

MALAYALAM CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

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To begin with it is better to have a contextualized thinking of fussy ideas about tolerance, literature and Christian literature. We would like to discuss these terms in the particular context of Kerala and Malayalam literature, which appears as part of the wider Indian spectrum. Moreover we are acutely aware of the indeterminacy of meaning of the key terms involved as they have polyhedron intelligibility. We should be careful about the conventionalized use of these terms in different spheres like literary criticism, politics and religions, so as to understand them that is as pragmatically, semiotically and discursively located in social relations and practices.

Tolerance as a virtue, *dharma* and tradition

In Kerala, tolerance is generally regarded as both a practical necessity and a moral imperative, a fact and a value. As far as we know, in traditional Kerala cultural and religious pluralism within the state was accepted as a virtue and the king was the protector of everybody's *dharma*. In Cochin and Travancore, two important former principalities of Kerala, several documents including copper plates bear testimony to the religious tolerance. Syrian Christian copper plates and Jewish copper plates are very good examples. So tolerance as a virtue bordering

on graceful acceptance of the different and even the hostile, is the historical experience of Kerala. Tradition posits memory. As Karl Marx pointed out, "ideas which have conquered our minds.... to which reason has welded conscience, are chains from which we cannot breakaway without breaking our heart; they are demons which man can vanquish only by submitting to them" (Lowith 1982:23). This explains the strength of traditions.

To be a leader in Kerala one has to swear by the multiculturalism of the state. Even religious fundamentalists belonging to different sects and political leaders of communal parties are at least pretending to be champions of religious harmony. Sree Narayana Guru, the most prominent son of Kerala during the last hundred years incorporated ideas and symbols of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in his movement. He declared that no religion is superior or inferior to another. He taught that every form of religion is relative, including one's own. This realisation logically would entail toleration (Mashi 1990:345). Born in an Ezhava family, a numerous but socio-economically backward community, Naryana Guru fought Brahminical supremacy but helped the sanskritisation of the society. Many rituals, prayers and other customs came to popular use among Ezhavas through his mediation. He was born Hindu but declared that he did not belong to any particular religion. Many struggles for social justice including the freedom struggle brought together people of different religious groups strengthening the ideology of tolerance as a practical necessity. Here one could bring in a discussion of socio-economic factors that promoted tolerance in this state. Muslims and Christians form 42.62 percent of the total population and they play a significant role in the political and economical life of the state. Even in the cultural field they have made significant contributions.

Many prominent writers and artists belong to these communities. This provides possibilities of socialisation cutting across religious boundaries. After the independence, the spread of ideologies like Marxism and Secularism, and political alliances including communal parties have necessitated tolerance at pragmatic and theoretical levels.

Tolerance as a literary convention

We propose the hypothesis that tolerance has become a literary convention in Malayalam literature. Malayalam writers prompt to suspend their disbelief and imagine a realm of perfect religious harmony. At the realistic level Malayalam readers and writers too experience communalism and casteism. Still they are free from intolerance in the imagined world. For example Christian themes have found beautiful literary expressions at the hand of non-Christian writers. Some of the best specimen of Christian literature in Malayalam are authored by Hindus. They belong to different generations and literary movements. Vallathol Narayana Menon (Romantic Poetry), G. Sankara Kurup (Lyrics), ONV Kurup (lyrics), Vayalar Rama Varma (lyrics), NV Krishnan Variar (surrealist poems), Vishnu Narayana Nampoothiri (Poetry), Sachidanandan (modern poems), Balachandran Chullikkadu (modern poetry), Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai (drama), M.T. Vasudevan Nair (short stories), K.P. Kesava Menon (biography) and K.P. Appan (literary essays), C.V. Balakrishnan (novel) are the prominent literary personalities to be mentioned in this context. These writers have produced literary works that are touch stones for understanding how Christian experience was interpreted and the world view in which it appeared.

The established practice of tolerance in literature has produced inter-related set of conventions in both form and

content of literary works. One of them is the established pattern of reinterpreting puranic stories. Kumaran Asan reinterpreted Buddhist puranas to create two excellent poems. His reinterpretation of *Uttara Ramayana* story with Sita as a feminist heroine of India, produced one of the best poems in Malayalam. Vallathol Naryana Menon attempted such a reinterpretation of the story of Mary Magdalene. In this celebrated poem Christ and Mary Magdalene very often appear as Krishna and Radha. This inter-textuality deserves explanation.

Imagined divine geography

When celebrated Malayalam poet Vallathol Naryana Menon described his hero as Christ the Krishna' this imagined divine geography found its most striking expression in Malayalam literature. Of course, this work, especially this expression met with stiff resistance from a few orthodox Christians. There are folk stories and beliefs connecting divine heroes. Very often Hindu saints and Christian saints are described as brothers.

It may be noted here that Vallathol Narayana Menon's Poem, reinterpreting the story of Mary Magdalene was the most popular and sensational piece of christian literature in Malayalam. Many artists adapted it for *Kathaprasangam*, a very popular form of public entertainment. M.P. Manmadhan, K.K. Thomas and Joseph Kaimaparamban presented this literary work in hundreds of stages as Kathaprasangam and it was cheerfully received by thousands of people. The popularity of the work even among Christians, did not wipe out opposition to it from a small group of Christians. Very recently D. Vinayachandran recreated the story of Mary Magdalene in the idiom of modern poetry. Vishnu Narayanan

Nampoothiri reinterpreted the story of Adam and Eve to highlight the human qualities of this couple. These reinterpretations provoked some protests but Christians of Kerala, especially the most numerous and traditional Nazranis (Thomas Christians/Syrian Christians) who were and are working for shared values, sacred geography and socialisation ignore such voices of protest. The political independence of the country and the secular democratic practices have promoted such tendencies of emotional integration. Even globalisation of our life through travel and mass media supports forces of unity. In the past, struggle for independence provided ordinary Christians an opportunity to join hands with their fellow citizens, overlooking their religious relation to the colonial masters. Many Christian names appear in the list of freedom fighters of Kerala. This includes not only men but also women. Akkamma Cherian, who is often described as the Jhansi Rani of Kerala belonged to a Christian family. This type of socialisation to protect socio-economic interests is bound to reflect in the cultural superstructure of the society. This would explain the concept of Christian literature in Malayalam, which in itself is a sign of tolerance.

Infidels of modernism

There are some Christians, especially among the so called Christian writers who are indifferent to socialisation, inter-religious dialogues, social and political programmes on behalf of the poor and social action. They look down upon 'infidels of modernism' who consider every literary work as a new beginning in the history of a people. And, as Kappen (1994:89) points out, 'it is a beginning in the sense that the new vistas it opens up come into conflict without familiar, customary view of things. And what is history but the struggle between the

old and the new gods?' Very few Christian writers were bold enough to reinterpret Christian experience in such a way that the literary product becomes 'a revelation of Being; A good literary work permits 'an overflowing of primal truth which can never be derived from anything that already exists.' It overthrows our familiar view of reality and opens up new, hitherto unseen vistas. Many non-Christian writers succeeded in reinterpreting Christian themes to serve this literary purpose. For example in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's Short story *Akkaldamayil Pookkal Viryumpol* 'when Akkaldama blossoms' the resurrection of Judas is described to stress the reversal of roles in the modern world. In N.S. Madhavans *Kappithante Makal* 'daughter of the captain' a hysterical girl establishes most trustworthy wireless communication with Christ. Among Christian poets only very few have dared to explore the potential of reinterpreting Christian themes. George Thomas and Cherian K. Cherian are the two major exceptions. George Thomas, brings out the contradiction in the celebration of Christmas by describing the scene in a slaughter house just in front of a Church where Christmas is celebrated ritualistically. In Malayalam fiction, Ponkunnam Varkey, Raphy, Parappurathu, Kakkanadan, and Zacharia have tried to reinterpret Christian themes in such a way that they throw new light on reality. These Christian writers with bold self-disclosing openness overthrow our familiar view of reality. Each of this work as Heidegger would say 'sets up a world'. These literary creations challenge us to take decisions that give our common destiny a new direction. In modern poetry and short story Christian symbols have acquired new meanings. As A.K. Ramanujam correctly points out, "though language consists of signs made of signifiers and signifieds, such signs are continually transformed. They become signifiers in a secondary system of connotation." In modern

Malayalam literature Christian signs like cross, Madonna, Judas and last supper have become part of a new system of connotation. This entry into the deep structure of the language has been facilitated by tolerance. To be very brief we can say that modern Malayalam Christian literature exhibits the dialectic of Malayalam literary tradition and orthodox western inspired Christianity. This leads us to a critical survey of western missionary inspired literature in Malayalam.

A definition of Christian literature

But before we proceed any further we must have a definition of christian literature as our working principle. Such a definition is offered by James Wiggins in his book christianity (1988:68):

"Significant Christian literature is that which either expresses consummately the Christian vision of an established Christian culture or which explores new facets of the images in the mirror that Christianity holds up to human life"

But here one point has to be clarified. The concept of 'the mirror that Christianity holds' deserves explanation. This should not be conceived as truthful imaging of the essence of life. This is literary representation. We should understand representation or 'Representation Myth' (Sinha, 1988:205-206) as constitutive of the material world, than as a secondary supervening upon it. Only by so doing can we break with the dualistic assumption-deeply embedded in our current culture (including the subcultures of psychology and psycholinguistics) that the mind of the individual can be studied independently of the social relation constituting historically located subjectivities. There cannot be any representation stripped

bare of the contingencies of history. Western Christians, especially the British Raj, considered Christianity as an intrinsic sign of western superiority. So they could place all other religions only in a hierarchical relation to Christianity. They were careful not to pollute Christianity with any other religion. Some of them could not think of conducting Christian worship in a building adapted to Indian forms. One Correspondent wrote:

I cannot but regard as fatal the idea of carrying christian teaching in a building entirely surrounded with symbols, suggestions and association, which are opposed to christianity' (Thomas Metcalf 1995:90).

Western Missionaries and tolerance

Western missionaries accentuated difference between Christianity and other religions and ensured a space for them in the traditional christian community of Kerala. The proceedings of the synod of Diamper (1599) bear testimony to this truth. They stopped many customs of traditional Christians and declared anathema to all those who attended festivals like Onam which had only distant connection with religion. There are several missionary works in Malayalam which created intolerance. Two very good examples are *Dusiparvam* of John Ernestus Hanxleden (?) (Arnos Padiri) and *Ajnjana Kudaram* of Joseph Fenn. Both of them are written in traditional Malayalam verse form but the content bears testimony only to the intolerance verging on verbal violence. This attitude of suspicion and contempt towards cultural forms of Kerala as propagated by western missionaries and those who followed them blindly, cut off many talented Christians from their cultural and literary heritage. In the nineteenth century, Benjamin Bailey, a CMS missionary

and a great benefactor of Malayalam language, had no hesitation in declaring that there is nothing worth the name literature in Malayalam. This assertion was rebutted by another great scholarly missionary called Herman Gundert. He collected and studied in detail almost every classical Malayalam work and used them in his monumental Malayalam-English dictionary which is even now subscribed for in large numbers. Dr. Gundert insisted on learning Malayalam through Malayalam classics with intimate connection to Hindu mythology and local culture. Many other missionaries preferred to learn Malayalam through Christian works in Malayalam. Most of these Christian works were creations of earlier missionaries.

Dr. Gundert, as a devoted evangelist, wanted to use all his linguistic and cultural wisdom in preparing an ideal translation of Bible. To begin with he composed a translation of the first five books of the *Bible* with the title *Sathyavedha Ithihasam*. This translation reflected the erudition and creativity of the translator. It turned out to be a Gundert version of the Bible in the cultural idiom of Malayalam. The very title including the work *Ithihasam* is a powerful sign of his translation. He used words and concepts borrowed from the traditional religious vocabulary of Kerala to express Biblical truths. The reaction from the mission headquarters in Basel, Switzerland was quick and emphatic but negative!

Dr. Gundert, was in fact, attempting a Bible translation in the Indian idiom. Indian theory and practice of translation, as exemplified in the regional language versions of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavadgita* seem to have impressed Gundert. Indian classics are not translated word by word. A survey of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavadgita* in various modern Indian

languages are transcreations. They are known as version - *Kamba Ramayana*, *Ezhuthachan Ramayana*, *Tulasidasa Ramayana*, *Adhyatma Ramayana* or *Bhasa Bhagavadgita*. The subtle distinctions between literal translation, free translation, paraphrasing and transcreation went above the heads of great Indian translators. They emphasised communication and it became possible in the Indian models of translation. The Western idea of translation which was most vividly exemplified in the Bible translations of modern languages was form oriented and slavishly literal. This concept of translation invaded the minds of Indian translators in the last two centuries. To make a faithful translation, one should translate literally-this was the idea that struck root in modern Indian languages through Christian literature-in-translation. Many world literary classics including Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (translated by Nalappattu) were translated into Malayalam in the typical *Bible* translation model. The whole of Christian literature-in-translation as we find it today in Malayalam, has been affected by this mechanistic view of translation imported as part of Christianisation and Westernisation. If Gundert would have been permitted to follow the Indian model in his translation of *Bible*, that would have promoted the growth of genuine Malayalam Christian literature. As it is, we have the consolation that Gundert's dictionary incorporating numerous citations from ancient Malayalam classics without any religious prejudice remains as a rare monument of tolerance in Christian literature during the period of vigorous Western missionary activities. Dr.Gundert's *Nalacharita Sarasodhana* also can be cited as a model of religious tolerance in missionary Malayalam literature. In this treatise, he has examined the Nala story from an ethical as well as a literary point of view. The dialogue form of this treatise brings out Gundert's imaginative sympathy in understanding the other man's point of view.

Kerala models

In the twentieth century, I.C. Chacko published a collection of essays on *Ramayana* under the title *Valmikiyute Lokathil*. The thematic analysis of *Ramayana* as reflected in these essays exhibit the literary and moral sensibilities of a Christian author. He wrote with the unique sensibility of an Indian Christian, and it is marked with respect for religiously transcending religious differences. Two more works of this nature are also worth mentioning. One of them is a multi volume encyclopaedia of Hindu Dharma, compiled with citations from numerous Hindu classics. This scholarly work as testified by many Hindu scholars and writers still remains unsurpassed as a valuable reference work. The name of the book is *Haindava Dharma Sudhakara^{ny}* and the author is O.M. Cherian. Now Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit is on the way to reprint this monumental work. Another Christian contribution to Hindu literature is *Puranic encyclopaedia* of Vettam Mani. This work originally published in Malayalam is now available in English. No doubt it is the primordial concept of *Ista Devata* that enables writers in Malayalam to achieve unity-in-tension in their literary works.

A Special type of tolerance

Just before concluding this presentation, I would like to make a brief reference to those 'literary works' in Malayalam which are popularly labelled as Christian literature. Those literary works which we have already referred to in this paper are not usually labelled as Christian literature; they are simply described as part of the Malayalam literature. But those books which are popularly classified as Christian literature include a large

number of neo classical works. Inspired by Western missionary concept of Christian exclusiveness these Christian writers keep their works free from the 'pollutions' of non-Christian literature and non-Christian philosophies. However they make use of the Indian generic forms like *Mahakavya*, *Sanskrit drama*, *Gatha* or *Pana* for the versification of biblical episodes. Arnos Padiri (*Puthenpana*), Kattakkayam (*Sreeyesu Vijayam*), K.V. Simon (*Vedaviharam*), Idayaranmula (*Kristu charitam*), Puthenkavu (*Viswadeepam*), Pravithanam (*Israel Vasam*, *Rajakkanmar*, *Kristugita*) and Ulakamthara (*Kristugatha*) are the prominent authors to be mentioned in this context. These devoted Christian poets were always insisting that they should not deviate in any way from the original Christian religious sources. So these literary works turned out to be simple versification of Christian religious texts. This puritanism also may be described as a kind of tolerance but in a very special sense. Of course, the very use of Indian literary genres for their discourse shows some kind of tolerance. But a student of literature is terribly disappointed by the reluctance of these writers to reinterpret Christian religious literature including the Bible to unveil their Being in all their splendour. Only C.J. Thomas could dare to do that in his drama based on the story of David. Others relished in a kind of 'non- reactivity' to the world around. In this way, these works also deserve the lable of tolerance. Because in immunology tolerance has a special meaning i.e., 'non-reactivity'.

Now I must conclude, but I have no conclusions to offer. I have been just trying to reconstruct and deconstruct two or three key terms in the title of the paper. This hermeneutic circle may deepen our understanding of the problem that is being discussed. Or this may help us problematize the theme of the seminar 'Tolerance and Indian Christian Literatures'.

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