

New Series

Volume 4

No. 2

November

2024



Pages 1- 16

Author: Flynn M. Fernandes

Title: *Arrokiya Matha Vailankanni: Enduring Symbols and Ancient Rituals Offer Redemptive Possibilities for Liberation of the Marginalized through Interreligious Encounter*

Abstract

The Coromandel Coast of southeast India is dotted with temples, mosques, and shrines presenting a hallowed, religiously plural landscape where stands the Shrine Basilica of Vailankanni. Popularized by reported apparitions of Mother Mary to two Hindu boys on separate occasions in different locations in the 16th century, and a manifestation to Portuguese sailors during a tempest in the Bay of Bengal in the mid-17th century, Vailankanni today is a major Marian sanctuary, third only to Lourdes and Fátima in terms of pilgrim statistics. Reports of miraculous healings have drawn pilgrims to *Arrokiya Matha*, Mother of Health, affirming a belief in her particular intercessory power. Inside the shrine, a statue of *Arrokiya Matha*, European in appearance but draped in an Indian sari, holds the Christ Child in her arm. The Shrine Basilica that evolved from a small chapel consecrated to *Nossa Senhora da Saúde* by the Portuguese sailors in gratitude to Mother Mary has withstood the passage of time and, together with commemorative chapels at *Matha Kulam* and *Nadu Thittu*, forms the centerstage for ancient rituals and the annual patronal festival. The locality of Vailankanni is a confluence of different types of encounters—interreligious, intercaste, multicultural, local, national, and international. The origins of ancient devotional practices reveal *Arrokiya Matha* to the Hindu pilgrim, delineating how Catholic conceptions of motherhood contrast with the feminine dimension of divinity in Hinduism. These ancient rituals have shaped new aspects of worship, bidirectional inculturation of faith practices, dialogue on-the-ground, and the search for liberation. Though these aspects of worship and evangelization remain largely localized to Vailankanni, they offer redemptive possibilities for liberation through interreligious encounter with permanent and prophetic implications for the Pilgrim Church at a time when the marginalized are systematically under attack by forces of political oppression.

Author

Flynn Fernandes, STD, taught theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Emmanuel College in Boston, Massachusetts. He serves as the Director of Religious Education at Holy Trinity Parish, Quincy, in the Archdiocese of Boston, and as Church Administrator at Harvard-Epworth United Methodist Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Introduction

Though the panchayat township of Vailankanni in the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu, India, today bustles with pilgrim activity, it was once a quiet, nondescript hamlet on the Coromandel Coast about 350 km from Chennai. Deriving its name from the 'kanni' (or 'virgin') of the town of Velai, it is largely inhabited by fisherfolk. Besides the Shrine Basilica and other chapels that commemorate the Marian visions, the sacrality of the Vailankanni landscape derives from the numerous Hindu temples dedicated to Shiva, Saniswara, and Vishnu in nearby Nagapattinam, and a famous dargah that enshrines the body of the Muhammadan saint, Mirán Sáhib, in Nagore, attracting a concourse of millions of interfaith pilgrims who converge around their sacred sites as well as that of the interreligious other.¹

Though the cult of Vailankanni has indigenous and apostolic origins, its Marian origin and reputation for miraculous healings is what draws millions of pilgrims to her shores. There is, however, neither historical nor archaeological evidence to confirm that the Virgin appeared at Vailankanni. Oral tradition has passed down narratives of two visions and one manifestation of the Virgin at or near this quiet village in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Mother of Health at Vailankanni, referred to as *Arrokiya Matha* in Tamil, is considered a Virgin of Indian origin² because of her reported appearances to two Hindu boys—the first a shepherd named Tamil Krishnannesti Sankaranarayanan from Vailankanni in the mid-16th century, and the second a crippled buttermilk vendor towards the end of that century. A third encounter was a manifestation of the Virgin's intercession when Portuguese sailors were saved from shipwreck in the storm-tossed bay with their ship landing on the shores of Vailankanni.³

Annually, Vailankanni is visited by an estimated 20 million pilgrims, primarily Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, from all over India, and as far as the Gulf countries, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.⁴ The Indian Christian diaspora propagates devotion to Vailankanni through word of mouth. In India, the narrative is popular wherever there is a substantial Christian population that circulates the Vailankanni message through pamphlets, newsletters, and bulletins. However, as Rila Mukherjee writes, history has remained largely

¹ V. Narayanan, 'Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory: The Healing Mother of Velankanni Basilica and the Infant Jesus Shrine in Bangalore', *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17, 2004, 20-32; V. Narayanan, 'Religious Vows at the Shrine of Shahul Hamid', in S. J. Raj & W. P. Harman (eds), *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, 65-86.

² M. Frenz, 'The Virgin and Her "Relations": Reflections on Processions at a Catholic Shrine in Southern India', in K. A. Jacobsen (ed.), *South Asian Religions on Display: Religious Processions in South Asia and in the Diaspora*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 92-103.

³ Historical details of each reported apparition of Mary are articulated in the shrine publication by S. L. Gabriel, I. Arokiasamy, P. Xavier, D. Amudhan, A. P. Raj, and S. Kulandainathan, *The History of the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health Vailankanni, 'The Lourdes of the East'*, Vailankanni: Shrine Publication, 2005, and in a shrine pamphlet by S. R. Santos, *The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health, Vailankanni*, Thanjavur: Don Bosco Press, 1983.

⁴ R. Mukherjee, 'Contested Authenticities', *Rethinking History* 8.3, September 2004, 459-463.

silent about Vailankanni, and unfortunately, 'it merits no mention in the annals of the Portuguese or in the district gazetteers of colonial India'⁵ except for a singular mention in the *Madras District Gazetteer – Tanjore* (1906).

Vailankanni's significance is not confined only to Tamil Nadu, but has apostolic, dogmatic, and political prominence for India. The historical connection between St. Thomas the Apostle, Mary's Assumption, and India is not limited to the first century. India, the apostolic home of the saint, gained independence from the British Empire on August 15, 1947, the dogmatic feast of the Assumption.⁶ Vailankanni pilgrims view August 15 as a date divinely ordained linking Arrokiya Matha (Mother of Healing) with Bharat Mata (Mother India). The procession on August 15 depicts the triumph of Arrokiya Matha whose intercession pilgrims believe was instrumental in India attaining independence.⁷ August 15, then, signifies India's liberation from foreign rule and Mary's liberation from her temporal earthly existence.

Though Vailankanni's pilgrim statistics situate her alongside Guadalupe, La Salette, Lourdes, and Fátima, her reputation for healing the sick connects her to Lourdes, though one might also find much commonality with Guadalupe. However, the worship symbols and ancient rituals at Vailankanni offer much more than miraculous healing. They form the centerstage for interreligious encounter so that redemptive possibilities that transcend constricting social, religious, and political boundaries may be experienced. The marginalized have found common devotion to Arrokiya Matha a source of redemption from social and religious oppression. This is particularly significant in this age when Dalits continue to face caste-based social oppression, and Christians and Muslims and their places of worship are systematically under attack by forces of political oppression in different parts of India. This article explores these enduring symbols and ancient rituals, the origins of Arrokiya Matha and her affinity (what draws pilgrims to her), delineating how Catholic conceptions of motherhood contrast with the feminine dimension of divinity in Hinduism, as well as the permanent and prophetic implications for the world church, tying together the christological priority for the marginalized with interreligious encounter as witnessed at Vailankanni.

Enduring Symbols and Ancient Rituals of Vailankanni

Two symbols of Vailankanni that have withstood the passage of time are the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health and the annual pilgrim festival at the end of August, both referenced in the aforementioned *Madras District Gazetteer – Tanjore* (1906) that describes the town of Vélánganni [*sic*] as:

⁵ Mukherjee, 'Contested Authenticities', 463.

⁶ R. A. Varghese, *God-Sent: A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary*, New York: Crossroad, 2000.

⁷ Frenz, 'The Virgin and Her "Relations"', 102.

Arrokiya Matha Vailankanni

chiefly important for a very large Roman Catholic festival which takes place here every eighth of September and the nine preceding days in honour of the Virgin Mary as 'Our Lady of Health'. Not Christians only, but Hindus also, come to this from many parts of the Presidency in the hope of obtaining relief from sickness, and many miraculous cures are said to take place. The village has indeed been called the 'Lourdes of India'.⁸

Shrine Basilica of Arrokiya Matha

The historical narrative of the Shrine Basilica includes all those locations that are sacred to Vailankanni. In addition to the basilica that evolved from a tiny chapel built by the Portuguese sailors, commemorative chapels were built at *Matha Kulam* where the Virgin allegedly appeared to the shepherd boy, as well as at *Nadu Thittu*, where she reportedly appeared to the lame buttermilk vendor.⁹ Though the *Gazetteer* of 1906 called the Shrine Basilica the 'Lourdes of India', it also described the Shrine (ca. 1883) as not particularly impressive externally or internally. However, what is noteworthy at Vailankanni is not architectural grandeur, but the annual draw of pilgrims who are not only Catholic, but also Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee, or religious other. After centuries of gradual expansion to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims, on November 3, 1962, the Shrine of Vailankanni became the Shrine Basilica of Vailankanni through an apostolic letter of John XXIII that described Mary's powerful intercession for the health of pilgrims who seek her maternal aid and participate in sacred services especially during the novena that precedes the feast of her Nativity. The apostolic letter also hailed the Shrine as the 'Lourdes of the East'.¹⁰ In addition, a home for the aged was set up, and a museum of offerings housing testimonials of miraculous cures through Mary's intercession was built.¹¹

Annual Patronal Festival

The feast of Arrokiya Matha coincides with the Nativity of the Virgin Mother because it was on September 8 that the Portuguese sailors are said to have landed on the shores of Vailankanni. During the Vailankanni festival that begins on August 29, every day a novena and the rosary are recited, and Masses are celebrated in English, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telegu, Marathi and Konkani for pilgrims who arrive from different states of India as well as from abroad. A flag processes through the streets of Vailankanni followed by an ornately decorated palanquin bearing a statue of Arrokiya Matha on August 29. The hoisting of the flag bearing her image marks the beginning of the festival and is repeated on each morning of the novena.

The palanquin of Arrokiya Matha processes through the streets of Vailankanni every night from August 30 to September 7. On certain nights, the statues of St Michael the

⁸ F.R. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteers: Tanjore*, Madras: Government Press, 1906. The original 'District Manual', published in 1883, was written by D. B. V. Rao.

⁹ Gabriel et al., *History of the Shrine Basilica*, 68.

¹⁰ Gabriel et al., *History of the Shrine Basilica*, 32-38, 41-42; Santos, *Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health*, 47-49.

¹¹ Gabriel et al., *History of the Shrine Basilica*, 34-36.

Archangel, St Sebastian, St Anthony of Padua, and St Joseph join other statues of Mary on additional palanquins.¹² Prior to the procession, the iconic statue of Arrokiya Matha is draped in an ornate silk sari in the presence of chosen palanquin-bearers and the public waiting to see or join the procession. She is crowned and garlanded, and a rose garland is placed on her hand. As music is played by the James Band, pilgrims queue up to offer flower garlands to the women waiting to carry the palanquins that are then decorated with these floral donations. Pilgrims listen to prayers in Tamil and English and a sermon in Tamil over the loudspeaker. The procession then commences and ends at the beach where fireworks light the sky as pilgrims dash to grab the garlands from the palanquins. On the night of September 7, the bishop celebrates Mass and music is provided by the James Band, the Velankanni Pilgrims Band, and other brass bands.¹³ On the evening of September 8, the flag is lowered marking the end of the festival.

Arrokiya Matha: An Assessment of Her Origins and Affinity

Patronal festival volunteers claim that Hindus outnumber Christians at Vailankanni. What draws these Hindu pilgrims to Vailankanni when they already worship a pantheon of goddesses is a complex question that can be answered by investigating the origins of the Vailankanni cult, the liberative dimensions of devotion to Arrokiya Matha, and the feminine dimension of divinity in Hinduism and Christianity, specifically 'kanni' power.

Origins of the Vailankanni Cult

The first apparition of the Virgin (ca. mid-16th century) took place before the Portuguese missionaries established their presence in India. Mukherjee affirms that, 'the *Krsna* motif is stressed as the origin in this story and the divine lady is not yet identified as the Virgin Mother of Jesus'.¹⁴ In the second vision (ca. end of the 16th century), the cult continues to develop with a Catholic dimension because by now the Portuguese had already made inroads into nearby Nagapattinam. In this version, a Christian element¹⁵ gets inserted into the original Hindu motif, but the divine lady is still not identified as the Blessed Mother. These apparitions allegedly occurred in a rural setting about 6 km from Nagapattinam in an area that could have

¹² M. Meibohm, 'Past Selves and Present Others: The Ritual Construction of Identity at a Catholic Festival in India', in S. J. Raj & C. G. Dempsey (eds), *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, 61-84.

¹³ Meibohm, 'Past Selves and Present Others', 66.

¹⁴ R. Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory: Vailankanni and a New Geography of Citizenship', in R. Mukherjee & M. N. Rajesh (eds), *Locality, History, Memory: The Making of the Citizen in South Asia*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, 152-181. Mukherjee points out that the naming of this place of the first apparition as *Matha Kulam* or *Ampa Kulam* (Our Lady's Tank) draws on the idea of *dudhsagar* (sea of milk) in the *Puranas*. She notes that the *Krsna* (after the boy child god Krishna) motif is stressed to emphasize an indigenous encounter. Rare depictions of the first apparition at Vailankanni show the Hindu shepherd boy dressed much like the child god Krishna offering a jar overflowing with milk to the lady. See also n. 18.

¹⁵ The buttermilk vendor is cured during this vision of the lady who instructs him to go to a Catholic gentleman in Nagapattinam and request that a chapel be built in her name.

Arrokiya Matha Vailankanni

been either Hindu or subject to Thomist influence. Syrian Christianity revealed parallels between Hindu and Christian beliefs; Mary was considered the sister of *Kali* while Jesus was venerated along with *Krsna*, making it easier to look to Mary as another goddess of the Hindu pantheon. Mukherjee points out that, 'if we accept the Thomist associations of Vailankanni, we find that there were a series of "encounters", or adjustments between Thomism and Portuguese Catholic faith at the time when the cult first appeared as a Marian shrine'.¹⁶ In the final manifestation (ca. mid-17th century), a strong Catholic influence led the fisherfolk to believe that the rescue of the Portuguese sailors was through the Virgin Mary's agency. In this way, the Vailankanni cult gradually became an amalgam of the Hindu, Syriac Christian, and Roman Catholic dimensions over a wide geographical landscape.¹⁷

Liberative Dimension of Devotion to Arrokiya Matha

A theory concerning the indigenous origin of the Vailankanni cult is that it evolved as a blend of the *Krsna* cult¹⁸ practiced in Tamil Nadu in the 16th century and the cult of *Ave Stella Maris* (Hail Star of the Sea) that believed in Mary's allegorical role as the guiding star for seafarers. From the beginning, as the sacred myth suggests, Vailankanni may have been a local goddess closely associated with healing and caring for the sick. Female deities, mother goddesses, or *shakti* figures associated with curative powers, were co-opted into Indian Catholic faith under Portuguese hegemony in south India. Villagers were compelled to integrate their local deities, especially those associated with curative powers, miracles, and bountiful harvests, into the Christian pantheon. Mukherjee offers the example of the deity, Shantadurga of Goa, who in her folk form of Santeri Mata was christianized as Our Lady of Miracles, and later evolved as Our Lady of Good Health and Our Lady of Cures in 16th century Goa.¹⁹

In Vailankanni, there is a temple dedicated to the goddess Mariamman to whom the village folk prayed during the smallpox epidemic that sometimes wiped out whole villages during the hot, dry months from January to June. Village worshippers of this deity believed that the absence of rain, and therefore a scant harvest, and dreaded diseases were in some way related to the failings of the community for not being in proper touch with the natural order, incurring Mariamman's wrath.²⁰ In this sense, Mariamman was a negative goddess,

¹⁶ Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory', 161.

¹⁷ Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory', 161-164.

¹⁸ J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens I: Veda und älterer Hinduismus*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960, 51-116, in F. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krsna Devotion in South India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, 18. Gonda, citing Friedhelm Hardy, asserts that the first literary documentation of emotional *Krsna* bhakti (devotion) in mature form was found in the Tamil hymns of Alvārs, especially Nammālvār (ca. 8th or 9th century), and argues that this devotion was transmitted to other regions of India through the Bhāgavata Purāna.

¹⁹ Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory', 160.

²⁰ W. T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1915, and H. Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1921, in Paul Younger, 'Velankanni Calling: Hindu Patterns of Pilgrimage at a Christian Shrine', in Alan Morinis (ed.), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992, 89-99.

feared for what she could do, not loved because of what she did.²¹ Paul Younger points out that

the underlying pattern of worship in the Velankanni pilgrimage festival is that found in the worship of Mariamman. The preparatory vows, the shaving of the hair, the presentation of offerings, the frenetic worship, the sharing in the worship of others, and the ecstatic moments around the central shrine make up a pattern these village folk would have known from childhood in connection with the shrines of Mariamman.²²

Susan Bayly claims that the Velankanni cult is different in that the Virgin was never identified with the caste lifestyle of any single convert community and first began to gain regional prominence at the end of the nineteenth century when the Roman Catholic Church in south India sought to replace the ritualized caste-based practices of upper-class notables (like the Paravas) with more popular broadly-based religious practices. Her devotees identified her specifically with the *amma* goddesses of Tamilnad, as warrior and conqueror, and used *sakti* to describe her supernatural power. One oral account suggests that 'the Virgin established herself at Velankanni after triumphing in a bloody battle against the reigning Tamil goddess'.²³

Apart from miraculous healings and exorcisms at Velankanni, the transition from worship of Mariamman to devotion to Arrokiya Matha appears to have a liberative dimension. The Dalits or untouchables were denied access to temples to worship the goddess Mariamman by the upper castes. A poem expressing this sentiment found at the Chapel of Apparition reads as follows:²⁴

Māriyamman, Mariyamman,
When the Portuguese arrived, Māriyamman, they made a mistake
writing your name.
They wrote Mariyamman, and that changed your history.
Māriyamman, Mariyamman, these are two different words.
But you are, in fact, the same.
Because the Brahmans forbade us access to the temples,
Before we always remained outside, never able to approach you.
Then, knowing how much we pray to you and respect you

²¹ Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory', 170.

²² Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 94; Mukherjee, 'Locality, History, Memory', 170.

²³ A. Meersman, *The Franciscans in Tamilnad*, Schöneck-Beckenried: Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire, 1962; S. R. Santos, *Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health* [pamphlet], Thanjavur, 11th edn, 1980, 367-368, cited in Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

²⁴ B. Sebastia, *Māriyamman-Mariyamman: Catholic Practices and Image of Virgin in Vailankanni (Tamil Nadu)*, Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry, 2002.

Arrokiya Matha Vailankanni

You decided to flee the temples and came here to take refuge.
To Velankanni you came
And now we can come and address our prayers to you,
Māriyamman, Mariyamman.

This poem presumes that the Virgin of Vailankanni is the goddess Māriyamman, and that she mirrors the power of the goddess. She is Māriyamman of the untouchables, but the equating of the goddess Māriyamman with the Virgin Mariyamman may serve a dual purpose—to advance the parallels between the Hindu and Catholic pantheons, and to convince the devout that Hindu deities are superior to external deities.²⁵ Younger, however, identifies a conceptual difference between the two based on their inherent spheres of effectiveness. The Hindu goddess ensures the well-being of the village whereas Arrokiya Matha fulfills individual needs. He claims that worshippers see Arrokiya Matha as a 'mother', whom they perceive as offering more acceptable ways of dealing with family problems, not just concerns facing village communities. At Vailankanni, it was the mother of each family, not the community, who assumed responsibility for making vows and having rituals carried out to appease the goddess to restore well-being to the family. These mothers preferred the 'new' goddess Vailankanni over Mariyamman to sort out the problems their families faced.²⁶

Vailankanni's location on the Coromandel includes a new dimension of her worship with foreign symbols, a sign of her limitless range of authority. Younger writes that fishing and trade conducted by sea was a source of livelihood for a significant number of inhabitants living near the coastline, which added mystery to a highly structured system of agriculture and social relations that was partially transferred from Europeans with their arrival by sea to India. The Europeans, namely the Portuguese, the Dutch, and later the French, brought unusual goods and ideas to the seacoasts, which had an impact on local inhabitants who were mostly fisherfolk. Thus, when 'many of the fishermen converted to Christianity, new forms of worship became part of the religious universe and held out the promise of allowing the more adventurous worshippers to gain ritual influence over the once mysterious powers of the sea'. Younger observes that the locals believed that if Arrokiya Matha could save shipwrecked sailors from perishing in a violent storm, then the scope of her power was unbounded. They paid attention to the fact that Vailankanni could meet their every need by interceding before God on their behalf.²⁷

The triumphant tone of the Mother-Child image of Vailankanni 'gives the basic Tamil polarity a sufficiently new form so that it provides hope and confidence to those who feel

²⁵ Sebastia, *Māriyamman-Mariyamman*, 50-51.

²⁶ Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 95-97.

²⁷ Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 96.

distraught and oppressed'.²⁸ Bayly claims that, in contrast to the Mariamman festival, the Vailankanni pilgrimage takes on a triumphal tone in worship with its organizers calling pilgrims to concrete social action, steering devotees to health clinics and social action workshops run by Vailankanni branches or worship centers in their local area, though a very small percentage of pilgrims actually respond. Arrokiya Matha with a crown on her head holding an already crowned child in her arm gives the image a triumphal character without distracting from the feminine nature of the image.²⁹ The triumphal splendor symbolized by the crowns, the golden adornments, and the happy child add to the peaceful aura, in marked contrast to the anxiety and fear that characterize aspects of the Mariamman festival. Mariamman, a fertility figure who brings rain and crops, is usually pictured alone, never pictured with a child, though sometimes with shadowy male figures.³⁰ Incurring her wrath leaves open the potential of barrenness, both of land and of woman.³¹ However, pilgrims are overcome with similar emotions of fear and anxiety when presenting their petitions to Vailankanni as are worshippers at the Mariamman fest.

Virgin Power and the Feminine Dimension of Divinity in Hinduism and Christianity

Roman Catholics believe that the Virgin Mary was born without the stain of Original Sin, a preparation to be the Mother of God from which she merits her power. They identify Mary as the virgin mother. Hindus, on the other hand, perceive Arrokiya Matha as the new goddess Vailankanni, necessitating an understanding of the feminine divine in the two faiths.

Hinduism includes the feminine among its expressions of divine power. Hindus worship many goddesses, but even a single goddess symbolizes something different in different territories.³² John Carman infers that Hindu goddesses are conceptualized differently, but always in relationship. First, as a goddess who stands on her own, she bestows all that is good in life on her worshippers and punishes those who fail to remember her with offerings. Second, the goddess may be visualized as married to a male deity and may be considered either as the dominant partner like *Kali*, or the loving wife *Parvati* who delights in serving her husband. Even in her self-subordinating role, she is capable of acting independently or in conjunction with her husband. Third, she is perceived as a human transformed into a divine being either through violent and untimely death, or, in her quest for love, by marrying her divine spouse and disappearing from the human realm to live

²⁸ Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 95.

²⁹ Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, cited in Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 97.

³⁰ B. E.F. Beck, *The Goddess and the Demon: A Local South Indian Festival and Its Wider Context*, Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1981, cited in Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 96.

³¹ Younger, 'Velankanni Calling', 96-97. Younger notes the polar character of the Tamil symbol system inclined toward portraying their goddesses as either militant, and independent upholders of the realm of fertility, or co-opted wives and mothers who are supportive of the goals of their husbands and sons.

³² J. B. Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

permanently with him.³³ Therefore, Carman writes, ‘the Hindu recognition of a feminine dimension of God ... is more inclusive of human experience and less shaped by patriarchal assumptions than the exclusively masculine notion of God in Western monotheism’.³⁴

Carman further argues that the reverence accorded to the Virgin Mary is one key to comparing the Hindu polarity of the masculine/feminine to Western monotheistic thought and practice. Mary of Scripture is in many respects very different from Hindu goddesses. However, belief in the Virgin Mother at various points in Church history and in different parts of the world has been akin in some respects to certain beliefs about Hindu goddesses. In contemporary popular devotion, for instance, Mary acquires some characteristics of old goddesses, especially with her power to bless childless couples with a child. In Catholic Europe, she is venerated by fisherfolk as *Stella Maris* or ‘Star of the Sea’, the one who protects their ships and safely guides them back to port.³⁵ The many goddesses of Hinduism are divine manifestations of one divine feminine power (*Sakti*).

Francis Clooney writes that Hindu goddesses and Mary serve as models for humans to realize their own personhood and even divinization. As Hindus recognize the feminine dimension of God and their religious experience includes the human aspect, they are not likely to prefer Mary who is godlike but not-god to supreme female figures like Sri Devi and Apirami. They are likely to appreciate and honor her as a powerful mother who is central to Catholic devotion even if she is not a goddess because she offers a different way of dealing with suffering, death, and other problems.³⁶ In Mary, God became human in Jesus. Christians are to remind themselves that Jesus is God and Mary is not-God. This is not the case with Hindus. In some territories, Mary as not-god wields more power than Hindu gods and goddesses.³⁷

Permanent and Prophetic Implications for the Pilgrim Church

Vailankanni, like Guadalupe, Lourdes, La Salette, and Fátima, reveals how simple Marian visions in obscure places can evolve into major centers of Catholic spirituality. René Laurentin claims that the spoken or non-verbalized messages of apparitions make known the hidden potential of the gospel in that they do not simply restate what Scripture reveals but deal with a particular situation at a particular time and place. Therefore, he claims apparitions have a dual function—permanent and prophetic.³⁸ The *permanent* function is that by which Mary’s appearances rekindle faith and give deeper meaning to these events for the spiritual life of

³³ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 283-284.

³⁴ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 278.

³⁵ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 290.

³⁶ F. X. Clooney, *Divine Mother. Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

³⁷ Clooney, *Divine Mother. Blessed Mother*, 229.

³⁸ R. Laurentin, *Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today*, trans. L. Griffin, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1990.

the people of God. Though none of the traditional gospel themes of prayer, fasting, repentance, reconciliation, and conversion are verbalized during the Vailankanni visions, they offer an invitation to take seriously the living presence of God among the people. What is permanent at Vailankanni are the enduring symbols and ancient rituals that have had a lasting influence on bidirectional inculturation of faith practices. The *prophetic* on the other hand addresses the educative impact of apparitions on aspects central to the *imago Dei*—interreligious unity, equality for all God’s people, God’s justice, and the christological priority for the marginalized.

The Permanent

Over the centuries, the Marian shrine at Vailankanni became a source of healing for millions of pilgrims. Varghese writes that it is at Vailankanni that Mary evangelizes in a special manner through signs, miracles and wonders.³⁹ It is here that one witnesses what Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, in *Encountering Mary*, describes as a Catholic sub-culture tied to Marian cosmology that today exists as a ‘church within a church’, transforming rural Catholicism into an apocalyptic mysticism.⁴⁰ A visible sign of this sub-culture is Marian pilgrimages found at apparition sites like Vailankanni that have become an invitation to the pious and the curious. Millions of Hindus, Muslims, the Catholic faithful, and the religious other flock to the Shrine Basilica. Along this sacred sea-facing landscape one can also visit the sites of the apparitions to two Hindu boys, a museum of healing testimonies, a home for the aged, as well as springs, streams, trees, and mounds that have become enduring cosmic symbols of the apparition narrative. At Vailankanni, pilgrims request that Masses be offered for their prayer intentions for a modest payment.

For Hindus, Vailankanni becomes another source of power for the effectiveness of rituals that include bathing in the sea, head tonsuring,⁴¹ votive offerings, and circumambulation of their bodies round the temple. Hindu and Christian priests sometimes encourage and even participate in these rituals that they characterize as ‘Indian’ and ‘Tamil’ forms of popular religion.⁴² This is due in part to the fact that the Church in the post-Vatican II climate, is more tolerant of Hinduism, and has replaced its former attitude of rejection with a positive disposition towards Indian culture, interfaith dialogue, and attempts to inculturate forms of Christian worship.⁴³ Yet Christian beliefs and social ethics challenge the non-egalitarian hierarchy of Hindu casteism because it runs counter to gospel values. Despite a

³⁹ Varghese, *God-Sent*, 80.

⁴⁰ S. L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

⁴¹ S. J. Raj, ‘Shared Vows, Shared Space, and Shared Deities: Vow Rituals among Tamil Catholics in South India’, in Raj & Harman, *Dealing with Deities*, 43-64.

⁴² Narayanan, ‘Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory’, 28.

⁴³ D. Mosse, ‘Catholic Saints and the Indian Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India’, *Man* 29, 1994, 301-332.

Arrokiya Matha Vailankanni

conscious incorporation of Indian cultural elements into Christian worship, there is incompatibility between Christian and caste values in indigenous attempts to reconcile sanctity and power, or to separate violence and death from life and regeneration in ritual sacrifice.⁴⁴

For all the fervor on display, the devotion to Arrokiya Matha appears localized to the Vailankanni context. Narayanan claims that the multitude of Hindus who flock to Vailankanni does not suggest that they frequent all Christian shrines. The evangelization that occurs at Vailankanni is paradoxical. On one hand, for instance, after Hindu pilgrims return home, they do not attend Sunday Mass at a local church or practice devotions to Mary. They appear to visit sacred sites of the 'religious other' where there is said to be *power* for Christians, *shakti* for Hindus, and *barakat* for Muslims. They sense this power in the holy place, the narratives of miracles, and the ritual of going on pilgrimage alongside others who share a similar hope. They visit Vailankanni and other holy places to offer petitions or thanksgiving, or simply because it is family tradition. At Vailankanni, the Mother of Health carrying the Child Jesus becomes a source of power and compassion. The divinity of Arrokiya Matha with Jesus is generic, appearing in many places, but also specific because its power can be localized. Hindus recognize this power as being of Mary or the Infant Jesus, but not of Parvati, Durga, or the boy Krishna.⁴⁵ On the other hand, they play a key role in spreading the word about Arrokiya Matha, and that in turn draws many other Hindus to the Shrine. In effect, it is not just Christians, but Hindus too, who are evangelizing the healing message of Vailankanni. Though there are converts among Hindus, they are fewer in number in recent decades, in part due to the nationalist brand of Hinduism (*Hindutva*) that threatens Hindu-Christian-Muslim unity in India. The whole issue of proselytization to another faith, especially Christianity and Islam because of their foreign origins, has threatened the lives of missionaries.

The Prophetic

Prior to Vatican II, the official teaching of the Catholic Church was *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the [Catholic] Church there is no salvation'). *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Council's decree on ecumenism, gradually changed that mentality. The Catholic Church now recognizes the possibility of salvation for all Christians, the followers of other religions, as well as agnostics and atheists. That there may be unity among all Christians and with followers of other religious traditions is the eschatological function of the reign of God toward which the Church advances.

⁴⁴ D. Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: a study of social organization and religion in rural Ramnad', thesis, Oxford University, 1986, 495-509, cited in Mosse, 'Catholic Saints and the Indian Village Pantheon', 326.

⁴⁵ Narayanan, 'Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory', 28.

In *Ecclesiam suam*, Paul VI affirms, ‘The church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make’.⁴⁶ The Pope summons the Church to be in horizontal communion with all peoples. According to his exhortation, ‘individual Churches have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand ... in the sense which one may call anthropological or cultural’.⁴⁷

Frederick Jelly writes that, ‘Mary has been given an essential role in the ecumenical and interreligious quest to promote the rights of every human being through divine means’.⁴⁸ Vailankanni underpins two key aspects of this quest—inculturation and dialogue through encounter—and how their intersection with the interreligious other has borne fruit. At the local and regional levels of integration within the Vailankanni cult, the Pope’s exhortations call upon the particular church to evangelize via interreligious dialogue, which necessitates inculturation.

Inculturating indigenous practices into different forms of Christian worship is an expression of liberation. According to Aloysius Pieris, inculturation is not a process to be undertaken apart from the struggle for liberation. For Pieris, inculturation and liberation are two names for the same process.⁴⁹ The inculturation of ritual praxis at Vailankanni is a unique, bidirectional process. Some rituals that offer insight into Hindu-Catholic and Catholic-Hindu inculturation at Vailankanni include votive practices and festival processions. However, it is possible that Christian practices did not always need to adapt to fit local culture; Christian missionaries may have brought some of these customs to India and Hindu tradition may have appropriated them. All castes and economic classes of Hindus visit the Shrine Basilica and other Vailankanni shrines in Nagapattinam and Chennai. At these sites, they light candles, say prayers, tonsure their heads as acts of piety, or offer silver models of various parts and organs of the body. This practice is common in Hindu temples, Muslim dargahs, and Catholic shrines in south India. A person suffering from some ailment purchases from a local vendor or an institutionally authorized shop, a small flat piece of silver with an etching of that body part (called *pratima* in Sanskrit, or *malar* in Tamil) and places it in the offering box as they make their way through the temple, dargah, or shrine. They return to make a similar offering when cured. At Vailankanni, pilgrims may initially offer wax models of body parts, and when cured, return with silver etchings.⁵⁰ Another ritual common at Vailankanni is a variation of the cradle

⁴⁶ Paul VI, Encyclical on the Church *Ecclesiam suam*, 6 August 1964, 65, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html

⁴⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, 53, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html

⁴⁸ F. M. Jelly, ‘Mariology and Ecumenism—Reflections upon 1965-1990’, *Marian Library Studies* 17.38, 2014, 547-565.

⁴⁹ P. C. Phan, ‘Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face’, *Theological Studies* 57, 1996, 399-430.

⁵⁰ Narayanan, ‘Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory’, 24.

rite practiced elsewhere. Women praying for a child tie cradles to the shrine tree and promise to offer a silver cradle to Arrokiya Matha when a child is born.

The votive ritual includes other practices common to both Hindus and Christians. Vailankanni's coastal location makes it possible for pilgrims to bathe in the sea, a practice carried out by Hindus on certain days of the ritual calendar. Others shave their heads or roll their bodies around the temple (*anga pradakshinam*), something now also practiced at Vailankanni. Narayanan explains that Christians also participate in some Hindu forms of worship, but attach their significance to something else. These practices can include wearing a sari or applying a *tikha* or mark on the forehead. Hindus bring to Vailankanni their customs, but also participate in Catholic rituals like the Stations of the Cross if they have been told it will deliver them from their present predicament.⁵¹ Though the boundaries between Hindu and Christian ritual practice in these shared, negotiated spaces are permeable, they do exist. Hindus cling to their identity and know how different they are from Muslims and Christians. They know whom to marry, whom to eat with, and with whom to worship, but they also adopt customs from others or export their own into the worship of Muslim saints whom they regard as powerful deities, and some images of the Blessed Virgin like Arrokiya Matha.⁵²

Despite the structural and functional similarities of Roman Catholic processions with those of other faiths, Catholics do not simply model their processions after those of Hindus. Frenz observes that Catholic processions in India are a creative conjunction of Roman Catholic processions in Europe and Hindu tradition, which adopted these practices from Christian missionaries.⁵³ What is common between Catholic and Hindu processions is one substratum for dialogue, but it does not blur the difference. For Catholics, it does matter that it is Mary, and not Mariamman or Parvati, who is sitting atop the palanquin dressed in a golden and white sari.⁵⁴ Hindus frequently participate in Catholic processions though the reverse is true to a lesser degree, due to discouragement by Catholic prelates. In some holy places, ritual participation is one-sided; while Hindus openly participate in cults to Catholic saints, Catholic involvement in cults to Hindu deities is often covert with offerings made through Hindu proxies.⁵⁵

Interreligious Encounter at Vailankanni and Hindu Fundamentalism

The Hindu-Christian encounter on display at Vailankanni stands in stark contrast with the current situation of religious persecution against Muslims and Christians in India. The unity witnessed at Vailankanni exemplifies what is possible in plural India. Religious persecution

⁵¹ Narayanan, 'Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory', 25.

⁵² Narayanan, 'Religious Vows at the Shrine of Shahul Hamid', 80.

⁵³ Frenz, 'Virgin and Her "Relations"', 94.

⁵⁴ J. P. Waghorne, 'Chariots of the Gods: Riding the Line between Hindu and Christian', in Raj & Dempsey, *Popular Christianity in India*, 11-37, cited in Frenz, 'Virgin and Her "Relations"', 94.

⁵⁵ Mosse, 'Catholic Saints and the Indian Village', 307.

has swelled in strongholds of Hindu fundamentalism. The rapid growth of Christianity in India has made the Hindu political mainstream constantly vigilant of Christian mission and evangelization. *Hindutva* ideologies aim at creating a national Hindu polity to the exclusion of Muslims and Christians because of the foreign and global character of their respective faiths.⁵⁶ The reality is that Muslims and Christians living in India see themselves as Indian, not foreigners or citizens with a westernized mindset.

The Indian Church's desire for revitalization stemming from perceived spiritual and community decline has become a political issue due to the minority status of Indian Christians and the desire of some national and regional parties to suppress all forms of Christian growth and evangelization in the face of Hindu nationalism.⁵⁷ The quiet danger of a Hindu nationalist ideology lurks beneath the mask of development and advancement promised by the ruling political party. The mounting persecution of minorities (particularly Muslims and Christians) has left many communities living in fear. There are numerous reports of *Hindutva*-incited militancy against Dalit Muslims and Christians.⁵⁸ As a mechanism for their own self-defense, many Dalits do not identify themselves as Muslim or Christian for fear of attacks and so that they can keep the privileges they enjoy.⁵⁹

Victor Turner claims that grassroots dialogue offers four valuable insights for interreligious encounter between Hindus and Catholics.⁶⁰ First, it primarily occurs among the religious folk on the margins of society, organically emerging from their lived human and spiritual concerns, and those of their neighbors with whom they engage in daily dialogical relationship. Pre-established and forced institutional experiments do not work for them. Through daily interactions, they draw from each other's ritual and religious resources and their shared culture and language. Second, they understand the world of rituals as efficacious and productive, not the world of theological concepts and categories. Selva Raj argues that 'although the institutional model recognizes the efficacy and dialogical value of ritual, it has only limited success and appeal because of its inherent elitism, and more importantly, because of the church's aggressive missionary approach in the past and, in some instances, even today'.⁶¹ Institutional dialogue appears divorced from the experiences and concerns of the dialogical and religious partners; it relies heavily on Brahminic and Sanskritic Hinduism

⁵⁶ T. C. Nagy, *Catholic Shrines in Chennai, India: The Politics of Renewal and Apostolic Legacy*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

⁵⁷ Nagy, *Catholic Shrines*, 2-3.

⁵⁸ J. C. B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit?' in S.M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*, New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999, 76-90, cited in J. Begari, 'The Human Rights Implications of Dalit Self-Assertion in India', in Mukherjee, *Locality, History, Memory*, 257-280.

⁵⁹ T. Pulloppillil, *Church, Private Property and the Scheduled Castes*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1998.

⁶⁰ V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, New Jersey: Aldine Transaction, 1974, 231-270; D. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987, cited in S. J. Raj, 'Dialogue "On the Ground": The Complicated Identities and the Complex Negotiations of Catholics and Hindus in South India', *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17.7, 2004, 33-44.

⁶¹ Raj, 'Dialogue "On the Ground"', 42.

whereas dialogue on the ground draws from lay Hinduism. The ritual exchange between lay Hindus and Catholics 'effects a certain organic transformation in the participants' perception of the 'religious other' that transcends temporal, spatial, ritual, and religious boundaries'.⁶² This means that direct entry into the ritual praxis of their partner in dialogue, as happens at Vailankanni, enriches the encounter and understanding of the other. Third, 'dialogue on the ground' is dialogue in action emerging from its religiously plural context. It is not a rejection of institutional models but serves as a corrective and complement to the concept-laden institutional dialogue that appears removed from the existential concerns of common folk and is often one-sided. Its loci are textual, metaphysical, theological, and mystical tradition whereas grassroots dialogue focuses on lay praxis and ritual. Finally, dialogue on the ground challenges a rigid understanding of authenticity, purity, and identity by discouraging the tendency to draw absolute contrasts between coexisting groups and ideologies.⁶³ These insights call for a shift in approach from top-down institutional dialogical experiments to bottom-up grassroots, from traditional emphasis on sacred text and theological reflection to lived praxis.

Reflecting on religious demographics, Francis Clooney argues that despite the ongoing spate of persecutions against religious minorities in plural India, a Hindu *Bharat* is an unrealistic vision of political propagandists. The presence of other traditions in India is clearly not going to fade away, and any change in demographics will prompt and necessitate a new and unending conversation between Hindu and non-Hindu neighbors.⁶⁴ With the migration of Hindus and Christians from India to the West, Europeans and North Americans find that the types of Christianity that have thrived in the Global South are vastly different from what they consider mainstream. These models of Christianity are far more enthusiastic and concerned with the immediate workings of the supernatural, through prophecy, visions, ecstatic utterances, and healing. If most Christians are now living in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, then religious practices dominant in those regions will soon become more common across the globe as these patterns get transplanted into the religious milieu of the core nations of world Christianity, either by migration or actual missions.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Vailankanni's witness to Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and followers of other faiths praying together asserts that religious pluralism extends beyond social and political orientations, providing a context for freeing oneself of constricting social roles to encounter the religious

⁶² Raj, 'Dialogue "On the Ground"', 42-43.

⁶³ C. G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, cited in Raj, 'Dialogue "On the Ground"', 43.

⁶⁴ F. X. Clooney, 'How the Numbers Matter: Demographics and the Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17.6, 2004, 12-19.

⁶⁵ A. P. Joshi, M. D. Srinivas, & J. K. Bajaj, *Religious Demography*, Chennai: Center for Policy Studies, 2003, cited in Clooney, 'How the Numbers Matter', 16-17.

other so that redemptive possibilities may be glimpsed or experienced. Here the Virgin Mary as Arrokiya Matha is clearly a focus of unity bringing about religious and multicultural unity at different levels. What is happening at Vailankanni is worth paying attention to as it awakens the Church to an important contemporary reality. The increase in migration of peoples in large numbers across the globe in recent decades has brought the religious and cultural identities of those people to their new domiciles. As a result, societies, including those in the West, have become religiously plural. Every day is an encounter between Christians and followers of other religions. Recognizing the signs of the times, John Paul II made the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue a priority for Catholic leaders and thinkers.⁶⁶ Developments in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit since Vatican II have influenced Christian reflection on the Church's engagement with religious pluralism, and the challenges of interreligious dialogue in ecclesial life.

Vailankanni has never received approval by the Holy See and the sanction by the local See is not clearly documented even though Bishop Sundaram did petition Pope John XXIII when he was in Rome for the Second Vatican Council. However, approval of Vailankanni's apparitions and manifestation is implicit in the appeal and subsequent papal exaltation of the Shrine to the status of 'minor basilica' in 1962. Given the pilgrim statistics of approximately 20 million annually, formal Vatican sanction would put on display for the world church the authenticity of popular piety by Vailankanni's non-Christian practitioners at a time when the Catholic Church has witnessed unprecedented growth in the Global South, despite the persecution of Christian and Muslim minorities in India. By appearing to impoverished Hindu boys the Blessed Virgin sends the message that who she appears to is not conditional on their being or becoming Catholic, and this message of Arrokiya Matha is in itself an inducement to redemptive interreligious and cross-cultural encounter, and the liberation of the marginalized.

⁶⁶ G. O'Collins, 'Jacques Dupuis' Contributions to Interreligious Dialogue', *Theological Studies* 64, 2003, 388-397.