Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 The experiences and expressions of marginal groups in a society rarely find mention in chronicles of royal history and textbooks of academicians. The situation is no different in matters religious. The same logic would explain why Christian theological productions and doctrinal pronouncements keep themselves aloof from the everyday life and practices of people like the Mukkuvar. Against this background, the present study has been an explorative journey through the inner labyrinth of the Mukkuva religious life, as really lived in the geo-social context of Vizhinjam. There has been a growing realization of the limits of socio-political engineering and technological maneuvering in effecting social change. This realization was the starting point of the present inquiry. The key assumption was that the cultural and religious attitudes remain far more powerful than the induced mechanisms in orientating the life of the Mukkuvar.

Religious phenomenon constitutes a multifarious reality which eludes the grip of any single discipline in isolation. Written scriptures and articles of faith present only one side of this reality. As truly lived by a community religion becomes accessible to study in the latent mode rather than the manifest; this insight explains why the present inquiry focusses almost exclusively on the latent mode of Mukkuva religiosity. This latent mode is inherently related to the unique marine context and to the neithal worldview that characterizes it. Hence an empirical approach was found more appropriate in the present study.
8.2 The Mukkuvar of the erstwhile Travancore coast have been devout Catholics for four and a half centuries. The Iberian Catholicism brought in by the Portuguese missionaries has left an indelible mark on the identity of the community. At the same time, this has not prevented the Mukkuvar from drawing nourishment from the neithal heritage of their forefathers. The apparent incongruity between the two religious traditions is inevitable. The manner of their interweaving the diverse elements to make meaning for their life remains the thrust area of the inquiry.

The study draws attention to the above mechanism, and discovers that it has been a process of encounter and dialogue between two divergent religious traditions and worldviews. This process has been taking place quietly for generations. That true Mukkuva religiosity is neither annihilated by the hegemony of Vedic Hinduism, nor uprooted by the incursion of Iberian Catholicism, indicates the inner vitality of the Mukkuva religious heritage. The Mukkuva Catholicism at the latent level shows how a marginal group finds itself at home with the disparate elements of apparently incongruous religious traditions, and discovers meaning for life support and orientation. The creative outcome of this process is both a factor of enrichment and a sphere of challenge to Christian practice of religion and its theology in the Mukkuva situation in particular and in the Indian context at large.

8.3 The study has unveiled the self-understanding of the Mukkuva people as real subjects of their religiosity at the latent level. Any religiosity, to be relevant to a people, has to belong to that people. As its authors and interpreters they constantly make and remake their religiosity, which can hardly be contained in any universal system. In this process they not only evolve a meaning frame to rely on, but also discover identity structures as
a community. That the former is rooted in the Indic/neoithal heritage, while the latter is indebted to Catholicism, does not seem to create serious difficulty. The creative religious mind is at work in the moulding of a Mukkuva Catholicism, finding expression in its unique symbols and ritual practices.

Mukkuva religiosity has also a collective character. The settlement pattern and occupational culture leave their mark on religiosity, and call for collective or group expressions of it. It is most evident in the performative and celebratory dimensions of their sense of the sacred. One will never be able to understand Mukkuva religion unless he or she is able to enter this world of performance and ritual celebration. This sense of the community enables them to experience the strong bond not only among themselves and with the world of the dead, but also with the animate and the inanimate worlds. Here is a religiosity that is truly cosmic in character. This aspect would also partly explain the apparent conflict the community feels with the institutional structures and the centralized leadership of Catholicism.

The existence on the margins of the society and their risk-ridden occupation impel the community to evolve a theology of combat at the latent level. Every fishing expedition is a sail into a warfare; every moment of life is to be fought and won. The very survival, both occupationally and socially, becomes a matter of struggle. It does not tolerate passivity and mild manners. This determination to fight and neve yield to fate is at the core of their theology and spirituality. Their fascination with mantric rituals and the Tantric tradition has to be situated here. It may be the Mukkuva way of expressing Christian hope.
The study also highlights the holistic way the divine is conceived in the Mukkuva religiosity. Life is more complex than pure black or white. The complexity that is experienced in everyday life is equally true of matters divine. This key helps to understand the divine harmony as consisting of the benign and the terrible, the fatherly and the motherly, the godly and the diabolic. The sense of ambivalence permeates the Mukkuva perception of the divine harmony and wholeness. It is not difficult to see the value of this perception as a bulwark against religious bigotry. The divinities and saints of the Hindus and the Muslims have a place of honour in the religious world of the Mukkuvar, often allowing easy osmosis and cultural interaction.

8.4 The ethnographic details of Mukkuva religion raise a number of issues that are significant from the perspective of Catholic theology. The traditional notion of salvation history may need to be broadened if it has to do justice to the total history of marginal peoples. The ambivalent features the Māta and the saintly figures portray indicate the urgency of grasping the mystery of the divine in concepts that are poly-dimensional and gender-sensitive. It may call for a review of the Judeo-Christian heritage in this regard. Even the trinitarian conception of the godhead may resonate better with the Mukkuva worldview if explained through the prism of the multiple bhāvas. The creative experiment in Christian Tantrism offers much possibility for a sacramental theology and spirituality that is more holistic. Perception of the human body as the microcosm contains the seeds of a body theology that still remains alien to the mainstream Christian tradition. It would not only play a corrective role in liturgical theology, but also help to unfold the mystery of the incarnation and the resurrection.
The issues raised above lead naturally to an appraisal of the existing ecclesiology. The difficulty regarding religious leadership leads to a critical view of the existing structures including that of ministerial priesthood. The centralized and hierarchical pattern that characterized Iberian Catholicism is at variance with the diffuse model of the neithal heritage. The possibility of evolving relevant ecclesial structures and modes of worship from the remnants of the organizational wisdom of the community is not remote. But this may require shedding of many accretions which are mere accidents of history.

8.5 The study opens up themes and issues for deeper consideration and further research. In this sense the study remains open-ended, and unfolds important areas to probe into with the help of different disciplines. Of utmost importance is the urgent need for ethnographic collection of neithal lore before they disappear altogether. Eilamidal songs, folk songs of women vendors, mantric formulae and cakras, etc., are examples. Even a reliable historical account of the community's past from its own experience and viewpoint is yet to be attempted; the available missionary chronicles are not free of distortion. Sound knowledge about the ancient community structures and processes will provide building blocks not only for a dynamic leadership in the community, but also for a relevant ecclesiology. Kapiyam, the treasure house of astronomical wisdom of the fisherpeople, deserves recovery and scientific scrutiny. A comparative study of Mukkuva fishing rituals and lore with those of other fishing communities in Kerala can yield fruitful results. One limitation of the present study, it was admitted in the first chapter, refers to the religious world of Mukkuva women; that remains a pertinent area for future research.

8.6 The methodological option in the present study tries to discover and recover the positive cultural and religious resources that lie dormant in the Mukkuva community. Does not the
accent on the cultural dimension undermine the exigency for **justice and liberation** in this marginal community? The answer is a definitive no. For a people on the margins, religio-cultural identity is as important as issues of justice and liberation, if not more. One is not necessarily the opposite of the other; instead, one presumes the other, or rather, both inter-penetrate each other, as in the *Yin-Yang circle*. Besides, liberative action becomes meaningful only when placed within the matrix of a particular culture. An *a-cultural approach* to liberative action is self-defeating. On the other hand, any cultural study that loses sight of the goal of justice and liberation ends up in cultural relativism. Therefore, the present methodological option implies not only a commitment to justice and liberation, but also a critique of it.

Authentic and relevant theology has to have a life context and a lived-experience as its point of reference. Doing theology in India is not simply a matter of expressing the Christian faith in culturally intelligible categories, but much more, responding to the concerns and challenges of a people from within their cultural context. The modest aim of this exploration has been to show that an interpretative presentation of the religious experiences and practices of the Mukkuva community is basically a step in the direction of **human liberation and wholeness**, moving beyond what the religious phenomena indicate in themselves.