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The Papal Encyclical Ad Extremas (1893): The Call for an Indigenous Indian Clergy, Its Effects Upon the Catholic Church in India, and Its Description of Indian Religions

Andrew Unsworth

ABSTRACT: Ad Extremas, an encyclical epistle issued by Pope Leo XIII, gives a rare insight into the official opinion of the Catholic Church with regard to India’s indigenous religious traditions at the close of the nineteenth century. By means of a historical and textual analysis of the document, this essay offers a critical assessment of its contents facilitating a better appreciation of the ecclesial transition that occurred between the pontificate of Leo XIII and the promulgation of those texts of the Second Vatican Council that made reference to Hinduism.

Introduction

Ad Extremas (On the Institution of Seminaries for Indian Clergy), an encyclical epistle issued by Pope Leo XIII, was promulgated on 24 June 1893. The purpose of the document was threefold: firstly, to discuss the establishment and development of seminaries and formation strategies that would facilitate a growth in numbers of indigenous clergy in India; secondly, to create less reliance on foreign (European) missionaries and to encourage new missionary strategies; thirdly, to root the Indian Church more firmly in the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of India.

By means of a historical and textual analysis of the encyclical, I will offer a critical assessment that will facilitate a better appreciation of its original ecclesial context. I will offer an assessment of the three main purposes of Pope Leo’s encyclical outlined above.

I have prepared my own translation of aspects of the original Latin text, and will refer to Ewald’s English translation for the sake of clarification and comparison; at times noting the deficiencies in her rendering of certain words and concepts.

What prompted the writing of the encyclical?

In practical terms, Leo recognised that despite the efforts of many Catholic

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missionaries, the Latin Christian evangelisation of India had barely begun. In theological terms, he had a desire to free the subcontinent from what he saw as ‘the darkness of superstition’. He saw the continuing evangelisation of India as a Gospel imperative and as a spiritual need that was within the gift of God’s providence directing and inspiring human work in co-operation with the divine plan. In order to do this he had to enact a major reformation of the Catholic Church in India and this began with a reformation of the way it recruited and trained its clergy.

What does the encyclical say?

Article one affirms the view that the origins of Christianity in India lie in the mission of St. Thomas. The advent of European Christian missionary activity in Asia occurred during the Catholic Reformation when the Portuguese led a fresh engagement between the Catholic Church and the peoples and religious traditions of India.

This encounter was fruitful in Malabar through the work of the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier (1506-52), and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), who present prototypical but contrasting approaches to the question of mission among the peoples of India.

The encyclical mentions St. Francis Xavier and substantially reiterates his negative estimation of indigenous Indian religious traditions. Nevertheless, Xavier made many converts among the lower castes and pariahs and challenged injustices committed against them. Ad Extremas does not refer to De Nobili. He studied and adopted the language and many customs of the high caste Indian population of Madurai. During his lifetime, De Nobili’s general approach was rejected by the Catholic Magisterium, and again in Pope Benedict’s XIV’s Bull Omnim sollicitudinum (1744).

In article two, Leo states his intention to reorganise and expand Catholic mission by establishing the ecclesiastical regularisation of Church life in India. This was effectively achieved during his pontificate and included a concerted personal effort on his part. In his Concordat with the Kingdom of Portugal on 23 June 1886 Pope Leo had formally ended the so-called Goanese Schism that was the consequence of a long lasting and damaging dispute.

The Portuguese had been granted a jurisdiction (padroado) by the Holy See over their colonial possessions in the East. In theory, this included patronage over ecclesiastical affairs in India. Since this was granted by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 the missionary context had changed far beyond its original parameters. Portuguese mission had come to a standstill.

From 1622, the Holy See, through the Propaganda Fide began to appoint Vicars Apostolic (Missionary Bishops) to India. During the next two centuries a number of disputes occurred over territory and clergy that resulted in the inability or unwillingness of bishops to fill vacant sees. This had left some of the Catholic population without the ministry of the Church, creating a lack of certainty as to who was their rightful pastor.

From 1834, the Holy See appointed Vicars Apostolic to those parts of India beyond the influence of the Goanese Church. In 1838 Gregory XVI suppressed three sees and much of the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Goa. The Portuguese regarded this as an insult and a breach of the padroado. They ignored what the Holy See had put in place. Portugal appointed Archbishop Silva Torres to Goa in 1843. His highhanded approach, not least his ordaining of 600 untrained men to the
priesthood and the resulting mayhem this caused, resulted in much antagonism and occasional violence. He was recalled in 1848.  

By 1886 a solution was required and seemed possible. The Apostolic Letter *Humanae Salutis Auctor* (*The Author of Human Salvation*), 1 September 1886, outlined how Pope Leo sought to heal the schism, regain control of the Indian Church and offer an acceptable solution to the issue for the Goanese, the Syro-Malabarese Churches and the wider Church in India.

The Syro-Malabarese Church was recognised by the Holy See in 1599. A brief schism was healed in 1653. In Canon Law the Syro-Malabar Church was allowed to retain its Syriac rites and customs. A new hierarchy was established in 1887 under the Congregation for Oriental Affairs.

In 1886, Leo gave recognition to the traditional *padroado* within Goa. The Archbishop of Goa acclaimed Primate of the East and Patriarch of the East Indies, was apportioned suffragan sees at Daman, Cochin and Mylapore. The Portuguese relinquished rights over the rest of India which was then placed under *Propaganda Fide*. The national hierarchy was established in 1886.

In *Ad Extremas* article three, Leo refers to a Latin hierarchy of bishops in India with jurisdiction over eight provinces: Goa, Agra, Bombay, Verapoly, Calcutta, Madras, Pondicherry and Colombo.

Leo believed that the Christian mission in India would continue to be precarious until it had indigenous clergy to serve it; not only in the role of supporting European Missionaries but in taking full responsibility for the administration of the Indian Catholic Church. He contrasts the difficulties experienced by European Missionaries with the potential ease that he imagines Indian clergy would demonstrate in negotiating social, cultural and linguistic challenges.

Article four calls for a ‘pious and zealous clergy native to India’ to preach the Gospel in the many vernacular languages of India which European clergy found ‘very difficult to learn’. He says that the European clergy ‘forced to live there as in a strange land’, had many difficulties ‘winning the hearts of the people’. In contrast, Indian clergy would ‘know the nature and customs of their people; they know when to speak and when to keep silent...they live among the Indians as Indians without causing any suspicion’.

In article five, Leo indicates his strategic plans and projections for the future, drawing on statistical information gathered by *Propaganda Fidei*. He concludes that, ‘the number of missionaries abroad is far from adequate to serve the existing Christian communities’. He asks the question: ‘if there are not enough foreign priests to care for souls, what will happen in the future when the number of Christians will have multiplied?’

Article five shows that Leo is positive about a future increase in the Christian population but he doubts whether the number of missionaries will rise in proportion. In article six he cites examples of missions where such issues have led to their collapse, citing the dangers that hostile secular regimes can pose to nascent Christian communities.

Article seven suggests that in order to preserve and propagate the Catholic religion among the Indians, ‘an Indian clergy had to be formed that could administer the sacraments and govern the Christian people, no matter how menacing the times’. This method of church planting, adopted from antiquity, ought to include the formation and appointment of indigenous bishops.

Seminaries were already in existence in India and Ceylon. In 1887 Synods in Colombo,
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Bangalore and Allahabad decided to found more diocesan seminaries, whereas in the absence of a diocesan seminary, bishops should use a metropolitan seminary.

Article eight suggests that a lack of material and human resources was hindering the formation of candidates despite the best efforts of those responsible. This was in marked contrast to the civil government and protestant communities who 'sparing no expense nor effort...offer young men a judicious and refined education'

In article nine, Leo speaks of his aspiration to form an Indian clergy, 'educated in all the refinements of doctrine and...virtues, essential for the pious and wholesome exercise of sacred functions...qualified priests in great numbers...would skilfully utilise the important resources of their studies'.

Article ten requests that European Catholics help meet the expense of the development of seminaries in India. In a spirit of global brotherhood he asks for prayers to be said for the success of the Church’s venture in India.

In articles eleven and twelve the pope assures potential donors that any excess will be used ‘beneficially and conscientiously’ on other related projects. He concludes the encyclical by bestowing his apostolic blessing.

What was the effect of Ad Extremas on India?

Seminary Formation and Indigenous Clergy.

In terms of seminaries, formation and numbers of indigenous clergy, Streit’s Atlas Hierarchicus (1913) suggests that the newly erected provinces (excluding Goa) contained 1502 priests. Of these, 1090 were ‘Foreign’ and 412 ‘Native’. Twenty years after Ad Extremas, foreign priests were still predominantly European outnumbering indigenous priests in a ratio of slightly more than two to one. In theory, for every priest, whether foreign or Indian, there were approximately 1050 Catholics, the size of a large but manageable community. Again theoretically, if the Catholic laity relied solely on indigenous clergy, this ratio would rise to 3828 lay people per priest.¹⁰

However, the clergy were not so evenly distributed. In general, the North suffered from a lack of priests and in particular a lack of indigenous priests, Karl Streit records five indigenous priests in North India.¹¹

Despite the best efforts of the Pontiff to encourage the promotion of indigenous clergy, especially Indian bishops, a point borne out by Ad Extremas, there was much inertia. As early as the 1630’s a call was made for more indigenous clergy; this was often reiterated. Resistance was usually based in scepticism among missionaries as to the intellectual ability and moral integrity of indigenous candidates. The inadequacy of the Catholic Mission to India, to which Pope Leo alludes, itself stifled the possibility of a growth in numbers of Indian clergy, and a relatively small number of Indian priests meant that it was more difficult to garner an adequate number of potential candidates for the episcopacy.¹²

In 1913, of a Catholic population of 1,577,246 (excluding the Goan or Syro-Malabarese Catholic populations), the majority of Catholics under the jurisdiction of the new hierarchy were registered as 'Indian'. Based on these figures, by 1913, despite Pope Leo’s aspirations, the majority of Indians were ministered to by Europeans.

It would be naive to expect a substantial change in such a short space of time. It takes the best part of a decade to train a priest in a major seminary and of every cohort entering the major seminary, on average a third would be ordained. These figures indicate the challenge facing Pope Leo’s vision for India.
The Goanese Province had four seminaries. In 1913, it had the most developed system of formation in India. According to Streit it had 846 priests of whom 797 were Indian, 49 foreign.

By 1896, all three Syro-Malabarese dioceses were governed by Indian bishops. These had their own seminaries and by the year 1913, 493 indigenous clergy served 453, 713 Catholics.13

Incidentally, Neill notes that, although the Goanese and Syro-Malabarese Churches contained a majority of Indian clerics, their own indigenous communities sometimes complained about their suitability.14 Such is church life.

Outside of the Goan and Syro-Malabar communities, none of the Latin Rite bishops in the newly established hierarchy were Indian. Although Rome could see that indigenous clergy were needed in much larger numbers, little was, or could be done to address the deficit in the short term. The policy could only be a long term aim.

To remedy this situation, in 1884 Pope Leo established an Apostolic Delegation under the Italian Bishop Agliardi. In 1893, Pope Leo established the Papal General Seminary at Ampitya in Kandy, Ceylon to serve the needs of all the Indian dioceses. The money used for the building of the seminary was donated by an Englishman and in 1890 Pope Leo had assigned Bishop Zaleski to oversee its construction and development. Consideration of this particular seminary clarifies a number of issues.

Caste politics and prejudices within the Indian Christian community caused difficulties throughout India. The seminary was located in Ceylon so that Indian candidates were formed away from their homeland so that caste prejudice could be broken down. Ceylon was far enough away from the influence of the Missions Étranègres. French clergy often favoured the retention of caste distinctions. The seminary was entrusted to the Belgian Jesuits because of their track record in providing excellent higher education elsewhere in India and because of their commitment to egalitarian principles as free as possible from caste distinctions.15

This institution developed a reputation for providing ‘a specially thorough theological education’ for Indian seminarians. By 1905, this Jesuit run college had 88 students from 21 dioceses.16

Missionary Strategies.

A Survey of Roman Catholic Missions (1915) makes the following observation:

[I]n the Goanese dioceses the foreign force is small; little or nothing is being done...that can be called direct missionary work. In regard to the rest of India, a large proportion of the foreign priests...is engaged in ministering to the European and Anglo-Indian community. When allowance is made in addition for the demands of pastoral work for the large Roman Catholic community, it will be seen that no very considerable force is left for direct missionary effort among non-Christians.17

Already, Ad Extremas had reflected on the status of the indigenous population of India and appealed for mission:

[N]umerous priests...To this day...are continuing these noble efforts; nevertheless, in the vast reaches of the earth, many are still deprived of the truth, miserably imprisoned in the darkness of superstition! How very great a field, especially in the north, lies yet uncultivated to receive the seed of the Gospel!18

This lament reflects the fact that Latin Catholics considered belief in the gods of India
to be incommensurate with belief in the one true God of Christianity.

Previously, missionary success had been in South India. Leo wished to extend missionary activity in North India. Ewald’s translation misses the meaning of Leo’s exhortation, rendering the Latin ‘vasto terrarium tractu’ with ‘vast reaches of the earth’, giving the impression that he refers to the global context. My translation, ‘vast tracts of the land’, makes better sense of the text, which refers to the North of India, not the Northern Hemisphere.\(^{19}\)

In its reference to the ‘remoteness of institutions and customs [itemque insolentia institutorum atque morum]’ in India, Ad Extremas appears to be alluding to the caste system. This, and other customs, remained ‘unfamiliar even after a long time’.\(^{20}\) It would be difficult to find a phenomenon within Indian society, which, being both an ‘institution’ and a ‘custom’ was as conspicuous and problematic for the Christian missionary than caste.

Following Di Nobili’s strategy, some Catholics wished to gain influence among the Brahmins and other higher castes, and if possible, convert them to Christianity. According to the Brahmins, and the higher castes, the conversion of the lower castes to Christianity presented a great disincentive to becoming Christian. This tension and the complexities inherent in the caste system itself, contributed to nineteenth century Christian exasperation at the lack of missionary success. The Church had to deal with many pastoral issues related to caste.\(^{21}\)

One such convert from Brahmanism was Brahmandaband Upadhyay (1861-1907) who studied the relationship between Thomism and Advaita Vedanta, helped to establish a Christian Ashram in India and had an important influence on the development of a Catholic faith more rooted in Indian religious and cultural forms. However, the greatest number of Indian conversions to the Catholic faith in this period happened among members of lower castes and the tribal peoples of Chota Nagpur.\(^{22}\)

Then, as now, there was no easy answer to the question of caste among Indian converts.

Indian Religious Traditions.

The references in Ad Extremas to Indian beliefs and practices are brief, yet from them one learns much about the Catholic attitude at the time. One sees that, de Nobili aside, the views expressed by Pope Leo differ little from the negative assessment of the religion of the Brahmins described by Francis Xavier.\(^{23}\) We read:

Likewise, there is Francis Xavier, who...through his incredible constancy and charity... converted hundreds of thousands of Indian followers to pure religion and faith from the fables and impure superstitions of the Brahmans.\(^{24}\) [Itemque Francisci Xaveri, qui... constantia et caritate incredibili assecutus ut centena Indorum millia ad sanam religionem et fide\(n\) a Brachmanarum fabulis atque impura superstitione traduceret].\(^{25}\)

This can be compared with Ewald’s version:

[He] converted hundreds of thousands of Hindus from the myths and vile superstitions of the Brahmans to the true religion.\(^{26}\)

Indian religions were considered idolatrous and lacking any basis in divine and saving truth. ‘Fabulis’ (literally ‘fables’) has the connotation of nonsense or untruth. Ewald’s use of ‘myths’ to translate ‘fabulis’ is less appropriate.

In contrast to ‘impure superstitions’, Christianity is characterised as ‘sanam religionem et fide\(n\)’ [‘pure religion and faith’].
This European distinction between Christian ‘religion’ and non-Christian ‘superstition’ was commonplace.\(^27\) Ewald disregards the word ‘faith’ in the Latin text. Her choice of ‘true religion’ distorts the sense of the original. Leo appeals not only to an intellectual dichotomy between what he sees as Christian truth and the untruth of Brahmanism, but also to the difference between Christian spiritual and moral purity and the impurity of Brahmanical religion. Ewald chooses ‘vile superstitions’, this is too harsh; ‘impure’ is more accurate. This aversion can be traced to St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (1: 23–25) which associates idolatry with (sexual) impurity. Perhaps these are allusions to the imagery of popular Hinduism, for example, the lingam, the portrayals of Krishna’s seductions or the images of the goddess Kali. Sophisticated Christian readings of Hindu iconography were in the future. The Christian critique of aspects of folk religion would probably be shared by some Hindus.\(^28\)

Ewald applies the term ‘Hindu’ to translate ‘Indorum’; this might cause confusion. In the nineteenth century ‘Hindu’ referred to an indigenous inhabitant of India. Today the term designates a person committed to the religious and cultural traditions of India without necessarily being ethnically Indian.\(^29\) However, Pope Leo’s ‘Indorum’ meant ‘Indian’.

In Ad Extremas, the religions of India were equated with Brahmanism. From the textual evidence available to us, the terms ‘Hindoo’ and ‘Hindoosim’ appeared as early as the1820’s. Nevertheless, the term ‘Brahmanism’ prevailed until the beginning of the twentieth century. Tiele, in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1884), and his Outline of the History of Religion, and Max Müller editor of The Sacred Books of the East (1879-1910), both use ‘Brahmanism’.\(^30\) The Catholic Church merely adopted the terminology used by Western European scholars at the time.\(^31\)

The later work of Catholic Indologists and theologians led to the first positive references to Indian religions to appear in the solemn teaching of the Church. During the pontificate of Paul VI, the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate), October 1965, stated:

Thus in Hinduism people probe the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible fecundity of myths and through a searching philosophical venture, and moreover they seek liberation from the anguish of our condition through ascetical forms of life, or by means of deep meditation or by taking refuge in God with love and confidence.\(^32\)

Here, Indian religions are no longer seen as fables and superstitions but vehicles through which the mystery of the Godhead may be discerned. The Church respects the authentic desire for spiritual liberation in the three major Hindu pathways of karma, jnana, and bhakti marga.

**Conclusion**

In Ad Extremas, Pope Leo expressed a desire to take the Indian Church into a new era. An indigenous clergy was necessary if it were to become truly Indian. His policy was laudable.

This enabled less reliance on European missionaries and encouraged new missionary strategies for the conversion of India that would build a Catholicism rooted in India’s spiritual and cultural heritage.

Progress was slow, but by the mid twentieth century the number of indigenous clergy in India had eventually increased and then exceeded the number of foreign missionaries.\(^33\)
The caste system, linguistic challenges and the religious and cultural traditions of India posed obstacles to Pope Leo’s evangelisation strategy. Naturally, issues related to caste were often carried over by Indian converts to Christianity, even those who became clergymen. The Church dealt with these issues, which varied from place to place, as it does today, in a prudential and pragmatic manner.

Although Pope Leo expressed a largely negative assessment of Hindu beliefs and practices, these were probably drawn rather uncritically from earlier assessments by Francis Xavier and DuBois. In the long run his overall strategy led to a greater appreciation of Indian institutions and respect for its languages and cultural-religious forms. This bore fruit much later in the positive teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Although no direct causal link is claimed here, there was clearly an indirect influence on later developments.

Ad Extremas was a timely document and the policies it expressed assisted the Catholic community in its transition from one dominated by European missionaries to an Indigenous Indian Church.

Notes

1 Latin text, Acta Leonis: Volume 13, (Rome, Typographia Vaticana, 1893), p.190ff; and at http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf-l-xiii_enc_24061893 [Hereafter referred to as AE, Latin Text, with number of article].


3 AE, Ewald, article 1.

4 AE, Ewald, article 2.


11 Review, p.646.

12 Neill, Missions, pp.403-405.


14 Neill, Missions, p.404.

15 Ballhatchet, Caste, p.12.

16 Review, p.649.

17 Review, p.640.
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18 *AE*, Ewald, article 1.
19 *AE*, Latin Text, article one; author’s English translation.
20 *AE*, Latin Text, article four; Ewald’s translation.
21 Ballhatchet, *Caste*, *passim*.
22 *Review*, p.640.
24 Author’s translation.
25 *AE*, Latin Text, article 1.
26 *AE*, Ewald, article 1.
32 Author’s translation.