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In Search of a Truly Indian Catholic Theology in Nehruvian India

ENRICO BELTRAMINI
Notre Dame de Namur University, USA
ebeltramini@ndnu.edu

The Modi dispensation provides a unique vantage for assessing the role, program, and self-understanding of the emergence of a local, indigenous style of theology within Roman Catholicism in India during the Nehruvian era. The style has often been linked to the internal history of Catholicism in the aftermath of Vatican II. In this article, the emphasis is rather located in the Indian context, and more specifically in the Nehruvian India. A special role in this relationship between Indian theologians and Nehruvian India was played by the category of difference that allows an appropriation of Western modes of thinking and yet marks a distance from them. I offer some consideration of the complex implications of this approach in theology.

Keywords: India, Christianity, theology, culture, postcolonial

Introduction

For the better part of seven decades after Independence , the "Nehruvian idea of India," to borrow a phrase from Sunil Khilnani, held sway in India's polity.[1] In the early nineties, India started gradually departing from that idea. But it was only in 2019, with Narendra Modi's second successive win in the general elections, that the Nehruvian principles upon which the federal, secular, sovereign, and socialist republic of India was founded seemed to be replaced by the BJP's attempt to rebrand India as an exclusively *Hindu* polity according to its ideology of *Hindutva*. It remains uncertain whether the replacement is definitive and whether the assertive majoritarian, right-wing attempt to transform contemporary India is successful. Yet a preliminary historical assessment of that era,

[1] Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997).

Enrico Beltramini is a scholar specializing in Christianity in South Asia. He has authored four books, with his most recent work focusing on the Indian Christian theologian Michael Amaladoss (Fortress Press, 2024). He is a faculty member at Notre Dame de Namur University in California.

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the Nehruvian era, seems legitimate. With the limits that each periodization presents to scholars, the end of an era opens such an era to historical investigation.

In this article, the subject under assessment is Roman Catholic (henceforth, only Catholic) theology in the Nehruvian era. In a period that approximately extended from the Independence to the rise of Hindu nationalism in the nineties, India has been home to at least three streams of Catholic theology. The first stream is the Brahminical lineage, a Westernized form of theology based on the scrutiny of the sacred texts of both Christianity and Hinduism; the second stream is focused on inculturation and religious dialogue; and the third stream is a socially engaged form of theology with several ramifications (Dalit, liberation, tribal). The first and the third streams have been adequately addressed, but the second is less known. The lineage was built around the concept of Indianness, that is, an essentialized understanding of what is "being Indian." Indianness is a universalized construct that provides meaning to individuals and collectivity and, therefore, as I will explain later, is addressed in the singular. The theological lineage under scrutiny, which I label "inculturation," was, therefore, the theological effort that sustains the rise of a truly Indian church, a church that is truly Indian and truly Catholic. In the following section ("Terminology"), I reveal the ecclesial sources of this specific interpretation of Indianness. In Indian Catholicism, therefore, Indianness stands for being Indian and Catholic.

An established line of thought in scholarship identifies the internal movement of the Asian (and therefore Indian) church as responsible for the shift from a Westernized stream of theology to another stream more inculturated in the Indian reality.[2] The catalytic moment, according to this scholarship, was the period immediately following the Second Vatican Council in which a series of ecclesiastical conferences were held in Asia. Some scholars locate the crucial moment in the papal visit of Pope Paul VI to Manila at the Asian Bishops' Meeting in November 1970.[3] Others rather designate the establishment of the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference (FABC) that followed the papal visit.[4] In both moments, the urgency was a profound inculturation in the Asian reality so that the Asian church (or Asian churches) would become

[2] Jukka Helle, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022); Xavier Gravend-Tirole, "An Examination of the Indigenisation/Inculturation Trend within the Indian Catholic Church," in *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion and Caste*, ed. Chad M. Bauman and Richard Ford Young (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2014), 110–37.

[3] This is the opinion of Filipino Jesuit priest C. G. Arevalo, who was present at that meeting. Quoted in Helle, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church*, 2.

[4] Helle, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church*, 3.

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truly Asian while remaining truly Catholic.[5] This study follows a different path: it investigates the link between culture and politics, on one hand, and theology, on the other. A different explanation is offered: the roots of a truly Indian theology need to be found not in the internal history of the Asian church but in the context of Nehruvian India. Central to the link between Indian theology and Nehruvian India is the category of *difference* that has been used with success in the articulation of both Indian modernity and secularism as well as in theology. This is the argument. With that said, I return to the FABC and its resolutions; they are important elements of a complex background in which the emergence of a truly Indian theology emerged. But the FABC does not play a primary role in this historical reconstruction; the Nehruvian India does.

Before I proceed, I need to state the boundaries of this work. The history of Indian theology is long, with ramifications from the nineteenth century. This history implies several ramifications among different denominations. In this study, I address only the Catholic ramification and among the several lineages existing within Catholicism, one specific style, the inculturation style. Apart from the section on terminology, the article is composed of two parts. In the first, I address the Nehruvian India, and I explain how the category of difference has helped frame an Indian modernity and a distinct Indian secularism. In the second, I offer a summary description of the state of the art of inculturation in the Nehruvian age according to sociohistorical categories, with specific reference to the question of theological Indianness. The most urgent need is to clarify the problem that the theologians of the inculturation style considered more compelling and how they solved the problem through their alternative theology.

Terminology

A few notes on terminology. I use the terms "Catholic" and "Christian" as synonyms not in the sense that what is Christian is in effect Catholic, but rather that Catholic is indeed Christian, although Christianity is much wider than Catholicism. I recognize the importance of the non-Catholic Christian communities of India and the role they played in the history of their country and Global Christianity. They simply are not part of this study. When I mention Indian theology, I strictly mean Catholic theology developed by Indian theologians and Western expats.

I use terms like "nationalism," "inculturation," and "culture." With "nationalism," I mean the exaltation and defense of the nation, which is considered

[5] Helle, *Towards a Truly Catholic and a Truly Asian Church*, 3.

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the chief social value. In India, the difference between secular nationalism *à la* Nehru and Hindu nationalism is not on the absolute relevance of India but rather on what one means for India. "Inculturation" is an abundantly known word in Catholicism, and I use it instead of the more common "enculturation." The 1985 Second Extraordinary Assembly of Bishops defined "inculturation" as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various cultures."[6] In brief, inculturation is a mutual mingling of Christianity and local culture. I discuss two specific understandings of culture later in the manuscript (see the section "Indian Theology").

The term "tradition" is used in this article both as (1) Tradition (uppercase), that is, the sacred tradition: the deposit of faith (*Depositum Fidei*) transmitted and lived from one generation of Christians to another, and (2) tradition, a specific line of thought, religious lineage, or stream within Christianity. In the footsteps of intellectual historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, I treat geographic terms such as "Europe," "India," and "Hindustan," to name a few, as if they refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate.[7]

I already summarized the meaning of the term "Indianness": an essentialized construction of being Indian as well as Catholic that Indian theologians received from the FABC. Indianness is the result of a process of dehistoricization and it does not admit differentiations.[8] After the establishment of the FABC, the bishops found that the most compelling question was related to the Asianness of the church. What exactly does it mean to "become Asian," or "being Asian" in Catholicism? The FABC has offered its response on several occasions. I selected three of them because they may help, by analogy, to more clearly frame the concept of Indianness. During the FABC's first plenary assembly in 1974, the bishops declared that "The church must be local in its songs, in its artistry, in its architecture, in its thoughts and language, in its way of life. As God became one of us—to make us His own—His Church

[6] The Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Report*, Rome, November 24 to December 8, 1985, II, C, 6.

[7] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 1–26, esp. 1.

[8] Not everyone is happy with the FABC's essentialism. Jonathan Y. Tan argues, "An approach which essentializes 'Asianness' is problematic, because it tends to universalize the abstract, theoretical constructs in a manner that downplays the rich diversity and plurality of underlying Asian realities." Jonathan Y. Tan, "*Missio ad Gentes* in Asia: A Comparative Study of the Missiology of John Paul II and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2002), 226–27.

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in Asia must be Asian."[9] The concept was confirmed a few years later: "Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things."[10] Several years later, the seventh Plenary Assembly stated, "We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian values of life, especially harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life."[11] Thus, Asianness is first of all to become Asian in all things, that is, local. By analogy, "Indianness" refers to a church that is Indian in all things, that is, local, inculturated, totally Indian. Consequently, a theology that embraces Indianness is a totally Indian theology. Phrases such as "true Indian theology," "Indian Indian theology," and "theology truly Indian" are used here as synonyms. Finally, I use the terms "Indianness," "Indian identity," "Indian self-understanding," and "Indian consciousness" as synonyms: although they may vehicle slightly different meanings, for the sake of this article, they deliver the same sense of "being Indian." Although I share the opinion that Indian consciousness is far from being single, this is precisely the meaning adopted by the FABC. Theologians in Asia (India) share the same essentialist construction of meaning. Writing on the FABC, Ruben Mendoza mentions "a growing collective consciousness [singular] on the part of Asians due in part to the actual problems with which Asians are confronted, their common aspirations and expectations, and their realisation of their inter-dependence on account of geographical proximity."[12] The consciousness is one, but of course, it takes different cultural configurations.[13]

Nehruvian India

At the core of the cultural and intellectual heart of the Nehruvian idea of India lies the impulse to transcend its colonial past and reappropriate the capacity to speak its own voice. This impulse is defined as the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the Western experience. In this study, this impulse is framed as an ambiguous, conflictual process in which the inheritor recognizes and deliberately downplays the influence of the predecessor.

[9] Gaudencio B. Rosales and Catalino G. Arevalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, vol. 1 (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997), 22.

[10] Asian Colloquium 26 in Rosales and Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 72.

[11] Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, vol. 3 (Quezon City: Claretian, 2002), 8.

[12] Ruben Mendoza, *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths: A Journey to the Kingdom in the Spirit: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970–2007* (PhD diss., Catholic University of Louvain, 2013), 20.

[13] Mendoza, *A Church in Dialogue with Peoples of Other Faiths*.

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The inheritor recognizes the traces of the predecessor, and yet the inheritor disowns any influence of the predecessor on the inheritor. By rejecting the influence of the Western predecessors, the Indian inheritors clear space for their own originality. The rejection of Western influence is a prerequisite for the emergence of an original India. A vibrant, creative India must recognize its father and then commit patricide. The struggle for originality necessitates the simultaneous absorption and rejection of Western influence. Central to this process is the notion of *difference* (or its synonyms "alternative" and "distinct") that is applied in various forms to a multiplicity of fields. Probably the two most important fields are related to modernity (and the consequential modernization of the country) and the elaboration of an indigenous form of secularism (to guarantee peace among religious communities after the drama of Partition). Modernity is a Western construct, the narrative goes, but Indian modernity is an alternative to Western modernity; secularism is a Western invention, but Indian secularism is distinct from Western secularism. Being different is apparently the best way out of the excruciating paradox of disclaiming an unmistakable influence. Thus, history and intellectual influence are the same thing. Indians read Western experiences in terms of difference so that they can create spaces of unfilled originality. Indian originality does not emerge through a graceful and peaceful negotiation with the past; it is rather Indian difference as a product of a complex wrestle in which India denied its debt to the West while producing work that reveals an unmistakable debt. As a matter of fact, the India–West relationship remains at the core of contemporary India.

Indian Modernity

A case in point is the Nehruvian configuration, which consists of bringing to completion "in Indian terms" the project of modernization that the British initiated. What I mean by "in Indian terms" is crucial. Jawaharlal Nehru argued, against Gandhi, that there was nothing quintessentially Western about modernity; modernity was universal.[14] Gandhi rejected modernization as inherently Western and therefore as a base for an Indian nation. He envisioned a state rooted in the moral principles of the *Bhagavad Gita* and emerging from the rural reality of the villages. On the contrary, Nehru believed that an independent India would be ruled by an enlightened elite concerned with economic growth and social justice. The idea was that Indian statesmen would assimilate modernity while rejecting its

[14] Giorgio Shani, "Rebranding India? Globalization, Hindutva and the 2004 Elections," *Ritsumeikan Review of International Studies* 3 (2004): 35–58, esp. 43.

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Western character. According to Nehru, different conceptions of modernity descend from the original idea. Accordingly, the Indian way to modernity ultimately became a matter of interpretation of modernity and rearticulation, in an Indian fashion, of its basic components. It was not an uncontested position.

Rabindranath Tagore was always aware of the enduring contribution of British rule to India, namely the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice that stand behind the idea of "civilizing mission." He recognized these ideals as foundational to a free and civilized society.[15] Like Gandhi, Tagore believed that this contribution should be conserved and protected in a post-Independence India. However, he claimed that the very source of such a contribution, that is, European civilization, had reached the end of its course. The title of his last essay in English, *The End of Civilization*, primarily had to do with Tagore's disappointment with Europe and its inability to walk the talk, to concretely deliver those ideals of freedom and justice that the British empire professed but never applied in India or elsewhere. Tagore's disappointment, however, was also with his own country, depleted and humiliated after two centuries of colonialism. He argued:

> The wheels of fate will one day oblige Englishmen to give up their Indian empire. But what kind of a country will they leave behind them? What stark, wretched misery?. . . What wasteland of filth and hopelessness?[16]

The generation of Indian leaders who ran the country in the period immediately after Independence shared Tagore's sentiment for an elaboration in Indian fashion of the British political and social heritage, but they did not share his pessimism. Nehru navigated between the Scylla of the legacy of the empire and the Charybdis of a resurgent nationalism, a nationalism that Nehru embraced and domesticated and that Tagore rejected.[17] The result was a set of Nehruvian principles upon which the federal, secular, sovereign, and socialist republic of India was founded. The Nehruvian "idea of India" involved neither a rejection nor a continuation but a transformation of colonial modernity.[18]

[15] Rabindranath Tagore, *Crisis in Civilization* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1950).

[16] Tagore, *Crisis in Civilization*, 1–5, esp. 5.

[17] In a letter to Charles Freer Andrews, he had written, "I love India . . . but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am not a patriot. I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world." See Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 70.

[18] For a different opinion, see Paul R. Brass, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Politics of India Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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Nehru committed India to modernity, but it would be a different modernity from that of the West or, in the words of Giorgio Shani:

> Rather a different modernity from that which the colonisers had hitherto imposed upon the colonised through the colonial state. The main administrative functions of the state, the collection of revenue and the maintenance of law and order, were to be kept but its role was to be transformed. India was . . . committed to securing for its citizens social economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; and equality of status and opportunity.[19]

The result, among other things, is a secular state that administrates the reality of religious pluralism that marks Indian society.[20]

In most of his scholarly work, particularly at the beginning of his career, Partha Chatterjee has dealt with the relationship between (British) colonialism and (Indian) nationalism (in the sense of Nehruvian nationalism), claiming the importance of the former in shaping the development of the latter.[21] Of course, he was not alone in addressing the complex matter of decolonization in India as a long-term process involving a nation born under the aegis of colonial rule and evolving into postcolonial polities. The balance between Western elements and what is properly indigenous in the discourse on Indian modernity implies the kind of bilingual consciousness that the postcolonial leadership certainly exhibited. Other scholars have signaled the unresolved contradiction of this transplanting of modernity into the Indian reality. What is an "alternative modernity," after all?[22] Adding the adjective "alternative" to it has significant pluralistic intentions, but it ignores that this "alternative," even though it is the result of the reconfiguration of the universal model, remains entrapped within the homogeneous assumptions of European modernity. A

Brass believes that Nehru committed India to both a rejection and a continuation of colony modernity.

[19] Shani, "Rebranding India?," 40.

[20] According to Ashis Nandy, a modernizing nationalist elite under Nehru seemed to imply that the state was committed to implementing "the same civilizing mission that the colonial state had once taken upon itself vis-à-vis the ancient faiths of the subcontinent." Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 321–45, esp. 323.

[21] I refer to Partha Chatterjee's two books, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986) and *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[22] For a criticism of the very concept of "alternative modernity" (and its twin, "multiple modernities"), see Arif Dirlik, "Thinking Modernity Historically: Is 'Alternative Modernity' the Answer?," *Asian Review of World Histories* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–44.

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generation of scholars has claimed that Western modernity is built into Indian modernity in the sense that Indian modernity carries with it some peculiarly Western assumptions about historicized time, sovereignty, and political secular. True, in the transferring exercise, a structural change occurs. By justifying India's modern experience through abstract Western theories, however, the sponsors of Indian modernity must answer a fundamental question: What defines the Western modernity to which they are an alternative?

A first, although partial, solution to the problem of the "universal model" that according to some finds applications in India is the concept of a "multitude of Western modernities," so that there are multiple varieties of Western modernity. As the exponents of the paradigm of multiple Western modernities have made clear, the "multiplication of modernity" not only calls into question long-held and widespread understandings of the Western experience but also reframes and legitimates the experiences of non-Western modernities. This semi-essentialist position, however, does not completely undermine the position that modernity is a universal concept with several ramifications, within and outside the West. A second, more drastic solution involves an absolute rejection of the heritage of colonization and the embrace of a form of nationalism that goes back to the origins. This turn to the past, however, is more a work of social revitalization than a historical reconstruction, that is, a more accurate historical understanding of Indian origins. By immersing themselves in the forms and categories of ancient Hinduism, modern supporters of religious nationalism enter into intellectual communion with the Hindu roots of India at their most vital moments. Indeed, this return to the origins only secondarily refers to a historical enterprise: the primary meaning it assigned to the phrase is a recentering of India in a more precise identity as the classic texts of Hindu tradition would nourish, invigorate, and rejuvenate twenty-first-century India.

Indian Secularism

Back to the Nehruvian India: the construction of Indian secularism is one of the most precious, celebrated, and fragile fruits of post-Independence India. The edification of the secular, a space autonomous from confessional religion, was supposed to be a remedy for the effects of the interreligious tensions, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. The father of Indian secularism, Nehru, with the Congress Party of India, has been celebrated for creating secular institutions and most importantly a climate of tolerance among members of different faiths. The constitution of India is adamant that India is "a sovereign socialist *secular* democratic republic that secures for all its

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citizens . . . liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship."[23] Despite being a nation overwhelmingly Hindu, the constitution places all religions on the same level and does not give preference to any religion over another. Unity in diversity was the guiding principle of the founding fathers of India. Nehru and his colleagues believed that only a pluralistic democracy could hold the people of different religions together and keep India united.

Indian secularism has been labeled as "distinct," in the sense of being a differently modern variant of secularism. Indian secularism is not a replica of the Western forms of secularism; it neither erects a strict wall of separation between state and religion nor pursues the privatization of religion. In the opinion of political theorist Rajeev Bhargava, one of the most insightful commentators on philosophical and historical questions around secularism, Indian secularism is distinguished from Western versions by a number of features.[24] In his view, Indian secularism is characterized by a "principled distance" between state and religion, a model of secularization that on one hand respects the diversity and at the same time empowers the state to interfere in cases of discrimination in the name of religion.[25] In Bhargava's opinion, Indian secularism preserves religious plurality through the regulating agency of the state. This identification of Indian secularization with the qualificative term "distinct" is problematic for some scholars, who believe it creates several analytical problems. One of these problems is that Western forms of secularism are multiple and, as a matter of distinctiveness, the lines between Indian and Western forms of secularism cannot be so easily drawn as Bhargava and others have done in their work.

Indian secularism, it has been said, maintains its distinctiveness with regard to its classic Western counterparts.[26] This distinctiveness consists in the fact that in India, the Enlightenment sense of the separation of religion and state has been translated into the more restricted concept of administration of religious diversity. On one hand, the secular as a distinct sphere differentiated from "the religious" has never taken root in India; India is, in fact, a religious society. On the other hand, India has developed its own distinct form

[23] The statement is included in the preamble to the constitution of India; emphasis added. See Sharad D. Abhyankar, "The Constitution of India," in *Constitutions of the Countries of the World*, ed. Gisbert H. Flanz, Release 97-6 (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1997).

[24] Rajeev Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," in *The Future of Secularism*, ed. T. N. Srinivasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20–53, esp. 27.

[25] Rajeev Bhargava, *Secular States and Religious Diversity* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 84.

[26] Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," 20–53.

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of political secularism according to which it can be said that "India developed a distinctively Indian and differently modern variant of secularism."[27] Like Nehru with regard to modernity, the champion of the Nehruvian secularism, Bhargava believes that secularism is not inherently Western. He claims that "secularism is a universal normative doctrine."[28] In his view:

> The idea of a secular state, i.e., a state strictly neutral with respect to all religions was a feature of colonial modernity and came to India with British rule, specifically with the Queen's Proclamation of 1858. This idea was inserted within a cultural background suffused with the prehistory of secularism and once installed was transformed into something entirely different by the efforts of those struggling against the filth in their own traditions as well as against colonial rule. The product of these struggles, the model of secular state in the Indian Constitution was vastly different from anything that existed in pre-British India or under British colonial rule.[29]

Thus, the distinctiveness of Indian secularism, according to Bhargava, is not traceable in colonial sources but in the transformation that took place in India. In effect, the Indian version of secularism, encapsulated by the celebrated statement *sarva dharma sambhava* (let all religions flourish), does not attempt to force religion out of the public sphere but sees it as an integral part of India's democracy. Secularism in India has been intended to afford equal respect to all religions. It was not premeditated to exclude religious practice or institutions from the domain of the public sphere or to guarantee state non-interference in religious affairs. As a matter of fact, the state has the right to intervene in religious affairs and to treat certain religious communities differently to guarantee equal respect for all religions. In other words, the equal respect guaranteed to each religious community eventually forces the state to intervene in religious affairs and treat religious communities differently.[30] Bhagarva adopts the analogy of the state as an instructor, who is forced by his

[27] Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," 20.

[28] Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," 23. Professor Bhargava also claims that the interpretation and the content of this normative doctrine evolve. In passing it can be added that in the same article, on page 26, Professor Bhargava probably unintentionally echoes Nehru and his *dictum* on modernity. In fact, Bhargava notes with regard to Indian secularism's critics that "if secularism is modern, they believe, then it must be western." The statement can be interpreted as an understanding of modernity as universal, that is, not essentially Western.

[29] Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," 40.

[30] Here I refer to the fact that although the postcolonial Indian state abolished separated electorates based on religious and cultural differences, it continued to conserve the colonial distinction between majority and minority religious communities, particularly in the reality of personal and civil law. Other examples of state interference in the private

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or her own role to make a distinction between good and bad assignments to treat all assignments with equal respect and in turn to apply the principle of neutrality.[31] As mentioned, Bhagarva labels his distinct interpretation of secularism "principled distance," meaning that the state either intervenes or not in the religious affairs of a community depending on whether the proposed intervention would promote religious liberty and equality of citizenship.[32]

Indian Theology of Inculturation

At the core of the cultural and intellectual heart of the Nehruvian India lies the impulse to transcend its colonial past and reappropriate the capacity to speak its own voice. Central to this impulse is the notion of *difference* that is applied in various forms to a multiplicity of fields. In politics, for example, this impulse has produced a different modernity led by a tolerant and secular state, where "difference" refers to Europe and to the West. In summary, the Nehruvian India implies a certain judgment of the Indian identity, the role of the state, and the nature of secularism that has been forged in the era of Independence. In the Nehruvian idea of India, the state is a vehicle of liberation and justice and promotes an alternative, a *different* modernity.[33] In the end, the Nehruvian India manifests the ambition to join modernity on India's own terms.[34]

The category of difference has served well in post-Independence India on serious matters such as the adoption of modernity and the elaboration of an indigenous form of secularism. The question is: Did the same category equally serve Indian theologians within the Catholic realm? Is it possible to identify a link between culture and politics, on one side, and, on the other, theology in Nehruvian India? The scope of this section is to show the resonance between a certain idea of postcolonial India and a certain Indian way of theologizing. More precisely, the aim is to state that Catholic theologians in Nehruvian India conceived their theology in terms of difference from Western theology. To reach that goal, however, I need to narrow down the problem that Indian

sphere of religious affairs are the introduction of temple rights to Dalits, the abolition of polygamy and child marriage, and the establishment of divorce.

31 Rajeev Bhargava, "What Is Secularism For?" in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 486–543, esp. 503.

32 Rajeev Bhargava, "Reimagining Secularism: Respect, Domination and Principled Distance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 50 (2013): 79–92.

33 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*.

34 "To think in terms of 'alternative modernities' is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity." See Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

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theologians faced in the seventies, for which the category of difference was the solution.

Theology of Inculturation: Dismissing Western Influence

Nehruvian India was home to three distinct streams of Indian theology: the Brahminical, the inculturation, and the social transformation lineages. Although these three streams still coexist in the present theological milieu of Catholicism, they can be considered in historical sequence. The Brahminical is a theological style imported from Europe with an emphasis on the sacred texts of both Christianity and Hinduism and doctrinal continuity. For the theologians active in the social transformation lineage, the church is necessarily people centered or, more specifically, poverty centered: their concern is the liberation of God's people from any form of slavery or bondage.[35] The theology of inculturation, the object of this study, is an attempt to deal with two major problems: how to come to terms with the idea that Christianity comes with a doctrine and a practice derived from its non-Indian roots and how to generate a theology that is truly Indian. The gospel has both universal and local significance: this is the potentially contradictory character of Christian theology in India and the source of the dilemmas related to theological conceptualization. Can Indian Christians develop an understanding of both their this-world and other-world conditions by looking to the Ganges, instead of to the Jordan or the Tiber, for inspiration?[36] Or it is written in their destiny that they must assimilate the reality of the Indian world through intellectual categories that have been developed elsewhere? Indian theologians have been struggling with these questions since the seventies.

In a previous section, I defined a true "Indian theology" as a "theology totally Indian." But a more complete definition would say that a truly Indian theology is the result of a double movement: the dismissal of any influence from the West and total inculturation. Let me start with the former. In a chapter written for the *Festschrift* honoring the one hundred years of life of Fr. Josef Neuner, SJ, Michael Amaladoss, probably the most celebrated theologian

[35] According to Sathianathan Clarke, a theologian with scholarly roots in both India and the United States, Indian theology cannot exclude and ignore "the voice of the majority, who testify to centuries of oppression and marginalization has been an ideological vehicle in the hands of the status quo." See Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

[36] Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 89–116.

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on inculturation, offered an ambitious goal to Indian theologians.[37] He mentioned "the efforts of Indian (Asian) theologians to focus directly on God's self-revelation in the Bible and to respond to it in terms of the Indian context and culture, independently of the mediation of Greek culture and philosophy."[38] Then he further clarified: "We do not wish to ignore two thousand years of doctrinal and theological development. But a pole of dialogue is different from a norm."[39] Those passages contain much more than can be disentangled here, but the sense is obvious enough: Amaladoss believes that it is possible to access revelation as it is contained in the Bible without the mediation of Greek culture and philosophy. Amaladoss states that Indian theology emerges directly and naturally from the primeval spiritual heart of India without Greek mediation. His statement implies a massive de-Hellenization of Christian theology and the bypassing of the patristic heritage (that is, Tradition).

In the first approximation, therefore, Indian theology of inculturation can be seen as an attempt to liberate theologians from its patristic parameters. In a statement that echoed the question Panikkar asked of Pope Paul VI, Indian theologians rhetorically demanded whether India should "become Romans or Syrians in dress, customs, government, worship, and thought, in order to become Jesus' disciples?"[40] What they meant by that is whether Indian theologians can be considered Christians only in the case that they conform to canonical rules and doctrinal frameworks that are at the same time mandatory and Mediterranean in character. On the other side, the church does not consider its theology Mediterranean but rather universal. Indian theologians are invited to orient their culture to this universal doctrine.

For a long time, Indian theologians have been concerned with the enduring effect of conceptual and doctrinal frameworks developed in a Mediterranean world and elaborated in a Western cultural context on their ability to

[37] Michael Amaladoss, "Toward an Indian Theology," in *Theological Explorations: Centennial Festschrift in Honour of Jesef Neuner S.J.*, ed. Jakob Kavunkal (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 18–34. Of course, Amaladoss is not the only Indian theologian involved in inculturation. The list would include scholars such as Sebastian Painadath, Paulachan Kochappilly, and Kurien Kunnumpuram.

[38] Amaladoss, "Toward an Indian Theology."

[39] Amaladoss, "Toward an Indian Theology."

[40] Indian Theological Association, Statement 1983, "Search for an Indian Ecclesiology," no. 4. The reference to Panikkar refers to a private meeting with Pope Paul VI in which Panikkar wondered if Christianity must be indefinitely bound to its Greek and Semitic origins. "I remember once telling Pope Paul VI during a private audience [probably dated January 1966], when he asked me what I was doing, that I was wondering if, in order to be a Christian, one had to be intellectually a Greek and spiritually a Semite." Raimundo Panikkar, "The New Role of Christian Universities in Asia," *Cross Currents* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1991–1992): 466–83.

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theologize in an Indic context. An Indian form of theology that is derivative of its European and Middle Eastern precursors and that has never proven able to escape their influence was perceived as irresponsive to the Indian context and its mission within the World Church. On the contrary, an Indian form of theology that emancipates itself from this influence, creates original work, and itself becomes a precursor to future theology was considered aligned with such a mission. Indian theologians have been aware of the risk of mimicking alien structures of thought for a long time. By 1978, they had already stated that:

> If much of the theological effort of our country . . . merely reproduces replays of the original western versions, we must ask ourselves whether the Christianity that was planted was such as would allow emerging Christian thinkers to answer to their own questions. Is the Indian theologian free to think for himself?[41]

Is the Indian theologian free to think for him- or herself? For decades, Indian theologians have been concerned with escaping intellectual determinism. How will it be possible to elaborate a serious and genuine Indian theology if the very source of the theology is hopelessly Western? The crux of the matter is *how* to navigate the narrow path between the Mediterranean roots of Christianity and its own dogmas and doctrines, on one side, and the treasures hidden at the core of Hindustan, on the other.[42] The matter, in effect, is quite complex, as Christianity is a religion of the Book (Semitic) and the Word (Greek), and its doctrine is firmly rooted in the late antique cultural and religious milieu that generated early Christianity.

Theology of Inculturation: Total Inculturation

I previously mentioned that a true Indian theology is the result of the dismissal of any influence from the West and total inculturation. Now I address the latter. Of course, the Brahminical also implies a certain degree of inculturation: it stands for the reconfiguration of Christian theology within the Indian cultural, religious, and intellectual landscape. But the inculturation style brings this idea of Indianness to the limit: it means a Christian theology that has severed ties with the Greek–Semitic roots from where Christianity

[41] Michael Amaladoss, T. K. John, and George Gispert-Sauch, eds., *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore: TPI, 1981), 18.

[42] For the meaning of "Hindustan," see Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). In his book, Ahmed Asif argues that Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Republic of India share a common political ancestry: they are all part of a region whose people understand themselves as Hindustani. Asif describes how the idea of Hindustan went missing in the 1900.

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and Christian theology were born. The destiny of Indian theology, in fact, goes through the eye of a needle squeezed between the duty to inculturate the gospel in every culture and the necessity to protect it from the identification with a culture.

To avoid the risks of a naturalization of Christian theology—in India and elsewhere—the church's official teaching distinguishes among the original inculturation, the primal inculturation of the early church, and the historical inculturations that followed. The Greek matrix is rather not another inculturation but, in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, "an initial inculturation which ought . . . to be binding on other cultures."[43] The Hellenization of Christianity is an indispensable and non-negotiable foundational ingredient of the Christian synthesis emerging from the encounter of the Scriptures with Hellenism achieved in the early church. For this reason, Greek culture is not really a mediation and should be considered normative. Catholic doctrine makes a second distinction between the term "culture" considered (1) as a universally human phenomenon, and (2) as a variety of diverse cultures. Thus, the pluralistic character of human cultures is subordinated to the universal character of the human culture (as a human phenomenon), which in turn is subordinate to the gospel.[44] The third and final retaining wall against the risk of damaging the integrity of the gospel against theological approaches favoring cultural diversity is the distinct ecclesiastic view embedded in the church's teaching, in which she (i.e., the church) is the undivided church, with her ramifications in play all over the world. Therefore, the phrase "Indian Christian theology" means a theology framed and grown in India, like French theology was born and then matured in France and like German theology in Germany.

The Indian theologians of inculturation, however, not only attempt to liberate theology from the constraints of patristic parameters; they also rejected this interpretation of culture. They follow a specific, constructivist understanding of "culture," according to which there are no unmediated experiences: ordinary forms of experience and grounds of knowledge are conditioned by the cultural background of the individual. Another way to put it is that there is no distinction between experience/knowledge and interpretation; culture

[43] Benedict XVI, *Lecture of the Holy Father: Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg* (September 9–14, 2006), "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html

[44] *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §53, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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does not operate at the level of interpretation but of experience. This specific reading of culture, adopted by the Indian theologians considered in this study, is relevant because it diverts from the church's official documents that carry the urgency of protecting the integrity of the gospel against theological approaches favoring cultural diversity.[45] More precisely, it disrupts the distinction between a universal and local understanding of culture and ultimately bypasses Greek mediation. The implications are relevant; I mention one. Scholars call Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, and Marie-Dominique Chenu "French theologians" and situate German thinkers such as Romano Guardini, Karl Adam, Dom Anselm Stolz, and Hans Urs von Balthasar in their German theological tradition. Certainly, some Indian theologians would subscribe to a definition of "Indian theology" as developed in India by Indian theologians; however, others would be dissatisfied with it. Others would say that Indian theology belongs to those who develop pathetic knowledge through their own social and living experience as Indian-born, their pastoral experience in the Catholic Church of India, and their educational path within Indian seminaries and institutions. Pathos is the primary hermeneutical key to Indian theology. This is theology from within that is produced by Indians. Indian theology is a theology of the Indians, by the Indians, for the Indians.

In the same period in which Nehruvian India articulated alternative forms of modernity and secularism, theologians of inculturation elaborated an alternative theology rooted in the Scriptures and unrelated to Christendom. From this perspective, Revelation has a universal character, and it is not associated with any specific tradition. The Scriptures are an inexhaustible fountainhead of dynamic spiritual life that is *semper novus*, always new, always effective every time Revelation is inculturated in a local cultural milieu. Christian theologians in India for decades now have been concerned with escaping intellectual determinism. Born in the colonial era, Indian theologians have taken innovative and more original paths in the long post-Independence period. Mainly concerned with the enduring grip of Western doctrines and cultural filters, they have retained the terms of Eurocentric frameworks but read them as if they could be separated from their European roots. The Indian theology as an alternative theology was born out of both an ambivalent struggle of acceptance and rejection of the Western heritage *and* Indian scholars' impetus to create original work despite all odds. The passage from a textual to an "alternative"

[45] See the recent Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization" (December 3, 2007), in which it is said that the gospel is "independent from any culture," §6, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20071203_nota-evangelizzazione_en.html

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theology is really a passage to a theology that negotiates its space between a perceived hegemonic European theology and a "nativist consciousness of difference," that is, a reconfiguration of an existing theological structure to cope with the reality of India.[46] It is this option that offers an alternative conception of Christian theology than that offered by the Eurocentric one and that ultimately contributes to the creation of a more local, contextual, and less hegemonic field.

Looking back at his long theological journey, Amaladoss conditioned the emergence of a true Indian theology to the severance of the Western ties:

> We Asian (Indian) theologians . . . are convinced that no serious Indian (Asian) theology will emerge as long as we are tied to the apron strings of a Euro-American system. We can correlate our experience to the Gospel without the mediation of a theological system, which we see ultimately as a game of power and control.[47]

What Indian theologians propose is not a simple departure from the work of Western theologians; Indian theologians are actively working to become less dependent on Western doctrines. Amaladoss traditionally identifies the beginning of the church as well as the kingdom with the resurrection of Christ: "This [i.e., his resurrection] is the beginning of the Church and also of the Kingdom of which the Church is the symbol and servant."[48] But then he borrows from the celebrated Indian scholar of the Scriptures, George Soares-Prabhu, SJ, a liberationist definition of the kingdom: the kingdom is the revelation of God's love. [49] When such revelation:

> Meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch as it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him . . . The vision of Jesus is theological, not sociological. It spells out the values of the new society (freedom, fellowship, justice), not the concrete social structures through which these values

[46] For the phrase "nativist consciousness of difference," see Chatterjee, *the Nation and Its Fragments*, 233.

[47] Olav Buttorm Myklebust, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31, no. 1 (2007), 21–24, esp. 24.

[48] Michael Amaladoss, People's Theology in Asia: Collection of the Lectures, East Asia Theological Encounter Program (2006-2018) (Phnom Penh: Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific, 2021), 18.

[49] Biblical interpretation in India has been flourishing for decades. George M. Sores-Prabhu is probably the most influential biblical scholar in India.

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> are realized and protected. To elaborate these is our never-to-be-ended task—for no "perfect" society is possible in history.[50]

The theme of the more perfect society is that of liberation for the poor and the oppressed, that is, the destitute, the illiterate, the social outcast, the physically handicapped, and the mentally ill. According to Amaladoss, "The problem is that the Church has equated itself with the kingdom."[51] The church is not the kingdom, and therefore the kingdom extends beyond the church.

It is possible to detect some parallels among the "alternative modernity" of the Nehruvian idea of India, the distinctiveness of Indian secularism according to the champion of the Nehruvian secularism, Rajeev Bhargava, and the "different theology" recently embraced by Indian theologians. All three take for granted that the original model can be denuded of its historical and cultural clothes, made cultureless, and therefore be deployed in service of local needs. All three recognize a universal model that can be interpreted with reference to the contextual condition, or to put it differently, a universal framework whose basic components can be rearranged according to the specific Indian landscape. The assumption is that new modernities, new secularisms, and new theologies can be generated through the interaction of the universal framework and local reality. The result is hybridization as a cultural process, that is, a cultural translation. All three struggle with this hybridization—the whole project of retaining an original Euro/Western model while reinterpreting it as if that model cannot serve as the standard. This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty implied with his often-cited phrase "provincializing Europe."[52]

Conclusion

Christian theologians of the Nehruvian era were, like anybody else, exposed to the culture of those days. They assimilated the hermeneutical key of "alternative" and adopted it to frame a style of theology that privileged estrangement and, at times, conflicting relationships with Western traditions. Some of those theologians still think that no serious Indian theology will emerge as long as Indian theologians are in dialogue with the Western schools of theology.[53] It is a bold statement and deserves attention.

[50] George Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society," in *Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, D. S. Amalorpavadass (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981), 607.

[51] Amaladoss, *People's Theology in Asia*, 21.

[52] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[53] A brilliant and recent example of theology of inculturation is Jacob Parappally, *Christ Without Borders* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024).

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