

JPJRS 11/1 ISSN 0972-3331, Jan 2008 127-139

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4268409

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4268409>

Sacraments Viewed in Indian Christian Perspectives

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Abstract: In this article, the author highlights the manner in which Sacramentality is understood from perspectives that are Indian and, at the same time, Christian. The author is emphatic that he does not do to attempt a merely comparative approach to the different religions in India and Christianity. The temptation of seeing Christianity as an axial religion and other religions as mere approximations of it could lead the Christian believer to view other religions as an outsider and to make judgments on these that tend to be concept-based, no more! Instead, if the mysterious presence of God is presumed in created reality as a whole, then one is encouraged to discover the sacramental presence of God from Indian perspectives. According to our author, the documents of Vatican II give good reason for presuming some kind of sacramental presence in the Indian reality. Would it not be the task of Christian theology to find out how the divine is present in religions other than Christianity? Would this not be a first step in trying to build community, especially in the secular reality of today that is founded on the divine presence underlying it? In the first part some basic sacramental insights from the Christian perspective are commented on. In the second part, an attempt is made to understand these insights from a perspective that is Indian and Christian. In perspectives that are authentically Christian and truly Indian, Sacramentality points to a way of life rather than to a cultic action by itself. So the author concludes the article by affirming that the effect of sacramental presence is meant to make men and women more caring and concerned about those who are suffering.

Keywords: Sacraments, sacramentality, Indian religions, Christian tradition.

When attempting to describe or define 'salvation', The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions speaks of it in the following terms: "The act or state of being safe in ultimate terms. Although all religions have some sense of a condition which might appropriately be called by this name, the state and the way to it are very differently understood."¹

In Christianity, the notion of salvation is inextricably linked with the incarnate person of Jesus Christ, the divine-human being who proclaims, through his whole being, the comprehensive and final salvation of humankind.² Both the person and proclamation of Jesus Christ constitute the Incarnational event that gave Palestinian and European Christianity its specific identity. At the end of the 15th century, when Christianity came to India with Vasco da Gama during the colonial expansion of the west, it had already been shaped by the culture of Europe, even though its dogmatic and doctrinal formulations preserved a Hellenistic format.

When Christianity speaks of the Incarnational event it means that the invisible becomes visible, spirit is made concrete through matter, the other-worldly is manifested in the this-worldly, God is present in the person of Jesus who is the Christ. The Incarnational event calls attention to the sacramental aspect of the reality of the world and, in particular, of human persons. Sacramentality eschews a worldly reality that is totally autonomous and by itself and a God who must then enter this reality and effect salvation in it. God is seen as already active in the world that is created by the God-self and Sacramentality refers to the underlying presence of God in that world. With the person of Jesus Christ in the world, there is a qualitative difference in the mode of God's sacramental presence in the world. The church community is the concrete, visible witness to Jesus Christ and, to that extent, is viewed by the believer as the official sacramental presence of the God-self in the world. As such, the church community is meant to express the sacramental presence of God coming to greater visibility, in its worship, teaching and life in the secular world: "...the church, in its teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that it is and all that it believes." (DV 8)

Our concern in this essay is to highlight the manner in which Sacramentality is understood from perspectives that are Indian and, at

the same time, Christian. It will not do to attempt a merely comparative approach to the different religions in India and Christianity.³ The temptation of seeing Christianity as an axial religion and other religions as mere approximations of it could lead the Christian believer to view other religions as an outsider and to make judgments on these that tend to be concept-based, no more! Instead, if the mysterious presence of God is presumed in created reality as a whole, then one is encouraged to discover the sacramental presence of God from Indian perspectives. The documents of Vatican II give good reason for presuming some kind of sacramental presence in the Indian reality.⁴ Would it not be the task of Christian theology to find out how the divine is present in religions other than Christianity? Would this not be a first step in trying to build community, especially in the secular reality of today that is founded on the divine presence underlying it?

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PART ONE: *Christian Sacramental Perspectives*

To many in the Church, it would seem that the seven sacraments in their present form cannot be changed. This presumption is based on proof texts from scripture and the Christian Tradition that have been pronounced on by the Council of Trent in the 16th century. This Council forbade change: “13. If anyone says that the accepted and approved rites of the Catholic Church which are customarily used in the solemn administration of the sacraments may be despised or omitted without sin by the ministers as they please, or that they may be changed to other new rites by any pastor in the Church, *anathema sit*.”⁵ However, we know that changes were made even though the substantial meaning of the sacrament remained constant.⁶

In the Council of Trent, sacraments were seen as instituted by Jesus Christ who marks the definitive phase of salvation in the world. Faced with the Protestant challenge in the sixteenth century, the Church’s concern was focused on the validity and the fruitfulness of sacraments. Hence, besides viewing the sacraments as grace-giving events in the

life of the Church community, the council spelt out neither the anthropological implications nor the ecclesiological dimensions of the Christian sacramental economy. In the wake of Trent, sacraments came to be seen primarily as the actions of a hierarchical clergy that possessed the power to effect sacraments in the faith community. The council concerned itself only with laying down the conditions that were to be observed if the ordained minister's action was to be sacramentally efficacious. In effect, the directives for sacramental celebration took the form of juridical and legal stipulations that were meant to assure the validity of a sacramental action performed (confect) by an ordained minister. This made the way for sacraments to be seen more as ritualistic actions and less as symbols of God's presence in the world and in the humanizing context of community.

In the post-Tridentine period, the catechisms that were published by the church authorities reflected the council's teaching on sacraments.⁷ The well-known description of a sacrament (an outward sign of inward grace instituted by Jesus Christ that brings salvation to the person) was helpful in a catechesis that was context-specific, i.e. describing a sacrament against the background of the Protestant Reformation. The Church wanted to affirm Jesus Christ as the originator of the sacraments and to identify clearly the person who was authorized to confect a sacrament?⁸ The ordained minister possessed the power to administer the sacrament and the believer was merely a recipient. In this transaction, sacramental grace was effected in the recipient and the sacrament was judged efficacious. Until Vatican II, the notion of Christian Sacramentality continued to draw its meaningfulness from the Tridentine understanding of the seven sacraments.

It was when the Liturgical movement gained a certain momentum and championed the participation of the laity in the liturgy—one recalls the practice of frequent communion encouraged by Pius X in 1905 and the Liturgical Congress in Malines (Belgium) in 1909—that the need for seeing a sacramental action as a community celebration was recognized. Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei* in 1947 supplied the groundwork for liturgical reform that paved the way for Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. There was a retrieval of the New Testament insight that the Christian vocation called a person to believe in Jesus

Christ. Through that action a faith community was born. The building up of a community of faith meant that God was present sacramentally among the people.

While changes have occurred, in the wake of Vatican II, that make for people's participation in liturgical worship, the assumption that, in the end, the ordained minister's action alone matters and that the community can be reduced to a group of mute bystanders still prevails. It would also seem that some further misunderstanding regarding the sacraments continues. Because they confer grace *ex opere operato* (by the celebration of the rite) the wider horizon, i.e. the presence of God underlying the worldly reality, is often neglected. Yet, sacraments are meant to point to, and give expression to, the Sacramentality in the world at large. However, the reality that offers the context in which sacraments function, merits little consideration. The signifying aspect of the sacrament is, for the most part, forgotten and the visibility of the sacrament is mainly concerned with the appropriate gestures, movements and words linked directly with the action or ceremony of an individual sacrament. The cultic moment of the sacrament in the Church is rarely seen as a representation of what happens in the outside world. Karl Rahner had drawn attention to this "anomaly" in the following words: "...the relationship between the 'sign' function [*Summa Theologica* III, Q. 60] and the instrumental causality of the sacraments as Thomas presents them is not fully thought out in its ultimate significance".⁹

Could the fear of the ordained minister forgetting his role be the reason for recent magisterial documents (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and *Redemptionis Sacramentum*) being issued which keep on highlighting the unique ministerial role of the ordained minister? One also discovers that the phrase "People of God" and the theology that should emerge from it are rarely mentioned in official documents. In Vatican II, "People of God" was a key theological intuition in the understanding of the Church along with the notion of the mystery of God present among his people. Is the ecclesiology that has its starting point in People of God too frightening for a Church that exercises its sacramental ministry hierarchically? Today's Church has a long way to go before sacraments are seen as ecclesial events in the building up of community.¹⁰ While *Sacrosanctum Concilium* lays great stress on the community dimension

of sacraments and the participative role of the laity, the Tridentine understanding—which is basically priest-centred—continues to cast its shadow on sacramental celebration.

To build up community means primarily that the community members form a unity because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their willingness to follow his way of life. Such bonding and identifying with the person of Jesus necessarily make for a code of ethics, a fact that is noted by Paul the apostle in his epistles. A Vatican II perspective sees the celebration of the sacrament as a prophetic initiative. The celebration of the seven sacraments is an opportunity for the church to become more truly itself and to effect transformation in persons and structures that will manifest the values of the Reign of God. Finally, the sacramental context is meant to bring a greater identification between the person of Jesus Christ and the members of the Church.

The pre-Vatican II understanding of a sacrament has assumed the form of a ritual act, primarily, performed according to rules and rubrics. Such an understanding offered measured scope to express godliness present in the world. The *aggiornamento* promoted by Vatican II surely indicated a new insight and understanding of the sacramental action. Perhaps the following description would more aptly express what sacramental celebration should imply.

In keeping with the insights gained in Vatican II, the sacramental action is (a) a celebration of faith in community to enable it to serve the purposes of God in the world, (b) a prophetic proclamation of God's Reign that transforms persons and society, and (c) an invitation and opportunity for believers to identify with the person of Jesus Christ. These three aspects of sacramental reality would offer a suitable way of understanding sacramental reality present in different cultural contexts since they emphasize faith as foundational for the God-experience, values that serve the cause of human transformation and a summons to personal freedom to follow a concrete example of godliness in the world.

PART TWO: *Indian Christian Perspectives.*

One can begin by asking what is specifically Indian when we look at Christian sacramental perspectives. One could begin by examining the ritual practices in the different religions in India and study their function in each community. One could then begin trying to incarnate the Christian sacramental experience in the rituals of each religion. This would involve the processes of adaptation and/or even inculturation. The difficulties involved are many. Should all the different rituals of religion be collapsed into a single pattern that can be called Indian? Even the three Individual Churches in India would find such an attempt unnecessary and counter-productive. Could one concrete sacramental form be the same for the whole of India? Given the variety of cultures and the consequent worldviews that are present, the meaningfulness of sacramental reality would hardly allow for such a possibility. Many considerations matter when one attempts to articulate Christian Sacramentality in Indian perspectives.

Religions in India constitute a mosaic of diverse faith communities. The present pattern of sacramental reality in the Latin Rite with its monochromatic and juridical structure would not fit in with the different faith communities. The concept of Sacramentality in Indian and Christian perspectives must take into account the issues that are significant in the India of today. The following must be considered to understand the meaningfulness of Sacramentality from perspectives that Christian and Indian.

(1) *Worldview*

The Christian worldview presupposes the notion of person. Edward Schillebeeckx's explanation of sacramental encounter uses the inter-personal model. In scholastic terminology, the notion of person is that of an autonomous subject that is dependent on, yet distinct from God. Secondly, the category of history is seen as essential to understand the Incarnation event in traditional Christianity since the event of the birth of Jesus is plotted on a space-time axis. Worldviews in India may not lay great store by the term 'person' who is seen as the autonomous subject. Must the category of history be a *sine qua non* for all privileged manifestations of God in the world? Cosmologies of the different religions in India differ widely and the elements and concepts of the

underlying structure of the world as a whole suggest that the sacramental manifestation of God in one religion is different from that of another. In Hinduism, keeping the sustained order (*Rta*) of the universe in place will call for sacrifice. In this scenario, what is the type of Sacramentality envisaged? In Islam, the whole concept of Sacramentality is questioned since the need to acknowledge the absolute proscribes any representation of it. The meaningfulness of objects, observances, customs and rituals is largely influenced by the worldview in which they occur and, by the same token, each expression of Sacramentality—if possible at all—will be in terms of a particular worldview.

(2) Universal Presence of the Divine

The sacraments of the Church were constituted by borrowing rituals from local cultures and then giving them a Christian finality through the use of appropriate words and modifications. In the nascent period of Christianity, these rituals, which were mostly taken over from the religion of Israel, preserved their external form but received a new meaning and function. Such a procedure supposes that the rituals even in their original locale possessed a meaning that was wholesome and in continuity with the new meaning acquired in Christianity. Should this fact not be an indicator that the footsteps of God trail over all creation and that Sacramentality in other religions or worldviews waits to be recognized, not infused?

There are merits in considering the whole world as sacramental, since all that exists has its origin from God. One could say that because the world is sacramental, we have the Sacramentality of God present in Jesus Christ and the Church with its seven sacraments. While a Christian believer may appreciate the Christian notion of Sacramentality as understood by the Church, he or she could legitimately look for and recognize Sacramentality present elsewhere. *Nostra Aetate* offers sufficient justification for doing so:

In its task of promoting unity and charity among people, indeed also among nations, it [the Church] now turns its attention chiefly to what things human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together.

All nations are one community and have one origin, because God caused the whole human race to dwell on the whole face of the earth. They also have one final end, God, whose providence, manifestation of goodness and plans for salvation are extended to all, until the elect be gathered together in the holy city which the bright light of God will illuminate and where people will walk in his light. (NA 1)

(3) Community

Community can be seen as the context of the self and the other. A person can only become himself or herself when he or she is symbolized in the other. The implication is that one person becomes truly himself or herself when engaged in relationship to another (the community). For other species it may be different, but for a person to be truly human there is need of the other. Relationship is the essential condition to be or become human. Every society acknowledges the need to form community for those who would be its members. The Hindu *samskaras* perform the task of bringing about community and they are usually seen as the counterpart of Christian sacraments. However, there are differences between the two. “The *samskaras* are the rituals through which high caste or twice-born Hindus mark their transitions through life (and death), and may thus be regarded as rites of passage. In [K.] Pandey’s summary, the *samskaras* are ‘for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual, so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community’.¹¹ Christianity, with freedom and equality as core values, cannot and should not endorse caste distinctions.

Community suggests that those who live in it share an equal dignity and the same rights. However, class and caste distinctions have always proved to be obstacles in the path to equality for all members in a community. In christianized Europe, feudalism persisted and it was mainly after the Enlightenment period that the nation state took shape in Europe, thanks to the American War of Independence (1776) that ushered in an era where church and state were confined to mutually exclusive spheres, and the French Revolution (1789) that gave rise to the nation-state. The nation-state was a secular reality and affirmed an individual’s dignity and rights, not because he or she professed a religion but because he or she was a human person.

In India, community has been synonymous with caste. On the basis of *Varna*, communities are formed. It is a moot point if social harmony has really been maintained because of casteist society. What is certain is that the lower castes have felt the inhuman oppression of those belonging to the higher castes. Religion is surely being misused to secure and perpetuate the advantages that accrue to the higher castes. Whatever may have been the merits of *Varnashamdharm*a that provides a code of ethics and observances for each person in virtue of his/her birth, stage of life, and the duties required of him/her, in fact, differentiation on the basis of caste militates against the idea of a true community.

(4) Prophetic Presence

Just as Jesus is seen as the eschatological prophet who inaugurates a new covenantal relationship of humankind to God, so too there have been prophetic persons in religions in India. The Buddha opted for a society where caste would have no place. In more recent times, persons like Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1881-1922) championed the cause of women. Similarly there are those who have taken sides with the Dalits and the Tribal people to obtain justice for them and the recognition of their rights and human dignity. Such prophetic action will always have a place in the building of true community and must be seen as sacramentalizing the presence of God.

(5) Ecological Concerns

In general, people who, for the greater part, gain their livelihood in a rural economy respect earth and nature. Ecological concern is not merely about preserving the bounty of nature for succeeding generations; it is first of all affirming God's creation as something given to human persons as a trust. That was the intuition of Gandhiji when he propounded his doctrine of stewardship. The gospels would surely support his intuition. A person's ethical decisions and behaviour reflect the sovereignty of God in his or her life. Closeness to the world of nature has been the lot of most Indians. The sense of the sacred, the holy and the divine follows them in their homes, places of work and in decisions of life. Shrines, temples and centres of pilgrimage dot much of the countryside and devotees frequent these. *Ashrams* witness to peoples' love for simplicity in life and also to their quest for God in

prayer, meditation and study. Ashram communities are made up of persons from different faiths who live in solidarity and manifest religious faith.

Conclusion

In perspectives that are authentically Christian and truly Indian, Sacramentality points to a way of life rather than to a cultic action by itself. The sacred is so dispersed throughout the secular that a person rarely finds it possible to ignore one or the other. In fact, a person is called to feel God's presence in both. All life is the play of God in the world of men and women reassuring them of their faith and responding to their needs. Indians, in general, feel the need of invoking God many times during the day and constantly performing ritual actions to remember the divine in their daily life.

The effect of sacramental presence is meant to make men and women more caring and concerned about those who are suffering. Sacramentality while directing our thoughts and actions to God will always include the neighbour, the one in need. Through the actions that bring health and wholeness to others the divine reveals its presence in the world and the community is the context where the God of all makes the God-self presence most significant and efficacious.

Notes

- 1 John Bowker (editor): *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford/ New York, 1997, p 844.
- 2 When speaking about Christianity, it is Catholicism that is implied.
- 3 This approach is reflected in the “History of Religion School” (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) that had used information derived from the comparative study of other religions in its study of Christianity in general.
- 4 *Nostra Aetate* 2: “The catholic church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these [Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions] religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone.” Norman P. Tanner (English Editor): *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Volume II (Trent-Vatican II) Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, London/Washington 1990, p 969.
- 5 ND 1323 in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis: *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, Jacques Dupuis (editor), 7th revised and enlarged edition, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 2004, p 566.
- 6 Pius XII in the apostolic constitution *Sacramentum Ordinis* (1947) decreed that the imposition of hands constituted the essential rite of ordination, even though, in the past, the handing over of the instruments (*traditio instrumentorum*) was seen as part of the essential rite of ordination.
- 7 The Roman Catechism (*Catechismus ex Decreto Concilii Tridentini*) produced in 1566 under Pius V was intended for priests to teach. It contained the Church’s doctrine concerning the creeds, sacraments, commandments and prayer. The pope had it translated into many languages.
- 8 This is true especially of the sacraments of Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick that are “conferred” by an ordained minister.
- 9 Karl Rahner: *Theological Investigations*, Volume XIV, (translated by David Bourke), The Seabury Press, New York, 1976, “9. Introductory Observations on Thomas Aquinas’ Theology of the Sacraments in General,” p 150.
- 10 “It must be remembered that the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas does not include any developed ecclesiology, and that the treatise on the sacraments follows immediately upon that of Christology, which is itself

included only at [a] relatively late stage. In view of these facts, it is of course impossible for there to be any really effective treatment of the Church as 'basic sacrament' [*Sacrosanctum Concilium* nos. 5 and 26] as a distinct theme. This inevitably has a damaging effect on the doctrine of the sacraments in general too, for the connecting member, so to say, is missing. Or to put it in other terms: the truly ecclesiological dimension of the sacraments is not taken into consideration. Even at those points at which Thomas interprets sacramental character as deputing the subject concerned to the Christian cult [Q. 63], and at which, as a result, there is a suggestion of an ecclesiological view of the sacraments, the Church is still not clearly included as a vital factor. For as Aquinas presents it this Christian cult is precisely viewed too much as a task of the individual functionary officially appointed in each case." *TI*, Volume XIV, pp 151-2.

- 11 John Bowker (Editor): *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1997, p 850.

No of Words:	4,414
Date Received:	December 4, 2007
Date Approved:	December 28, 2007