abolish legal slavery, and helped permit widow-remarriage and several other social evils (D' Silva, 1985).

Thus, Christianity itself became the symbolization of reform, and a causal agent for the birth of several emancipating social movements. The initiatives and the works of the Christian missionaries made Christianity a symbol and hope of the downtrodden, the marginalized, and the enslaved. The prevalent stratified and oppressive caste system was challenged. Equality and brotherhood symbolized by Christianity went beyond seeking salvation only for oneself.

Other trends such as service to one's fellow beings are reflected in the Ramakrishna Mission founded by Swami Vivekananda (D' Silva, 1985). Christian mission work today has been in a way imitated widely, and there is so much of good done through similar trusts and charities belonging to other religions.

The Christian 'convent education' symbolism underscores the need for character formation even while promoting formal education. Such formation of character embedded with Christian values of love, forgiveness, and honesty has far-reaching consequences and has determined the shaping of India's civil order and social fabric.

Christian organizations symbolize good leadership and structured order. They exemplify reliability and sustainability. The Indian legal system, patterned on the western and British laws, which themselves were in turn influenced by the Christian culture, has emulated Christian principles and values.

Conclusion

Christian symbolization belongs to the communities believing in Christ. It is an important part of the faith-experience of the community. It is a transforming process both within and without. Christian symbolization continues to explicate good will, practical wisdom, and virtue in a culture into which the Christian faith is born. Anyone with an open heart will be able to appreciate Christianity because one understands that Christianity as a religion had promoted and continues to promote the positive ethos of a society and sets the tenor for the progress of a society and the transformation of culture.

Christian symbolization has had its influence on the cultures of India in varying degrees at different periods of its history. It has reshaped and transformed them. Christian symbolization in the Indian subcontinent had not only affected and changed the Church's internal way of life but also had influenced and changed like leaven the whole dough of many Indian cultures and religions.

Further, Christian symbolization has brought about deep changes in perceptions of life and penetrated into the capillaries of the Indian social and political eco-system, rejuvenating and bringing meaning to age-old rich traditions. This process continues even today due to the active participation of committed Christians in the Indian polity.

Therefore, rather than merely remaining as an inert religion in the Indian subcontinent, Christianity today has become a symbol of equality, peace, emancipation, and transformation. It has influenced to a great extent the fabric of other belief systems and cultures. Though Christianity has remained a minority religion through the centuries, it has spoken out its values and priorities loud and clear. It has presented its own faith tradition as an opportunity for change within a context of the plurality of cultures and religions. Thus, in its journey through history, Indian Christianity can be said to have been a great agent of transformation. This is because Christian symbolization has pervaded and continues to pervade the Indian ethos and cultures.

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