

## Editor's Introduction

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In the early months of 2008, Selva J. Raj submitted a book proposal entitled *Vernacular Catholicism, Vernacular Saints: Identity, Caste, Exchange, and Authenticity in Tamil Nadu*. Raj described the rationale for his project as follows:

My book is a response to a serious imbalance in the study of religion, particularly in the study of Christianity, as I see it. In short, topics of concern for scholars of Christianity seem to be inversely related to religious concerns of the majority of its practitioners . . . In my view, vernacular Catholicism in India denotes the religious lives and practices of lay Catholic believers in a specific regional, linguistic, and cultural context. Contextualized in Tamil Nadu, south India, my study also offers due attention to ritual variety as well as to the role social, cultural, and economic realities play in shaping the contours and complexion of vernacular Catholicism in this part of the globe. The focus on earthly concerns and the cultural embeddedness of this vernacular Catholicism also offers clues to the ritual exchange and dialogue occurring at the grassroots level. This grassroots exchange articulates a new and alternative paradigm for interreligious dialogue, one that radically and substantively differs from the model advocated and pursued by the religious elite. Organized around these three thematic threads (namely, “vernacular” religiosity grounded in mundane concerns, its cultural embeddedness, and the ritual dialogue characteristic of this

religiosity), my book draws attention to a form of Catholicism that is too often overlooked by academics.

Shortly after completing the proposal and submitting it to the State University of New York Press, Dr. Raj suffered a heart attack. He passed away on March 15, 2008. The present volume is an attempt to bring his project—at least in part—to fruition.

Raj was, undoubtedly, one of the most important scholars of popular Indian Christianity and South Asian religion in North America at the turn of the twenty-first century. In a recent publication, Karen Pechilis has highlighted four of his distinctive contributions to the practice of scholarship in these areas: “collaboration, self-reflection, vividness of observation and a lightness of heart” (2013, 4). To this list, one might add a phrase Raj used frequently in his own scholarship, “dialogue in action.” For Raj embodied in his life of service and study a willingness to cross many boundaries with a sense of dialogical openness, seriousness, and humility. Born into a large Catholic family in the village of Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu on May 31, 1952, Raj completed his PhD with the influential South Asianist Wendy Doniger at the University of Chicago Divinity School and was serving, at the time of his death, as Chair and Stanley S. Kresge Professor of Religious Studies at Albion College in eastern Michigan. An ordained Catholic priest for over twenty years, he nevertheless dedicated his scholarly career to the ethnographic study of popular Christian and Hindu traditions that significantly challenged the interests of the institutionalized elite. Well-respected for his significant leadership in the American Academy of Religion, the Conference for the Study of Religions of India and the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies, Raj cut his administrative teeth in the 1970s and 1980s working with Mother Teresa on the streets of Kolkata.

Raj's book project would have drawn material from a number of his previous publications together with additional fieldwork and autobiographical reflections to offer a portrait of Tamil ritual practice at once personal and provocative, critical and constructive. This material was to be organized in three major divisions, from the general to the specific, titled “Vernacular Catholicism in Context,” “Health, Healing and Fertility,” and “Status, Humor, Conflict and Communion.” When, some years after Raj's passing, a decision was taken to move forward with his project, we ultimately opted to focus exclusively on his previously published articles and chapters. These have been very lightly edited, reorganized according to Raj's proposed framework for the original book project, and supplemented with several additional chapters solicited from close colleagues and collaborators. This procedure has

the virtue of consolidating and contextualizing Raj's distinctive contribution to the study of Indian Christianity, while at the same time preserving its integrity. It also, inevitably, carries a few disadvantages. Raj's ethnographic fieldwork on the shrine of Arockia Annai at Vadipatti and a number of small roadside shrines in the Tamil countryside, for example, which would have been central to the argument in part III of his proposed study, could not be included here. There is, as well, some repetition of data and argument among the various chapters. I am hopeful that readers will concur with me that the advantages carry the day.

The first four chapters of this volume establish a broad context for studying the "culturally embedded" vernacular Catholicism of Tamil Nadu, along with key aspects of Raj's theoretical approach. In chapter 1, entitled "Being Catholic the Tamil Way," Raj draws together aspects of his autobiography and ethnographic studies to illustrate the "double-edged" patterns of assimilation and differentiation that constitute Tamil Catholicism as a coherent, complex, and hybrid religious culture, distinct from the more rigid and contrived definitions advanced by the institutional elite. Chapter 2, contributed by Fr. Michael Amaladoss, S.J., traces the history of Catholicism in Tamil Nadu, focusing especially on the precedent established by the Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) for what would become a "double religiosity" of official and popular, or "meta-cosmic" and "cosmic," Tamil devotional practice.

In chapters 3 and 4, Selva Raj provides the contours of his theoretical approach. In chapter 3, this takes the form of a critique of the so-called "institutionalized" inculturation of priests and theologians—including especially, in this case, missionaries like de Nobili—and the spontaneous, organic indigenization of the laity, focused on existential concerns, ritual expression and "dialogue in action." Chapter 4 develops a more complex typology by looking beyond Tamil Nadu to patterns of "inclusion," "supplementation," and "traditionalization" of Hindu and tribal traditions among Santal Catholic communities in east-central India. Intriguingly, all three chapters of part I focus on funeral traditions, beginning with Amaladoss's personal narrative of a traditional paddy ritual at his own father's funeral in chapter 2, through Raj's accounts of "water-garland," "stripping the widow," and "Saturday Corpse" rites in chapter 3, and concluding with the complex multiritualism of Santal funerary traditions in chapter 4. As significant rites of passage, funerals offer fruitful lenses into their respective religious cultures as organic wholes, including the hybridity of their ritual ecologies.

Part II of the volume offers an introduction to several dimensions of Tamil popular practice, bringing out the centrality of what Raj terms the

“mundane, earthly goals” of health and fertility in the ritual lives of lay Catholics and Hindus alike. Chapter 5 offers a survey of various practices of vow rituals (*nerccai*) at three of the four popular shrines that dominate the ethnographic accounts in this volume: the shrine of the missionary martyr John de Britto in Oriyur, on the southeastern Coramandel coast; a closely related shrine to St. Anne at Arulanandapuram, near Madurai; and a shrine to St. Anthony of Padua in Uvari, a small fishing village near the tip of the subcontinent. By drawing comparisons from the rites practiced at these shrines to Hindu *netikkatan* rituals, Raj advances his fundamental, provocative claim that, “with some minor variations, Catholics and Hindus share a common ritual system” (p. 83). Chapter 6 tempers and adds nuance to this claim, employing Victor Turner’s theory of liminality and liminal experience to explore the apparent transgression and transcendence of distinctions between Hindus and Christians, and between different castes, in the pilgrimage traditions at Oriyur. Raj questions whether the liminal experiences of pilgrims as they seek this-worldly graces through such shared practices as animal sacrifice, hair-shaving, and cattle procession represent a true overcoming of social division or merely a temporary form of “cocktail communitas” that reinforces boundaries even as it crosses them (p. 110). Chapter 7 focuses on miraculous healing narratives of Hindu and Catholic women at the Anthony Uvari shrine as a problem not only for the elite institutional authorities of the church, but also for Raj’s own elite institutional authority as an academic ethnographer. In the end, he partially cedes his interpretive privilege to the “shared indigenous religious epistemology” and the “experiential dimension of miracle claims” of his research subjects (pp. 117, 137).

The three chapters of part III deepen the analysis of earlier chapters and shift our primary focus from the existential concerns of Tamil Catholics who participate in these popular devotions to the complex social dynamics of the rituals themselves. In chapter 8, we are introduced to a fourth shrine from the southeastern Tamil countryside: a second shrine to St. Anthony of Padua at Puliampatti, inland from Uvari in the Tirunelveli District. In his analysis of the boisterous *chaparam* procession of the patron saint during the shrine’s annual festival in 2003, Raj draws attention to dynamics of material exchange and status-competition, as well as the interplay of wealth and asceticism as different kinds of spiritual—and secular—capital. Chapter 9 further explores the relation of sacred and secular in two examples of humorous “ritual levity” at the Shrine of St. Anne in Arulanandapuram: “Men Who Cook” and a “Baby Auction.” Here, Raj draws on the Turnerian theorist Tom Driver to note the close interrelation of the sacred and the

sacrilegious—the serious and the playful—in the role reversals and apparent transgressive subversion that characterize these rites. In chapter 10, we return to the Anthony Uvari shrine and also to the question of status-inversion, albeit this time in *asanam* rituals of vow, sacrifice, and commensality dedicated to the patron saint. This chapter also offers a concise summary of Raj's notion of ritual dialogue as an alternative to the "contrived, structured, institutional dialogical initiatives engineered and pursued by the religious elite" and an encapsulation of his major contribution to both the ethnography and the theology of Hindu-Christian relations (p. 189).

In lieu of a conclusion, the essays of part IV offer responses and reflections on this contribution from scholars working in cognate fields. Chapters 11 and 12 contextualize Raj's ethnographic studies of vernacular Tamil Catholicism by comparison with the apparently less transgressive, high-caste Catholicism of neighboring Kerala, in Corinne Dempsey's essay, and the apparently less hybrid and vernacularized Tamil Christianity of the Church of South India (CSI), in the contribution by Eliza Kent. In both cases, Dempsey and Kent point out, comparison to Raj's work unseats any such easy generalizations about these different vernaculars. His work, instead, points us toward a more fruitful attentiveness to the particulars of ritual performance, to the significant power of regional distinctions to shade or diminish religious difference, and to the coherence, integrity, and sheer force of devotees' existential concerns as an appropriate locus of scholarly study.

The next two chapters lift Raj's methods from the practice of Christianity in south India to the religious and performative practices of the Hindu diaspora. In chapter 13, Vasudha Narayanan notes strong parallels between the transgressive ritual practices of Tamil Catholics and the transgressive practices of many U.S. Hindus—notably, the ostensibly polluting practice of Temple blood-drives and border-crossing service activities in soup kitchens and shelters run by evangelical Christians. In chapter 14, Purushottama Bilimoria tests the limits of performative transgression through his study of the diverse, embodied adaptations of Bharatanatyam and other Indian dance forms in studios and stages throughout the United States and Australia. In these final chapters, we witness a strong affirmation of Raj's fundamental insights into the centrality of hybrid practice and grassroots dialogue, along with examples that raise further questions about boundaries, resistance and creative transgression.

Importantly, these additional chapters by other scholars not only celebrate Raj's contribution, but also situate it within a wider frame and raise critical questions about its limitations. Thus, Dempsey and Narayanan both explore how, and to what extent, Raj's theoretical approach can travel

beyond the study of Tamil Catholicism to other traditions and contexts. Bilimoria's chapter similarly effects an important interpretive extension, from ritual performance to performance *qua* performance; but it also invites us to raise questions that Raj rarely brought to the center of his own studies—that is, questions of power, of colonialist and neo-colonialist hegemonies, and of wholesale cultural appropriation. Arguing along similar lines, Kent asks whether Raj succumbs to what Joel Robbins calls “continuity thinking,” in relentlessly drawing our attention to affinities between Catholic and Hindu practice, rather than ruptures or changes over time (p. 220).

As a number of subsequent scholars of South Asian Christianity and Islam have well documented—and as Raj partially concedes, especially in chapter 6—hybrid ritual practices can be read as establishing boundaries as much as transgressing them (see, e.g., Jørgensen 2013; Henn 2014; San Chirico 2014; Bauman 2015; Locklin 2016, esp. 130–33). “[D]ifferences,” writes Rowena Robinson in a critique of “syncretism” as an interpretive category, “sometimes become manifest in the very mediation of them” (2003, 103). We can note with modest irony that, for all of his emphasis on hybridity, Raj relies in the main on what may be too-rigid interpretive binaries: between an exterior devotion directed to mundane, this-worldly goals and an “interior, enlightened faith” demanded by priests and bishops (p. 132), between conceptualism and embodied practice, and, above all, between ordinarily laypeople and religious elites. Amaladoss's chapter 2 well reveals how popular religious practices can be interpreted not only as contrasts to the work of religious elites like Roberto de Nobili, but also as consequences of it.

One remarkable aspect of Raj's *oeuvre*, often commented on, is the beautiful humanity that characterized his person and permeated his scholarship. In his volume *Christian Inculturation in India*, Paul M. Collins has commended Raj's appeal as “ecumenical in all senses of that word” (2007, 188). If this is true of Raj's research and scholarly agenda, it also rings true with regard to his personality and character. Raj's humanity shines through in all of the chapters of the volume, when he illustrates ideas with reference to his own autobiography or personal details from his fieldwork, when he interrogates his own assumptions, and when he offers sharp critiques of institutional authority without either demonizing the elites themselves or disregarding the wisdom of those on the periphery. His distinctive disposition toward his material, as a Tamil Catholic, as a former priest, and as an academic ethnographer, might be fruitfully compared to the “born-againers” described in chapter 4, “those legal insiders who were once divorced from their cultural and mythological universe but eventually returned to their

tribal heritage through a second naïveté, as it were" (p. 59). Whether this comparison succeeds or fails, it is clear that Raj's unique contribution to the fields of interreligious dialogue, the anthropology of religion, and Hindu-Christian studies flowed as much or more from the unique personhood he embodied with such humor and grace as from his scholarly expertise. To bring this out adequately is perhaps beyond the scope of any scholarly volume. Nevertheless, this work begins and concludes with testimony to Selva J. Raj himself as both scholar and extraordinary human being, with a foreword by his friend and colleague at Albion College, Bindu Madhok, a brief recollection by Raj's photographer and field assistant Amanda Randhawa, an afterword by his doctoral supervisor Wendy Doniger, and a final, autobiographical postscript published shortly after his death. It seemed appropriate to give Raj himself the last word.

As explained above, *Vernacular Catholicism, Vernacular Saints* is a very specific project: it attempts to bring forward, insofar as possible from previously published work, the book project Raj set for himself in the proposal of the same name. It should not be confused with an anthology or even a representative selection from Raj's full scholarly career. Raj presented and published other work closely related to the material included here (e.g., Raj 2000; 2005d; 2005e; Dempsey and Raj 2015), as well as significant studies of Indian diaspora communities associated with the Syro-Malabar Eastern Catholic Church (Raj 2005f; 2008c) and the Hindu teacher Ammachi (Raj 2004a; 2005a). He co-authored several articles on international development and human rights with Bindu Madhok (Madhok and Raj 2004; 2006; 2011; Raj and Madhok 2007). He had planned a study of Mother Teresa, with whom he had worked for several years as a young priest. He also made a significant contribution to the teaching of South Asian religions, arguing both for closer attention to lived realities and ritual practice and for full inclusion of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism as authentic religions of South Asia (Raj 2005c). This last interest has, happily, borne fruit in a new textbook entitled *South Asian Religions: Tradition and Today*, conceived by Raj and brought to term by Karen Pechilis (Pechilis and Raj 2013). I would be delighted for this edited collection to be considered a companion to that one.



A few remarks about the presentation of these chapters may be useful. On the first page of each chapter, I have noted the place, or places, of its original publication; where the other chapters cite Raj's articles in their own

expositions, I have provided a reference to the work in its original published form, while also noting where the essay appears in this volume, in brackets. Raj's chapters and articles varied somewhat in his use of diacritical marks for Tamil and Sanskrit terms. In the interest of consistency, I have adopted his most common practice: to italicize such terms, without diacriticals or transliteration except where a Sanskrit term has passed into common English usage. Those with expertise in these languages will, I trust, readily recognize the terms and supply the missing phonetics.