

Devotion and popular religion

Examples from India

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ANNUALLY IN INDIA THERE ARE ANY NUMBER of Hindu festivals, from Deepavali and Holi to Krishna Asthami and Mahashivarathri; Muslim festivals such as Ramzan, Bakr-Id, Muharram; Sikh festivals, like Guru Nanak Jayanthi; Jain festivals, like Mahavir Jayanthi and Parsi festivals – not to mention an immense variety of local celebrations. They are all so wrought with a rich array of symbol and ritual that it is impossible not to find traces of them appearing in Christian popular devotions.

The diocese of Hyderabad – India in miniature

Hyderabad is situated in South India, with a Catholic population of around 90,000. Hindu and Muslim cultures meet here. Christianity and Sikhism embrace. There are Buddhists, Jains and Parsis as well. It is India in miniature. Among the Catholics, there is a fairly good mixture of Telugus, Tamils, Malayalees, Anglo-Indians, Mangaloreans and some Hindi-speaking people. There are many Christian churches. A recent local secular daily has the following account of one of the less well-known shrines here.

What would you do if you lost something? Naturally you would lodge a complaint with the nearest police station. But the diehard devotees of St Anthony's Church at Masab Tank have a better option: St Anthony.¹

In reality, St Anthony cannot be reduced to a mere 'lost and found saint'. Fr Joseph, the parish priest, says that he remembers a Hindu who wanted to offer thanks to the saint because he believed that his son, ailing for quite a long time, was cured because of St Anthony's intervention. Ashok, a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore sent 2,000 rupees to the church since he felt that St Anthony was responsible for his recovery from a terminal illness. A businessman in the city paved the courtyard of the church with polished stone as a mark of thanksgiving. Lots of devotees want to bear the cost of the evening service which is conducted every Tuesday, then they distribute bread among the poor. 'People's faith,' says Fr Joseph, 'is indeed amazing.'

One man was rescued from financial distress by a friend; he attributed the miracle to St Anthony's prayers. You will find any number of things-lost-in-autos-drivers-brought-it-back-narratives by the devotees. People of all faiths come to the church in this Muslim-dominated area.'

Three major shrines

The following is a summary of interviews I conducted with the parish priests of the three major Catholic shrines of Hyderabad. It will give a fair sample of what is happening in other similar shrines in India.

The Infant Jesus of Emjala

Emjala is situated about seventeen kilometres from Hyderabad. Just thirty years old, it has grown into a big pilgrim centre with a 'Mary Land', based on the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary, and the 'Holy Land', to give people some biblical knowledge. In keeping with the trend here, the present parish priest has introduced a charismatic dimension to his ministry. Every Saturday healing services are held. A small chapel is built for the twenty-four hour eucharistic adoration. Prayers and sermons are Bible-orientated. People come with great faith and pray and go away with inner peace. Unlike in the Infant Jesus Shrine, at Viveknagar in Bangalore, where people bring offerings every Thursday from early in the morning until near midnight, here people come to pray and listen to the Word of God and to be prayed over by the priests. There is also a group of young boys from the village who form the intercessory group. They also preach standing in front of the statue of Infant Jesus. Every Thursday there is feeding of the poor. Different families and business people book months in advance for this work of mercy. Every Sunday, families come and cook in the premises of the shrine and distribute food to the hungry. They offer candles, flowers and garlands; they break coconuts and offer silver replicas of the part of the body that is healed.

Who comes to pray? Pastors from the Salvation Army, people from the Church of South India and the Baptist Church, Muslims and Hindus – including the staunch devotees of Lord Ayyappa, a Hindu god. Even a Brahmin family are regular visitors there, since, thanks to the prayers of the son to the Infant Jesus, the father of the family has stopped drinking.

Our Lady of Good Health, Khairatabad

This church is situated at the heart of the Muslim area in old Hyderabad. It thrives without any difficulty or resistance from Muslims in the vicinity. In the days of the annual celebrations in September, nearly half a million devotees visit the shrine; some sixty to seventy per

cent of them are Hindus. Many Muslims and several Christians belonging to other Christian denominations come. In 1904 two statues of Our Lady were brought from Italy. The Italian Lady has now become very Indian; people bring saris and clothe the statue on festive occasions. They offer candles, silver articles, flowers and coconuts. They take half of what they offer home. Childless couples offer silver articles after the birth of a child. Here too there is an adoration chapel where people of different denominations pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

St Anthony's shrine, Mettuguda

This started as a small shrine where Catholics gathered late at night and sang '*bhajans*' (a kind of singing in which a few lines are repeated several times, similar to Taize chant). It then developed into a busy shrine. People with stomach aches and all kinds of diseases come here. Couples drop in to say that, thanks to St Anthony's prayers, they have been blessed with a child. Catholics participate in the Mass on a Tuesday – St Anthony's day. But the largest number of participants are Hindus. They stand in a queue to touch the statue of the saint, thus gaining a blessing for their children. They kneel before the priest and ask for his prayers and blessings. Again, candles, flowers, cash and, more especially, loaves of bread are brought. Part of the gifts are distributed to the poor waiting at the gate. On a Tuesday the loaves of bread offered to St Anthony are cut into small pieces and distributed to the devotees, who receive them respectfully as *prasada* – literally 'grace' or gift.

Devotions and shrines of India

Paul Karachira has classified some of the popular devotions generally practised within the territory of Ernakulam Archdiocese, Kerala.² With some variation they can be found in many parts of India – or, indeed, in many parts of the Catholic world. They include visiting pilgrim centres, novenas to Our Lady, St Joseph, St Anthony, St Jude; family rosary; visiting the cemetery and praying for the dead; surrendering as a servant of a saint; taking a blessed arrow from the statue of St Sebastian in procession; offering of figures engraved in metal plates; pious associations like Vincent De Paul, Legion of Mary, etc; sharing a meal on the anniversary of a death; scapulars, medals and relics; kissing of sacred statues and other articles.

Amongst the many places of Christian devotion in India the following may be mentioned as a mere sample.

Dhori Mata Thirthalaya, in Bihar, takes its origin from an illiterate Hindu coal cutter named Rupa from Bilaspur, who found a statue of Our Lady carrying a child at Dhori Colliery in 1956.

Our Lady of Divine Grace, in Mokama, Bihar, springs from the legend that is attached to the place where the statue of Our Lady is enshrined. A beautiful princess who loses her husband in a hunting accident vows to serve her people for the rest of her life. After her death, her house is known as *Mokum-Amah* – the house of the Mother.

Blessed Alphonsa of Bharananganam, Kerala, was a teacher and died after a life-time of illness. After her death in 1946, school-children started to go to her tomb and pray.

Our Lady of Good Health, at Velanganni, Tamil Nadu, known as the Lourdes of India, combines a local legend of Our Lady's apparition to two local boys and the story of Portuguese sailors who, caught in a heavy storm at sea, pray to her to save them and in return promise to build her a church. They arrive in Velanganni only to find a chapel there already. Our Lady here is popularly called '*Arogya matha*' or '*Velanganni matha*'.

Our Lady of Happy Voyage, at Bandel, West Bengal, has a similar story of sailors in distress pledging to build a church and fulfilling their promise once they are saved.

St Anthony at Armenian Street, Chennai (Madras), is another very famous shrine, the statue of which is said to have been donated by Portuguese soldiers. Once a week, people line up in queues which are so long they spill over on to the main road and several police personnel are employed to maintain order. Who are the largest number of devotees? Hindus, of course.

The Infant Jesus shrine at Viveknagar, Bangalore, goes back to December 1969, when the parish priest was granted a request at the intercession of the Infant Jesus of Prague. In keeping with his promise he built a church there.³

The influence of local culture and Hindu religion

To what extent has Indian culture formed these devotions? Clearly there is a great deal of interaction – as the following examples indicate. Andrew Athappily, for instance, speaks of some particular characteristics of the devotion to St Sebastian in Kerala.⁴ People find in religion a way of achieving victory over evil. St Sebastian with his sharp arrows

is considered to be the patron who nails the evil spirit and appeases the wrath of God. This feast has some of the elements of Hindu practice. There is often a gorgeous procession in which the arrows of St Sebastian are taken to the houses of devotees. Just as the *pujari*, the Hindu priest who officiates at the devotion, will sometimes go into houses with sword and coconut flowers to drive away the demons, so the arrows of St Sebastian are taken to Christian families.

There is a practice called *Vedi Nercha* in which fire crackers are offered in honour of a saint or the Lord Jesus himself. Crackers were once used to announce the commencement of the festival and to add solemnity to it. But latterly it has assumed another dimension, namely, the sort of offering made in Hindu temples, to secure favours from the saint.⁵

When a child falls sick, parents promise to go to a particular shrine and shave the hair of the head of the child.⁶ This happens particularly at shrines of St Anthony and Our Lady. When parents want to cut the hair of their children for the first time, a number of them go to their favourite shrine. This practice is very common among Hindus. In Andhra a number of Hindu women shave off the hair of their head at Tirupathi – the ‘Vatican of the South’ – praying for offspring, for the welfare of their loved ones, for long life for their husbands.

Before going on a pilgrimage people fast and do penance. Men grow beards. They even wear dresses of special colour, mostly saffron, the colour of renunciation. As they approach the shrine, some come to the statue of the saint on their knees; some roll on the floor all the way up to the altar; some just prostrate; those who have vowed to draw the decorated car join others and pull it. These are all customs commonly found among Hindus.

Dressing the statue of the saint with a veil or a sari, tying on the wrist threads blessed at the shrine or kept at the feet of the saint, washing the feet of St Sebastian and then drinking the water praying for healing, carrying a cross or a stone on the head while climbing a hill to reach the shrine – these, and so many others, are all practices to be found in the religious traditions of India.⁷ Because of this intermingling, many Hindus feel very much at home in Christian shrines and churches. Believing as they do in the incarnate power of the divinity, they have no difficulty in accepting Mother Teresa as an incarnation of divine power and place her statue or photo in the numerous shrines of goddess Durga. Married Hindu women have no difficulty in making a vow to Mary, the Mother of the Forsaken at Khamholaj in Gujarat.⁸ It is interesting to

note that on Deepavali day, the day of the great Indian festival of lights, the crowd is at its largest there.

We find devotion to the Infant Jesus in Maharastra and Kerala, in Chennai, in Hyderabad and in many other places. There is a tradition among the mystics and *bhaktas* or devotees in Hinduism to think of God as an infant in the cradle and sing him a lullaby. Coming as they do from such a tradition, Hindus have no difficulty in honouring the infant Jesus. In Gujarat there is a shrine built by a Hindu artist, with a mosaic representing the mysteries of the rosary. In north Gujarat is a shrine named after Our Lady of the camels.⁹ Some of the customs in these shrines, like the breaking of coconut, offering of money, reciting of rosary beads, singing of *bhajans* are not Christian in origin. The *garbo* dance, for instance, is not merely an entertainment but a form of prayer and worship normally offered to the mother goddess. A wooden statue of the mother wrapped in garlands is carried on the head by the male dancer. Others dance around the statue and sing *bhajans* in her honour.¹⁰

Another Hindu custom is the celebration of *navarathri*, a festival of nine nights in honour of Lord Shiva. In keeping with this tradition the new Christians of Gujarat celebrate a nine-day feast of Our Lady.¹¹ For the days preceding the main feast there are various devotions, dances and *bhajans*, the recital of the rosary, with Mass at noon and *arati*, a blessing ritual, in the evening. For the *arati*, a lamp with incense and flowers is placed on a silver or brass plate. The plate is held in both hands and taken anti-clockwise three times above the head and down to the waist, to welcome someone or to worship God. In worship the plate is taken round and the devotees place their palms over the flame and touch their head and their heart with its warmth, praying for purification and healing.

What are popular devotions?

The new dictionary of sacramental worship says that 'Popular devotions can be considered as religious exercises – prayers, methods of meditation, orders of service, rituals, gestures – whose text and rubrics are not contained in the official liturgical books of the Roman Rite.'¹² It is common in academic circles to employ terms like popular piety, popular religion, or popular devotion. The qualifier 'popular' implies a distinction from the learned or sophisticated.¹³ Faith is, of course, a gift whereby God moves a person through grace to give God assent and to surrender. Devotion is a profound dedication, the ready will to serve God. Thus devotion is any attempt to respond to the gift of

faith.¹⁴ It can be thought of as a collective name for prayers and practices which originated from private initiatives and were not accepted within the official liturgy of the Church – even though many popular devotions are highly recommended and approved by ecclesiastical authority.

The Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy gives some guidelines with regard to popular devotions to saints.¹⁵ The Constitution on the Church speaks of Marian devotion.¹⁶ These guidelines can be summarized briefly. The saints are works of the grace of God and fruits of pastoral ministry. They must always point to the power of God's grace. If they were to obscure God or even take his place, veneration would turn into idolatry. They are great examples for the Church in their surrender to God and in their co-operation with the inspiration of God. Veneration of saints and special devotion to them is legitimate and good as long as they are given their proper place.¹⁷

Strengths and limitations

Pope Paul VI speaks in favour of popular devotion, while at the same time pointing to the drawbacks. 'One finds among the people particular expressions of the search for God and for faith. This manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know.'¹⁸ Devotion engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others. This is genuinely a 'popular' religion not because it is to be distinguished from the 'sophisticated' but because it appeals to the emotions and the feelings.¹⁹ There is a much greater degree of participation by people. Crucially, they have *something to do*: to place a flower or to break a coconut, to offer food and fruits to God, to share out what is offered and blessed, to kneel, to walk, to sing, to dance, to go on pilgrimage, to recite the rosary, to light a vigil candle. To do this they do not need an official sanction or an ecclesiastical nod. They have no fear of doing a wrong thing or of being reprimanded for not doing the right thing. People are restless at seeing the clergy at official liturgies giving them no role to play. This is what *they* can do.

Moreover, devotion brings people together and develops a sense of solidarity. Dedication of the family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus gives an added assurance and commitment. Spending the whole of a Friday in Lent going from parish to parish in larger groups praying the Way of the Cross or going on a long pilgrimage together as a village, unites people, unites them in faith and in struggle, unites them irrespective of their caste or gender distinctions and reminds them that they belong to the

same Pilgrim Church. People are united in their sufferings and expectations, praying as they do for a favour or for a healing. It is interesting to note that in developing countries like the Philippines, Mexico and India, where there is much poverty and want, people identify themselves more with the suffering humanity of Christ in its various forms. The devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo in the Philippines, and the strong attraction to the veneration of the crucified One on Good Friday among many Christians and non-Christians in India, are but a couple of examples.

Popular religiosity is not unproblematic. It is often subject to penetration by the distortion of religion and can even lead to the creation of a sectarianism which can endanger a truly ecclesial community. As the Constitution on the Liturgy says, 'devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, or in some way are derived from it and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them.'²⁰ To achieve the right relationship of devotion and liturgy, a hierarchy of values must not be forgotten. Obviously devotion to Christ takes precedence over devotion to human mediators or saints. Sometimes devotions are prompted by self-interest and the desire to gain some favour. At the same time, the Church must accept that it is impossible to root out popular religion from the hearts of the people and re-establish a 'pure' liturgy. And, even if it were possible to do, would we not be committing a grave mistake?

It is perfectly possible with care and sensitivity to integrate the two. As my examples have shown, there is a richness of faith in India which unites people across the religious and caste divides. Popular forms of Indian religion and the devotions to which they have given rise in India can be a vehicle for the new 'dialogue of life' going on today in our cities and villages. Feasts are celebrated together; not only pleasantries, but even sweets, food and gifts are shared. As the *Guidelines for inter-religious dialogue* issued by the Catholic Bishops of India say:

There are certain festivals in our country, which although associated with one or more myths of particular religions, have become festivals of great social importance . . . Authentic Christians who live in internal dialogue with other religions will feel an inner joy in these and other feasts, and even celebrate them and make their own the religious values expressed in them.²¹

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NOTES

- 1 *Deccan Chronicle* (a Hyderabad local daily in English), 17 January 2001.
- 2 In Paul Puthanangady SDB (ed), *Popular Devotions in India*, Research Seminar, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1986, pp 628–630.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp 321–322.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p 370.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p 327.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 624.
- 7 Recently I was invited to bless my nephew's marriage. My brother showed me all the saris and dresses he had bought for the bride, bridegroom and their families. The very first thing that he showed me was a rather expensive sari. He told me that it was meant for Our Lady of Velanganni. According to the local custom and the family tradition, when people go to buy the necessary materials for a wedding, they first buy a sari and present it to Our Lady of Velanganni in thanksgiving for the successful arrangement of the marriage. Our Lady would be dressed in that sari for a few hours and then the sari will be given for auction. It will be sold at a very cheap price for a bride of a very poor family or to an orphan girl who would be getting married.
- 8 Paul Puthanangady, p 335.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 335.
- 10 For the strongly affective nature of this form of devotion see Michael Barnes, *God east and west* (Great Britain: SPCK, 1991), p 30. 'One of the most prayerful experiences I have ever had was in the home of a Hindu in South India, chanting *bhajans*, devotional hymns, with a group of friends.'
- 11 Paul Puthanangady, p 335.
- 12 *The new dictionary of sacramental worship*, Peter E. Fink (ed) (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p 331.
- 13 *The new dictionary of catholic spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed) (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p 271.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p 272.
- 15 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 103, 104, 108, 111.
- 16 *Lumen Gentium* 66 and 67.
- 17 Bernhard Raas SVD, *Popular devotions* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), pp 15–17.
- 18 *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48.
- 19 Michael Barnes, *ibid* p 95: '*Bhakti* religion . . . lacks formality; the image, and the memories and emotions which the image evokes, are all that matters . . . All that really matters is the level of emotional response, the response of the heart.'
- 20 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 13.
- 21 *Guidelines for inter-religious dialogue*, CBCI Centre, New Delhi, 1989, no 99.