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A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE INCULTURATION EFFORTS OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS: IN THE CONTEXT OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS PLURALITY IN SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract: This survey investigates the efforts of Protestant scholars to inculturate the Christian faith and expressions in the South Indian context during the 19th and 20th centuries. The focus is on the Christian scholars' efforts to adapt Western Christianity to Indian philosophical systems and a multi-religious context. It traces how the initial efforts in linguistics shifted from adaptations of Indian philosophies. Then there was a move toward engagement in dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies, first in a multi-religious context and finally in a secular context. This survey is important because these efforts have a significant impact on the thinking and practice of present-day Christians and other people in India.

Index Terms – Protestant Christians, Indian philosophical systems, religious pluralism and modern Indian context.

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, Christianity is generally regarded as a Western religion, though Jesus, the founder of Christianity, was born and lived in Israel, in Asia. This is because the churches established during the colonial period retained the Western style. However, some Indian Christian scholars realized this was not right and developed a passion for adapting the Christian faith and its expressions to the Indian context. Some were sympathetic and adapted Indian philosophical systems popular in South India. Others adapted to ashram life and developed a dialogical method. Others were committed to transformation work, using various methodologies grounded in higher values within the Indian socio-economic, cultural, and political context. The focus is only on the efforts of Protestant Christians in South India. The aim was to recognise past divine interventions in India and take modern India forward in the context of pluralism.

II. INCULTURATION IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Adaptation of Indian/Tamil Terminology

When the missionaries ventured into translation work to make Christian faith understandable to the Indians, they faced many difficulties. Robin Boyd observed that it was hard to find “clear and readily understood terms to coincide with Hebrew and Greek words”; the seemingly neutral words already had “fixed” Hindu religious and philosophical meanings; however, when some such words had to “be chosen” they used them despite their Hindu connotation, but “in the course of years ... it gradually” acquired “specific Christian overtones.”¹ With great effort, missionaries such as Ziegenbalg and Fabricius translated the Bible into local languages, adopting Hindu terminology.

However, it was H. A. Krishnapillai (1827-1900), an ardent follower of the Vaishnavite family,² who took the next step: expressing Christian faith in Tamil Christian poetry. He wrote poetic Christian epics such as *Rakṣanya Yātrigam* (Pilgrim’s Progress) and *Rakṣanya Manōgaram* (Joy of Salvation).³ He used Indian/Tamil terminology such as Saccidānanda, Mumūrti (for the Trinity), and Tāy (for the Motherhood of God).⁴ Tamil scholars say he wrote his epics in the Tamil literary style of the Kamba Rāmāyana, a Hindu poem. He wrote many lyrics using Carnatic music for congregational singing in church.

2.2 Adaptation of Indian Philosophies

2.2.1 Adaptation of the Philosophy of Rāmānuja

Hailing from a Shaivite family, A. J. Appasamy (1891-1980) became a “writer, teacher, pastor and bishop.”⁵ He chose the Christo-centric *bhakti mārga*, which emphasises the love of God.⁶ His thesis was on “*The Mysticism of the Fourth Gospel in its Relation to Hindu Bhakti Literature*”, and he also wrote many other books, like “*Christianity as Bhakti Mārga* (1928), *What is Mōkṣa?* (1931), *The Gospel and India’s Heritage* (1942), etc.”⁷ He used “philosophical exposition as found in Rāmānuja.”⁸ Concerning the use of the word *avatāra*, he said, “... the term *avatāra* can helpfully be applied to the incarnation of Christ, provided certain safeguards are observed.”⁹ He used the word *antaryāmin* to refer to “the immanence of Christ” and also “the indwelling Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ Appasamy expressed his attitude toward Indian culture by saying, “My own conviction is that the more effective way would be to begin with God and not with man”, and insisted that Hindus “should be first helped to understand the wonder and the depth of God’s love, particularly as revealed on Calvary.”¹¹ Probably, he said this because many evangelical missionaries began their preaching by condemning human sin before presenting the Gospel. He found that the central theme linking Christianity

¹ Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (1969; 2nd ed. 1975; repr. Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 16.

² Ibid., 112.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶ Ibid., 122-123, 141.

⁷ Ibid., 119-121.

⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰ Ibid., 124-125.

¹¹ A. J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s Heritage* (London and Madras: SPCK, 1942), 98, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 131.

and Hinduism is love, encompassing both God's love and our love for God, which, in turn, motivates love for others.

2.2.2 Adaptation of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo

P. Chenchiah (1886-1959) was a convert in Madras, a lawyer, and a lay theologian.¹² He formed a group of thinkers, 'the Rethinking Group,' that subscribed to a radical interpretation of Christianity.¹³ He is also the co-founder of *Christo Samāj* in Madras, replicating Ram Mohan's *Brāhma Samāj* in North India.¹⁴ "His constant appeal, therefore, was to get away from the doctrinal statements and confessions of the church and move to 'the raw fact of Christ'."¹⁵ He promoted the view that Christ represented "a new stage in the evolution of man; he is 'the True Man, the New Man';¹⁶ he is *ādi-puruṣa* of a new creation."¹⁷ Chenchiah not only interpreted Christ through Indian philosophical terms and ideas, but also placed importance on "direct experiential touch with Christ ... the *anubhava* of the living Christ."¹⁸ He quoted Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)¹⁹ and insisted on Christian life in complete "mystical union" with Christ, which he called *sāyujya* that would make a Christian not only be "identified with Christ" but also become "as it were 'a Christ' himself."²⁰ As the Western church failed to appeal to many Hindus, he proposed ashram life as an "alternative to the institutionalized life of the Church."²¹ He moved towards "a 'religion-less' Christianity without ritual sacraments."²² In his book, he wrote, "There will be no baptisms, no confessions of faith, no creedal profession ..."²³ Despite the numerous scholarly interpretations of Christianity in Indian culture, the rethinking group did not continue Chenchiah's inculturation process. The church also ignored him for rejecting the sacraments, one of Christianity's four pillars.

2.2.3 Adaptation of Vaiṣṇava Bhakti Tradition

V. Chakkarai (1880-1958) was a lawyer and evangelist who was also involved in the freedom struggle and became the Mayor of Madras in 1941.²⁴ His father was "a follower of the *Vedānta*, while his mother ... was a devotee of the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition."²⁵ He emphasized the importance of *bhakti* toward "Jesus the *Avatār*," showing that Jesus's *avatāra* is "not temporary and static but is instead permanent and dynamic."²⁶ He also said, "... our knowledge of God must be founded on the experience and consciousness of Jesus and

¹² Boyd, *An Introduction*, 144.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁵ Ibid., 145.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *National Christian Council Review* (1943): 363, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 150.

¹⁸ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 147.

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, 6.2.47, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 152.

²⁰ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 152.

²¹ Ibid., 160.

²² Ibid., 161.

²³ P. Chenchiah, *Rethinking Christianity in India* (1939), 190, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 161.

²⁴ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 165-166.

²⁵ Ibid., 165.

²⁶ Ibid., 171.

not on *a priori* speculations, like those of Anselm in Europe, and Saṅkara in India ...”²⁷ He too gave importance to the “immanent God, the indwelling Christ” and differentiated one’s encounter with Christ from Indian understanding by saying that it is, “Not a mere radiating influence, not the repercussion of His teaching on later *bhaktas* but His very Personality is claimed to be the *antaryāmin*, the inspirer and the guru seated in the lotus of the *Bhakta*’s heart.”²⁸

He explained Christ’s death using the term *niṣkāmya karma*, popularly understood as an “action done with no thought of personal gain.”²⁹ However, he acknowledged that Christ’s death gained redemption for the believer and the whole world “for he is the Great Physician, the *parama vaidya* of the soul.”³⁰ In this way, he redefined the concept of *niṣkāmya karma*, as Jesus did through his sacrificial love, giving his life for the benefit of others. Unlike Chenchiah, Chakkarai placed importance on Holy Communion and thought of Christ’s death as *yajña*, a sacrifice that releases power, “the *sakti* of which was to emerge from eating his body and drinking his blood through the symbolism of bread and wine.”³¹ However, his efforts in inculturation were not well received in the churches in South India.

III. INCULTURATION EFFORTS IN THE MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

3.1 Adaptation of Ashram Movement

Ashram “is a traditional Hindu pattern of simple, community living oriented to spiritual discipline and realisation.”³² It followed the ancient *Guru-siṣya* (Teacher-student) model of learning, with the teacher living in seclusion. Amalorpavadoss defines an Indian ashram as a “... place of intense, sustained spiritual quest for the Absolute by a group of persons around and under the guidance of a guru...”³³

Many Christian ashrams were established in India for spiritual growth. “The first Protestant Christian ashram was the Christu-Kula Ashram ... at Thiruppathur,”³⁴ which then came under the Church of South India, Diocese of Madras when it was founded. Adapting the ashram life to Christianity, S. Jesudasan, one of the founders, describes it in his booklet, *Unique Christ and Indigenous Christianity* (Bangalore, 1966) as “Christ-centred fellowship in thought and worship, evangelism among and service to the community ...”³⁵ The churches in South India, under the leadership of K. T. Paul and V. S. Azariah, have “officially recognized” the movement of indigenization and unity...³⁶ These two leaders were behind the formation of many Christian ashrams in India, the National Missionary Society, and the Church of South India.³⁷ Ernest Forrester Paton (1891–1970) and S. Jesudasan (1882 - 1969) promoted the Indian way of worship

²⁷ Ibid., 212.

²⁸ V. Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought* (Madras: CLS, 1932), 143, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 168.

²⁹ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 179.

³⁰ Chakkarai, *The Cross*, 155, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 177.

³¹ Ibid., 118, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 178.

³² M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), 333.

³³ D. S. Amalorpavadass. “Main Categories of Hindu Philosophy and spirituality,” in *Indian Christian Spirituality*, ed. D. S. Amalorpavadass (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1982), 159.

³⁴ Thomas, *The Acknowledged*, 333.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 284.

³⁷ Ibid.

and Christian living in a quiet, calm place, so that the clergy and laity could dedicate their time to prayer, study, and work.³⁸ They built a place of worship in Dravidian temple architecture, a hospital, and a farm.



Figure 3.1 Temple inside the Christukula Ashram.

Concerning the Christukula Ashram, Collins suggests, “A more enduring experiment was begun in 1921 at Tirupattur in Tamil Nadu ...” following a Gandhian style of life.³⁹

3.2 Attempts to Promote Ecumenical Spirit through Dialogical Method

Scholars and missionaries promoted the dialogical method to foster mutual understanding, build positive relationships, and encourage collaborative efforts toward shared values and goals among various religious and ideological groups.

3.2.1 Adaptation of Dialogical Method in Interfaith Context

The initial phase undertaken by many scholars was to use dialogue as a common platform for relating to people of other faiths and sharing views on interrelated ideas, doctrines, and spirituality. M. M. Thomas (1916-1996) proposed three levels of “dialogue with Hinduism”, namely, 1) study “the contribution of each faith to man and society,” 2) study “the central theological issues of each faith,” and then, 3) “dialogue at the level of interiority.”⁴⁰ However, his emphasis was on the task of nation-building.

3.2.2 Adaptation of Dialogical Method in Secular Context

In the next phase, many scholars and laity sought a shift towards a focus on the Indian social context and on liberation from its evils, injustices, and oppression.

3.2.2.1 Application of Christian Faith in Modern India

P. D. Devanandan (1910-1962) took a different path from fellow Indian Christian thinkers, who emphasized ancient Hindu philosophical systems and movements. He said, “The real problem in Hindu India is to effect a synthesis between traditional world-view and contemporary secularism. Thoughtful Hindu leaders are wrestling with this problem, and it is in relation to this concern that the good news of God incarnate in Jesus Christ will have to be spelt out.”⁴¹ Boyd summarises Devanandan’s observation of the failures of the Hindu orthodoxy under four topics:

- (1) the “... traditional conceptions of the *ātman* work against the idea of freedom and development; (2) the understanding of the meaning of *creation* ... underrate the importance of the material world and so

³⁸ Paul M. Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, Liturgy, Worship, and Society, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 312.

⁴¹ P. D. Devanandan, *Preparation for Dialogue* (CISRS: 1964), 38, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction*, 202-203.

fails to give adequate support to plans for raising the standard of living; (3) the understanding of *history* ... fails to provide a basis for the idea of purpose and planning; and (4) (the understanding of) *society*, ... thinks mainly in terms of individual salvation and fails to envisage a 'transforming community.'⁴² (*Numbering mine*).

Thus, Devanandan affirmed that Christianity provides answers to the questions of Modern India that other political, social, and religious groups cannot offer.⁴³ He "... fought for a more positive attitude to Indian culture and Indian history, believing profoundly as a Christian that God was at work in both."⁴⁴ Devanandan is "the first of the Indian Christian theologians of the post-war period in whom the concept of dialogue assumed a dominant role ..."⁴⁵

Devanandan defined dialogue in the context of "contemporary India" as "a sharing of experience ... together to arrive at some firm theological basis which will undergird that movements towards God's new creation ..."⁴⁶ He believed that the Christian mission is "bringing ... the insights of the Christian faith on ... all themes on which the secular Hinduism is searching" and "Indian Christians must claim their 'cultural kinship' with Indian society and state their view in dialogue from *within* that society."⁴⁷ Thus, for him, the contemporary context served as a platform for dialogue.

3.2.2.2 Application of Christian Faith in the National Movement

K. T. Paul (1876-1931) was "another Indian Christian leader ... involved in the national movement ... emphasized that the living Christ would be sufficient for the needs of India if only he were 'left alone with India'."⁴⁸ He studied at Madras Christian College in Tambaram and worked at the Tamil Nadu government secretariat in Madras.⁴⁹ He was appreciative of the Ramakrishna movement's move toward "enriching the content of Karma-Yoga by reading into it ... unselfish service ..." and said that this is "what indeed we cherish as the distinctive message of Jesus Christ."⁵⁰ M. M. Thomas is appreciative of K. T. Paul's position as it "sees the Christian values of Western culture as having awakened India, through the National Movement ..." and "every realm of Indian life is tested in the light of Christ's values ..."⁵¹

3.2.2.3 Application of Christian Faith in the Nation-building

M. M. Thomas was also oriented towards the task of nation-building and promoted "*karma mār̥ga* in the form of constructive social action."⁵² He was "the leading representative of those who advocate a

⁴² Boyd, *An Introduction*, 188.

⁴³ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁵ Eric J. Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith: Some Christian Attitudes to Hinduism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977), 139.

⁴⁶ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 202.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 204-205.

⁴⁸ Rufus M. Jones, "Secular Civilization and the Christian Task," in *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council*, (OUP: 1928), vol. I, *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems*, 362, quoted in Sharpe, *Faith meets*, 72.

⁴⁹ Encyclopedia.com, s.v. "Paul K. T.," <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/paul-k-t> (accessed September 18, 2025).

⁵⁰ K. T. Paul, *The British Connection with India* (London, 1928), 55f, quoted in Thomas, *The Acknowledged*, 147.

⁵¹ Thomas, *The Acknowledged*, 253-254.

⁵² Boyd, *An Introduction*, 311-313.

theology much more closely related to modern, secular India, and to the world of the Asian revolution.”⁵³ Boyd summarises his work and says, “Thomas’ attention is fixed, not on the static systems of traditional Hinduism, but on the dynamic world of Indian renaissance, where he sees Christ at work and already acknowledged, albeit partially: ‘the Christ in the Western Culture awakening the Christ in the Indian culture and preparing India for the new life and the Gospel of Christ’.”⁵⁴ Thomas carried “forward Devanandan’s experiments in dialogue”, and focused on the theme, “man and society – a secular conversation which should, he believes, lead on to the possibility of a common culture, ... where Christian and Hindus meet together in the context of modern, secular India to find common fields of action and service for the good of the nation as a whole and of individual ‘persons’.”⁵⁵

3.2.2.4 Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies for Common Good

Stanley J. Samartha (1920-2001), a professor of History and Philosophy of Religions at the United Theological College, Bangalore, served on the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee.⁵⁶ He was “... the first director of the World Council of Churches’ summit on ‘Dialogue with people of living Faiths and Ideologies’.”⁵⁷ In his eagerness to promote dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies, he made statements unacceptable to the evangelical churches. For example, he said, “God alone is absolute, and all religions are relative”,⁵⁸ including Christianity; “Christians need to move from ‘normative exclusivism’ to a position of ‘relative distinctiveness of Christ ...’,”⁵⁹ and Jesus can be equated, “with Buddha, Rama, Krishna, Ambedkar and Gandhiji.”⁶⁰

Samartha believed in “dialogue in community”, i.e., dialogue with “neighbours in the same towns and villages... to build up their relationships, expressing mutual human care and searching for mutual understanding” to deal with the day-to-day problems of modern life.⁶¹ For him, “Mission is God’s continuing activity through the Spirit to mend the brokenness of creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity and to heal the rift between humanity, nature, and God.”⁶² Thus, for him, the concerns of common humanity served as the platform for dialogue.

⁵³ Ibid., 311.

⁵⁴ Thomas, *The Acknowledged*, 251, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction to*, 312.

⁵⁵ Boyd, *An Introduction*, 312.

⁵⁶ Sunil Koshy, “Theology of Stanley J Samartha: A Missiological Appraisal” (master’s diss., Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture, 2020), 1, [Missiology and Mission Theology](#) (accessed September 9, 2025).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁸ K. P. Aleaz, *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), 81-82, quoted in Koshy, *Theology of*, 4.

⁵⁹ S. J. Samartha, “The Cross and Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture,” in *Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India*, ed. Soman Das (Bangalore: UTC, 1987), 16, quoted in Koshy, *Theology of*, 3.

⁶⁰ S. J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralistic World* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 142-143, quoted in Koshy, *Theology of*, 10-11.

⁶¹ World Council of Churches, “Guidelines on Dialogue with people of Living Faiths and Ideologies.” (Geneva: WCC, 1979), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies> (accessed September 21, 2025).

⁶² Samartha, *One Christ*, 170, quoted in Koshy, *Theology of*, 6.

VI. FINAL REMARKS

It was amazing to see how the Christian scholars have earnestly tried to inculturate Christian faith and expression, using Indian philosophy and deeper religious understanding that were dear to their native soil. The significance of this paper lies in its tracing of a movement that began with faith expression in native languages, which naturally led Christian scholars to engage with Indian philosophical terms. This venture, in turn, motivated them to adapt Christian faith to their cherished Indian philosophies. As they began to realise the effectiveness of Indian spirituality, the Christian ashram movement gained momentum. Simultaneously, a dialogical method began to develop in the field of interfaith relations, emphasising mutual sharing and seeking to enrich each other's religious and spiritual experiences. When doctrinal theology gave way to contextual theology, themes like oppression, poverty, injustice, exploitation and social evils in Indian society were taken up seriously for Christian faith application and evaluation through higher values. The dialogical method was promoted among 'living faiths and ideologies' to engage in the socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental context in India for nation building and peaceful coexistence.

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