Chapter 7

THE CHALLENGE OF MUKKUVA RELIGION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The earlier chapters discussed the phenomenon of Mukkuva religion, taking an emic view, with the aim of articulating the major contours of their sacred world. The coastal settlement and the seascape, the mysteries of the sea and of the skies, the experience of the past and the uncertainties of the future, all play a part in this sacred world. Their ritual life as well as their conception of the divine become intelligible only from within this world. At the same time, the conversion experience initiated a new process of encounter between two major religious traditions giving birth to what may be called Mukkuva Catholicism as it exists and is being practised today.

The Mukkuva religious identity is that of a people on the margins. Any marginal people, by the very nature of their context, are inclined to live and practise a latent mode of religion. The manifest form may exist at the periphery of Mukkuva consciousness.¹ Therefore the latent mode provides easy access to the heart of Mukkuva religiosity. This chapter tries to explore some basic questions that emerge from this phenomenon, and to draw the implications for a Christian theology that is truly rooted on the Indian soil.

¹ For a detailed discussion on manifest and latent modes of religion, see chapter 1, under 4.1.
The latent mode of Mukkuva religion may appear an admixture of elements from various traditions with no inherent logic or method. But a careful reading would reveal a craftsmanship at work weaving together these disparate elements into a unified whole. "All significant human activity implies faith (or unfaith), and therefore a theology (or a mammanology, a satanology, a demonology). And all theology has a method; it has its own tools and procedures, and its proper 'manner of grasping reality'. Method is to theology what grammar is to language".² Therefore, every religion at the latent level implies a latent theology and a proper method, and Mukkuva religion is no exception.

Human experience is the basis of all religion and theology; and every experience is context-bound. The primary experience of the Mukkuva community, for generations, have been intertwined with their life and work in close association with the sea and the seashore. A unique neithal culture, with its specific worldview and religious conceptions, may be seen as the outcome of this long association. This neithal religiosity has been the strength and protection of the community in the face of the risk-ridden occupation they were engaged in. The contribution of religious traditions like Buddhism, Tantrism, popular Hinduism, etc., have been significant in re-shaping neithal religion at various stages of its development.

The experience of mass conversion to Catholicism by mid-sixteenth century was a significant event for the Mukkuva community. They found themselves confronted by an alien religious system and worldview. Though the new dispensation was welcomed as it gave them a new

identity, the inner process revealed many apparent incongruities and contradictions. It was an encounter between two divergent religious traditions, viz. that of Iberian Catholicism and the pre-existent neithal religion. The attempt to shape what may be called Mukkuva Catholicism has to be seen against this background of divergent religious traditions in interaction. Their attempt was naturally confined to the latent plane. Mukkuva Catholicism thus can rightly be called the religion of the people on the sea shore.

To be on the sea shore, geographically and socially, is to be on the margins of the mainstream society. To be noted here is the fact that marginality extends to the realm of religion too. The latent mode of Mukkuva Catholicism has always remained on the margins of mainline Catholicism, and this inherent marginality characterizes Mukkuva practice of religion. It is on the sea shore that they become their own masters, and real subjects.

The concerns and issues vary significantly as to whether one is taking a view from the centre or the margins. The fascinating yet frightening world of the sea and the fish, the constant threat from the forces of evil, and the need to ward them off, the inner urge to celebrate life communally... these rarely find a place in the manifest mode of religion - neither in its liturgy nor its theology. The view from the margins often tell a different story from what has been officially documented. The obvious example is the observation of the missionaries that the Mukkuvar are 'troublesome', 'hard to deal with', 'not very obedient to the Church', and 'resisting the authority of the priests'. What made the Mukkuvar not to obey and to rebel was never inquired into nor properly understood by the missionaries. The same viewpoint from the 'centre'

continued to rule during the period of Goan hegemony, and continues to colour pastoral attitude even today.

7.2.1 Real Subjects only at the Latent level

The Mukkuva experience reveals how Catholicism reduced the Mukkuvar to mere objects or consumers during the past three and a half centuries of their religious history - as masses to be converted, as neophytes to be instructed, as Christians to be managed. However, the silent process of dialogue was going on at the latent level. This process of re-shaping their religion enabled them to effectively deal with the contradictions or incongruities emerging from the encounter between the two religious traditions with divergent worldviews.

All through its Christian history the Mukkuva community was trying to assert themselves as real subjects of their religion. As subjects they were both creators as well as interpreters of religion. This is evident in the two sub-processes involved; first, they dared to re-read and re-formulate the Christian scriptures, practices and doctrines to suit the concrete needs and thought patterns of the neithal context. Second, they brought along elements of their neithal religion into their practice of Catholicism. In the former they became interpreters of a tradition, while in the latter they have been the original creators. The Mukkuvar, with their specific religious experience and faith heritage, thus remain the subjects in both the processes. If the term theology can be freed from the monopoly of professionals, then the Mukkuvar can be counted theologians at the primary level. 4

4 In a subaltern hermeneutical perspective the question 'who interprets?' becomes pivotal. See Felix Wilfred. "Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics", Jeevadhara, 26/151, pp.56 ff.
This reshaping was at the same time a subtle form of protest and rebellion against the manifest form of Catholicism that failed to recognize their life concerns. Religion, whatever be the mode, is power. Manifest religion tries to keep this power away from the masses, or takes it away altogether. Latent religion, on the other hand, brings power closer to the masses; hence it is essentially empowering people, and so liberating people. Here lies the radicality of latent religiosity for any marginal people.⁵

Two related concepts that would help understand the phenomenon better are total experience and total history. To make religion comprehensible within the community's horizon of experience is a dominant concern. Religion is not understood by them as occupying a corner of their total space; nor can it be cut up into sacred and profane. It permeates every space and every activity of their daily life - whether at the sea or on the shore. Fishing is as religious an activity as going to church, or even more. Chëluparachil is a ritual that brings together the satisfaction or frustration of a day's work on a plane that is both secular and sacred. A life that is fighting with the fury of the ocean and of the sharks may not be able to imagine a religion that speaks only of peace and an other-worldly future. Concern with total experience makes Mukkuva Catholicism a religion of everyday life rather than one of Sunday obligations. That is why the same people who stand as spectators in the Sunday church, sing and sway, young and old alike, as they pull the kampavala ashore.⁶

⁵ This does not deny the remarkable capacity Catholicism has displayed in the past to absorb popular religious practices, particularly in the veneration of the saints. See Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints, London: S.C.M. Press, 1981.

⁶ The term experience, as is used here, approximates the Indian term anubhava, meaning knowledge derived from personal observation or experiment, and not from memory (from anu-bhū = to perceive, to understand, to experience, to embrace, etc., according to Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984). Anubhava implies consciousness that one is being affected by the reality in question, and is affecting it in return. Unfortunately the English term experience is often used as equivalent of both anubhava and paricaya. Paricaya means 'acquaintance, intimacy, familiarity with' etc.; it refers to the idea of practice, frequent repetition or accumulation, and is a much narrower
Closely linked is the concept of total history. In their practice of religion at the latent level, they create their own theology, and in this process give due recognition to their total history, not only their Christian history. The religious history of the Mukkuva does not start with their conversion experience; the earlier chapters tried to trace it back up to the Sangam period, the earliest period written history could reach. Even the present day rituals are indicative of the rich store house of faith heritage lying dormant in the collective memory of the community. This collective memory is their history; it is their theology that has evolved through generations. To deny this is to deny their very identity. Their encounter with the Divine encompasses not only the Christian scriptures and the Catholic tradition, but equally those of the pre-Christian past, whether it is Buddhist or Tantric or Hindu in origin. This positive approach to total history has power to free a people from the burden of a conflict of religious traditions.

Mukkuva realization of their being subjects of religion has serious implications for Christian theology. One can see the Catholic preoccupation with the object of theology in the post-Tridentine phase. The object referred to Tradition, by which was meant the doctrine transmitted by the Church from the time of Christ and the Apostles to the present day. Evidently the pre-Christian religious traditions of the Mukkuvar are excluded here. When they, as subjects, expand the scope of Tradition, it would force the notion of salvation history too to assume wider configurations.

concept. Anubhava, on the other hand, is an accepted source of knowledge in all systems of Indian thought.

7.3 PRACTICE OF RELIGION AS DIALOGUE BETWEEN WORLDVIEWS

For a people to perceive themselves as subjects of religion and theology is to recognize the specificity of their culture in the sacred realm. The culture of a people is co-extensive with their total history as well as their collective experience over generations. Two processes of interaction are noteworthy here: one, between the community and their nearthal life context; and the other, between the two divergent religious traditions. It is the latter that is the main concern of this section.

Every religious tradition has evolved, and continues to operate, in the context of a specific and unique worldview. The cosmological features of the Mukkuva world was discussed in chapter 2, and showed how it is vitally linked with the community's association with the sea and related phenomena. Similarly, the missionaries brought along not only the Iberian Catholicism, but also a worldview that is specific to the Mediterranean basin. An encounter between two divergent religious traditions, as has happened in the Mukkuva community, implies more than a mere acceptance or rejection of certain articles of faith in isolation. Every article of faith is interwoven into the worldview of the people in question. Written documents mostly reflect only the missionary perspective which is basically Iberian. More important for the present purpose is the inner dynamics seen from the viewpoint of the Mukkuvar themselves. And from this viewpoint it becomes an encounter and dialogue between two worldviews.

Schreiter, while analyzing the encounter between two religious traditions, utilizes the concepts of syncretism and dual religious system. The category of dual religious system is found helpful
in unfolding the dynamics of the process in the present study, though it is used with some reservations.

In dual systems, as different from syncretism, people follow the practices of two distinct religious systems operating side by side. Sometimes both may get equal importance, at other times one system may remain the dominant one. In the history of Christian conversion, emergence of dual religious systems has been one of the consequences whenever a rigid line was taken on the question of any cultural accommodation. The ruthless approach to 'pagan' images and practices and symbols of the Mukkuvar by Francis Xavier and his associates is a case in point. The parallel existence of the Christian and the Indic religious traditions in the Catholic Mukkuva community today appear to be a good example of a dual religious system.

Schreiter discusses three kinds of dual systems. In the first kind Christianity and another tradition operate side by side. People follow both sets of rituals without seeing any contradiction. In the second kind, 'Christianity is practised in its integrity, and selected elements from another system

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8 For a detailed discussion of these concepts, see Robert J Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, New York: Orbis, 1985, chapter 6. The reservation concerns the term 'system'; it is too preposterous a term to make sense in the Mukkuvar context. System building has been alien to their practice of religion, which may better be understood as a 'way of life'; it can hardly be fitted into any system.

9 The concept of syncretism "has to do with the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity" (Schreiter, Ibid., p.144). The result is the birth of a new system out of this process. Luzbetak, however, makes a distinction between syncretism in anthropological terms and in missiological terms. He explains the latter as "a combination of beliefs and practices that are theologically untenable". See Louis J. Luzbetak, The Church and Cultures, New York, Orbis, 1988, p. 360.

10 Schreiter explains a dual religious system thus: "In dual systems a people follows the religious practices of two distinct systems. The two systems are kept discrete; they can operate side by side. Sometimes one system is followed more faithfully than the other;... in other instances the two systems may be followed almost equally...". Ibid., p.145.
are also practised'. This dual practice is more evident in times of distress. However, the two are perceived incompatible or contradictory by the Christian leadership, if not by the members. The third kind is called 'double belonging' and has specific reference to situations where belonging to a religious tradition is closely linked up with a national culture, as in Burma or Thailand. The Mukkuva practice of religion seems closer to the second kind described above, i.e. the practice of Catholicism remains primary while practice of some elements from the pre-existing Indian traditions goes on simultaneously.

The notion of dual religious system, though helpful, does not fully explain the Mukkuva experience. The two religious streams, at the latent level, do not always run parallelly; there are also meeting points leading to a process of dynamic integration. This process of encounter and interaction, directed by the creative religious mind of the Mukkuvar, refuses to be contained by the above notion. The following sections would discuss this aspect more in detail.

7.3.1 Structural Identity and Meaning Frame

Closer scrutiny of the process of interaction would reveal that each tradition comes to meet some need of the community at the religious phenomenal level. The Mukkuvar value their Catholic identity, as historically it has given them a status in an otherwise marginal context. They had only to gain socially by becoming Christians. The careful maintenance of the ritual and administrative structures of the Church is noteworthy. In sociological terms the Catholic tradition has contributed to the structural identity of the community. However, the meaning frame is still basically provided by the Indic/neithal tradition, as is evident from the active survival of beliefs and practices from that tradition. The Catholic tradition does not seem to have contributed

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp. 148-149.}\]
significantly to alter their system of meaning and worldview. In their search for meaning the Mukkuvar still seem to fall back on the Indic/neithal religious heritage and worldview.

No contradiction between the identity structures and the meaning frame seems to exist for the community at large, although the Church leadership has always tried to suppress the neithal heritage. Here one can see the contrasting 'religious logic' at work: for the Mukkuvar, rooted in a neithal worldview, the religious boundary is not a closed boundary, as religion itself is not an exclusive category. The boundaries remain open, built on a conjunctive logic, ie, both this and that. In contrast, the inherent logic in the Christian tradition has been a disjunctive one, ie, either this or that, but never both. In this exclusivist thought pattern, if you are a Christian, then you cannot be any other. That has been the ruling logic of the Western Church, finding its culmination in the maxim, no salvation outside the Church. This intolerance sanctioned only the elimination of the pagan, and prevented any creative interaction between religious traditions. Encounter and dialogue existed only within the experience of those proselytized; for, their logic was open to welcome another tradition while retaining the previous one.

On the other hand, a careful look at Church history reveals that the Christian tradition has been full of instances of encounter with varied cultures at different stages of its evolution. Influence of many West Asian cultures and customs is well documented in the Old Testament. The history of Christianity in the early centuries is equally marked by the impact of Hellenistic,

12 Ibid., p.150.


Roman, Germanic and Celtic cultures. These cultural influences were taken for granted in the period of philosophical and doctrinal articulation of the Christian tradition, with little attempt at reflecting upon these influences themselves. The missionary movement from the 16th century did raise the issue of the Gospel in relation to the newly discovered cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. But the motto was to conquer for Christ; this resulted in a negative attitude to the cultural richness of the people proselytized, as is clear even in Francis Xavier.\textsuperscript{15}

With a radical shift in orientation, Vatican II acknowledged the plurality of cultures (\textit{Gaudium et Spes} 53),\textsuperscript{16} and spoke of entering "into communion with various cultural modes, to her enrichment and theirs too" (G.S.58). It called for an extensive theological elaboration of the intimate relations between the Church and cultures, and the mission of the Church with regard to both society and culture (G.S.62). However, one can not miss a domineering air in these pronouncements. The same accent is evident in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI (1975), \textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}, which called for 'evangelization of cultures', or in Pope John Paul II's call for Church's dialogue with the cultures of our time.\textsuperscript{17} Terms like inculturation, cultural adaptation, dialogue with cultures, all imply an initiative coming from outside a culture.

\textsuperscript{15} Xavier's manner of destroying and dishonouring the idols of 'pagans' is described in chapter 2, under 3.4.


The notion of inculturation assumes that the Gospel (presumably shed of its western cultural garb) comes face to face with a local culture, say, the Mukkuva culture. The very act of thus viewing a local culture as an empty pot in terms of faith is anthropologically untenable. The existing heritage of neithal religiosity is inseparable from the Mukkuva culture. Therefore, it makes better sense to speak of inter-cultural encounter and dialogue, to be fair to the people involved.

7.3.2 The latent Process of Inter-Cultural Dialogue

The process of encounter and dialogue discussed above characterizes the latent mode of religion. It was the Mukkuva community that became inheritor to a dual religious system. Being rooted in both traditions, they need not be inculturated; the term itself becomes an anomaly. What takes place is an encounter between two traditions, involving a dialogue between worldviews. Here the Mukkuvar themselves remain the subjects directing the process. This inter-cultural dialogue is not something to be started afresh; it exists there already, and has been going on quietly for centuries. Inter-cultural dialogue belongs to the very dynamics of the encounter between the Mukkuva tradition and Catholicism.18

Two illustrations from the Mukkuva world of experience would clarify the process better.

7.3.2.1 Mukkuva Conception of the Spirit World

In the missionary worldview whatever belonged to the religious past of the Mukkuvar were *pagan* and *forms of devil worship*. The missionaries were following the demonology of Christian Europe of the middle ages which depicted demons as horrifying creatures responsible for every evil and misfortune. This demonology had been largely an amalgamation of patterns from various traditions in the surrounding cultures in its early development. Etymologically too the use of terms like *devil*, *demon* and *satan* as interchangeable indicates a process of fusion of concepts.\(^{19}\)

But the branding of their rituals as *devil worship* does not seem to have disturbed the Mukkuvar deeply; for *devil* (or demon) did not have the same negative connotation in the Indian religious context. Demons are not specifically evil beings, though not sufficiently divine to be regarded as gods. A definitive identification of demons with evil is certainly absent; the boundary line between gods and demons is thin and often shifting. The paradox of a good demon and an evil god too is not absent in Indian demonology.\(^{20}\) Besides, the Mukkuva reading of the biblical

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\(^{19}\) The Hebrew Bible used the term *šāṭān* to mean 'adversary' (Job.chs.1&2; Zech.3:1-2 etc.). In the intertestamental period the idea of *šāṭān* as the adversary of God emerged; he came to be identified with the powers of evil in the universe, probably under the influence of Persian ideology of dualism. Gradually the identification of *šāṭān* with the fallen angel and 'the serpent' of Genesis ch.3 followed (Rev. 12:7 ff; Lk. 10:17). The Greek word *diaboulos*, usually rendered *devil* in English, was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term *šāṭān*. But devil is also used to translate another Greek word *daimôn*, which originally referred to a minor deity or a guardian spirit; but it got fused with the Jewish *schemôn* (vengeful spirit) and translated into Latin as *demon* to mean the embodiment of evil. Thus Christian demonology is the outcome of varied conceptions, especially from Greek and Judaic traditions, fused together. Some N.T. texts also clearly associate demons with *paganism* and *heathen worship* (1 Cor. 10:20ff; Rev. 9:20; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 6:16 etc.) See *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1975-76 ed. s.v. "Satan", "Demon"; *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Bangalore: TPI, 1994; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Demons - An overview" by J.B. Long. and "Satan" by A. Sharma.

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\(^{20}\) Asuras appear in Hindu mythologies as demonic creatures and the chief opponents of the gods, but the distinction in terms of good and evil is not absolute. "Those who always win are gods, but because their adversaries are never really eliminated, the kinship of the gods and the demons always resurfaces", writes Ricoeur. See *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Evil" by Paul Ricoeur; cf.also W.D. O'Neill, *The
account gave the devil an appealing character; for, were they not angels originally, but punished to become devils? Thus they are seen as divine beings of a different grade, and likely to be more powerful having features of both angels and devils. This belief is reflected in rituals like \textit{vedi nercha} or \textit{oil and wig nercha} at the Amman temple that the Mukkuvar resort to at times. Paying homage at Hindu shrines or temples is not seen as implying any contradiction with Christian beliefs. Such reinterpretations seem to make life more livable and religious practice more satisfying.

\textbf{7.3.2.2 Belief in Life After Death}

The Christian credal formula affirms belief in "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come". Chapter 4 above had explained how the funeral rituals and related beliefs show deep influence of the neithal tradition. The hope of continued existence after death would make the Mukkuvar feel at home with the Christian article of faith. But the intricacies of a bodily


\footnote{Rev. 12:9; Eph. 2:1-2; Gen. ch.3. A similar conception is present in some Hindu texts too; according to \textit{Amarakośa} 1.1.7 the demon is called \textit{pārva-deva}, i.e. "one who was formerly a god". See O'Flaherty, \textit{The Origins of Evil}, p. 65.}

\footnote{These have been described above in chapter 4 under 1.4}

\footnote{This is the phrase used in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 C.E.), popularly known as the Nicene Creed. The version in the Apostles Creed reads, 'the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'.}

\footnote{That the body will be reanimated is a doctrine of revealed truth and an article of the Catholic faith. Resurrection is understood as an act of divine power in calling persons to a new form of life eternally in God's presence. It affirms that the glorious resurrection of the dead takes place when Christ appears in his majesty. At the heart of this doctrine is the belief that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead to become the Saviour. 1 Cor.15:1-58 presents the argument logically. See also Vat.II, L.G.50 &51.}
resurrection would certainly be baffling. For, if one continues to live after death, although in another mode of existence as Muni or Peiy-Piśāṣu or any other, resurrection becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the promised resurrection 'on the last day' would appear too far off to become meaningful here and now.

It would appear that the Mukkuvar spontaneously do away with the mythical garb of resurrection coming from another cultural tradition, while affirming the Christian conception of 'life everlasting'. The masses offered for the dead at all occasions and the elaborate annual rituals of kuzhi āṭhal on All Souls Day may be seen as contributing to the well-being of the dead ones who continue to live in one mode or another. Probably the unity of the living and the dead is better emphasized in the Mukkuva belief system.

The two examples given above are but two samples of the ongoing dialogue between worldviews. But they do raise questions about Christian demonology and eschatology, and point to the inadequacy of these to come to terms with the experience of a people like the Mukkuvar. Similar questions arise also with reference to the doctrine of the resurrection. The Mukkuva experience may help to look afresh at the Christian theory of resurrection, which is but one among various attempts to explain the mystery of the radical transition at death and the related process of purgation.  

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25 History of the Christian tradition shows that belief in life after death, especially belief in resurrection, is a rather late addition to the body of Jewish beliefs. It is only in the book of Maccabees that explicit mention of it appears, probably necessitated by the mass killings of the Jewish people for their resistance to paganism. Moreover, the celebration of the All Souls Day was brought into the Roman rite only in the tenth century; in Celtic regions some aspects of the pagan winter festival of Samhain were attached to this feast. See Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, Middlesex: Penguin books, 1972, p.171.

26 It is gratifying to note that Christian theologians have begun to take this issue seriously. For an insightful discussion on the topic, see Concilium 1993/5, "Reincarnation or Resurrection?" ed. by H. Haring and J.B. Metz.
Discussion on the cult of Cintāthira Māṭa (chapter 5.2) revealed two aspects central to the Mukkuva practice of religion: a) that the long tradition of the worship of a mother goddess or Śakti continues to survive and influence the community; and b) that Cintāthira Māṭa seems to depict within her the two contrasting features of the benign and the terrible. The cult appears to be the creative answer of the community to the apparent incongruity that resulted from the superimposition of a Mary image over their goddess heritage. She has come to symbolize the community and its identity in a powerful way. This section tries to see how the traditional Catholic image of Mary gets reconciled to the goddess image, and how the phenomenon challenges Christian religion and theology.

In the Catholic tradition Mary, mother of Jesus, is depicted as Virgin, Mother, Queen, Bride, etc., always the benevolent, the loving and the forgiving. She remains the embodiment of all desirable feminine qualities. This is evident in the doctrinal history of the mystery of Mary which developed in close association with christological doctrines. The Council of Ephesus (431) stated that Mary was not merely the mother of the man Jesus, but the mother of God himself (Theotokos), since God truly became man through her. This divine motherhood of Mary has been the foundation for later doctrinal formulations on Mary. On a parallel stream, her virginity also came to be emphasized. Vatican II (1964) presents her as "an eminent and unequalled example of both motherhood and virginity" (Lumen Gentium, no. 63). The Apostolic Letter, Mulieris Dignitatem, written on the occasion of the Marian Year (1988) affirms that 'virginity and motherhood' coexist and wonderfully complement each other in Mary.\(^2\)

\(^2\) The cult of Mary seems to have appeared in the Christian liturgical tradition only in the fourth century, although forms of Marian devotion existed earlier. This is not surprising, given the Jewish heritage of strict monotheism devoid of gods and goddesses. But once established in the Greco-Roman world, the
A possible line of inquiry refers to the picture of Cintāthira Māta in relation to the above understanding of Mary in the Catholic tradition. The Mukkuva religious mind is likely to have felt at home with the ambivalent nature of Mary as Virgin and Mother, for the pre-existing Devi image is akin to such an ambivalence. But the incongruity between the benign and the terrible seems to create problems since the terrible or fierce is so alien to the Mary of the dogmas. Is it not possible to see Cintāthira Māta as the creative answer of the Mukkuva mind to this apparent incongruity? It is likely that the Māta, in Mukkuva understanding, is not merely a benevolent mother; she also assumes the terrible features of a Devi. In other words, the Māta may be seen as depicting not only the sāntabhāvam (benign aspect), but also the rudrabhāvam (terrific aspect) that is so characteristic of the pre-Christian Devi. Both the aspects seem to co-exist in her.  

Influence of the female deities of the surrounding cultures seems to have crept into Christian practice. Historically Mary exhibits a continuity with the attributes of some West Asian goddesses like Isis, the patroness of sailors in Egypt, the Sumerian goddess Inanna (Queen of heaven and earth), the Semitic goddess Ishtar, etc., especially in combining in her the seemingly contradictory aspects of virginity and motherhood. See New Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Marian Feasts", by P. Rouillard; The Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. "Goddess Worship - an Overview" by Preston; Andrew M. Greeley, The Mary Myth: On the Femininity of God, New York: Cross Road Book, 1977, ch. 6, etc.

28 Kalpana Ram is partly right when she exposes the Christian splitting of the feminine into benign and malign forms, depicting the Virgin Mary as the 'embodiment of a purely benevolent idea of the maternal feminine'. See Ram, Mukkuvar Women, pp.63 ff. But she fails to see how the Mukkuvar refashion Mary according to their own image; the traditional image of Mary, in Mukkuvar hands, takes on terrible features too, as happens in the case of Cintāthira Māta. Similar phenomena of Marian devotion are present also in other parts of the world with a colonial past; eg. the image of La Conquistadora (The Conqueress or Our Lady of the conquest) in Santa Fe, or that of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. See Ronald L. Grimes, Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976, and Jody B. Smith, The Image of Guadalupe: Myth or Miracle?, New York: Image Books, 1984.
This process can be better understood in terms of the following steps:

1. The instance of *fascination*: The image of Mary resonates with the religious imagination of the Mukkuva community due to her close resemblance to the Amma image so central to their tradition.

2. The instance of *dismantlement*: The image of the *uni-dimensional* Amma, which depicted only the śāntabhāvam, appears lifeless, and so not satisfying. They seem to long for a *two-dimensional* Amma that reflects the very cosmic realism.

3. The instance of *ascription*: The missing elements in the Catholic Amma, especially the rudrabhāvam, is appropriated from the Indic/neithal tradition and ascribed to the Mary image to give it wholeness.

Thus she assumes the role of a protector goddess and even a mighty warrior in times of distress and crisis like that of a communal clash. No serious conflict seems to be experienced in combining the two contrasting features in the Māta. Still the predominant figure of *Cintāthira Māta* is far from the terrible figure of a Kālī; the overbearing presence of warrior saints like St. Michael and St. James in the Mukkuva religious world, together with the Catholic tendency to suppress whatever seemed terrible in Mary, may explain this feature.

The cult of *Cintāthira Māta* may be seen as a fine example of the dialogue between two worldviews. The Mukkuvar themselves are the subjects of this dialogue. To talk of *inculturation* ignoring this *natural process of inter-cultural dialogue* would mean denying the Mukkuvar of their subjecthood. In fact it becomes a *reverse process of inculturation* for the Mukkuvar, deeply rooted as they are in the *neithal culture*. *Cintāthira Māta*, from a Mukkuva point of view, may
mean more a Christianized Devī than an inculturated Mary. This reverse process of inculturation has hardly been paid attention to by Christian theologians.

The cult of Cintāthira Māta poses a challenge before the traditional presentation of Mary as undimensional. The one-sided accent on the benign, imposed on the religious cosmos of a people is anthropologically not sustainable. Reality, even if it is sacred, comprises not only the good, but also the not-so-good and the fierce, as Kadalamma is reminding them day and night. The Mukkuva understanding may find some resonance with the Gospel presentation of Mary in the magnificat, where she owns up a God who is not only benign, but also ruthlessly terrible (Lk. 1:46-55). Unfortunately, the later Church tradition has underplayed, or rather suppressed, this aspect. Cintāthira Māta may help to open up the door to the authentic Marian heritage.

The very conception of God as a male figure too faces difficulties. The powerful human longing for the divine feminine within one's religious universe is a fact, particularly in marginal communities like that of the Mukkuvar. The image of a purely male monotheistic God becomes difficult for such people to comprehend. For most ancient peoples the image of the divine appeared feminine. Besides, no civilization in the world is said to have developed goddess worship so elaborately as did India. The Māta of the Indic/neithal tradition highlights the feminine aspect of God, and the motherliness of God. Christian theology continues to struggle with the concept of male monotheism it has inherited from the Jewish religious tradition. The preoccupation of the fifth century Christians at Ephesus might have been with the Mother of God; but what is to be recovered today is the very Motherliness of God.
That the symbol of Cintāthira Māta as the embodiment of the ambivalent features of both śantabhāvam and rudrabhāvam may indicate an inner need in the Mukkuva religious psyche for the wrathful dimension of the divine. It may be objected that this conclusion, relying only on the image of Mary, is unwarranted; but a scrutiny of the pattern presented by the Mukkuva devotion to the saints would strengthen this conclusion.

An observable characteristic of the popular saints venerated at Vizhinjam is the explicitly militant features they depict. This is obvious in the case of St. Michael, the arch-angel, or St. Sebastian, the soldier-martyr. But these features are attributed also to other saints who have hardly any militant background historically or scripturally; St. James and St. Antony are examples. St. James is transformed into a military hero, in his local title as pagai miragiya Santiyāgappar (Santiago, who dispels enemy ranks).\textsuperscript{29} The terrible features of an otherwise benevolent St. Antony are given expression to in many mantric formulae that aim at propitiating him. These indicate a clear urge in the Mukkuva mind to look for saintly figures who depict terrific or warrior features.

In this context, a reference to the Indian rasa theory seems helpful in shedding better light on this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{30} Bhāva is a concept widely used in Indian psychology, aesthetics and bhakti literature; literally it means sentiment, disposition, temperament, etc., and may indicate the

\textsuperscript{29} The legendary background of this title was discussed in chapter 5 under 3.0

\textsuperscript{30} It is true that the rasa theory has evolved in the Sanskritic tradition in India, away from the neithal culture or a marginal context. However this theory presents one of the most comprehensive systematizations of human bhāvas that would make sense in any human situation. This fact would explain why the rasa theory is employed in the present analysis.
expression of a characteristic emotional state. It was Bharata (second century BCE to second century CE?) who has systematized rasas and bhāvas in his Nārāya Śāstra (treatise on dramatics). He classifies eight primary bhāvas (sthāyībhāvas) that go with the eight rasas; they are: rati (love), hāsyā (humour), karuṇā (compassion), rudra (dread), vīra (valour), bhayānaka (fright), bhīhastā (awe) and abhuta (wonder). Later theoreticians added a ninth one, viz. śānta (tranquility). Besides these sthāyībhāvas there are 33 (34) subordinate bhāvas (vyabhicāribhāva), which serve to strengthen the prevailing sentiment. Bhāva is what expresses a reaction, be it by bodily gesture or by words. Its end is rasa or the final state of relish or satisfaction. Rasa results from bhāvas.

Of the nine-fold categorization of primary bhāvas, śāntabhāvanam seems to have acquired a monopoly in the Christian tradition, almost to the exclusion of most other bhāvas, perhaps with the exception of karuṇā. The Mukkuva emphasis on the 'neglected' bhāva like rudra and vīra in their religious practice at the latent level has to be seen against this background. Bhāvas like abhuta or bhayānaka are emphasized in tantric rituals too; some of the mantras used in healing rituals use the language of fire and sword aimed at the destruction of the enemy. That the Mukkuvar, with their hunting instinct, fighting with the ocean day and night, attribute these bhāvas to the Christian saints and to Virgin Mary indicate an inner urge to experience these

31 The three basic temperaments referred to in the Bhagavad Gītā are sattvik, rajāsik, and tamāsik. Tantric texts also usually mention three 'dispositions' or 'characters', viz. divya (god-like), vīra (heroic), and pashu (animal-like). The bhakti tradition speaks of panch-bhāva (five-fold bhāvas), viz. śānta bhāva, vālsalya bhāva, mitra bhāva, mādhurya bhāva and dāsya bhāva, referring to the mode of relationship of the devotee with god.

31 For a simplified exposition of the rasa theory, see Adya Rangacharya, Introduction to Bharata’s Nārāya Śāstra, Bombay: Popular Prakasan, 1966, ch.10.

31 It does not mean Christianity is totally lacking in the expression of other bhāvas. The Old Testament clearly presents a wrathful and warlike God. See Samuel Rayan, The Anger of God, Bombay: BUILD, 1981.
within the sacred world of Catholicism. It proves their ability to re-present the universal Christian symbols and precepts suited to their life context and thought pattern. It also remains a silent protest against the neglect of most of the basic bhāvas in Catholicism - in its sacred liturgy, its sacramental rituals and devotional practices.

Some issues of theological concern surface here. The Mukkuvar present the ingredients of a *theology of combat*; their very life is one of warfare - with the wind, the waves and the sharks. Religion and theology can not remain aloof from this experience. Love of *Kadalamma* does not prevent them from fighting her. Love and fight coexist, both in life and in religion. Non-comprehension of this *theology of combat* gets many a pastor into trouble with the coastal people. Similarly, the capacity to perceive the God-head in its multifarious bhāvas may be the Indian clue to the Trinitarian mystery.

7.5.1 Accounting for Evil Within a Sacred World

Recognizing all reality in their multifarious bhāvas helps to explain the Mukkuva approach to evil and suffering. The dark contrast with which evil is presented against good, which is characteristic of a dualistic thought pattern, gets diluted here. Experience of evil and its ill effects is part of their daily life. The warrior saints and the mantric rituals come to their help in encounter with evil. It is important to note that evil is accounted for *within the sacred world*, not outside of it.

The Christian theological urge to place God outside and above evil has its base in the Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy. If evil is the opposite of good, and God is understood as all-
good, then the evil has to be outside the divine realm. The evil is abruptly taken out of the existential context to a cosmic plane, and is attributed to Satan or the devil as evil personified.\textsuperscript{34} But to the Mukkuvar, experience of evil remains an existential reality, and they try to explain it \textit{within} their sacred world. The reality of evil is more complex than mere black and white, as the \textit{rasa theory} illustrates. In fact, the Mukkuva insight into demonology appears closer to the biblical viewpoint. Genesis I presents God as struggling with evil (chaos) in the process of creation. Evil is recognized as a primal reality, and not necessarily as the opposite of good.

Besides, analysis of rituals and beliefs reveal that Mukkuvar attribute the causes of evil to a human agency, not to an abstract evil personified, nor to an impersonal karma.\textsuperscript{35} It may be the \textit{evil eye} cast by a neighbour or a jealous relative resorting to \textit{dur-mantravādām} (mantric rituals to do harm). The spirits have only an instrumental role, if any. The attribution to a human agency brings protective or remedial action within human reach. The Mukkuvar thus affirm their subjecthood as they refuse to submit to evil. This may be the source of their inner strength to strive ahead in spite of risks and calamities.

\subsection*{7.6 AN EXPERIMENT IN CHRISTIAN TANTRISM}

A close look at the practice of \textit{Mantravādām} in the Mukkuva community may further illumine the dynamics involved in a dual religious system. The power of \textit{mantravādām} is a generally

\textsuperscript{34} This is stated in the declaration of the Fourth Lateran General Council (1215) which says "... For the devil and other demons were indeed created by God naturally good, but they became evil by their own doing. As for man, he sinned at the suggestion of the devil". See Neuner J. and Dupuis J. ed., \textit{The Christian Faith}, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1992, p.14.

\textsuperscript{35} M. Amaladoss discusses the phenomenon of attributing evil to a human agency as a feature of people's religiosity. See his "Encountering Evil: Interpretations in Popular Religiosity", in \textit{Jeevadhara} 26/151 (January 1996), p.23.
accepted fact. At the same time there is a strong disapproval against it within the community, probably due to official Church's strong stand against it. Hence, there is an obvious guilt feeling in those who practise it. "Some of those who go daily for mass and communion are the ones who go to the mantra\textipa{\textit{v\text{\text{\text{\text{\text{\text{\text{d}}}}}}}}} in the evening", some comment. It is illustrative of the incongruity of a double world in which some of them live. This inner conflict is a very disturbing factor, not only within individuals but also in the community as a whole.

Yet, what is significant is the specifically Christian colouring many a mantric ritual takes on; there appears to be a definitive attempt at christianizing the mantric tradition. Two imageries used in the cakra of St. Michael are very biblical: the cross in its saving aspect, and the sword of St. Michael in its terrific aspect. The cross of Christ, in the Christian tradition, always stood for humble submission to the Will of the Father; (eg: 	extit{he delivered himself up to death; like a lamb being taken for slaughter}..., etc.). It evokes, in the Mukkuva mind, the benign aspect of the divinity. The sword of St. Michael, on the other hand, has reference to the Genesis story; this symbol evokes the terrific aspect of the divinity. The cakra of St. Michael, thus, is a good illustration of Mukkuva attempt to reconcile the contrary dimensions of the divinity - that of the benign and the terrific.

The preceding discussion establishes the deep influence of Tantrism in the everyday ritual life of the Mukkuva community. Far from being two religious systems in conflict, the community


37 A detailed presentation of Tantrism and its influence on Mukkuva practices is given above in chapter 4, under 2.2
tends to juxtapose them to make better sense out of a chaotic and risk-ridden world. The attempt at christianizing cakras and mantras are extremely valuable indicators of the way the Mukkuva religious mind works. The deep emotive and cultural content these have for the people can not be brushed aside. Is it Tantra in Christian garb? Or vice versa? Is it possible to bring both into a religious framework without serious conflicts? Official Christian theology has so far paid little attention to these questions. But these are vital questions that emerge from the midst of vibrant Christian life that theology can no more ignore.38

In fact Christian mantraḍādaṃ is not a new concept. Ulloor Parameswara Iyer has a section on Christiani mantraḍādaṃ in his book; it discusses its practice among the Syrian Christians of Kerala, and quotes some Christian mantram and mentions practitioners like Kadammattathu Kathanar.39 Even in the western Christian tradition the use of sacred monograms (IHS, INRI, XC, A-O, X-P, etc.) and Palindromes40 are indications of a similar pattern of symbolic use of words. Early Christian art used many pagan motifs which were open for a Christian reinterpretation; the fish, the Greek word for which (ἸΧΘΥϹ) formed an acrostic Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour, was

38 There have been some attempts at seeing the link between Tantra and Christian practices, more in the context of inter-religious dialogue in India. This insight is present scattered in the later writings of Bede Griffiths, though he never ventured to elaborate it systematically. He places Tantra as the opposite of the Vedanta, as a necessary requirement to balance the trans-worldly orientation of the latter. Tantra, according to him, is not something to be added on to the Christian tradition, rather, something that is already there, but only to be discovered. He makes a preliminary attempt to read the New Testament from a Tantric point of view. For a good appreciation of Griffith’s efforts in this direction, see W. Teasdale, Toward a Christian Vedanta: The encounter of Hinduism and Christianity according to Bede Griffiths. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation. 1987, pp.146 ff.


40 Palindrome is a mysterious construction of words that can be read forward and backward. SATOR is the first line of a Latin palindrome found in Pompeii and in England; it is in the form of a square, and is not yet clearly deciphered. See JCJ Metford, Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legends. London: Thames and Hudson, 1983.
a favourite Christian emblem, especially of the eucharist. Similar was the case with other motifs like dove (peace), peacock (immortality), etc.

The Mukkuva community opens up the arena for a rethinking on mantravādam in the Christian tradition. Observation shows that most of the Christian mantravādis practise it in close association with the profession of healing. They practise one indigenous system of medicine or another, and many of them are called vaidyan (medical practitioner). Some authors indicate that mantravādam and exorcism were part of the treatment of physical ailments in the ancient Tamilakam, before and even during the Sangam period. Sudhir Kakar discusses Tantrism with reference to the healing traditions of India.\(^{41}\) Healing profession (Ayurveda, Siddha, etc.) is as much a spiritual science as it is a medical science. The cosmic aspect of illness, ill-fortune and ill-luck is highlighted by all Indian systems of medicine including Tantrism, making medical and "priestly" functions hardly separable. Vaidyan (literally doctor) is usually both a medical man and a priestly (ritual) functionary.\(^{42}\)

Two aspects of Tantrism seem to be of particular significance to Christian religion and theology. It emphasizes Śakti, the divine feminine, and the positive role of the body, in the practice of religion. The Śakti aspect was discussed in relation to the Cintākhira Māta under 7.3; this section, therefore, concentrates on the latter aspect.


\(^{42}\) A recent article by Aloysius Pieris reflecting on a traditional Buddhist healing ritual is noteworthy in this context. See his "Prophetic Humour and the Exposure of Demons", Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, 60:5 (May 1996), pp.311-322.
The Indian *body image* emphasizes its intimate connection with the cosmos. The Indian systems of health and healing had recognized this long back. According to *Caraka Samhita*, "The person is comparable to the cosmos.... That is, the person is a minuscule image of the great cosmos. All the features (*bhāvas*) that are present in the cosmos are present in the person. All that are in the person are in the cosmos...."43 There is obviously a continuity between the human body and the natural environment. This insight of *Ayurveda* underlies Indian thinking in general.

Tantra emphasizes the creative ordering of the powers of nature and of the body; in other words, the Tantric tries to interiorize the cosmos through *cakras* and *yantras*, aiming at transcending the duality of the inner and the outer. But it is not an escape from the world, but an affirmation of the world; it is this element of affirmation that makes Tantrism appealing to ordinary people who are preoccupied with issues of daily survival.

The Christian image of the body, on the other hand, sharply differentiates it from the rest of the cosmos, especially the physical environment. The Christian idea speaks of the human person as "created in the image of God" (Gen.1:26-27), implicitly underplaying the vital link with the rest of the created world. As a result the body plays only little role in Christian liturgy and other religious rituals.44 This may explain why the Mukkuva youth look forward to the *sapram procession* at the parish festival to dress up and to celebrate the body as distinguishable members of *sabhakal*.

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43 Quoted in Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, p.293.

44 There have been recent attempts at a rethinking on the role of the human body, particularly in the area of sacramental theology. See, for example, the whole issue of *Concilium* 1995/3 (*Liturgy and the body*, ed. by L.M. Chauvet and F.M. Lumbala).
Insights from mantravādam and tantrism call for a conceptual shift in the Christian understanding of the body and its significance in sacramental theology and spirituality. To accept the human body as the alter-ego of the cosmos is to accept it as a primal sacrament. As microcosm it embodies the human-divine mystery. It is through the mediation of the body that human beings grow into the awareness of this mystery. At its heart is the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of the Word becoming Flesh. The incarnation invites human beings to celebrate the body as central to any act of worship. Areas like body spirituality and vibration spirituality call for more theological exploration. The Indian traditions of mantras, yantras and nāmajapas can guide this process significantly.

Any attempt to contain the Tantric stream within the Christian contemplative tradition appears misguided.\textsuperscript{45} Tantrism, with its accent on the microcosm and macrocosm, implies a clear affirmation of the body and the world, and can not be correlated with the other-worldly emphasis of the Christian contemplative tradition. Its liberative potential appears more pronounced if due recognition is given to the spirit of human rebellion implied in this tradition; it is resistance to a passive submission to one’s fate, an urge to tame the ocean - and oneself.

\subsection*{7.7 TWO MODELS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN CONFLICT}

Analysis of the process of encounter between two religious traditions within the Mukkuva world makes it clear that the Catholic tradition contributes to the structural identity of the community, while the meaning system remains deeply in the Indic/neithal religious heritage. A process of dialogue has been taking place at the latent level giving new expressions to Mukkuva

\textsuperscript{45} Teasdale seems to be following this misguided direction; see Teasdale, \textit{Towards a Christian Vedanta}, p.170.
Catholicism. The community does not seem to have experienced any destabilizing tension in the process at the faith level. But one area where the interaction had serious repercussions was that of religious leadership.

The mass dimension of the conversion process led to a total displacement of the existing structures of community leadership, including religious, by a centralized system of religious control introduced by the missionaries. Traditional offices like Pradhāni, ārukāṭṭam, etc., were either eliminated or made subordinate to the all-important office of the priest. This has led to a crisis of leadership in the community.\textsuperscript{46} Besides the religious leadership, the socio-political as well as the juridical leadership functions came to be centered around the priest.\textsuperscript{47} This centralization process eventually resulted in retarding the proper growth of various leadership functions in the community. The heart of the crisis can be seen as a conflict of perceptions regarding religious leadership - between a centralised and hierarchical model, on the one hand, and a highly diffused model, on the other.

The office of the Catholic priest, as the administrative head of a constituency called the parish, has its roots in the feudal background of medieval Europe. From the fourth century the local organization of the Western Church followed the civil model of the Roman empire. With the conversion of the Germanic tribes, the structures of the Church got influenced by the Germanic royal model in which the princes represented both the earthly and the sacred powers. The concept of the Roman Curia (Papal Court) thus evolved in the 12th and the 13th centuries. The Church was seen as the sole representative of every aspect of people’s daily life, legitimized by the doctrine of the "Two Swords", the earthly and the spiritual. This state of affairs continued

\textsuperscript{46} This was discussed above in chapter 6, under 4.2

\textsuperscript{47} The bulky File of Petitions at the parish church is indicative of this. See chapter 6, under 4.2
till the rise of independent nation states. This was basically the prevalent model at the time of the missionary enterprises worldwide in the 16th century. It was the same model that was implanted by Iberian Catholicism among the Mukkuvar. Past few centuries of its existence on the Indian shores changed this model very little.

The above model should be seen in contrast to the non-Vedic model of religious leadership functions that existed in India. Absence of a regular priesthood characterized the religion of ancient Dravidians; in other words, religious functions remained diffuse in the community, having no hereditary or professional priests. There was no priestly class set apart, unlike in Vedic Brahminism which penetrated the non-Vedic religious traditions in course of history. The deep influence of this diffuse model is still evident in the Mukkuva religion at the latent level; priestly functions are found dispersed among many community functionaries, viz. pirusenti for the affairs of the sabha, chelâji at the fishing operations, vaidyan or mantraâdi at many occupational or


49 This diffuse phenomenon has been brought out by ethnographic studies of many south Indian communities. The Irulas of Kerala-Tamilnadu boarder on the Western ghats, in spite of Vedic Hindu influences, still retain at least four categories of priesthood, viz. pattakaran, mannukkaran, pattali, as well as guruvan, the head of the lineage. See P.G. Reddy and A. Chettaperumal, "Religion Among the Irulas of Coimbatore District, Tamilnadu", in Religion and Society in South India, ed. by G. Sudarsan et.al., Delhi: B.R. Publishing Co., 1987, pp. 76 ff. See also Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, s.v. "Dravidians", by W. Crooke.

50 According to the Vedic tradition, priestly functions appear to have remained in the hands of a special class of hereditary priests, who came to be known under the generic title of brahman. The 'profession' was based on sacred learning and knowledge of tradition. ऋग्वेदा (2.1.2) refers to different categories of priests who assist at sacrifices, viz. hotṛ, potṛ, nestṛ, agnīdh, prasāṣṭṛ, advāryu and brahman: purohitā was the domestic priest at the service of kings and nobles. The Brāhmaṇas present the brahmans emerging as a definite class in the varṇa system (=the order of caste hierarchy). As the Vedic sacrifice was replaced by temple worship in later period, brahmans became 'temple priests'. See Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, s.v. "Priest, Priesthood" (Hindu), by A.B. Keith.
domestic rituals, or the nāvier for funeral rituals. These priestly functionaries, at other times, are engaged in one or another profession like fishing or trading. That the Mukkuvar were resisting the Catholic priest-centredness time and again is clear from the missionary documents themselves.\textsuperscript{51} Can it be that the model of religious leadership, and of priesthood, inherited through the missionaries basically remains alien to the neithal religious ethos of the Mukkuvar?\textsuperscript{52}

The Mukkuva perception of the Catholic priest, at the same time, has an element of ambivalence. The priest is always revered and highly regarded in the community in a way rarely seen elsewhere. How to understand this reverence against the perception of this model of priestly leadership as alien? The ambivalence may be explained in terms of the distinction earlier made between identity structures and meaning frame. The office of the parish priest is basically part of the manifest religion, and a key symbol of its identity structure. The alienation is felt at the meaning level, and so finds expression in the diffuse model of religious leadership at the latent level. The conflict resulting from these divergent perceptions of leadership functions is not experienced severely, probably because the two operate within two distinct modes of religious practice. The Catholic priest finds himself largely kept out of the latent realm.

The wide gap that exists raises questions not only about the adequacy of Catholic priesthood in a marginal community, but also its congruence with the Indian heritage of non-Vedic priesthood. Indian Christian ecclesiology may not remain the same if these questions are seriously attended to. It becomes increasingly evident that only a diffuse model of religious leadership can resonate

\textsuperscript{51} See above, chapter 2, under 4.0

\textsuperscript{52} Some may point to the poor response to vocations to priesthood and to religious life from the community as a proof of this alienation. Though in many Mukkuvar villages the response is not very poor, at Vizhinjam it appears to be true: there have been only four priests and one religious sister from Vizhinjam till today! There is an interesting legend popular at Pozhilyoor, another fishing village south of Vizhinjam; when Francis Xavier was going about preaching and baptizing the Mukkuvar along the coast, people at Pozhilyoor are said to have stoned him. It is because of his curse that Pozhilyoor does not produce priests!
with a people on the margins. Only such a model can acknowledge and appreciate the
subjecthood of the people. This realization can lead to a rethinking on the clergy-centred religious
leadership of the Church, and strengthen the search for appropriate counter-structures. The
Mukkuva religious experience points to the possibility.

7.8 CONCLUSION

If theology is a believing community’s awareness of its faith at a given moment of history, it can
evolve only in a concrete human setting and historical context. In the Mukkuva context of
Vizhinjam a creative interaction between divergent religious traditions has been going on. The
fruits of this interaction, as well as the questions that emerge, have significance for the Church
in India and for its theology. This chapter attempted to dialogue with some of these questions
and insights from a theological point of view. The aim, however, was not to romanticize
Mukkuva religion, but to indicate possibilities for a theology that is truly rooted in the Indian soil
and in the Indic religious heritage.

The Mukkuva experience shows that the unique theological process, emanating from the above
mentioned encounter, occurs at the latent level; the manifest mode of religion is hardly involved.
This process indicates what it means to be an authentic Christian community in a neithal context.
At the same time, the experience and the insights are in no way limited to the neithal context;
they reflect, though in varying degrees, the experience of most marginal groups in India.
Therefore the questions discussed may have wider implications; the Indian Church, if it is
sensitive to the stirrings of the Spirit in peoples and cultures, can not ignore the fruit of the
experience of these people. They offer not only challenges but also possibilities for becoming a
Church that is authentically Christian and truly Indian.