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The Indian Church at Worship

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In the year 1932 Bishop Azariah of Dornakal, with the approval of the Episcopal Synod of his Church, published in Telugu a marriage service for use in his diocese. In it the essential Christian act of solemnization of matrimony was enriched with local marriage customs from non-Christian sources, where these were considered free from idolatrous associations. Demands that worship in India and other countries should be less foreign and more 'indigenous' were then of comparatively recent origin, and judging by the comment made on this service by the Episcopal Synod,¹ it was evidently hailed as a bold and enlightened step in the right direction.

It was particularly valuable and indeed urgent to begin this Indianization at the point of marriage. The dramatic poverty of our marriage services of Western origin constitutes in itself an additional temptation to those already tempted to contract mixed marriages by non-Christian rites. Perhaps even more cogent to Christians is the immensely powerful dramatic emphasis in Hindu marriage ceremonies on the binding and life-long character of the marriage vows. The tying together of the bride's and bridegroom's clothes, the binding together of their hands, the exchange of garlands, the seven steps walked together and the vow of which the sacredness is enhanced by its being made in the presence of fire—all these are a colourful Indian heritage. In view of the fact that marriage was a divine ordinance 'in the beginning' and Christ only endorsed what was already part of the basic structure of society, the Christian need have no hesitation in 'baptizing' this heritage to be part of the marriage rites of the Church.

Such may well have been the hopes entertained of this service; but 19 years later, when enquiry was made about its use, the reply received from Bishop Azariah's successor was: 'Apparently only lip-service was paid in the matter of the use of this service. I can find little trace of its being used except occasionally in Dornakal itself'.² Such was the fate of a hopeful experiment, even though backed by the authority and forcefulness of that great bishop. It is not surprising that other experiments of this nature have come up against apathy and conservatism and

¹ See *Principles of Prayer Book Revision* (S.P.C.K.), pp. 78f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

met either with failure or only very limited success. With regard to marriage the best we can do to console ourselves is to reflect that the use in many parts of India of the *mangalasutra* instead of the Western ring is a purely Indian custom. Here local tradition has gloriously triumphed. The Liturgy Committee of the Church of South India is at present engaged in examining existing marriage rites with a view to producing a C.S.I. rite or rites which will embody the principles which Bishop Azariah had in mind. Perhaps today with the growing consciousness that the Church in India should give expression to its own heritage, the new experiment will be better received than that of a generation ago.

This instance we have described as typical of the reception with which Indianizing of worship is inclined to meet must prompt us to reflect and to examine what it is we aim at doing when we set before ourselves the project of making Indian Christian worship 'more Indian'. The creed in which we express our belief in 'the holy catholic Church' should remind us in our worship of Paul's great affirmation that 'there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman: but Christ is all in all'. The Indian Church, therefore, can never be merely Indian: its members are heirs of the universal Church throughout the ages whose heritage of worship we have been studying. The creative periods in worship, both that of the early centuries and that of the Reformation, had their main centres in other lands and their fruits have been brought to India by foreigners. Christians in India need not be embarrassed by this: it is part of their universal fellowship in Christ.

At the same time, as Dr. Sundkler in his book, *The Church of South India*, has pointed out, a law of the science of botany has its analogy in the subject we are studying: 'transplantation' has brought about a measure of 'mutation'. We see this in the worship of the Christians of St. Thomas. They call themselves and are known by others as 'Syrians', and this is a recognition of the fact of their ancient connexions with the Churches of East and West Syria. In worship their rites have been imported from these regions; and yet when planted and rooted in India they have undergone some independent development, and Indian Christians have through the ages given to them a character which they can call their own.

The new formulations of worship which had their births at the Reformation have been brought to India by evangelists of many different denominations and often present a confused scene. They are of more recent transplantation and bear in a more marked degree the characteristics of the countries of their origin. Also when the pioneer missionaries of these churches came to India, it was hardly to be expected that the simple, illiterate folk who formed the majority of their converts should make very much contribution of their own to the development of Christian worship. Nor did the missionaries themselves know enough

about Indian art and culture, Indian social and religious customs to be able to distil from them elements that could enrich the Church's heritage of worship. They were inclined to dismiss all these as belonging to the darkness of pagan superstition and therefore to be wholly abandoned at the renunciation by the convert in Baptism of the devil and all his works. Converts, too, were sincere in their desire to imitate in all things their fathers-in-God who had brought them from darkness to light. Hence the prevalence of Western forms of worship in our services, of Western architecture in our churches and, in spite of many hopeful developments in Indian church music, the prevalence in many congregations of translations of Western hymns in Western metre and set to Western hymn-tunes.

We must not go to the extreme of saying that this is all wrong. As we have already affirmed, the Church transcends national boundaries, and to use, for instance, a Hindi translation of a Lutheran or Anglican prayer book enables the Hindi-speaking Christian to enter in a measure into its supranational heritage. Even the revised eucharistic rites of the Lutherans, the Anglicans and the Church of South India have only been 'Indianized' to the extent of including some elements from the Syrian rites. The specifically Indian contribution to their wording and structure is very small, though the significance of these three largely independent revisions, as having with remarkable accord returned to the Church's classical heritage in worship, may be very great in the future. We must not fail to mention the 'Indian Liturgy' of the C.I.P.B.C. which is more thoroughgoing in its return to the Syrian heritage both in wording and in the use of Syrian chants. But this liturgy is only used in a few Marathi and Malayalam speaking congregations, and when we reflect that the Liturgy of St. James is a comparatively recent importation into India, we must admit that the use of passages from it can hardly claim to be more Indian than the continued use of Anglican or Lutheran prayer books.

Similarly a case could be made for Western types of church architecture as better suited than that of Hindu temples or Muslim mosques to the essentially congregational character of Christian worship. Above all one would not wish to deprive the Indian Church entirely of the universal heritage of Western hymnody. Nor can it be said that a congregation which follows in the main a Western mode of worship merely imitates the West. As with the ancient Indian Syrian tradition, protestant Christians in India have succeeded in giving to their more recently imported ways of worship a stamp of their own. Transplantation has indeed engendered mutation.

At the same time, we dare not be complacent and say that all is right. Worship, it has become a commonplace to say, must be related to the whole of life. Can we claim that Indian Christian worship, as it is at present conducted in most churches, is calculated to bring the treasures of Indian common life to the throne

of grace ? The vision of the glory of the nations being brought as tribute to Christ in his Kingdom must be our primary inspiration in seeking to make our worship a fitting expression of India's heritage. No less a reason will suffice. But a further consideration can only come second to this in importance. It is one of a more practical nature connected with the outreach of the Church's mission. What, we must ask, is the evangelistic value of our present ways of worship ? To say that the normal worship of the Church is for instructed Christians and that it does not matter if a Hindu thinks it strange or foreign is not enough. The new convert, when he comes to church for the first time, will inevitably find some things strange and new to him ; but in the main he ought to feel that the service in which he is taking part is something which could soon belong to him and to which he could soon belong. Can this be said of many of our Christian services ? If not, the value of all efforts to make the Indian Church's worship more Indian cannot be overstressed.

Let us start with music and poetry. Though translations of Western hymns have often been the foundation of an Indian Christian's personal devotion, the Westerner who hears them sung in church seldom feels that the singing of choir or congregation has come alive partly, no doubt, because the words of most Indian languages do not fit easily into Western metre. It is significant, too, that hardly any new compositions in this mode, or even good translations, have been produced by Indians themselves. No wonder, if it means, as it often does, murdering their own language to produce them ! For a congregation to rely entirely on Western hymns is to live on borrowed capital and to prefer foreign slavery to native freedom.

The spirit, on the other hand, in which lyrics are sung to Indian music is entirely different. There can be no question that this singing is alive. And, more hopeful still, it is a heritage which is ever increasing. Never a Christmas passes without a new lyrical carol being composed, and if a lyric is required for worship on some special occasion, there is always a poet to write it and a musician to give it a tune. Indeed the compositions in our standard lyric books are only a tenth of this magnificent heritage of Christian folk-song, as those who have used the Rev. John Samuel's Tamil *Manuscript Songs* will know. To every new edition which he brings out he has to add ones recently composed or discovered. When also will our congregations of Anglican heritage realize that their painful efforts to fit their Psalms and Canticles to Western chants for which their language is unsuited are quite unnecessary when these Psalms and Canticles are so much better sung in lyrical versions to Indian music ?

Together with these lyrics which are sung in our services we must class the less formal sacred concert (*kalaksheba* or *bajna*) which is one of the best methods of educating our village congregations in the great themes and personalities of the Bible and is still more powerful as "lyrical evangelism". Perhaps the

Church in Andhra, where the people are gifted with a musical talent above that of many other areas, may claim to have advanced furthest in the use of their own Telugu poetry and Carnatic music, particularly at the great Christian conventions which take place in the month of May. In passing we may say that there is nothing more characteristic of India's religious pilgrimage than the *mela* or *jatra* and no Christian enterprise in this mode of assembly is more lastingly popular. In Palamcottah, Tirunelveli District, an occasion of this type was started over half a century ago by missionaries as a counter-attraction in the month of July to a popular Hindu festival. It is still celebrated with the same enthusiasm and to attend it is to meet the rural Church in all its vigour.

Western rites, too, can be given a more Indian form by the use of Indian music for versicles and responses, by singing lyrical versions of confessions, thanksgivings, the creed and the Lord's prayer and by chanting lessons and prayers in the way that the *Vedas* are chanted. At Tamilnad Theological College we have experimented with this way of rendering Morning and Evening Prayer and with Carnatic settings to the congregational parts of the C.S.I. *Order for the Lord's Supper*. In the C.S.I. diocese of Jaffna they have been more ambitious and have set the whole eucharistic service to Carnatic *ragas*, the celebrant chanting the prayers, the readers chanting the lessons, the deacon the litany and the people singing the lyrical versions of their parts from the *gloria in excelsis* onwards. To hear a recording of this was an inspiration: to be present at it must be bliss. It deserves the attention of the Church throughout India.

Experiments in the use of Indian architectural themes in churches have been fewer; though many recent buildings have to a greater or lesser extent embodied some features of local architecture and carving. Bishop Azariah's inspired blending of architectural styles at Dornakal is an outstanding example to be followed (according to the spirit rather than the letter). Together with its Indo-saracenic dome and other features of Muslim architecture it has Dravidian pillars with their datura leaf-banana bud capitals—an effective symbolism of life out of death. Over all are a structure and proportions reminiscent of the renaissance architecture of St. George's Cathedral, Madras; so that in this splendid church East meets West. The use of the Indo-saracenic style might not be so well in place anywhere less close to a Muslim centre like Hyderabad; just as Dravidian pillars would not be appropriate to Delhi or Agra. The great buildings of St. John's College, Agra, including the chapel, are rightly of pure Indo-saracenic and might have been transported from Fatehpur Sikri, except for the cross that surmounts the main dome.

On the other hand, the chapel of the Christu-kula Ashram, Tirupathur, is equally appropriate to its surroundings in its pure Dravidian, indistinguishable from the architecture of a South Indian Hindu temple, until you get near enough to see that all

the symbolism is emphatically Christian. A less ambitious instance of an experiment in combining the two great architectural styles of India is worth recording, particularly as the village of Oyyangudi, where the building in question is situated, is somewhat off the beaten track in Tinnevely District and not likely to be visited by many sightseers. In 1939 the Christian congregation there had collected enough money to build themselves a larger church and came to the Rev. G. E. Hubbard, an ordained architect who was then in charge of the Art Industrial School, Nazareth, with a request for a design for the new church. He firmly refused to design them one in pseudo-Gothic which was what they had in mind, but persuaded them to accept a design which, though not Gothic, would satisfy the conservative villager by conforming to his notion of what a church should look like. The result was a building of the general shape and plan which we expect to find in a church, a shape which has been hallowed by centuries of use in Christian worship. This traditional appearance was enhanced by the retention of the fine tower of the old church the design of which had been inspired by the tower of some English parish church. But though the windows and interior arches were pointed, as in Gothic, anyone who knew anything about architecture would recognize them as inspired by the Indo-saracenic form. And they were set on sturdy Dravidian pillars of single stone blocks carved with Christian symbols. This blending of the styles has a felicity and inspiration of its own; but except where Mr. Hubbard himself was given the opportunity of experimenting in school and college chapels, his line of architectural development has not been followed in the locality. Another instance, we may say, of hide-bound conservatism such as Bishop Azariah's marriage service came up against. It is only fair to add that the bishop's architectural vision in Dornakal cathedral has inspired some imitation in neighbouring village churches.

And may we plead that church furnishings should not be imported or copied from the West, but that Indian types of lamps, for instance, should be used instead of Western candlesticks? And should not we insist on the ancient oriental symbol of reverence, the removing of shoes before entering church? Should we not refuse also to allow our churches to be cluttered with ugly pews? To sit cross-legged on the floor is a posture which inspires greater reverence, as those who are accustomed to it well know. After what we have already remarked about music it goes without saying that the harmonium is an abomination: Let us have drums, cymbals and *vinas* to accompany our lyrics. The opportunities for vulgarity which the increasing supply of electricity has afforded—coloured lights over holy table and font, etc.—bring a grave danger of disfigurement to our churches. Let all things be done decently and in order.

We have already mentioned the Christian *jatra* as characteristically Indian. It is worth specifying two particular forms of it which generally have a more local character in their celebration.

Firstly there is the home festival with its procession of prayer at every house and its lamp lighting ceremony with the accompanying promise of faithfulness to marriage vows and mutual love in the home. This surely meets a need in India's society and the Church's contribution to it in an age when the whole structure of family life is undergoing transformation at the impact of modern technological developments. Finally there is the long established and ever popular harvest festival which gives expression to what is common to all Indian devotion, Christian and non-Christian, the desire to offer the fruits of the earth to God. No one who has attended a village harvest festival can say that the Church in India has not made a significant contribution to world-wide worship here. In the long processions of men, women and children bringing up their baskets of grain and fruit, their chickens and their goats, we see a symbol of the end of all true worship, the offering of man's daily life and its products to God that he may sanctify them for the fulfilment of his purpose of the salvation of mankind.

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The determining faith with which the Christian approaches any truth is the faith that Jesus Christ is the fullness of light. This is not a claim that the Christian makes on behalf of Jesus, it is a claim which he himself made. He called himself 'the light of life'. So that in Christ's presence everything is seen clearly and in its right proportions and relations. In the presence of light, only darkness melts away, everything else remains.

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Through long ages religion has been man's attempt to question the Universe and wrest an answer from it as to its meaning: God was asked to justify Himself before man, his needs, his problems, his desires, his standards; and in the result men have either shaped God in their own likeness, that is to suit their prejudices; or they have denied God's relevance and even His existence. When you study the Christian faith, however, you will find that basically the position is reversed. It is man who has to justify himself before God and His purposes and His standards. The meaning of man's life is not in himself, man is made for God; and men achieve their true destiny when they fulfil God's purpose for them. Jesus is the revelation of God's purpose. In him God confronts man and challenges him. . . He is the standard both of goodness, and of truth.