

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN MUKKUA COMMUNITY

Insights and Challenges from the Coastal Context

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Introduction

Christian life and practice present before us a living paradox. The Christian tradition, on the one hand, is deeply rooted in the subaltern soil of ancient Israel and of the Roman empire; the dominant mode of religious thought and theological discourse in the contemporary Church, on the other hand, keeps a distance from the religious experience of subaltern peoples and groups. This paradox is evident in the pronouncements of the magisterium, in the articulation of theological thinking, and in the training programme of Church functionaries. This paper has to be situated within this paradox.

The term 'subaltern' has become fashionable among academics today. The value implication (the dictionary meaning is 'of inferior rank', 'at a lower position', etc., originating in a military context of ranks) creates some difficulty in using this term, yet it has come to stay. 'Subaltern classes' usually refer to those social classes and groups not included under 'elite'. Guha uses it as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way".¹ Subordination is one constitutive term in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance. Specific groups belonging to the subaltern classes may vary from place to place due to the regional disparity in social and economic development in the country. However groups like dalits, tribals, coastal fisherpeople, etc. are generally considered subaltern. This paper deals primarily with the coastal fisher people.

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¹ Ranajit Guha, Subaltern Studies I, Delhi: Oxford Univ. press, 1994. See Preface.

There has always been a domain of faith-life vibrant among the Mukkuva fisherpeople independent of, or in spite of, the domination of elite theology and ritual system. Generations of hierarchical domination have not suppressed it, and that is proof of its vigour and vitality. I intend to take a closer look at this domain of faith experience that has been sustaining them in diverse life situations. My association with some fishing communities in Kerala for over a decade, and my inquiry into certain aspects of their religious life provide the life-context for this paper.

Mukkuvar: A Subaltern Community

The term 'Mukkuvar', in the Kerala context, is used generically to mean any sea-going fisherman, or more specifically to denote a particular subgroup of marine fishermen. I follow the usage prevalent along the Thiruvananthapuram coast where the term refers exclusively to the Christian (Catholic) fisherpeople.

The Mukkuva community in Kerala is a subaltern community. This can be shown geographically, socially, and also religiously. Geographically the very location and structure of a fishing village, traditionally called 'tura', has its existence between the land mass and the sea, almost segregated from other human settlements. They have been pushed to the geographical extremes of the land, making them 'fringe-dwellers'. In ancient Sangam literature, *neithal tinai*, the coastal region where fisherpeople swell, is placed at the lower stratum of the *tinai* structure comprising the five eco-cultural zones (*ain-tinai*), as if excluded from the civilized society. Socially they have always remained outside the caste structure, and were looked down upon due to this very profession. Thus they remain a subaltern community both literally and figuratively.

The same subaltern condition is present in the religious arena too. The various social and ecclesiastical dynamics in the past have contributed to their being subordinate to the elitist Christian hegemony. Even a casual look at the major themes and issues hotly being debated in various Church fora and Christian journals,

including theological, would prove this point. Their religious experience and insights are rarely recognized as Christian.

The mass conversion of this fishing community into Christianity goes back to the period of the sixteenth century missionary enterprise. Francis Xavier reached the shores of the former Travancore in 1544. The conversion experience, from the Mukkuva point of view, was a significant turning point in their religious history.² They found themselves confronted by an alien religious system and worldview. Though the new dispensation was welcomed as it gave them a new identity, the inner process revealed many incongruities and contradictions. For they had already been deeply rooted in a culture and religious worldview that may be called Indic/Neithal. This Neithal religiosity has been sustaining the community in face of the risk-ridden occupation they have been engaged in. Mukkuva Catholicism has to be seen at the interface between the two divergent religious traditions, viz. that of Iberian Catholicism and the pre-existent Neithal religion.

Let us Enter through the Latent Mode

The Mukkuvar have been Catholics for four and a half centuries. The external manifestations of Catholicism are very much present, as in any other Catholic community. However, our task is to move beyond these externals, to get to know the authentic religious beliefs and practices as they are really lived. And for this it is essential to enter the religious domain through the door of the latent mode of religiosity.³

'Manifest Mode' would refer to the socially recognized and sanctioned elements of religion that exist within conventional and official structures and norms. The 'latent mode' on the other hand, refers to those elements that are not formally recognized and

² For details on Mukkuva conversion, see George Schuurmmer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*, Vol. II, Rome: The Jesuit Historical Institute, 1997.

³ The concepts, manifest and latent, have been adapted from Robert Merton (*Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1968 enlarged edition, New Delhi: Amerind Publishing Co., chapter 3).

approved, and therefore operate outside, of rather deep within, official structures and norms. Both are present wherever religion is practiced. Subaltern people, because of the very condition, feel more at home in the latent mode; the manifest form is likely to exist on the periphery of their religious consciousness. The main concern of this paper is their latent mode of religion since this alone opens their to their religious world as lived in their everyday life.

We shall now discuss some feature of the Mukkuva practice of religion.

1. Both Neithal and Christian-Moulding their own Religion

Every religious tradition has evolved, and continues to operate, within a specific and *unique worldview*. The Mukkuva worldview is vitally linked with the community's association with the sea and the related phenomena. The sea for them is Kadalamma; it is Kenakadeviamma (corrupt form of Ganga-devi-amma), the Mother Ocean. Neithal wisdom tells them that the ocean, not the landmass, is the primary reality. The sea, or rather the shore, becomes the axis mundi in the worldview of a Mukkuvan. Besides, their *life rhythm* is regulated more by the lunar calendar, not the solar calendar. A lunar day is 50 minute longer than a solar day. Therefore a lunar calendar, not the solar calendar. A lunar year is 11 days shorter than a solar year. Most of the fishing operations are regulated by the tides as well as the waxing and waning of the moon. These cosmological factors have serious implications for the religious beliefs and practices of the Mukkuva community.

In the Neithal tradition *fishing* is the most central activity that gives expression to the basic beliefs and concerns of the community. The series of ritual acts meticulously performed during a fishing expedition point to the religious character of fishing itself. Eilamidal and Cheluparachil are part of the ritual complex of a fishing operation; Eilamidal is the rhythmic singing of folk songs by the crewmembers during a *kampavala* (shore-seine) operation, while *cheluparachil* is the ritual group evaluation at the end of a fishing

operation. *Fishing, for a Mukkuvan, is more than a mere occupation; it is a sacred activity that interlinks, and gives meaning to every aspect of his life.* [I do not intend to go into the details of the many rituals and practices in their everyday life.]

The missionaries, on the other hand, brought along not only the Iberian Catholicism, but also a worldview that is specific to the Mediterranean basin. A process of encounter between the two religious traditions, Indic/Neithal and Iberian Catholic, followed. Written documents mostly reflect only the missionary perspective that is basically European. More important for the present purpose is the inner dynamics seen from the viewpoint of the Mukkuvar themselves. From this viewpoint it becomes an *encounter and dialogue between two worldviews.*

A searching mind will easily discover that a *dual religious system* is operative in the Mukkuva practice of Catholicism. In dual systems people follow the practices of two distinct religious systems operating side by side. The parallel existence of the Christian and the Indic religious traditions in the Mukkuva community is a good example of this.⁴ At the same time there are also meeting points leading to a process of dynamic integration at the latent level.

It is possible to illustrate this from the Mukkuva world of experience itself. Their conception of the spirit world, which is not fully in line of with the Christian understanding, does not prevent them from paying homage at Hindu or Muslim shrines. Similarly their belief in life after death shows ambivalence – feeling at home with the Christian hope in ‘life everlasting’, yet doing away with the mythical garb of resurrection that appears alien to the Neithal worldview. Their experience does raise questions about Christian demonology and eschatology, and the doctrine of the resurrection, as to their adequacy to respond to their life concerns.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of these concepts, see Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, New York: Orbis, 1985 chapter 6.

We may also ask what role the two religious traditions in the dual system play for the community. They value their Catholic identity, as historically it has given them a status in a subaltern condition. They had only to gain socially by becoming Christians. They carefully maintain the ritual tradition; this has contributed to the structural identity of the community. However, the continuation of many Neithal practices and beliefs indicates that the meaning frame of the community is still deeply rooted in the Indic/Neithal tradition. The Catholic tradition does not seem to have contributed significantly to alter their system of meaning and worldview. In their search for meaning, the Mukkuvar still seem to fall back on the Indic/Neithal religious heritage and world view.

They do not see any contradiction between the identity structures and the meaning frame. The reason is the conjunctive logic that is operative in their neithal worldview. Here the religious boundary is not closed, but remains open, built on *conjunctive logic*, ie, both this and that. In contrast, the inherent logic in the Christian tradition has been *disjunctive*, ie, either this or that, but never both; if one is a Christian, then he or she cannot be any other.⁵ Encounter and dialogue can take place only in worldview that is being ruled by conjunctive logic.

2. Cintathira Mata and the Divine Feminine

The cult of Cintathira Matha (Sindhu Yatra Mata = Our Lady of Sea Voyage) at Vizhinjam is an important phenomenon touching upon the core of Mukkauva Catholicism. Cintathira Matha is the patroness of the church and the protectress of the people, especially in times of crisis, they believe. Women call upon her to protect their men out in the sea. She is also invoked to fight on their behalf even in a communal riot. The cult reaches its high point at the time of the parish festival when her statue is taken around the village in a solemn car procession.

⁵ Schreiter, p.150.

The cult of the Mata does not offer valuable insights into the Mukkuva conception of the divine, if placed in the broader context on the Neithal religious heritage. The sea was their Kenkadevi Amma the mother ocean. Worship of Amman, the mother goddess, was popular in the ancient Tamilakam. Bhadrakali was considered the caste deity of the marine fishermen. The existence of numerous Bhagavathy temples along the coast supports this view. One myth has it that Parasurama established 64 Durga temples along the Kerala coast. The long tradition of the worship of the mother goddess, the feminine Sakti, in the neithal culture has certainly left an indelible mark on the Mukkuva religious consciousness.

Even after conversion the Amma remained alive in the collective religious psyche of the community. Kenkadeviamma could never fully vanish from their life, nor would Bhadrakali. It would appear that Our Lady of the Assumption was superimposed on the Amma image, transforming her in to Cintathira Matha, through a process of religio-cultural osmosis that continued for four and a half centuries. The cult can be seen as the creative answer of the community to the incongruity that resulted from the superimposition of a Mary image over their goddess heritage. She has come to symbolize the community and its identity in a powerful way.

How do the Mukkuvar succeed in reconciling the contrasting features of the Devi and that of Mary? What challenge does the phenomenon pose for Christian religion and theology?

In the Catholic tradition Mary, mother of Jesus, is depicted as Virgin, Mother, Queen Bride, etc., -always the benevolent, the loving and the forgiving. She remains the embodiment of all desirable feminine qualities. Doctrinal history emphasizes both the virginity and the motherhood of Mary (Council of Ephesus, 431; *Lumen Gentium* 63; *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988). The Mukkuva religious mind is likely to have felt at home with the ambivalent nature of Mary as Virgin and Mother, for the pre-existing Devi image is akin to such ambivalence. But the incongruity between the benign and the terrible seems to create problems since the terrible or fierce is so

alien to the Mary of the dogmas. Can we not see Cintathira Mata as the creative answer of the Mukkuva mind to this apparent incongruity? The Mata, in Mukkuva understanding, is not merely a benevolent mother; she also assumes the terrible features of a Devi. In other words, the Mata may be seen as depicting not only the *santabhavam* (benign aspect), but also the *rudrabhavam* (terrific aspect) that is so characteristic of the pre-Christian Devi. Both the aspects seem to co-exist in her. In other words, the Mukkuvar refashion Mary according to their own image.

Thus she assumes the role of a protector goddess and even a mighty warrior in times of distress and crisis. They do not seem to experience any serious conflict in combining the two contrasting features in the Mata. Still the predominant figure of Cintathira Mata is far from the terrible figure of a Kali; the overbearing presence of warrior saints like St. Michael and St. James in the Mukkuva religious world, together with the Catholic tendency to suppress whatever seemed terrible in Mary, may explain this feature.

The cult of Cintathira Mata may be seen as a fine example of the dialogue between two religious traditions. Cintathira Mata, from a Mukkuva point of view may mean more a Christianized Devi than an inculturated Mary. This reverse process of inculturation has hardly been paid attention to by Christian theologians.

The cult of Cintathira Mata poses a challenge before the traditional presentation of Mary as uni-dimensional. The one-sided accent on the benign, imposed on the religious cosmos of a people is anthropologically not sustainable. Reality, even if it is sacred, comprises not only of the good and the benign, but also the not-so-good and the fierce, as kadalamma is reminding them day and night. The very conception of God as a male figure too faces difficulties. The powerful human longing for the divine feminine within one's religious universe is a fact, particularly in subaltern communities like that of the Mukkuvar. The image of a purely male monotheistic God becomes difficult for such people to comprehend. For most ancient of people the image of the divine appeared feminine. Besides, no

civilization in the world is said to have developed goddess worship so elaborately as did India. The Mata of the Indic/Neithal tradition highlights the feminine aspect of God, and the motherliness of God. Christian theology continues to struggle with the concept of male monotheism it has inherited from the Jewish religious tradition. The Neithal tradition can help to recover the very Motherliness of God.

3. The significance of Warrior Saints

Most of the popular saints venerated at Vizhinjam depict explicitly militant features. This is obvious in the case of St. Michael, the arch-angel, or St. Sebastian, the soldier-martyr. But these features are attributed also to other saints who have hardly any militant background historically or scripturally; St. James and St. Antony are examples. The terrible features of an otherwise benevolent St. Antony are given expression to in many mantric formulae that aim at propitiating him. St. James is transformed into a military hero, in his local title as *patai mirattiya* Santiyagappar (Santiago, who dispels enemy ranks). This may have reference to a Spanish tradition in which St. James was the patron of Spain in the fight to reconquer the land from the Moors. He is shown as seated on a white horse, with sword in hand. These indicate a clear urge in the Mukkuva mind to look for saintly figures who depict terrific or warrior features.

The Indian rasa theory may help in shedding better light on this phenomenon. This theory is a subtle and comprehensive systematization of human *bhavas* that would make sense in every human context. Bhava is a concept widely used in Indian psychology, aesthetics and bhakti literature; literally it means sentiment, disposition, temperament, etc., and may indicate the expression of a characteristic emotional state. Bharata (second century BCE to second century CE?) has systematized rasas and bhavas in his *natya Sastra* (treatise on dramatics), and classifies eight primary bhavas (sthayibhavas) that go with the eight rasas. Of the nine-fold categorization of primary *bhavas*, *santabhavam* seems to have acquired monopoly in the Christian tradition, almost to the

exclusion of most other *bhavas*, perhaps with the exception of *karuna*. The Mukkuva emphasis on the 'neglected' *bhavas* like *rudra* and *vira* in their religious practice at the latent level has to be seen against this background. *Bhavas* like *adbhuta* or *bhayanaka* are emphasized in Tantric rituals too; some mantras used in healing ritual use the language of fire and sword aimed at the destruction of the enemy. That the Mukkuvar, with their hunting instinct, fighting with the ocean day and night, attribute these *bhavas* to the Christian saints and to Virgin Mary indicate an inner urge to experience these within the sacred world of Catholicism. It proves their ability to re-present the universal Christian symbols and precepts suited to their life contest and thought pattern. It also remains a silent protest against the neglect of most of the basic *bhavas* in Catholicism – in its sacred liturgy, its sacramental rituals and devotional practices.

The Mukkuvar seem to present here the ingredients of a theology of combat; their very life is one of warfare – with the wind, the waves and the sharks. Religion and theology cannot remain aloof from this experience. Love of *kadamma* does not prevent them from fighting her. Love and fight coexist, both in life and in religion. Non-comprehension of this theology of combat gets many a pastor in to trouble with the coastal people. Similarly, the capacity to perceive the God-head in its multifarious *bhavas* may be the Indian clue to the Trinitarian mystery.

4. Experience with Christian Tantrism

Protection against evil forces is a major preoccupation of Mukkuva households, for they believe misfortune is largely due to the activity of evil spirits. They thus resort to *mantravadam* or mantric rituals, often in secrecy. *Mantravadam* is an ambiguous term having a pejorative meaning in common usage. A close look at it with an open mind, however, may be rewarding.

Mukkuvar resort to mantric rituals for either of three reasons: to bring good luck, whether in fishing or elsewhere; to remove or to ward off evil, especially caused by gods of other religions (*Murujati*

daivangal kootiyal); or to harm one's enemy. Antoniar chit (Plate of St. Antony), *Mikhel malakayude inruppu chakram* (Wheel-seat of St. Michael), and *Satrusamhara Mala* are good examples of mantric rituals with a Catholic colouring.

What is significant is the specificallyally Christian colouring many a mantric ritual takes on; there appears to be a definitive attempt to Christianize the mantric tradition. The imageries used in the *cakra* of St. Michael are very biblical: the cross in its saving aspect, and the sword of St. Michael in its terrific aspect. The cross of Christ, in the Christian tradition, always stood for humble submission to the Will of the Father; (eg: he delivered himself up to death; like a lamb being taken for slaughter... etc.). It evokes, in the Mukkuva mind, the benign aspect of the divinity, the sword of S. Michael, in the other hand, has reference to the Genesis story. "At the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the Cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life". 'The flaming sword is depicted in the *cakra* as a four-fold sword. This symbol of fiery St. Michael evokes the terrific aspect of the divinity. The *cakra* of St. Michael, thus, is a good illustration of Mukkuva attempt to reconcile the contrary dimensions of the divinity – those of the benign and the terrific.

It is not difficult to find the deep influence of Tantrism in the everyday ritual life of the Mukkuva community. The attempts at Christianizing *cakras* and mantras are extremely valuable indicators of the way the em religious mind works. The deep emotive and cultural content these have for the people can not be brushed aside. Is it Tantrism in Christian grab? Is it possible to bring both into a religious framework without serious conflicts? Official Christian theology has so far paid little attention to these question. But these are vital questions that emerge from the midst of vibrant Christian life that theology can more ignore.

Most Christian mantravadis practice it in close association with the profession of healing. They practice one indigenouse system of medicine or another, and many of them are called *vaidyan* (medical

practitioner). Some authors indicate that *mantravadam* and exorcism were part of the treatment of physical ailments in the ancient Tamilakam, before and even during the Sangam period. Sudhir Kakar discusses Tantrism with reference to the healing tradition of India.⁶ The healing profession (Ayurveda, siddha, etc.) is as much a spiritual science as it is a medical science. The cosmic aspect of illness, ill-fortune and ill-luck is highlighted by all Indian systems of medicine including tantrism, making medical and "priestly" functions hardly separable. *Vaidyan* (literally doctor) is usually both a medical man and priestly (ritual) functionary.

The Indian body image emphasizes its intimate connection with the cosmos. The Indian systems of health and healing had recognized this long back. According to *caraka Samhita*, "The person is comparable to the cosmos... That is, the person is a minuscule image of the great cosmos. All the features (*bhavas*) that are present in the cosmos are present in the person. All that are in the person are in the cosmos...."⁷ There is obviously continuity between the human body and the natural environment. This insight of Ayurveda underlies Indian thinking in general.

Tantra emphasizes the creative ordering of the powers of nature and of the body; in other words, the Tantric tries to interiorize the cosmos through *cakras* and *yantras*, aiming at transcending the duality of the inner and the outer. But it is not an escape from the world, but affirmation of the world; it is this element of affirmation that makes Tantrism appealing to subaltern people who are preoccupied with concerns of daily survival.

Tantrism, with its accent on the microcosm and macrocosm, implies a clear affirmation of the body and the world. Its liberative potential appears more pronounced if due recognition is given the spirit of human rebellion implied in this tradition; it is resistance to a

⁶ Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors - A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*, New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1982, pp. 151 ff.

⁷ Quoted in Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, p. 293.

passive submission to one's fate, an urge to tame the ocean – and oneself.

5. A Different View of Religious Leadership – the Diffuse Model

We saw that a process of dialogue has been taking place at the latent level between the two religious traditions giving new expression to Mukkuva Catholicism. The community does not seem to have experienced a destabilizing tension in the process at the faith level. But one area where the interaction had serious repercussions was that of religious leadership.

The mass dimension of the conversion process led to a total displacement of the existing structures of community leadership, including religious, by a centralized system of religious control introduced by the missionaries. The office of the *Pradhani*, the institution of *urukuttam*, etc., were either eliminated or made subordinate to the all-important office of the priest. The approach of Francis Xavier included the creation of a set of Church offices like *kanakkapilla* (catechist), *ubadesiar* (sacristan), *modem* (overseer), etc., to supplement the work of the priests.⁸ Besides the religious leadership, the socio-political as well as the juridical leadership functions came to be centered around the priest, as the bulky File of Petitions in the parish office testifies. This centralization process eventually resulted in retarding the proper growth of various leadership functions in the community. The heart of the crisis is a conflict of perceptions of regarding religious leadership – between a centralized and hierarchical model, on the one hand, and a diffuse model, on the other.

The office of the Catholic priest, as the administrative head of a constituency called the parish, has its roots in the feudal background of medieval Europe... This was basically the prevalent model at the time of the missionary enterprises worldwide in the 16th century. It was the same model that was implanted by the Iberian Catholicism

⁸ Patrick Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel: The Social Study of the Paravas of the Coromandel*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1984, p. 67.

among the Mukkuvar. The past few centuries of its existence on the Indian shores changed this model very little.

The above model stands in contrast to the non-Vedic model of religious leadership functions that existed in India. Absence of a regular priesthood characterized the religion of ancient Dravidians; in other words, religious functions remained diffuse in the community, having no hereditary or professional priests. This diffuse phenomenon has been brought out by ethnographic studies of South Indian communities.⁹ There was no priestly class set apart, unlike in Vedic Brahminism which penetrated the non-Vedic religious traditions in the course of history. According to the Vedic tradition, priestly functions appear to have remained in the hands of a special class of hereditary priests, who came to be known under the generic title of brahman. The 'profession' was based on sacred learning and knowledge of tradition. In the diffuse model, priestly functions remain dispersed among many community functionaries. Remnants of this model are still evident in Mukkuva Catholicism at the latent level, viz. *pirsenti* for the affairs of the *sabha*, *chelali* at the fishing operations, *vaidyan* or *mantravadi* at many occupational or domestic rituals, or other times, are engaged in one or another profession like fishing or trading. That the Mukkuvar were resisting the Catholic priest-centredness time and again is clear from the missionary documents themselves. It is likely that the model of religious leadership and of priesthood, inherited through the missionaries, remained alien to the Neithel religious ethos of the Mukkuvar.

The wide gap that exists between the two models raises questions not only about the adequacy of Catholic priesthood in a subaltern community, but also its congruence with the Indian heritage of non-Vedic priesthood. Indian Christian ecclesiology may not remain the same if these questions are seriously attended to. It becomes increasingly evident that only a diffuse model of religious

⁹ See, for example, P.G. Reddy and A. Chellaperumal, "Religion Among the Irulas of Coimbatore District, Tamilnadu", in Religion and Society in South India, ed. by G. Sudarsan et al., Delhi: B.R. Publishing Co., 1987, pp.76 ff.

leadership can resonate with a subaltern people. Only such a model can acknowledge and appreciate the subjecthood of the people.

6. Change of Roles: People become Subjects

There is no denying that their Catholic history during the past few centuries has reduced the Mukkuvar to mere objects of religion – as masses to be converted, as neophytes to be instructed, as Christians to be managed. At the same time a silent process of dialogue has been going on at the latent level. This was a process of re-shaping their relation. This reshaping enabled them to effectively deal with the contradictions of incongruities emerging from the encounter between the two religious traditions with divergent worldviews.

A view from the subaltern position makes it clear that it is the latent mode of religion that helps the Mukkuvar to assert themselves as real subjects. It is there they become celebrants and highpriests and theologians. As subjects they were both creators as well as interpreters of their religious tradition. This is evident in the two sub-processes involved; first, they dared to re-read and re-formulate the Christian scriptures, practices and doctrines to suit the concrete needs and thought patterns to the Neithal context. Second, they brought along elements of their Neithal religion into their practice of Catholicism. In the former they became interpreters of a tradition, while in the latter they have been original creators. The Mukkuvar, with their specific religious experience and faith heritage, thus remain the subjects in both the processes. If the term theology can be freed from the monopoly of professionals, then the Mukkuvar emerge as theologians at the primary level.¹⁰

This reshaping is at the same time a subtle form of protest and rebellion against the manifest form of Catholicism that failed to recognize their life concerns. Religion, whatever be the mode, is

¹⁰. In a subaltern hermeneutical perspective the question 'who interprets?' becomes pivotal. See Felix Wilfred, "Towards Subaltern Hermeneutics", *Jeevadhara*, 26/151, pp. 56 ff.

power. Manifest religion tries to keep this power away from the subaltern masses, or takes it away altogether. Latent religion, on the other hand, brings power closer to them; hence it is essentially empowering people, and so liberating people. Here lies the radicality of latent religiosity for any subaltern people.

Religion is not understood by the Mukkuvar as occupying a corner of their life experience; rather, they view it as encompassing their total experience. Nor do they cut up their experience into sacred and profane. Religion permeates every space and every activity of their daily life – whether at the sea or on the shore. *Cheluparachil* is a ritual that brings together the satisfaction or frustration of a day's work on a plane that is both secular and sacred. Concern with total experience makes Mukkuva Catholicism a religion of everyday life rather than one of Sunday obligations.

Mukkuva Catholicism emphasizes not only total experience, but also total history. The religious history of the Mukkuvar does not start with their conversion experience. Even the present day rituals are indicative of the rich store house of faith heritage lying dormant in the collective memory of the community, going back to prehistoric times. This collective memory is their history; it is their theology that has evolved through generations. To deny this is to deny their very identity. Their encounter with the Divine encompasses not only the Christian scriptures and the Catholic tradition, but also those of the pre-Christian past. These pre-Christian texts thus become part of their 'Old Testament', thus broadening the idea of Christian scriptures. When a subaltern group, as subjects, expands the scope of Tradition and Scripture, the notion of salvation history too would assume wider configurations.

Conclusion

The gulf between what is prescribed and what is actually lived is a common feature of every religious tradition; this is the gulf between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'. For a subaltern people the gulf is two-fold: besides the above gulf, there is also a gulf between

the elite and the subaltern practices of religion. This indicates the seriousness of the challenge we are facing today in the Church.

Our purpose is not to romanticize Mukkuva religion, but to grasp the dynamics of religiosity in a subaltern context, and to bring in the subaltern perspective into today's training programme in the Church. What has been illustrated with reference to the Mukkuva community can be seen as resonating with the experience of every other subaltern group. The unique theological process that has been taking place in their marginal context, and the insights emanating from them, reflect, in varying degrees, the experience of most groups that are subaltern. The questions discussed, therefore, have wider implication; the Indian Church, if it is open to the stirrings of the Spirit in peoples and cultures, can not ignore the experiences and insights of the subaltern people.

It is in the subaltern condition, rarely at the elite center, that creative stirring and prophetic announcements originate, as Christian history clearly illustrates. Did not the Jesus movement originate on the margins of the Jewish society? Was not Jesus himself a marginalized Jew? The practice of religion at the latent level is implicitly a denouncement of the manifest religion that reduces people on the margins to non-subjects. It implies the urge to be freed from what is oppressive and life denying. To be vibrant on the margins would shake the foundations at the center; this would explain why the official church tends to suppress or to ignore the creative search taking place among subaltern groups. If taken as a challenge, it would call for more reverential interaction between the center and the margins.

Interaction and inter-cultural dialogue between the elites and the subaltern groups, as equal partners in the common religious quest, assumes great importance today. We may call it intra-religious dialogue. "If you greet only your brother (at the center), what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?" (Mt.5: 47). A sensitive consideration of the religious experience of the subaltern people like the Mukkuvar places before us the urgency of this intra-religious dialogue, which is yet to become a concern in our churches and seminaries.