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# BEING CATHOLIC THE TAMIL WAY: ASSIMILATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

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## Introduction

THE ritual life of Tamil Catholics in south India defies tidy, conventional categories like assimilation, differentiation, and othering, since the complex negotiations characteristic of this lived tradition often involve both assimilation and differentiation. This dynamic reflects/reveals their hybrid and liminal cultural and religious condition where boundaries are not fixed or absolute, but constantly fluid, permeable, and negotiable. While this pattern is manifest almost in all spheres of Tamil Catholic life and practice, in this paper I focus on how lay Catholics configure and maintain their "tamilness" in the realms of devotional music, caste discourse, and public devotional rituals with relevant anecdotal accounts and illustrations drawn from personal experience as well as field research, and reflect on the "both/and" dynamic characteristic of Tamil Catholic life and practice.

Allow me to preface my remarks with two biographical references, one dating back to my pre-adolescent years and the other to my early adulthood. When I was a high school teenager, my parents lived in a small south Indian town, and our house was directly opposite a tiny Hindu shrine that had no roof, side walls, or door. Placed against the compound wall of the local king's palace were a simple iron trident and a large stone. It was known as "Muniandi kovil," a shrine dedicated to the local Hindu deity Muniandi. Daily after sundown I would sit on the steps of our house and watch people go by. Some would stop at the shrine, stand with folded hands for a moment, place a few limes on the

trident, and apply some *kumkum* on it while others would break coconuts on the stone, causing a stampede as neighborhood kids and adults scrambled for the coconut pieces. Week after week I used to watch this ritual with certain youthful fascination and curiosity. Every time I saw a devotee break a coconut I wanted to try my chances at the holy slivers. But I was too shy and too self-conscious.

One evening, as I sat in my favorite spot, I saw a couple ready to do the coconut thing. "This is it; I'm going to do it, come what may," I said to myself, and ran to the shrine. As luck would have it, there were not too many young scramblers on that day and I was lucky to get a few slivers. With no second thought, I delightfully consumed the pieces. When I shared my adventure with my mother, being a pious Catholic, she was visibly upset and angry and scolded me: "Don't you know that you shouldn't eat food offered to idols?" From my catechism lessons I knew that I shouldn't have, but I didn't care about normative guidelines. Three decades and two careers later, I recognize that I had instinctively responded to the situation in the way most of my cultural peers routinely respond, particularly during crisis moments. In the process, I had absorbed—as one absorbs one's mother tongue—the interactive and assimilative spirit—some might say transgressive spirit—and religious pragmatism of the land. Ironically, while my mother had absorbed the "either/or" spirit in which she was firmly grounded—thanks to catechetical indoctrination—I had absorbed not my mother's spirit, but the "both/and" spirit of my motherland.

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Selva Raj, who recently passed away, was the Stanley S. Kresge Endowed Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Albion College, Michigan. For a tribute to his life and work please see the essay by Corinne Dempsey in this issue.

My second biographical reference relates to my early days in a seminary in Calcutta. On a hot June day in 1970, I boarded an inter-state train in Madras that was bound for Calcutta. This was my very first trip out of Tamil Nadu—my familiar cultural and religious terrain since birth—where I grew up among fellow Tamils of various persuasions but with little to no contact with members of other linguistic or ethnic backgrounds. After a tedious forty-eight hour train journey I arrived in Calcutta to start my seminary studies at Morning Star College. When I arrived at the seminary, I met several fellow-seminarians who too were newcomers like me. Even though they were all Indians, they nevertheless looked slightly different and spoke unfamiliar languages that I did not understand, but was propelled by a genuine curiosity and interest in learning about them and their cultural heritage. Soon I discovered that many had come from Mangalore, some from the Chotanagpur tribal belt in Bihar, and a few from Kerala. They spoke Konkani, Hindi, and Malayalam. As one who had lived a fairly insulated and sheltered cultural and religious life within Tamil Nadu, I didn't realize until this encounter that there were Catholics of different linguistic and ethnic stripes like Mangaloren Catholics, adivasi tribal Catholics, and Malayalee Catholics. This was my first introduction to—more precisely, first lesson in—the reality of internal diversity and plurality and multiple Christianities within Indian Catholicism, a subject that would occupy my scholarly research interests for the better of my academic career. While the Calcutta encounter opened my eyes to the reality of multiple Catholicisms each distinguished by its distinctive regional, ethnic, and linguistic features, subsequent academic study and field-research on these regional forms helped hone my intellectual sensitivity to, understanding of, and appreciation for the complexities, nuances, and complications within each of these regional expressions.

Looking back, while my pre-adolescent adventure offers clues to my youthful, rebellious streak and to the assimilative spirit pervasive in the sub-continent that I had imbibed—naturally and spontaneously—from grassroots religious culture and ethos in south India, the Calcutta encounter—which in some ways was my

informal initiation to the study of regional and grassroots Catholicism in India—reveals the regional, vernacular character of grassroots Catholicism in India. Two caveats. First, this paper focuses on lay, grassroots definition of Tamil Catholic identity that stands in sharp contrast to the one framed—some might say, contrived—by the religious elite. Second, though the three areas discussed in this paper are neither unique nor peculiar to Tamil Nadu or Tamil Catholics, the assimilation/differentiation strategy evident in these three realms is particularly striking, pervasive, and inescapable.

### I. Devotional Music

Anyone familiar with the rich, ancient cultural history of Tamil Nadu knows full well that music and dance have long been integral parts of Tamil religious and secular culture. Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music are Tamil Nadu's two major contributions to the repertoire of Indian musical and performance traditions. Despite its celebrated native musical heritage, for long Tamil Catholic devotional songs were sung to Western, European tunes and melodies, largely due to European missionaries' lukewarm interest in and inadequate appreciation for indigenous musical traditions. To them, training converts to sing to Western tunes was another way of instilling in converts a sense of "otherness" about themselves as well as differentiating converts from their non-Christian, Hindu neighbors. As an altar boy, I remember singing the "Tantum Ergo," a devotional hymn typically sung in Latin (and later in Tamil) to Western musical tune during Catholic Benediction service. I also vividly remember my father enthusiastically playing European melodies on organ during Sunday Masses. Thus until the early 1960s, Catholic devotional hymns were literal and straightforward Tamil translations of European and Gregorian hymns sung to Western tunes and melodies.

But the program of renewal inaugurated by Vatican II opened new doors. Simple verbatim translations of Western hymns were no longer used in Tamil Catholic liturgical services. New local genres and melodies not only found their way to the Catholic devotional tradition but gained institutional endorsement and validation.

Of particular note in this regard are the contributions of the All India Seminar on Church in India held in Bangalore in the late sixties that set an institutional tone for liturgical renewal. While institutional leaders provided incentive and impetus for the indigenization of devotional music, a quiet grassroots movement was also gaining momentum. Spearheading this movement in the early 70s was a small band of gifted and creative devotional musicians like Charlesmani and Thamburaj who sought to revamp Catholic devotional music by adopting indigenous classical musical genres from Tamil devotional tradition, folk tradition, popular culture, and the Tamil film industry, forming a potpourri of Western, classical India, and folk genres. In the mid-seventies Charlesmani released a collection of devotional songs called Maniosai that blends Tamil folk and film tunes sung to the accompaniment of an ensemble of Western and Indian musical instruments like sitar, tabla, guitar and key-boards. Not only did Maniosai and other new devotional hymns become popular among the religious masses but they also gained institutional endorsement and legitimacy as these new hymns were included in liturgies, largely through lay insistence, eventually replacing traditional European melodies and hymns. The devotional songs most popular today represent further refinement of the devotional tradition pioneered by Charlesmani and his companions. The subsequent inclusion of local forms of bhajan—a devotional genre adopted from north Indian devotional and temple tradition—into official Catholic liturgical services, is a further attempt to provide an indigenous, Tamil character to Catholic devotional expressions. The development of indigenous Catholic devotional songs that share several common musical features with Hindu and folk devotional musical tradition as well as pop music serves as an example of both assimilation and differentiation: while it assimilates to the local milieu and its aesthetic forms and preferences, it enables Tamil Catholics to differentiate their tradition from its European and missionary legacy.

Interestingly, while Tamil Catholics opted for the assimilation of native musical genres and forms, consciously shedding the vestiges of European and Western musical legacy, their

Protestant counterparts steadfastly chose to retain—until very recently—the European musical style and genre, vernacularizing only the lyrics. Tamil Protestants consider devotional music as one of the major markers of their Protestant identity that helps differentiate themselves from their Catholic and Hindu counterparts. Such an approach is also consistent with the respective histories of these Christian groups who traditionally opted for different adaptive strategies. While the former tends toward assimilation, the latter tends to emphasize differentiation, viewing assimilation as a form of corruption and a sure sign of dysfunctional faith.

## II. Discourse on Caste

The realm of social customs and practices—specifically caste—is another area where Tamil identity is asserted, reinforced, and celebrated. Put simply, despite their ancient religious history and heritage, caste considerations and politics shape, dictate, and regulate the character and contours of personal, social, and communal life for the vast majority of Tamil Catholics. Ironically, caste consciousness is particularly intense and widespread in older Catholic communities like the Mukkuvars and Paravas in the district of Kanya Kumari at the tip of the Indian peninsula who proudly trace their Catholic Christian heritage to the missionary efforts of such stalwarts as Francis Xavier in the 16th century. Even after centuries of Christianization, their personal, social, and communal life is governed by caste considerations that are doctrinally incompatible with the Gospel message and Catholic official teachings. So entrenched and deep-seated is the caste sentiment that its imprints can also be found in the imaging of saints, festival celebrations, and parish structures. Three illustrative anecdotes capture the continuing power and the pervasive influence local social realities and assumptions exert on Tamil Catholic life and practice.

A civil engineer by profession, Henry is a native of Asaripallam, a tiny village 5 miles south of Nagercoil whose residents belong to the Chettiar (merchant) caste. In this village, social interactions and marriage rules are governed by

endogamous rules. After completing high school education in his native village, he went to the metropolitan city of Madurai to pursue a degree in civil engineering. While at college, he fell in love with a young woman of the Nadar caste and decided to marry her. When he conveyed his intention to his family, his parents and siblings protested strongly and admonished him against such a socially ill-advised move as it would have serious and lasting repercussions including social ostracism for the entire family. But Henry paid no heed to their protests and warnings. Having been away from the village for several years, in many ways he had outgrown the village. He was not intimidated or cowed down by what he considered obsolete, inane conventions and empty threats. Undeterred he went ahead with his plans to marry the Nadar girl at a civil ceremony in Madurai which no family member attended. By marrying a Nadar girl in a civil ceremony, Henry committed two major violations: against village social norm and Catholic canonical rule. Not surprisingly, the village council duly ostracized Henry, his new bride, and his extended family. When the couple returned a few months later to his native village for his parents' blessing, the newlyweds were barred from entering his parents' home. A large group of men and women that had gathered in front of the house formed a human wall and refused entry. After several hours of haggling, the couple was forced to retreat. Two years later, when Henry's father passed away, the village council issued a similar ban prohibiting his burial in the village cemetery but permitting his funeral service to be held at the parish church. But Henry was not allowed the funeral service, officiated—ironically—by his own elder brother. To cap off the irony, his father—who until this inter-caste marriage was a very well respected village leader—was finally buried in a Nadar cemetery in the neighboring village.

That caste considerations not only affect individual lives but also shape and influence the social and religious life is further illustrated in the social and religious dynamics at the shrine of St. John de Britto at Oriyur, a tiny nondescript village 15 kilometers south of the port town of Tondy in northern Tamil Nadu. The history and popularity of the shrine are related to the events surrounding the martyrdom in 1693 of John de

Britto—affectionately called Arulanandasamy—a Portuguese Jesuit missionary—who in the late 17th century spearheaded a mass conversion movement in southeast Tamil Nadu, known as the Marava country (Sauliere 1947). Tradition holds that Britto soon came to be perceived as a holy man of great power and, accordingly, a threat to Setupathi, the Raja of Ramnad. Setupathi eventually had Britto beheaded in 1693 and impaled on a stake after decapitation (Bayly: 399-404). The development of the cult of Britto and the popularity of the shrine are intimately linked to the saint's martyrdom and the special curative, transforming powers attributed to the saint. A special power attributed to the shrine derives from the color of the soil surrounding the shrine. Miracle stories attribute the red soil surrounding the shrine to the sacral, transforming powers of the martyr's blood.

While the shrine's religious economy is centered on the special sacral powers of St. John de Britto, its social economy is firmly grounded in native assumptions and arrangements, most notably caste identities and rank. Cast in indigenous ritual garb and idiom to resemble a local Hindu tutelary deity, the saint himself is transformed into a "Marava saint," (the saint of Marava castes) because of his extended missionary work among them. Thus, the cult of Britto is centered on caste—rather than religious—identities insofar as the three dominant caste groups in the region (Udayar, Kallar, and Pallar), collectively known as Marava castes, constitute Britto's principal cultic constituency (Raj: 85-111). As the Marava saint, Britto supports caste identity and the social status quo. Interestingly, while Britto's blood is said to have transformed the physical and, to some extent, the religious landscape of this otherwise sleepy village, no such transformation is visible in the world of social relations; its social landscape remains unaltered. Put differently, while professing their new-found Catholic identity and embracing the spiritual, economic, and social dividends it yields, Oriyur residents also weave their deep-seated caste assumptions and practices into their personal and communal lives—even if these are—as noted above— theologically and ideologically incompatible.

At Oriyur, this is most evident in the

configuration of the village cemetery which in many ways is a microcosm of the village, its social landscape, and social economy. At one end of the shrine complex lies the Catholic cemetery configured along caste lines and social ranking, with burial plots in close visual and physical proximity to the shrine being reserved for upper caste Vellala residents, followed hierarchically by various lower castes. Thus, Vellala Catholics are buried in the first few rows facing the shrine, while other lower caste Catholics like Udayar, Kallar, Pallar, and Parayar have their burial plots at the far end of the cemetery, away from physical and visual proximity to the shrine. The same social protocol and pattern is followed in the organization and naming of village streets that are named after the caste identities of their inhabitants such as Vellalar street, Kallar street, Pallar street etc, and hierarchically organized with the upper caste occupying the street closest to the shrine. Accordingly, Vellalas live on the prestigious first street, followed by various lower caste groups such as Udayars, Kallars, Pallars and Parayars whose homes and streets are progressively distant from the shrine. Ironically, the Vellalas who constitute a tiny minority in the village (15%) wield disproportionate power by virtue of their social status and rank, their access to formal education and better employment in parochial schools, and their access to social prestige and religious power mediated—until recently—by Vellala priests. Interestingly, while these Catholics embrace the caste structure, they, however, differentiate themselves from their Hindu counterparts by not observing commensality rules.

Moving beyond the micro level of personal and social relations to the macro level, we discern that caste ideology and caste politics are also at work in the institutional life and culture of the church, most notably in the selection and appointment of candidates for key ecclesiastical positions. Evidently, caste is a pan-Indian reality that shapes and influences social commerce and political discourse throughout India. However, the extent of its power and its bewildering hold on the institutional life of the church is in many ways peculiar to Tamil Nadu. I should note here that unlike the two previous

examples, caste discourse at this level is less straightforward and more complicated. While this is not one of the principal concerns of the laity, since the core issue and central actors are all clerical, grassroots lay engagement and contribution—under clerical pressure, some might argue—is nevertheless no less significant. According to many observers, it is the clergy that instigate and perpetuate caste politics. And priests, nuns, and laity alike readily and openly admit that caste is a major—if not the most important—variable and criterion in the appointment of diocesan bishops and major superiors of religious orders. When a diocesan sea becomes vacant, it is not uncommon for priests and laity from various caste groups to campaign and lobby for the appointment of a priest from their own caste. If this fails, they lobby—often successfully—for other key ecclesiastical positions and offices.

Locating this dynamic in its historical context would help illustrate the complexities and nuances of the caste discourse within the local church. When the heyday of European missionary activity ended in the mid-20th century, the baton of church leadership and authority was passed on to upper-caste Vellala clergy who were deemed most qualified and well-positioned to lead the young local church. Thus for over three decades the Vellala clergy and nuns held exclusive and monolithic control over key ecclesiastical positions, providing little or no scope of mobility for dalits and other lower castes. However, the mid-eighties witnessed a major shift in power relations, thanks to the theology of liberation and the tidal wave of change it inspired. Partly in response to the growing grassroots demand from lay dalits inspired by dalit clergy for equal access to power sharing and partly in response to the theological ideals implicit in liberation theology, during the last two decades the Vatican appointed a number of dalit and other low caste priests as bishops. By so doing the Vatican hoped not only to level the ecclesiastical playing field but also to help the local church to transcend and overcome the caste ideology that is contrary to official teachings. Of the thirteen bishops in Tamil Nadu today, three are dalits, one Vellala, and several others from various marginalized caste groups such as Udayars and

Vanniars. While the appointment of dalit bishops has certainly helped ameliorate the vast number of dalit Catholics who outnumber upper caste Catholics as well as to heal past wounds and omissions and reverse roles, it has not entirely succeeded in either relaxing or overcoming the grip of caste consciousness or erasing caste politics. On the contrary—some church observers claim—it has only helped reinforce caste ideology—albeit in a new form involving a new cast of characters—in that today dalits keep the doors closed to non-dalits and upper-caste clergy. In the words of one clergyman, “it is old wine in a new wine-skin.” This has led some upper-caste clergy to speak not simply of role reversal but reverse discrimination. According to some Vellala clergy, not only are all doors to key ecclesiastical offices closed to Vellalas, they are now regarded as “untouchables.” As one Vellala priest, who for long had been considered by many as a serious and well qualified candidate for bishopric, told me in a recent email communication: “The heyday of Vellala rule is over and tables have turned. Today Vellalas are the untouchables. And no Vellala can ever become a bishop in Tamil Nadu.” The only exception to this growing trend is when two competing low castes cannot agree on a mutually acceptable candidate. Frequently, in such cases, a Vellala bishop might be welcomed as a lesser evil as was the case with the appointment of two Vellala bishops. The caste discourse in Tamil Nadu, both at the institutional and grassroots levels, is another example for the dynamic of assimilation and differentiation insofar as caste ideology is both transcended and reinforced. The shift in Catholic caste discourse also parallels and mirrors the current caste discourse in the Hindu tradition in that in both cases upper castes feel displaced by dalits.

### III. Religious Festival

The most compelling evidence for this dynamic of assimilation and differentiation can be found in Tamil Catholic lay ritual tradition prominent during annual religious festivals at famed pilgrimage sites like Velankanni, Uvari, Oriyur, and Puliampatti. Though a thick

description of a Catholic festival detailing various ritual sequences would have been most appropriate to substantiate my thesis, due to space constraints I restrict myself to highlighting its salient features. Put simply, the Catholic festival tradition involves a wide assortment of devotional rituals and votive offerings including, though not limited to, goat or chicken sacrifices, the offering of coconut saplings, circumambulations, flag-hoisting, colorful chapparam processions, ritual tonsures, ceremonial auctions, possessions, bodily prostrations, and spectacular displays of piety and devotion (Raj, 2002, 2004). And the material objects deployed to accentuate and accessarize these votive ritual performances include such common votive items like coconuts, fruits, sandal-paste, salt, pepper, neem leaves, and body facsimiles in silver, aluminum, and gold. Even a cursory look at these material objects reveals the striking family resemblance between these votive objects and those used by other South Asian religious practitioners, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist.

What is notable about Tamil Catholic festival tradition is that in addition to these common South Asian votive items drawn from indigenous—some might argue, Hindu—ritual databank, Tamil Catholics also use traditional Catholic ritual objects like candles, holy water, rosaries, saints’ medals, crucifix, and scapulars. Thus, the material objects and religious symbols which Tamil Catholic devotees use to accessarize their ritual performance at festivals and pilgrimages are drawn from multiple religious sources—Tamil, Hindu, South Asian, and Catholic—making way not merely for the juxtaposition but for the organic blending or synthesis of diverse ritual traditions. By drawing on multiple ritual sources, Tamil Catholics freely assimilate the indigenous religious culture into their ritual praxis while consciously differentiating themselves from non-Catholic pilgrims. Such a strategy enables them to simultaneously express their attachment to indigenous religious heritage and loyalty to their new-found Catholic identity. This ritual process also reveals the complex negotiations and complicated identities, of what Julius Lipner calls “the ambivalent minority status” of Tamil Catholics.

As Turner (1969) and Younger (2002) have argued “the [religious] festival is an explicit statement of social solidarity and serves as an opportunity to examine a deeper sense of social identity,” inherent social divisions, and hidden tensions (Younger: 4) that provides a ritual platform for experiencing intra and inter-cultural as well as intra religious and inter-religious *communitas*. My own field-research findings in Tamil Nadu confirm Younger’s conclusion that the festival is a forum for annual self-definition of complex social, caste, economic, and religious identities (Younger: 162). Given the pervasiveness of religious festivals and their social role in south India, their appeal among Tamil Catholics is neither strange nor unique. What is unique to Catholic festivals, however, is not merely the juxtaposition of the sacred and secular common in other south Indian Hindu festivals but the organic and spontaneous confluence of different, even disparate, religious and ritual streams and the specific socio-cultural context that predicates this confluence. This organic confluence is negotiated, I argue, through the effective deployment of the double-edged strategy of assimilation and differentiation that symbolically expresses the hybrid identity of Tamil Catholics.

Whereas the festival reveals this dynamic in the realm of public and communal devotion, a similar dynamic is also discernible in the domestic realm where individual Catholics negotiate their hybrid identity by developing their own creative and ingenious rituals, often predicated by practical exigencies. Let me turn to one final autobiographical anecdote. When my elder brother began constructing a new home in 1990, his Hindu contractor and mason demanded that a special puja involving chicken sacrifice be offered to ensure the wellbeing of both construction workers and future residents of the home. Though life-long and devout Catholics, my brother and his family acceded to the demand and provided the prescribed ritual items and paraphernalia that included fruits, banana leaf, flowers, incense sticks, coconuts, camphor, beetle leaves, and a live chicken. On an auspicious day determined by a Hindu astrologer, in the presence of my brother and his family, the mason—acting now as a ritual specialist—killed a chicken at the construction

site, sprinkled its blood on its corners as well as on the foundation stone, and offered fruits and coconuts intended to placate some unknown malevolent spirits that are said to occupy and hover over open, uninhabited space. When he finished sprinkling the chicken blood, the mason spread a banana leaf on which he placed some fruits and a broken coconut, lit some incense sticks and camphor, performed *arati*, and carried the burning camphor (*chutam*) and incense sticks around the site, warding off evil spirits. Following this, the mason poured the water into a pit he had dug in the middle of the site. My sister-in-law later explained to me that the water ritual was to ensure good drinking water for the new home. After the mason completed the water ceremony, my brother and his family also poured a jug of water into the pit. As the mason conducted the puja, my brother and his family stood there along with other construction workers and witnessed the entire ritual sequence—sometimes taking active part, but for the most passively observing it. While the mason was performing the puja and offering Hindu prayers—my sister-in-law later confided—she was silently praying to St. Anthony and other Catholic saints. When he completed the puja, my sister-in-law who is a pious Catholic lady, pulled out a bottle of blessed holy water that she had obtained from the parish priest and proceeded to bless the four corners of the site by sprinkling them with holy water and placing an assortment of votive items (a holy picture, a Christian medal, and a crucifix) on each of the four corners of the site so that—she later told me—“Jesus might guard our family and protect our new home” (Interview with Ruby Amaladoss on August 1, 1990).

Evidently, both assimilation and differentiation are at work in this domestic ritual performance. Assimilation is amply evident in my brother’s and sister-in-law’s ritual behavior. Even though they did not take active part in the ritual, their physical presence, their willingness to have this ritual performed at their site and on their behalf, their endorsement of the ritual, and their material contributions to the ritual suggest that they assimilated, or at least endorsed, the ideology behind this ritual performance and prescription. Differentiation is prominent when



my sister-in-law performed her “Catholic thing” in the presence of Hindu masons and workers. By her ritual actions, she was letting her Hindu workers know that while she shares Hindu religious ideas and ritual idiom, she also has a different religious identity and a distinct ritual tradition. Neither my brother’s family who consider themselves devout Catholics in good standing nor did their Catholic friends and neighbors view their ritual performance as a sign of dysfunctional faith. They deem such assimilation as not only inevitable but religiously salutary. As in public devotional rituals like festivals and pilgrimages, in the domestic realm too, the assimilation/differentiation or both/and dynamic enables Tamil Catholics like my sister-in-law to draw from multiple and different—even disparate—religious sources and ritual streams that help “covers all bases.”

### Conclusion

In closing, I wish to reiterate what I stated in the introduction to this paper. The ritual life of Tamil Catholics in south India defies tidy, conventional categories like assimilation, differentiation, and othering, since the complex negotiations characteristic of this lived tradition often involve both assimilation and differentiation. This dynamic reflects/reveals their hybrid and liminal cultural and religious condition where boundaries are not fixed or absolute but constantly fluid, permeable, and negotiable. As I have argued elsewhere (2004),

in such a religious universe, for the vast majority of lay devotees, assimilation and differentiation (or both/and approach) serves as an effective strategy to negotiate in a guilt-free manner their multiple identities and manifold loyalties. This dynamic also reveals the pragmatic spirit that governs lay grassroots religious practice in South Asian Religions in general and in Tamil popular Catholicism in particular.

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