CHAPTER 9

The Social and Physical Spaces of the Malabar Rites Controversy

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Introduction

During the last decades, categories such as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘caste’ have been strongly criticized as by-products of the British colonial enterprise in India. It is argued that these classification instruments served to discipline and control the Indian subjects by manipulating and reifying fluid religious and social dynamics.\(^1\) Although necessary, such a critique finds a specific limit in its almost exclusive focus on the British colonial period, ignoring the role played by Catholic missionaries, particularly during the early modern age.

A fundamental moment in the production of Catholic orientalist representations of India was the Malabar Rites controversy, a wide and violent clash over the missionary method followed by the Jesuits in the missions of Madurai, Mysore and the Carnatic during the first half of the eighteenth century. The scholarly literature on the Malabar Rites controversy is extremely limited, primarily due to the great abundance and geographic dispersion of the archival and manuscripts sources essential for its reconstruction. Moreover, old and new hagiographical strategies have made it even more difficult to understand the effective meaning of the controversy. The latter has usually been understood as a conflict over an alleged ‘inculturation’ of Tridentine Catholicism within South India: the *accomodatio* (‘adaptation’) proposed by the Italian Jesuit Roberto Nobili (1577–1656) in the Madurai mission at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and enforced by his successors until the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the following century, was thus seen merely as an attempt to adapt Christianity to a non-European culture.\(^2\) As I will argue, the

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2 This can still be seen in recent scholarly works, such as Collins P.M., “The Praxis of Inculturation from Mission: Roberto de Nobili’s Example and Legacy”, *Ecclesiology* 3 (2007) 323–342; Pavone S., “Tra Roma e il Malabar: Il dibattito intorno all’amministrazione dei sacramenti ai paria (secc. XVII–XVIII)”, *Cristianesimo nella storia* 31 (2010) 647–680; eadem,
anachronistic projection of categories proper to contemporary Catholicism has led observers to underestimate the relevance of power relations in the construction of a religious community staffed by European missionaries (mostly Portuguese and Italians) but not subject to a European political power. As a result of this neglect, scholars have ignored that the Malabar Rites were primarily Christianized Hindu saṃskāras (i.e., ‘sacramental’ rituals) functional to the reproduction and distinction of caste hierarchies, rather than mere cultural traits that should be accepted in order to make Christianity more palatable to non-European peoples. Far from being an enlightened experiment of early modern missionaries, the Malabar Rites were primarily an expression of the prevailing agency of the leading native converts. On the other hand, the Jesuit tolerance of caste structures was combined with a clear rejection of Hindu religious practices, so that it is to be ruled out that the missionaries ever had a ‘syncretic’ intentionality.

This chapter uses a visual source in order to explore the connection between physical, social and religious spaces in the early-modern ‘adaptationist’ Jesuit missions of South India. The document we consider here is a multi-view orthographic projection of a typical church in the Madurai mission, presented by the Jesuit Procurator Broglia Antonio Brandolini to the Roman Congregation of the Holy Office in 1725. The purpose of the image was to show how the ‘noble’ castes and the untouchable paṛaiyār (i.e., ‘pariahs’ or ‘untouchables’, as they were called during the British Raj) could participate in the same Mass while avoiding all physical contacts. The image integrates—and acts as an interpretative key to understand—the abundant textual sources on the discussions about the segregation of the paṛaiyār held during the eighteenth-century Malabar Rites controversy. In my interpretation, a careful analysis of the image can ascertain a clear directionality from left to right in the allocation of spaces within the church complex to the missionary, the higher castes and the paṛaiyār, as well as to the women of both caste groups. Particularly relevant was also the proportion of space granted to each community. Notwithstanding their numerical strength, the paṛaiyār were segregated in a mere one-third of the entire church complex. They were not allowed either to get in touch with the ‘noble’ Christians, or to have direct contact with the missionary, whose residence was placed in the high-caste sector. In addition to the left-right
