

CATHOLICITY WITHIN THE CONSTRUCTS OF COLONIALISM
AND PLACE: UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN NEGOTIATIONS OF
RELIGIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY ACROSS THE INDIAN
SUBCONTINENT – INVITED SESSION

- Topic: Catholicity within the Constructs of Colonialism and Place: Unity and Diversity in Negotiations of Religio-Cultural Identity Across the Indian Sub-continent
- Convener: Deepan Rajaratnam, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University
- Moderator: Hansol Goo, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University
- Presenters: Deepan Rajaratnam, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University
Akhil Thomas, Harvard University
- Respondent: Rohan Abraham, KU Leuven

In response to the convention's theme, "One Baptism: Evolving Visions of Catholicity from Nicaea to Vatican II and Beyond," these three invited papers interrogated catholicity within cultural families by focusing on the place that is the Indian subcontinent. Collectively, the panel not only surfaced the ongoing impact of colonial legacies on religious identity and catholicity in place but also provided a way to consider catholicity within other cultural families with similar legacies.

Deepan Rajaratnam from the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University opened the panel with his paper, "[Grace in the Context of Colonialism: A Multi-Generational Account of Inculturating Tamil Catholicism](#)." Rajaratnam argued that Tamil Catholics draw on Tamil Hinduism to reimagine and relativize the European character of their popular saints and in so doing, the Tamil people not only subvert the legacy of colonialism but also reinscribe colonialism's legacy. Drawing on the ethnographic work of Selva Raj in Tamil Nadu, India and autoethnography from Rajaratnam's own Sri Lankan Tamil family, Rajaratnam argued that Tamil Catholics draw on Tamil Hinduism to reimagine and relativize the European character of their popular saints. Punctuated with pictures illustrating his family's multigenerational Catholic practice and its entanglement with the broader history of European colonialism, Rajaratnam further contended that Tamil practices of popular piety successfully subvert the legacy of colonialism even as they reinscribe this legacy into their aesthetic and religious imagination.

Advancing the examination of catholicity within cultural families, Akhil Thomas from Harvard University turned to Malayalam Catholicism with his paper, "Poetics of Displacement: Malayalam Catholic Verses in Hindu Metres in 18th Century Malabar." Examining the poetry of Jesuit Johann Ernst Haxleden, Thomas argued that the use of Hindu poetic forms intended to adapt Christianity to a culture influenced by Hinduism instead produced a poetics of displacement that continues to significantly shape Indian Catholic identity. To this end, Thomas teased out the relationship of Haxleden's work in relation to Indian literary classics, particularly the Malayalam Ramayana and the devotional poem Jñana Pāna. With its own poetic character and delivery, Thomas' paper connected the implantation of Catholicism in the context of colonialism to the adaptation of American diaspora to convey the complexity of layered legacies of identity. In this way, Thomas' paper foregrounded the problematic of colonially

constructed literature designed to acculturate the Malayalee people now used as a focal point to resist acculturation in the context of the American diaspora.

Rohan Abraham from KU Leuven concluded the presentations with a formal response paper that brought methodological points to the fore. Abraham pressed Rajaratnam on the definition of “culture” and the relationship between culture and grace at work as Tamil Catholics negotiate the remnants of colonial ideology through the practice of popular piety. Abraham also identified Rajaratnam’s interweaving of ethnographic detail, ancestral history, and theological history as itself a work of inculturation. In response to Thomas, Abraham asked who speaks in poetry as it is read and recited across contexts and centuries. In raising this question, Abraham exposed the tension between authorial agency and the community’s interpretive agency as reader. Abraham also pointed to the form of Thomas’ work itself—the blending of narrative, poetry, and historical reflection—as one that makes tangible the intersections of the poetic and the theological in the production of culture. With this response, Abraham teased out the ways that colonial remnants and identity negotiations were at play across both Tamil and Malayalee Catholicism and provided a launching point for the ensuing discourse around catholicity within cultural families.

Bringing her how her own personal and scholarly expertise around culture, migration, and liturgy from the Korean context, Hansol Goo from the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University moderated a lively, critical, and wide-ranging discussion. Some participants asked whether leaving unique cultural concepts untranslated would allow readers and listeners to construct meaning distanced from their own cultural frames. The conversation also teased out the parallels between the dynamics of colonialism, inculturation, and catholicity in the Indian sub-continent and other cultural frames. Finally, participants also noted the significance of this panel to the Society both in terms of its noteworthy theological contributions and the cultural identity of Tamil and Malayalee panelists themselves—both of which were unimaginable even two decades prior.

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