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Hindu Catalyst for Catholic Priesthood

Thomas Chillikulam, S.J.

Gyanoday, Khaspur Village, District Patna, Bihar 801503.

Abstract: An overview of the origin and development of priesthood in Hinduism is given. It was Vedic sacrifice that led to the importance of Hindu priests. Hindu priesthood has changed with the times. It is in the performance of sacraments, especially the last rites, that Brahmins hold sway. Knowledge of the Vedas is of utmost importance to Hindu priests. For Catholic priests too, preaching and teaching the Word is primary. The need of the hour for Catholic priests is to be worthy Ministers of the Eucharist, to be prophetic, and witness to the kenotic nature of Christian priesthood. The ideal for Hindu priesthood is to be one who has mastered his senses.

Keywords: Priest, priesthood, Hindu priest, Brahmin, Vedic sacrifice, development of Hindu priesthood, Catholic priest.

Introduction

The origin of Priesthood is co-terminus with the development of human civilization and socio-religious structures. Priesthood existed in all cultures and religions at all times, in some form or other. Even in Islam which denies any priestly order, the Mufti fulfills the function of a teacher and interpreter of religious laws and the Imam leads the people in ritual prayer. Similar is the case with 'Bhikku' in Buddhism. Hinduism, from ancient times, developed a well structured order of priesthood within an even more structured institution of Varna system. It would be naïve to assume that the notion of priesthood is the same in all religions. Priest and priesthood mean different things to different religions, yet they play similar roles within their systems and can be seen as homologous

concepts having similarity in difference. This similarity in difference provides us with a good foundation for a fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue between the understanding of priesthood in other religions and Christianity. In the following pages, beginning with a brief study of the origin and development of Hindu priesthood, I intend to reflect on some of the significant insights of Hindu and Christian Priesthood and see how these insights can work as a catalyst for a more relevant and meaningful Christian priesthood in India today.

1. Origin and Development of Hindu Priesthood

The earliest priests of the Vedic times were sage-poets. The Rig Veda mentions 150 such seers (*Rshi*). The important figures among these include Bharadwaj, Kashyap, Gotam, Vishwāmitra, Jamadagni and Vāṣiṣṭha. They were composers and singers of hymns or Mantras. Vāṣiṣṭha composed the highest number of Sūktas, the entire seventh Mandala of Rig Veda consisting 104 Sūktās, and Bhardwaj has sixty Sūktās of the Rig Vedic Mantras to his credit. These figures were royal priests (*Purohita*) and recited the Mantras and offered sacrifices for the welfare of their ‘Yajamāna’ the King, and for his victory in war. For instance, Bharadwaj was the priest of King Divodas, and Vasishta functioned as the priest of King Sudas. The earliest recorded horse-sacrifice (*Ashwamedha Yajña*), found in the Rig Vedic Aitareya Brahmana (8.4.21), is performed by Vāṣiṣṭha on behalf of King Sudas. Besides being composers and singers of Mantras, the early Vedic priests also functioned as ministers or advisors (*Mantri*) of the King and occasionally as commanders of the army. Vasishta speaks with great pride about the role of the priest in the success of the king:

“(King) Tristu Bharat was like an orphan child. When Vasishta became his priest, he became mighty.” (RV. 7. 83. 4). Priests Bharadwaj, Vasishta and the sons of Vishwāmitra actively engaged in warfare. Thus, it is not surprising that the priest Bhardwaj prays for physical power than spiritual power — “*Aśma bhavatu nastanu*” i.e., let our body be of stone (R.V.6.75.12). The King would remove the priest if he failed to bring success in war through the recitation of Mantras, performance of rituals, by providing strategies or even as commander of the army. Bhardwaj was removed from the position of Royal priest and minister by Sudas because his Mantras failed to be effective.¹

The only allusion in the First Veda to priesthood as part of a well ordered social structure is found in the famous Purusha-sūkta. In this hymn of cosmogony, the whole creation – sun, moon, animals, plants, humans and even social structures – originate from the sacrifice of the Purusha who is “the life giving principle of this whole universe, whatever has been and whatever shall be” (R.V.10.90.2). The Sūkta provides a philosophic-theological foundation for the validity of the Varna system as divinely ordered. In this well defined hierarchical system, the Brahmin class enjoys primacy due to its origin as the “mouth of the Purusha” (*Brahmano ‘sya mukham āsīd*)² and exercises superiority over the other three classes which represent the lower parts of the Purusha. Being “the mouth” of the Purusha, Brahmins are to be the seat of speech and teachers of the world.³

The development of the Brahmana priests as a hereditary, exclusively endogamous class within the hierarchical Varna system as well as their primacy over the other Varnas, to a great extent, can be credited to the

emergence of Vedic sacrifice. The earliest and originary experience of the Veda was one in which gods and humans communicated freely and spontaneously. The world of the gods, humans, animals and all beings moved in a smooth and interrelated order called Ṛta. Gradually, this spontaneous relationship was replaced by a rigid structure called Sacrifice (Yajña). Yajña began to be considered as the custodian of the cosmic order, and even gods could be controlled by the sacrifice. The supreme value in life was the imperative prescribed by the scripture to perform sacrifice because sacrifice was seen as the “navel of the universe” (Yajñovai *bhuvanasya nābhi*). With the ascendance of sacrifice, it was natural that the performer of the sacrifice, the priest, too gains supremacy.

Priesthood became a complex affair with a shift in importance from the *Grahya* (domestic) sacrifice to the *Srauta* sacrifice. In the *Grahya* sacrifice the householder himself was the sacrificial priest and there was only a single domestic sacrificial fire. On the contrary, the *Srauta* sacrifices were undertaken by kings, nobles and rich householders for specific intentions, and these required many priests, immense wealth and several days of performance. The chief priest in a sacrifice, *Purohita*, was appointed by the *Yajamāna*, the undertaker of sacrifice. Sacrifice itself being complex, its various aspects required specialized priests. Based on their varying functions in the sacrifice, there emerged four classes of officiating priests called *Ritvij*, besides the *Purohita*. They are (1) The *Hōtri* who recites the Mantras in praise of gods who would partake of the sacrifice, (2) *Adhvaryu* who prepares the altar, looks after the fires, cooks the oblations and thus acts as an over all in charge of the sacrifice, (3) *Udgātri* priests who sing the *Sāman* verses as well as songs

addressed to particular gods, and (4) Brāhman, the expert of the ritual and the expository of sacred power who makes sure that the rituals are performed accurately and according to Vedic prescriptions.

Nomenclatures such as Acharya, Upadhyay, Guru, Pundit etc. have been used as correlatives for Hindu priesthood. Manusmriti, while employing all these terms for priests, clearly distinguishes them – “a Brahmin who initiates a student in the sacrament of ‘Yajñopav ’ and teaches him the Veda and the Upanishad is Acharya. A Brahmin who teaches the Vedangas for livelihood is Upadhyay...”⁴ In the classical Hindu thought a Brahmin need not be an Acharya or an Upadhyaya, but, for exceptions notwithstanding, only a hereditary Brahmin would be eligible to be Acharya, Guru or Upadhyay.

Hindu priesthood has treaded a long path from the Purohita of Vedic times to the Pujari of modern times. Without going into the details of this journey it suffices to say that while retaining many of the ancient characteristics, Hindu priesthood has changed with times. The Pujari or Pandit’s role today is much reduced in terms of influence in socio-political sphere. As temple priest he performs the consecration and worship of the idol (*Shasopachār*) and does the daily ‘Arati’. In some temples special Yajña, Satsang (singing of Bhajans) and ‘Pravachan’ (preaching, mainly based, on the stories of the Puranas) are also undertaken by the priests. Hindu Puja is not centred merely on temple worship. Worshipping in the temple is neither obligatory nor is it seen to be essential. The Puja today is a simple worship form in which the priest receives the offerings of the devotees on behalf of the deity and returns it as ‘Prasad’ of the deity. He may also bless the devotee by sprinkling holy water and giving

the same to sip. Many upper caste families, both in the urban and rural areas have a special place of worship such as a prayer room with the idols of their personal god or a Tulsi plant in their yard. In the domestic worship, a priest is not present except when invited for a special occasion. Then there are public rituals such as that takes place during festivals. In Durga Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, Saraswati Puja and such other festivals idols are installed in Pandals for public *darshan* and worship, and in those occasions the priest plays a significant role in transforming the image into a deity through the rite of consecration called '*Pranapratishta*'.

It is in the performance of the sacraments (*samskāras*) that the Brahmin still holds sway. Not all sacraments requires the presence of a priest, but in the last sacraments – *Antyeshti* and *Srādhā* – a Brahmin priest's participation is considered essential, because what the Brahmin eats (during the *Shrādhā* ceremony) goes to the ancestors and "satisfies the fathers" (*Pitṛnām tasya triptih*) for seven generations.⁵

In villages, and even in urban areas, people often consult the priest to find the auspicious time (*Muhūrta*) for important functions. They help find right partners for marriage by matching the horoscopes of eligible boys and girls. The Pujari of today, especially those in the villages, need not necessarily be a scholar, a knower of the scriptures or even a pious person. He might just know sufficient Mantras to perform a ritual. A Hindu Pujari may not command the respect of the village as he often demands a big sum for his services. Kanchan, a young man from the village of Khaspur where my residence is located, expresses his view of the priest graphically – *aaj ka pandit "paisa dijiye, katha pathenge"* (pay up the

Pandit first and listen to the Katha). But he adds in the same breath – “but we can’t do without him, *Pandit toh Bhagawan hi hai*” (after all, Pandit is equal to Bhagawan).

Having considered the origin and development of priesthood in Hinduism, I shall proceed to reflect on some of the important insights of Hindu priesthood and interface them with the Catholic understanding of priesthood.

2. The ‘Vedapāthi and Veda Pāragam’: Priest as Knower and Teacher of the Word

Scripture is closely associated with the priest in all religions. One of the important functions of the priest is to explain and interpret the revealed Word to people. In Hinduism, from the early Vedic period, a true Brahmana was perceived to be a knower of the Veda, and teaching the Veda was his sole privilege. The Veda, being direct knowledge (*aproksha Anubhūti*) and not human word (*apurusheya*), is accepted as Divine Word. Hence the mandate given to the Brahmana during the Upanayana rite “to go beyond what is human (*apakrāman paurusheyād*) and take up the divine Word (*Vṛnāno Daivyaṃ Vachah*)”⁶ The Rig Veda identifies the Brahmana with the inherent power of knowledge (RV.VIII.35) and the Atharva Veda (22.22) prays for the birth of Brahmanas possessing the lusture of Vedic knowledge (*Brahman Braahmāno brahmavarchasi jayatāma*).

Manusmriti insists that being born as the mouth of the creator, it is both the right and duty of the Brahmin to teach the Veda. One must never accept a person as Acharya if he is not a Brahmin and who does not possess the knowledge of the Veda and the Vedangas. A non-Brahmin can be accepted as teacher only in an emergency situation when the Brahmin is not available.⁷ Indictment

of the priest who does not know the scriptures is harsh and sharp – “a wooden elephant, a stuffed deer and a Brahmin without the knowledge of the Veda are only namesakes (*nām vibhrati*) and are not real...just as a eunuch is fruitless (*aphalah*) among women so also a Brahmin without the knowledge of scripture is fruitless (*Vipro anrichoaphalah*).”⁸ For Manu, the greatest ‘Tapa’ a Brahmin could undertake is the study of scripture (2:166). According to him, “feeding a single Vedapāthi priest during Srādha (*Brahmabhoj*) brings the same fruit as feeding ten lakh priests who do not know the Veda” (3:131). The Guru who teaches the Veda is graded higher in respect and honour than the students’ parents who gives him birth (2:146). A true Brahmin is a knower and teacher of scriptures (Vedapāthi or Veda pāragam). According to Satapatha Brahmana, a scholarly priest (*Brāhmanam Vedapāragam*) makes the place of sacrifice holy by his very presence.⁹

Teaching the Veda and learning it, both demand certain inner and outer dispositions, because both these acts are considered as sacred as a sacrifice. Manu calls Vedic learning and teaching ‘Brahma Yajna’ that is, sacrificial offering to God – *Adhyāpanam Brahmayañnah* (3:70). Connectedness to the divine is essential for the knowledge of scripture. Scripture as direct revelation (*aparokshanubhūti*) is ‘Sruti’ (heard) and to “hear” one must be connected to the Divine that reveals Itself. Hence the teacher of the Veda is not a mere ‘Shāstri’ but a Guru and Acharya. The Acharya gives a second birth (*brahmajanma*) to the student and becomes his second father, the first being the biological father. Manusmriti asks the student as well as the teacher to be ‘*Jīvendriya*’ (one who has control over the senses) to qualify for

learning and teaching of the Veda (2:115) The understanding of Self-control as a pre-requisite for scriptural knowledge is symbolically expressed at the ‘Upanayan’ ceremony when the student receives his ‘Kaupeen’ (loin clothes) and ‘Mekhala’(waist band).

Moral aptitude and behavior based on Dharma must mark the character of a Vedapāthi. Manu prescribes non-violent attitude (ahimsa), purity of mind (*manasi shudhe*), tolerance to humiliation (*avamānasya ākānśet*) and endearing speech (*Vākchaiva madhura*).¹⁰ External behavior of the Vedapāthi must be marked by politeness, discipline, respect for the Acharya, elders and women as well as purity and cleanliness of the body.

3. The Catholic Priest as Teacher of the Word

Vatican II in its document *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (4), places, in no uncertain terms, preaching and teaching the Word as the “first task of priests”. The eligibility and authority to teach is not given to any and everyone in the Church, neither can this authority be earned by any means. It is a grace “given and offered...authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty (“the sacred power”) to act *in persona Christi Capitis*.”¹¹ Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest receives a “special grace of the Holy Spirit so that he serves as an instrument for his Church...as a representative of Christ.”¹² Vat. II affirms that priests are “authentic teachers of the apostolic faith endowed with the authority of the Church.” (LG.25), and the Word of God is “rightly sought from the mouth of the priests.” (PO.4).

Unlike in the case of Christian priests, priesthood is not bestowed on the Brahmin priest by a higher authority nor

is he authorized or mandated by any external authority to teach. Yet, he is bound by his priestly duty to study and teach the Word. His responsibility and authority to teach is intrinsic to his nature and priestly state. The Christian priest's task as teacher of the Word is more challenging than his Hindu counterpart in that his hearers are different and diverse. He is mandated to teach, interpret the scriptures and form the Christian community on the one hand, and proclaim the gospel to people of other religions on the other.

The Catholic priest's mission of proclaiming the gospel to all is increasingly becoming complex in India today. Verbal proclamation, sometimes even proclamation of gospel values through social upliftment, is perceived by many people of other religions as part of a strategy to convert and Christianize the country. The Hindu fundamentalists are more vehement and audible today than ever in branding Christian proclamation as immoral and even as anti-national. The Christian fundamentalist groups, by their fiery preaching and utterances that hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindus have also been fanning the fire of mistrust.

In Hinduism, no mandate is given to the priest to "go out" and preach. Hindu priest or Guru does not have to "go out" because people "come in" to hear and learn the Word from him. He is seen and experienced as a man of the Veda. It is interesting to note that the most commonly used literary word for priest among Christians in Kerala is 'Vaidikan'. During Vedic times the 'Ritvij' priests were known as 'Vaidik' due to their close association with Vedic mantras and rituals. The Sanskrit word 'Vaidik' in its adjectival form literally means "born from the Veda" or "in the image of the Veda"¹³. An ideal Hindu priest's life

is to be so rooted in the Veda that he was to be ‘Vaidik’, i.e., in accordance with or in the image of the Veda. If we apply this meaning to Christian priesthood, a priest is one who is so rooted in the Word of God that he is the image of the Word or in other words, he **is** the Word. The Christian priest, as he reads, reflects and teaches the Word, “must ask himself: how can I **be** the Book that I read...how do I make God’s Word my flesh...we must seriously strive to **live** scripture, to be the Book, to give visibility and voice to the Word of God.”¹⁴

When the priest becomes the Word, he needs to “go out” less. He will attract people to “come in” and hear the Word. His proclamation must be more with life than with words. The Bhagavad Gita is emphatic in saying that it is not words of the priests and elders that people follow but what they do or act (*Yadyatācharati*) and what they prove (*Yat pramānam kurute*) through their life (BG.3:21). A less intimidating and more receptive way of proclaiming the Word in India today is by using fewer words and by being the Word.

4. The Purohita: Priest as Minister of Sacrifice

The Priest and Sacrifice (Rituals) are inseparable twins in most religious traditions. In Hinduism, the very etymological sense of the word ‘Purohita’ is “one who is placed in front” (in the performance of Yajna and in the council of royal ministers). In the Vedic sacrifice, the priest offered gifts and food meant for gods into the sacrificial fire, accompanied by sacred Mantras, and the sacrificial fire carried the offerings to gods. Yet, “What is interesting for us is that in the Vedic conception the ‘sacrificer’ is the ‘lay person’..., though he is ‘consecrated’ for the liturgical function, while the

Brahmins act as his ‘ministers’ in the performance of the sacred action.”¹⁵ The priest does something similar to what the sacrificial fire does to the oblation – facilitating the transformation and transporting of the offerings to the divine realm. This is the reason why Agni is said to be the first priest and the prototype of priesthood.

The purpose or intention of Sacrifice (Yajña) could be specific personal needs and desires of the Yajamāna (purushartha). Yet, sacrifice itself contained an inner transformative power related to the well being of the whole cosmos. The structure of sacrifice represented the warp and woof of the cosmos and sacrifice maintained not only individual prosperity but universal and cosmic order. Manusmriti articulates this understanding in a graphic way – “oblation offered in the fire goes to the sun, from the sun comes rain, from the rain comes vegetation and food (*annam*) and from food originate human beings” (3:76). Ultimately, it is sacrifice that maintains and keeps going the cosmic order and its process. The priest’s role as mediator in promoting this order is vital.

Today’s Hindu Pujari continues to fulfill the mediating role of the Purohita by performing the ‘Shadśopachār’ (16 forms of worship) to the deity in the ‘garbhagriha’ of the temple, by receiving the offerings of the devotees on behalf of gods. Most importantly, the role of the Brahmin priest is inevitable in the performance of Srādha. In Srādha karma his role is much greater than mediation. He represents the ancestor. Feeding the priest (*Brahmabhoj*) is the most important ritual for the Srādha ceremony because the ancestors (pitarah) eat and get satisfied while the Brahmin eats. In his detailed description of the Srādha ceremony (Manusmriti 3: 187-284), Manu instructs the Brahmin priest to continue eating even if the food is

unbearably hot because as long as he keeps eating, the fathers (pitarah) continue to eat the same food and are satisfied (*Pitarah tāvāt aśnanti*, 3:237). A satisfied Brahmin would say the final word of blessing “*svadhāho*”, implying, “may the fathers obtain the food” and the ancestors are considered fully happy and enter the abode of gods. Be it sacrifice, Puja or Srādhā, the actual performer is not the priest but the layperson. He is only a mediator, a representative and an agent. He “stands in front” (Purohita) on behalf of the people, not as a leader but as a minister.

5. Catholic Priest – Minister of the Eucharist

The centrality and significance of the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is well summed up by Vat.II: “...in the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself our Pasch and the living bread which gives life to men through his flesh—that flesh which is given life and gives life through the Holy Spirit”. (PO.5). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1356) outlines three important dimensions of the Eucharistic celebration – (1) thanksgiving and praise, (2) memorial and sacrificial meal, (3) the presence of Christ. Eucharist is communitarian by its very nature and all the above three are actualized in the “Eucharistic assembly of the faithful”. In the assembly of the faithful the priest stands “acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ...and make present again and again...the unique sacrifice of Christ.” (#1566) Thus, the priest as minister of the Eucharist plays an indispensable part as he 1) represents Christ (“act in the person of Christ”), 2) leads the faithful in thanksgiving and praise 3)

unites the offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ and 4) makes present Christ sacramentally through the celebration of the Eucharistic meal and consecration of the bread and wine.

One of the accusations against Catholic Mass is that it is too “priest-centred”. Even after the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council, it is not a rare sight in Churches today where priest is the “performer” and people’s role is often reduced to a few mutterings of “Amen”, “Alleluia” and “also with you”. The priest must not forget that it is Christ himself who offers the sacrifice in union with the community. When the priest acts “in the person of Christ”, it implies that he does not act in his own person. The instrumental and mediatory role of the priest needs to be retrieved today.

The Vedic idea of the instrumentality of the priest could be insightful for us. In the Vedic sacrifice it is the intention (*niyoga*) of the layperson that is central to sacrifice. The power of the mantra and the expertise of the priest are only instrumental in the accomplishment of the intention of the Yajamāna. The Catholic priest, as his Hindu counterpart, is called to offer the sacrifice in the name of the community. But the instrumental nature of the priestly role in the Eucharist is often forgotten or ignored. Michael Amaldoss has rightly pointed out this discrepancy: “The presbyter plays an indispensable role of praying and offering in the name of the community. But we offer our thanks and prayers ‘through, with and in Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit’...we should rather say that presbyter as ‘priest’ has an instrumental role in relation to Jesus Christ and the Spirit (God) and a coordinating and facilitating role in relation to the community”¹⁶

When people speak of the “sacred hands of the priest that bring down Christ to earth” one must sense the danger of a wrong understanding of the doctrine of “ex opere operato”. The words of consecration are not magical words uttered with the magical power of the priest. “He is not putting on his own show in which people are the spectators. He is not set apart with special magical powers to make Christ present on the altar...it is the faith of the Church and the Spirit of God who do this, even when the presbyter happens to be an unworthy servant”.¹⁷

The Vedic sacrifice assumes a universal significance as the sacrifice holds the potential to accomplish not only the personal intention of the Yajamāna, but the maintenance and upkeep of the cosmos and its processes. Through oblations and other rituals the Vedic priest offered the whole cosmos as a sacrifice. The cosmic nature of sacrifice reflects vividly in the Eucharistic sacrifice too. In their celebration of the Eucharist Vat. II invites the faithful to “offer themselves, their works and all creation with Christ”. The Catholic priest as he presides over the Eucharist is urged to help the community of believers to connect with the world and the cosmos. The ritualistic sacrifice that celebrates Christ’s sacrifice on the cross must be united with the actual crosses of the crucified people of the world who are victims of hunger, exploitation, violence, dehumanization and deprivation. No priest in India can truly and authentically offer the Eucharistic sacrifice unless he makes himself part of the struggle to overthrow altars of structural injustice on which Dalits, Adivasis and the marginalized people are daily sacrificed.

6. Brahmana: The Upholder of Dharma

A Brahmin is said to have three births. The first is from the mother, the second from the Guru through the sacrament of Upanayana and the third from the study and performance of sacrifice (*Yajña dīksha*).¹⁸ One becomes a Brahmana (Brahma + an, i.e. related to Brahma) not just by his first birth from the mother but from the latter two births too. Being related to God and being a knower of God, the Brahmin priest possesses an innate divine power which not only distinguishes him from the others but also raises him to a position of moral authority and power. Atharva Veda X.5 uses hyperbolic terms to describe the innate power obtained during the stage of Brahmacharya and especially in the sacrament of Upanayana. The student ‘being carried in the womb of the Acharya’ (*acharya Brahmachārinām krunute garbhamantah*), when born through Upanayana is visited by the Devas, and in him the Devas meet in concord (*tasmin devāh sanmanaso bhavanti*). Verse 5 of the same Atharva text goes on to say that the twice-born Brahmin now is given the power and responsibility to “grasp the worlds together, constantly drawing them together (*lokān samgribhya*). ‘Lokān samgibhya’ reminds us of ‘loka-samgraha’ in Bhagavad Gita 3:20 and the social responsibility of the Hindu priest.

The Dharmasastras continued to bestow the same sublime position and sacredness to priesthood, but not without reminding the Brahmin of the ideal he is expected to live and teach. Manusmriti affirms the moral, intellectual and spiritual superiority of the Brahmin over all other humans – “*Sreshtāh nareshu Brāhmanāh*” (1: 96). By virtue of his knowledge and innate power “a ten year old Brahmana must be considered father to a hundred year old Kshatriya.” (2: 135). A Brahmin is not born for himself. He is born as ‘the immortal body of Dharma’

(*Murti dharmasya śāśvati*) and he is born for dharma-
“*Dharmārtham utpanno*” ((1:98). This is so because he
holds the power to protect the dharma of all beings -
“*Sarvabhūtānām dharmakoshasya guptaye*” (1:99).

Artha Sastra reiterates the great moral power and responsibility of the priest to stand for truth. As Purohita and minister (mantri) of the king, the priest provided advice and counsel to the king. But if the king erred, the priest was expected to play the admonitory role. This was easier said than done, as the priest was often in the payroll of the king. Yet, Kautilya, in his Artha Sastra, reminds the priest – “Just as the disciple follows the teacher, the son follows the father and the servant follows his master, so too the King must follow the priest” (4.8.2). Already the Atharva Veda had declared autonomy to the priest. After the Rajasuya sacrifice at the coronation of the king, the priest addressing the people says, “Ye, people! This is your king. But Soma is the king over us Brahmanas.” (AV.Vs.9.23). The independence of priesthood held its own by its claim to spiritual power and wisdom. The priest and the sage exerted a healthy check on the king. “The internal balance of power between Brahmana and Kshātra-spirituality and politics- during the Vedic period prevented politics from assuming dictatorial powers or expansionist militarism, and spirituality from surrendering to the harsh asceticism or anti-secular outlook on life.”¹⁹

7. The Prophetic Role of Christian Priesthood

Faced with a declining public confidence and fast fading image in the post-modern world, priests are challenged to rediscover their prophetic role. The prophetic dimension of Christian priesthood finds its source in the very person and mission of Jesus. The

priesthood attributed to Jesus in the Letter to Hebrews is not an overly cultic and hierarchical priesthood but one that is obtained through his self-giving death that he offered as the perfectly efficacious sacrifice. Jesus' attitude towards cultic practices and observances were threatening for the Pharisees and scribes. "Continuing the mission of Jesus and adhering to the value system he proposed would always and everywhere invite the ire of the establishment."²⁰ The sending out of the apostles, narrated in all the synoptic gospels, discloses the prophetic character of discipleship.

The apostles are sent 'to proclaim the Kingdom and to heal' and they are given "power and authority over demons" (Lk.9.1). They are sent as signs of the Kingdom and as counter signs of the worldly values of money and power (9.3). They are to "shake the dust from their feet in testimony against" those who do not welcome the Kingdom values (9.5). They must not strike a compromise with the powers of the world but must be ready to face opposition and persecutions because they are sent as "lambs among wolves." (10.3).

The Christian priest who shares the priesthood of Christ is called to be a prophet. An overly hierarchical, cultic and institutional priesthood cannot fulfill the prophetic mission but would rather fall prey to the temptation to side with the powerful of the world. The Church-feudal lord nexus in medieval Europe and the Brahmana-Kshtria-Vaishya coalition in the Hindu Varna system greatly deprived priesthood of its prophetic power. The Catholic priest of today is often perceived by people as economically powerful, politically influential and socially exclusive. The physical and psychological boundaries and walls that priests build around them, often keep them away from

people as a privileged class.

A growing number of priests today are inclined to engage in elite educational and other institutions. They often relate with people more like administrators and even as businessmen than godly priests. A Hindu alumnus of a prestigious school, in his letter to the editor of a national news paper, paints such an image of Catholic priest graphically: “often the first Christian priest we Hindus meet is the arrogant administrator in a Christian school.” Such views of the Catholic priest, perhaps exaggerated and generalized, indeed convey some truth about the inadequacies of today’s priests in fulfilling their prophetic role.

The prophetic mission of the priest, in the words of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, is “to refashion creation and restore it in God’s image”. Wherever God’s image is tarnished and disfigured, especially of God’s preferred people, the last and least of society, the priest must stand up as a sign of God’s justice and love, without any fear of intimidation by the powers of the world. It is noteworthy how the Vedic priest has defined himself in relation to his prophetic role: “Being stationed in the front (*purohitāh*), we shall remain wakeful in the kingdom.” (YV. Vs.9.23). The Christian priest too is “stationed in front” not to rule and control but to serve and defend the weak.

8. Jitendriya: The Ascetic Dimension of Hindu Priesthood

Hinduism is primarily a religion of the house holder, and Hindu priesthood retains this characteristic. The Brahmin priests differed from the Buddhist and Jain Sramanas and the wandering Hindu ascetic sages in that they remained householders, exercising their priestly

occupation, enjoying wealth (artha) and pleasure (kama) and very much a part of the social and family fabric. However, the ideal of a Brahmin priest underscores a sense of detachment and renunciation. He is to be a conqueror of the desires of the senses (Jītendriya), not just during the Brahmacharya stage, but throughout life.

Manusmriti (2: 88-100) instructs the priests to subdue and control the senses just as the rider controls the horses. Mind, considered to be one of the senses, too needs to be restrained. Senses and mind can be controlled by the practice of ‘Japa’ and ‘Tapa’. A Jītendriya is identified by his equanimity, not getting too exuberant (*na hrshyati*) and not getting too disheartened (*na glāyati*). A true Brahmin is advised to shun praise and honour as if it is poison (*sammānah vishādiva*) and welcome humiliation as if it is nectar – “*Amritasyeva Avamānasya sarvadā*” (2:162). He must not please the world in order to earn his livelihood, but must protect his integrity (4:11).

The epic Mahabharata identifies three important marks specific (*kevalam*) to priesthood – teaching, self-control and practice of austerities (tapas).²¹ The Bhagavd Gita (18:42) expands these defining marks of the Brahmin – calmness, restraint, austerity, purity, patience in suffering and uprightness, wisdom, learning and faith in God. The distinctive characteristics (*lakshana*) of a Brahmin are outlined in the Bhagavad Purana – Peacefulness, self-restraint, austerity, purity, contentment, kindness, devotion to God and truthfulness.²²

9. The Kenotic nature of Christian Priesthood

Christian Priests, by reason of their sacerdotal consecration, are “enabled and obliged even in the midst of human weakness to seek perfection” (Vat. II. PO.12).

Priestly perfection consists in following Christ who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...and became obedient unto death.” (Phil.2:7-9). Jesus demanded from all who wanted to follow him closely, detachment from material possessions, hunger for power and positions. To be an apostle, freedom from all attachments was a non-negotiable. This kenotic spirit of priesthood, in a way, renders the distinction of ‘secular’ priest and ‘religious priest’ redundant. The Christian priest is not to withdraw from the world but immerse in the affairs of the world to rebuild, to heal and to transform. Yet, he is to do all these with total freedom from attractions of the world, greed and selfishness.

The Sanskrit word for asceticism is ‘Tapas’. It is interesting to note that the word literally means ‘fire or ‘heat’, and Agni is viewed as priest par excellence. Agni burns and consumes and connects the worshipper with God. The priest is to be ‘tapasvi’ burning up all the attachments that bind him to the worldly values so that he is enabled to connect people to God. The Hindu priest in ancient days was expected to retreat to forests in the stage of ‘Vānaprastha’. It was a withdrawal from the chaos and confusion of the world. Today’s Catholic priest needs to “withdraw” from the rat race of accomplishments, achievements and accumulations, and bring an element of ‘Āranyaka’ in his life by heeding to Christ who invites him to go off to a deserted place to be with him (Mk.6:32).

Conclusion:

In the above pages I have made an attempt to derive some of the significant and positive insights on priesthood from Hinduism and show how these insights can synergize and enrich Catholic priesthood in India today. Hindu

priesthood and Christian priesthood both have, at different phases of history, suffered distortions such as exaggerated sacralization, clericalization and abuse of institutional power. Within the Varna system Hindu priesthood has theologically justified and enacted the subordination and dehumanization of a large section of people, the vicious effect of which continues till today. The Catholic priesthood, as a powerful institution, has failed to address many inherent inadequacies. Yet, the understanding of priesthood in both traditions provides valuable insights that are relevant for today.

The ministerial, cultic, prophetic and kenotic dimensions of priesthood in Hinduism and Christianity point to a mediatory role of priesthood in which priests are instruments and servants who mediate between people, God, and the cosmos. The challenge and task of Christian priests in India today is to be “stationed in front” as a convincing sign and sacrament of God’s reign in our world.

¹ See Samkriyayan, Rahul, *Rig Vedic Arya*, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 2004, Pp.26-31

² R.V. 10.90.11

³ Based on the rules of Sanskrit syntax, *Brāhmano'sya mukham āsīd* does not mean Brāhmana was formed from the mouth of Purusha, but rather, Brāhmana was his mouth. Cf. M.Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism*, Rome: Universita Gregoriana, 1982, p.139

⁴ Manusmriti 2: 140-143

⁵ Manusmriti 3: 146

⁶ AV. VIII. 105

⁷ Abrahmanam adhyayanam aapatkaale vidheeyate (Manusmriti 2: 241-42)

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- ⁸ Manusmriti 2: 157-158 (translation is my own).
- ⁹ Satapatha Brahmana III.1.1.5
- ¹⁰ Manusmriti 2: 159-162
- ¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, #875
- ¹² Ibid. #1581
- ¹³ Apte, Vaman, *Sanskrit-Hindi Kosh*, Delhi: Nag Publishers, 2002, p.979
- ¹⁴ Francis Gonzalves, "Be Book, Be Bread, Be Bridegroom", in *Vidya Jyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol.74, June 2010, p.36
- ¹⁵ Gispert-Sauch, "Priesthood in Hinduism", in *The Divine Shepherd's Voice*, Vol.1, Jan-Mar 2010, p.19
- ¹⁶ Michael , Amaladoss, "The Presbyter as Priest", in *The New Leader*, Vol.123, June 1-15, p.9
- ¹⁷ Ibid.p.9
- ¹⁸ Manusmriti 2:169
- ¹⁹ Chandra Bose, Abinash, *Hymns from the Vedas*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966, p.17.
- ²⁰ Malipurath, Thomas, "Re-Emerging the Christian Priesthood for our Times", in *Bible Bhashyam* Vol.XXXVI. No.2, June, 2010, p.133
- ²¹ Mahabharata, Shanti parva 60:8-29
- ²² Bhagavad Purana VII.XI.21