

Chariots of the God/s: Riding the Line between Hindu and Christian

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Joanne Punzo Waghorne

CHARIOTS OF THE
GOD/S: RIDING THE
LINE BETWEEN HINDU
AND CHRISTIAN

The Christianity of Madura under the Jesuits was indeed disguised idolatry. Except that the image of the Virgin Mary was worshipped in the temples and paraded upon the cars, there was little change in the old ceremonies and processions of Hindooism. There was the same noise of trumpets and taum-taums and kettledrums, there was the same blaze of rockets and Roman candles and blue lights, there were the same dancers, with the same marks of sandal-wood and vermilion on their naked bodies. (JOHN WILLIAM KAYE, 1859)¹

Things are moving in the state of Tamilnadu at the southern tip of India. New Indian-made cars zip along the crowded streets of Chennai (formally called Madras) and even the old “cars” of the God/s, great wooden *ter* (chariot) are being refitted with new braking systems and steel rims or totally rebuilt for a new age of travel. This renewed interest in the very old practices of the chariot procession is as much a part of the Roman Catholic communities in Tamilnadu as it is among the Hindu. These highly public statements of devotion are now, as they have been in the past, events that on the one hand mark and make a claim to territory, God/s circle

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¹ John William Kaye, *Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative* (London: Smith, Elder, 1859), p. 33.

the streets of “their realm,” but on the other hand exhibit God/s in public on the uncertain periphery of their domains. Everyone is invited to come together in these public streets at the borders where all worlds meet. Thus the very site of the procession is a shared public space where no single deity or religious tradition can claim clear title. The revival of the long neglected chariot processions may mark a willingness of many religious people within Tamilnadu to begin to negotiate a renewed civil religious idiom—in the race of other movements within India to fix discourse into the narrow road of Hindu nationalism.

The nineteenth-century missionary description of the early Roman Catholic missions in Tamilnadu quoted above, if relieved of its negative rhetoric, could describe practices today ranging from the great chariot festival at the old church at Avur in a rural area of Pudukkottai District to the urban processions in Chennai of Our Lady of Velanganni in the suburb of Besant Nagar. In Avur, the week after Easter, a brightly painted wooden image of the Risen Christ rides in state on a magnificent wooden *ter* along the streets of this very small village with a very long history of Christian missionary activity. In Avur, hundreds of devotees, many of whom are Hindu, pull on two massive chains attached to the front of this three-storied wooden chariot with man-high wheels. Atop the ornate wooden plinth, poles support a canopy of rich cloth that shades the Risen Christ in the hot April sun. The wooden *ter* and the stone platform-tower with spiral steps to reach the thirty-foot-high plinth closely resembles the *ter* and tower at the nearby temple for the Goddess Mariyamman whose chariot festival occurs in the previous month. In Besant Nagar, thousands assemble to watch the elegantly carved image of Mary in a white and gold sari ride in her ornate wooden palanquin along the beach road of this prosperous urban neighborhood. Again Mary’s holy form is draped in a rich silk sari and she wears elegant gold jewelry much like the goddesses of the nearby Mahalakshmi Temple. A busy passageway with vendors selling images of the Virgin Mary and Mahalakshmi—produced in much the same style—connects the newly constructed church to this new temple not a block away. A quick glance would indeed make it appear as if nothing but the names and forms of the deities separated the chariot procession at the Hindu temples from the festivals at the Christian churches.

Both of the Christian events have expanded in recent years. The days are gone when such practices came under the ban of a papal bull or even the frowns of secularist governments. The priest at Avur made it clear that the chariot festival was celebrated with dispensation from Rome and that the present *ter* dated from 1802. The pastor at the new church for Our Lady of Velanganni in Chennai expressed pride that the festival celebrating the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary drew increasing numbers of devotees from all religious groups. This rapprochement between Hindu

and Christian style of worship had the public sanction of the former Chief Minister Jayalalitha. In Manapari (Malaiyadipatti), a small town near Tiruchirappalli, a banner on a grand chariot belonging to Saint Thomas Church pictured the chief minister, hands folded in veneration, and proclaimed her help in the inauguration of this “holy *ter*.”

The building and renovation of Christian chariots in contemporary Tamilnadu cannot be separated from new public interest in the rebuilding of grand chariots for all *koyil*—the common Tamil term for temple or church. By 1989, the magazine *Frontline* reported the new fervor for re-establishing chariot festivals at temples where the wooden cars had been left to deteriorate for years.² Another article notes, “The pomp and splendour and pageantry of the car culture has an appeal to Christians and Muslims also . . . a Hindu institution, the car festival through the centuries has influenced other religionists too thus serving as a symbol of ‘unity in diversity.’”³ In major temples like Tyagesa in Tiruvarur the chariot was renovated at a cost of six hundred thousand rupees and in places as far flung as Nedungudi in Pudukkottai, a now wealthy restaurant owner in Singapore finally fulfilled a vow to rebuild the wooden car in his local temple.⁴ Building or renovating a *ter* is a very expensive undertaking. These multistoried structures rise over thirty feet high. A team of carvers works, often in public view, for months to intricately carve the multiple wooden panels that finally are jointed together with elaborate corner braces layer on layer, first the plinth then three, six, or more layers. Iron smiths then join giant wooden wheels to the metal axial. The wooden bas-relief panels are designed to educate the public on the history of the Lord or Lady who will ride in this grand vehicle. The building of a *ter* gives any religious institution a very public voice within a town or city. Whether by private support or public funds both Christians and Hindus transfigure their devotion into wood and steel and move onto the streets in what has long been the ultimate act of public display, the chariot festival.⁵

² V. Ganapathi Stapati, “Festival of Fervour,” *Frontline* (India) (July 8–21, 1989), pp. 76–79.

³ Raju Kalidos, “Chariots of Culture,” *Frontline* (India) (July 8–21, 1989), pp. 69–75.

⁴ We photographed the process of rebuilding this famous chariot throughout the year 1994–95. The old car was disassembled and a facsimile of all images was recarved on newly cut wood and all parts recreated and replaced! Nedungudi is a very small village with a great temple in rural Pudukkottai District. On the old car, see Gopalkrishna Gandhi, *Tamilnadu District Gazetteers: Pudukkottai* (Madras: Government of Tamilnadu, 1983), pp. 824–25.

⁵ Religious organizations can receive public funds in south India. The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment, a Tamilnadu state government agency, oversees the finances for many Hindu temples that are considered public institutions and thus in need of state support and control. For an overview of the endowment see Franklin A. Presler, *Religion under Bureaucracy: Policy and Administration for Hindu Temples in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). On the history of the *ter*, see George Michell, ed., *Living Wood: Sculptural Traditions of Southern India* (Bombay: Marg, 1992), pp. 29–52.

The sharing of style of worship has its points of confluence but also its limits. The former chief minister of the state of Tamilnadu,⁶ J. Jayalalitha, educated in convent schools, seemed as willing to support the growth of Catholic festivals as Hindu and remained in the good graces of her Christian constituents until a partisan marked her forty-seventh birthday with a poster depicting her as the Virgin Mary that was displayed all over Chennai next to another poster of the chief lady as the Hindu Goddess Durga (fig. 1). At this point, in a very apt phrase, all hell broke loose in the Christian community but not in the Hindu. The United Christian Council joined the Archbishop of Madurai Diocese in calling for “reparation prayers” throughout the state for the “blasphemous” act.⁷ Why are some styles of worship so readily shared with official and semiofficial sanction, while others are not? What is it about the chariot festival, in particular, that makes its form so flexible, so readily adopted by Christians and others, and so much a part of the contemporary revival of public religion in Tamilnadu?

At issue here is the nature of shared forms of public ritual. Early missionaries, most Protestant and eventually Catholic as well, had great difficulty in understanding how a shared form of ritual did not imply a shared theology and hence a Christianity that was nothing more than Hinduism by another name. Public rituals indeed share a common religious idiom. But this public language cannot be reduced to a simple conjecture that Christians succumb to their “Hindu” environment—the conclusion of the most influential modern discussion on “intermingling patterns of culture” of Christians in South India.⁸ In South India, what the nineteenth century so easily called “Hinduism” did not dominate until the twelfth century. Before that, the religious landscape of Tamil country was peopled by Buddhists, Jains, and ardent devotees of Shiva or Vishnu. The devotees of Shiva and Vishnu never saw themselves as co-religionists under a common umbrella of “Hinduism.” Later Muslims and Christians joined the mix. All contended with each other. Yet, all were girded by a much older sense of divine power that remains alive today.⁹ This undergarment of religions in Tamilnadu remains hidden by its outer layers. Not simply Hindu, for want of another term, I would call it a *shared religious sensibility* that makes all dialogue and debate intelligible and possible. The

⁶ India is organized much like the United States with state governments sharing power with the central government in New Delhi. The chief minister has the powers of an American governor.

⁷ Reported in the *Hindu* (March 10, 1995), p. 4.

⁸ Carl Gustav Diehl, *Church and Shrine: Intermingling Patterns of Culture in the Lives of Some Christian Groups in South India* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1965), pp. 175–80.

⁹ Norman Cutler provides a good summary on recent scholarship on South India as a multireligious region in *India's Worlds and U.S. Scholars, 1947–1997*, ed. Joseph W. Elder and Edward C. Dimock (New Delhi: Manohar and the American Institute of Indian Studies, 1998), pp. 463–75.



FIG. 1.—A large billboard appeared in Chennai depicting then-Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha as the Virgin Mary and as the Goddess Durga to mark her forty-seventh birthday. The donor, whose picture is inserted into the posters, announces, in Tamil, “Oh Mother, I revere you” on both images.

critics of the adoption of “Hindu” form to further Christian piety failed to realize that the sharing of a common idiom like the *ter*, rather than blurring the distinctions between the God/s who ride these divine chariots, serves to stress difference—but of a very special kind that we still fail to see. There must be a common idiom for dialogue, an accepted grammar in which to pose debate. Yet at the same time, this common public religious idiom, if it is to function commonly, does not negate difference. It matters very much that Mary, dressed in a sari but in Her color of white and gold, rides atop the palanquin, and not the Goddess Parvati. It matters

that the Risen Christ is pulled through the street and not Lord Shiva. The argument for this article will rely on visual details of two Christian chariot processions that I witnessed and Dick Waghorne photographed, at Our Lady of Velanganni in a prosperous middle-class neighborhood in suburban Chennai and at a very old church in the poor Christian village of Avur in rural Pudukkottai District, two hundred miles south of the metropolis.

THE CHARIOT AT THE INTERSECTION OF ECCLESIASTIC AUTHORITY
AND POPULAR DEVOTION IN TAMILNADU: A CENTURY OF DEBATE

The Shrine of Periya Nayaki Mata (the Great Protecting Mother), a large impressive Roman Catholic church, seems out of place in the tiny village Avur. Dating from 1747, the church was constructed on the plan of an earlier church built in 1697 by the Jesuit missionary Father Ventantius Bouchet who founded the small Christian settlement with a basilica worthy of the major center of Catholicism that he envisioned for Avur.¹⁰ Although the Jesuits had the support of the various Hindu rulers of the area, especially the rajas of Pudukkottai, the money for the mission and the church came from local Christians and from France. Bouchet went on from Avur to become the superior of the mission of the Carnatic and was in Rome during the serious wave of controversy over the “Malabar rites”¹¹—the special accommodation that the Jesuits of the nearby Madurai Mission had made with their high-caste converts to retain many practices in dress and celebrations after their baptisms. Although the Jesuits had been vindicated in the practices during the seventeenth century, Avur never grew to fill Bouchet’s dream in the eighteenth. The mission was crippled in its development by the later infamous papal suppression of the Jesuits. The mission in Avur passed from one Catholic jurisdiction to another often with considerable dissension.¹²

The papal bull in 1744 ended the Jesuit policies of “accommodation” that the brilliant Italian nobleman-turned-priest Roberto de Nobili had initiated just before Bouchet’s time. De Nobili scandalized later generations of missionaries and many of his own contemporaries by adopting the saffron robes, begging bowl, and bamboo staff of a Hindu sannyasi, a mendicant. De Nobili began his mission in the city of Madurai in 1606 and within a few years settled in a small thatched hut near the famous Meenakshi Temple. He quickly realized that no high-caste Hindu would convert to a religion that at that time was associated with the Parangi (foreigners)—an unflattering term for the meat-eating, unwashed, and thus virtually untouch-

¹⁰ Gandhi, pp. 792–96.

¹¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 77.

¹² S. Radhakrishna Aiyar, *A History of the Pudukkottai State* (Pudukkottai: Sri Bihad-ambal State Press, 1916), pp. 399–402.

able Portuguese masters of Goa. The former Roman nobleman began to refine his behavior to fit the customs of the elite of Madurai. In addition to dressing as a sannyasi, he adopted a strict vegetarian diet, observed all of the rules for cleanliness that marked a man of the upper castes, spoke and wrote elegant court Tamil, and styled himself as a Roman raja, a member of the ruling class. Later he penned several discourses, still extant, in Tamil and Sanskrit arguing Christian theology within classical Hindu texts. De Nobili permitted his Brahmin converts to continue wearing their sacred thread, with a small cross attached, and other bodily signs as was the fashion for men of their high standing. Throughout his long efforts to accommodate his lifestyle and his teachings to the Indian cultural environment around him, de Nobili struggled with serious accusations of near heresy from both the Brahman theologians of Madurai and many members of his own church. The Brahmins eventually exonerated him of all charges of atheism but the Portuguese authorities in Goa and his fellow clerics condemned his methods.¹³ Finally, after a long struggle, Pope Gregory XV issued the bull *Romanae Sedis Antistites* in 1623 sanctioning de Nobili's policy of allowing high-caste Hindus to retain the sign of their status.¹⁴ De Nobili's close kinship with the pope and other high authorities in Rome may have saved the day for the Jesuits, but the battle over linking "Hindu" practices to the rites of the Church continued into the eighteenth century when a new pope finally reversed the earlier decision. The encyclical *Omnium Sollicitudinum* condemning accommodation to Hindu practice remained in effect until the mid-twentieth century.¹⁵

The central place that de Nobili holds in the historiography of Catholic missions in southern India disguises some real paradoxes. Why, if the Jesuits were disbanded and the Malabar rites eventually condemned, has the church at Avur celebrated the chariot festival since 1766, well after the fatal papal bull? Why was the tiny church able to construct a grand wooden chariot in 1802 to replace the earlier, less permanent bamboo structure?¹⁶ In a perspective study of popular cults among Muslims as well as Christians during the seventeenth century in Tamilnadu, Susan Bayly paints a very different picture of Christianity in the religious environment of the times. Her tableau is filled with sannyasis and various holy men and women revered as healers and teachers who claimed to derive their power from the Catholic saints and the Virgin Mary. Few of these were affiliated with or sanctioned by ecclesiastic authorities, and many derived their Christian

¹³ Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The Life of Robert de Nobili* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959), pp. 92–103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 221–30; Neill, p. 31.

¹⁵ Neill, p. 79.

¹⁶ Earlier chariots in Tamilnadu may have been built of poles and then disassembled. This was likely the case in Avur. See Kalidos (n. 3 above), p. 71.

imagery from the maritime communities who had converted earlier under Portuguese rule but quickly developed their own Christian rites and pantheon.¹⁷ While the itinerant wonder workers spread devotion to Christian figures, the Paravar caste, the most important of the fishing and trading communities, built its own churches and initiated festivals in and near Tuticorin. In 1720, independent of the Church, the community constructed the Golden Car for their patron form of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Snows. In 1806 they built a grander chariot that still runs today.¹⁸ Both of the chariots at Avur seem to ride closely on the heels of their compadres in Tuticorin but with some important differences. The Avur chariot festivals derived from the Jesuits, and at this point de Nobili again enters the picture.

This chariot procession in Avur could never be considered renegade or idolatrous because its lineage was ecclesiastic. The Paravars, although sometimes prosperous traders, were regarded as low-ranking fishermen among the elites that de Nobili converted. The rules of purity that the Italian priest had adopted prevented his associating with such men, and he created another body of missionaries, Pandaraswamis, to minister to the lower-ranked castes.¹⁹ Some of these Pandaraswami Jesuits established the car festivals in their permanent missions. The scenario was likely the same for Avur—designed as a serious mission center and always integrated into the larger Catholic Church framework. Indeed, the invitations printed in Tamil for the annual Car Festival from Avur carefully place the history of the festival within a strict Church genealogy. The 1990 invitation even speaks of the Jesuit missionaries as Vedam Bhodakars, Teachers of (Holy) Wisdom, and uses highly honorific Tamil forms when naming them. In Madurai, de Nobili was given the name Tattuva Bhodakar, Teacher of Reality.²⁰

The Car Festival at Christian churches such as Avur cannot be placed on an elementary scale of accommodation to popular Hindu practices on the one side and adherence to pure Roman Catholic doctrinal rites on the other. As Bayly makes clear, the real measure of orthodoxy was not in the nature of the practices but in whether these genuflect to the Church or whether they derive their power from the overarching religious logic of the Tamil countryside albeit with a nod to the Holy Mother Church. Thus the grand church and festivals of Our Lady of Snows could be suspect while the holy *ter* festival at Avur was not. Important here is the nature of “the religious landscape” that is Bayly’s term for the milieu of the times.

¹⁷ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900*, South Asian ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 321–40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 392; Cronin, pp. 251–52.

²⁰ Cronin, p. 127.

As mentioned earlier, what we now call Hinduism came late to this area. Prior to the fifth century, another kind of religious sentiment was and still is alive that centered on the kings and goddesses as Bayly reveals in the title to her book.²¹ In addition to this, Buddhism lived on in South India into the fourteenth century, and Jains remained strong. Both venerated renunciative holy men above the gods. The religious melange of Tamilnadu focused on renunciants, kings, goddesses—personages not principles—cannot be called “Hindu” in the contemporary sense. When Pope Gregory XV issued *Romanae Sedis Antistites*, which allowed converts to wear the thread and other marks “as distinctive signs of their social status, nobility, and of other offices,”²² the Holy Father may well have tapped into the cultural logic of the Tamils. Such customs and many of the rites adopted by Indian Catholic Christians are in some sense a matter of “civil” practice and hence not “religious”—if we take religion to mean a very specific sect. In this sense these common practices belong to the “civil religion” of Tamilnadu—a larger definition must remain until this whole story unfolds.

The revival of chariot processions in the modern world with whole-hearted participation by the Roman Catholic community flies in the face of two centuries of Protestant missionary critique of the all too easy Catholic accommodation to the “silly observances” and “ghastly superstitions” of the “Hindoos.”²³ The critiques grew shrill in the mid-nineteenth century when Protestant missionaries and upstanding scholars in Great Britain looked back in horror at the easy accommodations to Hinduism that the early Jesuit missionaries effected in the then infamous Madurai Mission. The religions of the “Hindoos” now solidified in the minds of the British as “Hinduism” took its heaviest blows during this period from the 1830s to the 1850s in part because of the rising power of the evangelicals on the one side and utilitarianism on the other in Britain—neither had any use for ostentatious displays. The chariot festivals were often singled out as the epitome of all that was idolatrous and dangerous in Hinduism. The English language gained the word “juggernaut” at this time. This term is a corruption of the name of Jagannath, “lord of the universe,” the presiding deity of the great temple at Puri in east-central India whose chariot festival remains a major religious event. From the colonial descriptions of the unwieldy restlessly moving chariot, a juggernaut came to mean “a belief or an institution that elicits blind and destructive devotion to which people

²¹ See George L. Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 21–50; David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 138 ff. On the relationship of Gods and kings, see also my *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

²² Cronin, p. 229.

²³ Kaye (n. 1 above), pp. 33–34.

are ruthlessly sacrificed; an overwhelming advancing force that crushes or seems to crush everything in its path.”²⁴ Missionaries often linked the chariot processions epitomized by the Puri festival to the outmoded and cruel Hindu religion that subjugated the spiritual and material welfare of the Indian people.

A secondhand description of the chariot festival at Puri from a famous missionary who first visited Puri in 1806 captures the injured sensibilities of the time. Claudius Buchanan, the story goes, “first made the acquaintance of the giant idol known as Juggernaut. With the influence of the salubrious sea breezes of Pooree, he found the monster hiding in high carnival.”²⁵ Kaye’s full description suggests a lewdness, what we would now call a sadomasochistic impulse, at the heart of the chariot festival. The French Catholic missionary Abbé J. A. Dubois in 1816 already connected chariot festivals throughout Tamil country with a general licentiousness. “Decency and modesty are at a discount during car festivals. . . . It is common enough for clandestine lovers, who at other times are subject to vexatious suspicion, to choose the day of the procession for their rendezvous in order to gratify their desires without restraint.”²⁶ Chariot festivals could never be associated with “Christianity”—which by this time was safely relieved of much of its history of public religious processions and church festivals.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the British rulers of India were caught between two principles not easy to balance—their long-standing promise of noninterference with the religious practices of their subject peoples and the equally pressing concern to look after their moral and material well-being. Until the 1840s, the rulers of India, the East India Trading Company, kept up active support of religious festivals in imitation of the Indian rajas whom they superseded. The Company sent marching bands and troops to keep order and guard the valuable jewels on the bronze images used for processions. After rancorous debates in Parliament all such connections with “idolatry” were forbidden.²⁷ Much of the rhetoric about the chariot processions at this time was part of this great public debate in Britain over the supposed support of “idolatry” by a “Christian government.” Thus a sharp distinction emerged in public rhetoric between a moral and wholesome Christianity and the licentiousness of public religious displays in India. Interestingly, state rituals presumed to be secular were encouraged both at home and in the colonies especially if they focused

²⁴ *American Heritage Dictionary*, version for Microsoft Office and Windows 95, s.v. “juggernaut.”

²⁵ Kaye, pp. 368–69.

²⁶ J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. Henry K. Beauchamps (1818; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1906), p. 604.

²⁷ Parliamentary Paper no. 66 of session 1845.

attention on the queen-empress and the glory of British rule.²⁸ But in the 1870s, Victoria, as the newly declared empress of India, confirmed her government's respect for the religious sentiments of her Indian subjects. Festivals had to be tolerated. This conflict instilled a sense of wariness of festivals in the officers of the Indian Civil Service that continued into the postindependence Indian Administrative Service.²⁹ Years of missionary critique of supposed rancorous public display took its toll on the educated elite of an old colonial port city like Madras (now Chennai). Such display continued but often without the open support of the educated elite of society.

The hostility toward religion in general and public displays of religions in particular reached its peak in the state of Tamilnadu during the 1960s with the election of the first Dravidian-based party—a populist group supporting Tamil language and culture but not the “Hinduism,” which they saw as imported from a hostile Aryan north. All of this radically changed with the election of a set of former cinema stars as chief ministers of the state. First M. G. Ramachandran and then his successor J. Jayalalitha re-established open support of religious festivals as a mark of the grandeur of Tamil culture. The face of MGR (as he is still called) could be seen in a gigantic light sculpture during the great chariot festival at a famous temple in Mylapore in Chennai in 1987. Jayalalitha surpassed her political mentor and former leading man with active support of temples and churches. Thus religious festivals, particularly the chariot procession, now have the favor of the Government of Tamilnadu as well as great popular support from the growing educated middle classes throughout the state.³⁰ It is a new day for public display of religions.

THE CHARIOT PROCESSION AT AVUR

The pristine shining interior of this beautiful church, which we saw a week before the festival, was dusty and littered with bits of food and other residue from the large numbers of the faithful encamped in the church when we arrived on April 23, 1995, a week after Easter. Inside the church lay an open sepulcher where the image of the Risen Christ had lain throughout Easter week. The Risen Christ now stood outside at the edge of the

²⁸ Waghorne, *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India*, pp. 31–53.

²⁹ This is clearly shown in the film version of E. M. Forster's novel *Passage to India*. I also speak from many years of dealing with Indian Administrative Service officers, many of whom continued to greet the coming of public religious events with mixed feelings at best and sometimes hostility and certain subtle embarrassment. This is less true than a decade ago and certainly not true for all officers of the central government. Local officials of the Tamilnadu government tended to be more supportive of such events.

³⁰ The present Government of Tamilnadu is headed by a member of the original ruling party, the DMK. Their position toward festivals now is not clear, but Jayalalitha still wields considerable power in the state.

stage where for the two previous nights players performed the Passion and the Resurrection dramas. These were followed by a late night mass at the church. At the side of the main altar within, miniature images of Mary and Joseph knelt watching the baby Jesus with the small Christmas lights still visible. A mural of the crucified Christ covered most of the wall above a side altar. Christ, deathly pale with bleeding legs and pierced hands, hung on the cross set in a rocky barren landscape that might be Pudukkottai or Palestine. The landscape was the only tiny detail that might link this European Christ to his Indian surroundings. At first glance, the church itself gives the appearance of a European structure. But a closer look at the archways and the cornices on the columns reveals an eighteenth-century style of architecture that also appears in the old palace of the former rajas of Pudukkottai in the town not twenty miles away.³¹ This church announces its place in the Indian landscape not in broad strokes but in very small architectural details and in the remnants of its many devotees.

We had photographed details of the large wooden *ter* before all of the paraphernalia of the festival covered it. The style of the *ter* closely resembles other chariots in the region but again with some significant differences. This chariot has three layers of sculpted wood, not six or seven as is the case with the Hindu forms. Since each layer of the Hindu chariot symbolizes the realm of one of the Hindu Gods, I would guess that these layers at Avur refer to the trinity.³² The detailed carved images would take a major paper to outline, but all these images reference Christian narratives of the saints and the life of Jesus while adding some decorative features taken from the repertoire of royal symbols in this former princely state.³³ On the day of the festival the great chariot was fitted with an ornate canopy of printed cotton cloth (fig. 2). From the roof of this hung the traditional *tombai*, cloth columns used for all happy occasions.³⁴ The *tombai*, canopy, and all of the cloth that draped the chariot were all floral with none of the images of lions and other mythical beasts that decorate Hindu *ters*. As with neighboring chariot festivals for other deities, the divine figure in the main car would not travel alone. A smaller chariot carrying Saint Michael the Archangel and a larger chariot with the Virgin Mary would precede the Risen Christ. Mary's *ter*, painted a sky blue, was decorated with red roses. Saint Michael's vehicle also wore blue paint.

³¹ See my book, *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and the Divine in England's India* (n. 21 above), pl. 56.

³² From an interview with the carvers who were remaking the great chariot at Nedungudi in Pudukkottai district, March 16, 1995. I did not do a close study of the chariot at Avur, which deserves a detailed analysis of its own.

³³ Pudukkottai District was once a small independent state ruled by a Hindu Maharaja.

³⁴ There are a number of words here that I do not transliterate but keep in the form that they so commonly appear in English conversation and publications: *tombai*, *pandal*, *tali*.



FIG. 2.—The faithful pull the grandly decorated chariot around the streets of Avur. Marigold garlands cover the base of the *ter* hiding the detailed carvings. The *tombai* hang from the roof now covered with floral-patterned cloth.

Outside, booths selling sweets and trinkets lined an area near the route of the chariot that would round the four streets of this largely Christian village. The *ter* would begin and end its journey from a special docking

tower in typical Nayak style, identical to the dock at the nearby temple to the Goddess Mariyamman. Both towers likely date from the time of the first church car of 1766. Before the procession, the faithful carried the wooden image of the Risen Christ palanquin-style to the *ter* with the priest in attendance. The parish priest, Father Maria Francis, described the Christ as wearing “a dhoti” on his waist and an upper cloth of white silk with a gold border draped over both shoulders. In his left hand he carries a flag, a white silk background with a gold cross. The Christ image is the only one dressed by devotees for the festival. His icon body, taken naked from the sepulcher, requires new clothing before he goes out on the streets in triumphal procession. His Tamil devotees dress him in the attire of an elite man—the same formal dress worn by gentlemen entering an orthodox temple or attending a wedding or feast. The Blessed Virgin does not wear a sari in Avur, but her image was carved with the same clothing of pink chemise with a blue mantel found all over Europe. She stands on a slender silver moon with angels peaking out from a base of clouds. This is her traditional Catholic form as Queen of Heaven, and in Avur she wears a crown of bronze with what look like inset rubies. Saint Michael wears the garments of a Portuguese warrior of the sixteenth century inscribed onto his wooden body. The Archangel, guardian of Heaven, completes a triad of holy figures that parallel three deities processed in Hindu temples in Pudukkottai: Shiva as Lord of the Universe, his consort Parvati as the Mother Protector of the world, and Chandeeswara as guardian of all of Lord Shiva’s heavenly treasures.

The chariot procession speaks of the triumphal rule of the universe by Christ risen, *not* by Shiva. In Avur, the soulful procession of the body of Jesus that marks Catholic procession in southern Europe does not occur. Here the glorious Risen Christ rides in state in his domain. Interestingly, unlike the Hindu chariot procession, the priest of the *koyil* here did not ride with his Lord. As the great chariot rolled forward in a cloud of dust, the priest and other dignitaries walked in front of the sweating hundreds of men who pulled the Risen Christ. The sun shines very bright in April, and the unwieldy chariot pulls in its own direction. Getting such a mass of near solid wood around the streets surrounding the church proved an exhausting task. When the *ter* docked at its tower, the crowd of those who had served God as his human horses, reached a frenzy. A special delegation of the faithful then mounted the stairs. They were ecstatic as they entered the canopy and took the Risen Christ into their arms and moved down the stone stairs with him. The faithful waited at the end of the procession for the managers to throw them the marigold flowers that decorated the chariot. Some inverted their black umbrellas to catch the blessed flowers. Nothing else was offered or received.

The differences between this Christian festival and the Hindu processions in the district were written in many small details. The very conscious choice of colors and patterns for the cloth draping and the paint on the lesser chariot: pink and blue, floral and not paisley patterns, cloth devoid of any other imagery. Note the predominance of the cross atop the chariots in the place where the finial marking a Hindu structure would appear. The chariots and the holy images are draped in roses, marigolds, and jasmine, all flowers that also bedeck Hindu deities. But, here there were no lotuses—the flower par excellence of the Hindu Gods. All of these signs are meant to be seen and understood in a very Tamil context. Here were the answers to the questions, Who is Lord of the universe? Who is the Queen? Who guards the gates of Heaven?

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AT BESANT NAGAR

Besant Nagar stretches along the coast in the south of Chennai. Prosperous middle-class professionals moved to this newly built suburb beginning in the 1970s when taxicabs could not be persuaded to travel so far from the city. They settled around several fishing villages and displaced others. Now, crowded and considered quite near to the city, the area has attracted residents from various castes and religious backgrounds. The community, named after the Irish Annie Besant, an important woman in the Theosophical Society, has an eclectic flavor like the religious sentiments of its namesake. The large gated grounds of the world headquarters of the society form the northern boundary of the area. Within this compound is the city's best library on world religions. The oldest sections of the neighborhood stretch along the beach road that begins to curve inland about two miles from the start. Here at the juncture of the beach road and a street returning to the main route to downtown Chennai stands the new chapel complex of Our Lady of Velanganni. This is a kind of branch church of a much larger and more famous basilica about two hundred miles south on the coast of the Tanjore district. The duplication of famous rural shrines in this urban setting is common. Nearby in the same neighborhood, residents with help from a benefactor abroad are constructing the Aruppadaividu Temple (*aru-p-patai-vitu*, six houses of battle), which brings together in abbreviated facsimile shrines the six holy places where the God Murugan conquered demons. Temples to mark each of these victories by Lord Murugan are scattered in separate rural shrines all over Tamilnadu. The grand Mahalakshmi Temple one block down on the coast from Our Lady gives devotees the opportunity to visit all of the nine forms of the Goddess of wealth and well-being under one roof. Thus Besant Nagar offers the convenience of worshipping at shrines to a variety of famous divine beings without leaving this comfortable neighborhood.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Health in Velanganni, Tanjore District, like the smaller version in Besant Nagar, draws devotees from “all castes and religious communities” unlike the shrine to Our Lady of Snows in Tuticorin, which remains the powerful central shrine for the fisher-trader caste only. Susan Bayly traces the wide popularity of Velanganni to the struggle of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to “replace the caste-based cult worship practiced by the Paravas with more popular and broadly based religious forms.” She points to the paradox that the Catholic missionaries chose to support the cult of Our Lady of Health, a “warrior and a conqueror,” whose shrine even official guides claim was once the site of a powerful Goddess. Our Lady, legend tells, conquered the Goddess after a fierce battle and established herself at the vanquished lady’s abode.³⁵ Thus the Virgin Lady of Velanganni won a wide following that extends well beyond the Christian community as a healer of illness and a victor over all demonic forces—attributes often associated with the Goddess Mariyamman.

The presence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy pervaded the festival celebrating the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the shrine in Besant Nagar. While the rural chariot festival drew only the local clergy, the Archbishop of Madras presided over the festivities here. He celebrated Mass for thousands of worshippers in a larger pandal, a bamboo structure erected for many festive occasions. With crimson vestments, gold and white shawl and red miter, he chanted the service in Tamil. Later, His Eminence read prayers in front of the wooden palanquin that would carry the image of Mary through the streets. Even his vestments matched the colors of the sari that draped the image of the Virgin Mother in front of him. The parish priest, just before the Mass, heard confessions in an outdoor confessional. Nuns sold religious literature. The entire event clearly had the imprimatur of the church. Yet, the same seeming paradox was here as in Velanganni itself: There were more signs of Christian-Hindu confluence than I saw in rural Avur. The festival began, just like ones in nearby Hindu temples, with the raising of the flag—the white and gold of Our Lady of Health. Worshippers, as in a Hindu festival, touched this flag pole and tied the traditional holy strings dipped in turmeric powder around the pole as a pledge to attend the festival to its end. Long lines of devotees waited at the entrance to the chapel to offer various gifts to the Lady. Among these were wax candles that are exclusively Christian, but I also saw brass trays with a broken coconut, jasmine flowers, and a banana, which is a variation on the Hindu offerings. Missing from the trays were camphor, betel nut, and red vermilion. Apparitions of *di Nobili* were here in the saffron-robed mendicants, men and women, carrying rosaries! The parish priest told me earlier that he was pleased that Hindus also worshiped here. I could not

³⁵ Bayly (n. 17 above), pp. 367–68.

distinguish easily whether the devotees were in fact Christian or Hindu, and somehow in the atmosphere of the moment this identification seems not to matter.

The architecture of the shrine complex also mixes very traditional Catholic imagery with subtle markings of a wider religious landscape. The complex contains a chapel to Our Lady, a parish house for the clergy and administration, an outdoor shrine to Our Lady of Health, and room to construct a *pandal*—an outdoor tent of massive bamboo poles covered with palm fronds used by all here for annual festivals and weddings. Across the street is a large office building with a massive cross atop, which houses central administration for the Roman Catholic Church in the city. The chapel mixes motifs that echo a Portuguese heritage with a touch of the Islamic and the modernism of Le Corbusier.³⁶ The facade, stucco with embedded tiles, has two turrets at the ends of the sloping triangular roof. The steeple rises from the back and looks a bit like a satellite relay station with a massive cross on top. A loudspeaker is attached but no bell. The outdoor shrine houses a permanent plaster image of the Blessed Virgin. Built as an octagon in the likeness of a crown, the Archangel rests on top. All of the decorative elements, crosses at the top of each point of the crown, are completely Christian. But Mary is enclosed by wrought iron bars in workmanship typical of the area. On her birthday, a delegation of the ladies of the church carefully draped her in a beautiful dark blue sari with pink and green paisley motif woven into the rich silk. They dressed her affectionately like a young daughter on her wedding day.

Our Lady of Health in Besant Nagar will not ride a grand chariot for her birthday. Here in an urban environment, Mary rides an ornate wooden palanquin (fig. 3), carefully carved with crosses interlaced over its surface—a diminutive Gothic cathedral. But a closer look reveals that the palanquin is modeled on the chapel next door. Like the chapel, the palanquin has a triangular facade with two turrets on either side. It is as if the very modern chapel were remade in miniature in wood but given a Gothic flare. The palanquin, although thoroughly Christian in its styling, actually follows the broader religious logic of the region far more accurately than the *ter* at Avur. The chariots of the God are expected to take their form from the *gopara*, the great gate-tower of the temple that houses the deity.³⁷ They are “mobile architecture.”³⁸ Again, like neighboring temples, the

³⁶ This famous architect was commissioned to design a new state capital called Chandigarh in North India. His design revolutionized design in modern India. Most modern houses and office buildings in major cities derive from his work.

³⁷ I was told this during the chariot procession at the nearby Kapaleeswara Temple. My informant pointed out that the *ter* used to have the same number of layers of sculptures as the *gopara* but that those layers were damaged. This may not be an accurate story, but it reflects the sentiments in the area on the proper nature of the chariots.

³⁸ Michell, ed. (n. 5 above), p. 36.

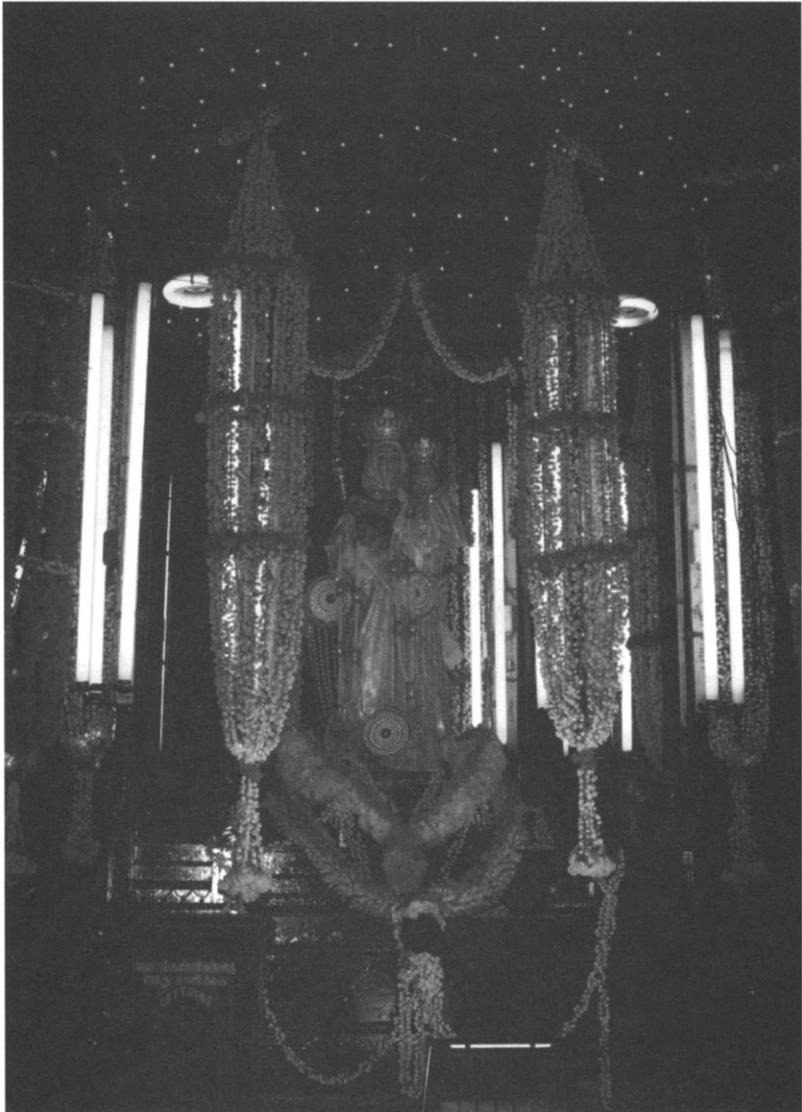


FIG. 3.—Fluorescent tubes light the Virgin Mary with her infant son as she rides out into the streets of Besant Nagar. Here strings of jasmine flowers with marigolds take the form of *tombai*.

Besant Nagar complex had a special image of Mary meant for procession only. And, again like their Hindu neighbors, the faithful watched as several of their members dressed and decorated the holy image. Three men chosen from the congregation carried the golden scepter, the processional

icon, and the crowns to the waiting palanquin. Then another pair of men took the image of Mary, dressed in a white and gold brocade sari with her infant son in her arms, and began to place a red and gold crown on her hair and another on her son's small head. The dressers fitted the scepter to her hand, and one obviously very important devotee had the honor of tying the tali around Mary's neck and then placing a ruby necklace on the infant Jesus and his mother. The act of tying the tali is filled with rich cultural associations. The tali, a special necklace with a pendant always hung on a cloth string, is tied at the moment of marriage sometimes by the husband or the husband's sister and marks the woman as truly auspicious and fit for motherhood. Thus when the Mother of the World goes out to meet her devotees in Besant Nagar, she wears all of the marks of a blessed Tamil mother—to her Hindu devotees she takes the form of a Goddess, to her Christian worshipers she is the Holy Mother.

The entire event at this coastal suburban neighborhood was written in mixed metaphors from traditional Catholic signs to Hindu emblems of power—all set on a stage of contemporary urban public life. Throughout the festival devotional music to Mary blared over loudspeakers—the words praised the Mother of the World but the female voice sounded as if it belonged in the local cinema. The tunes were buoyant—none of the somber tones of *Ave Maria* fell on this festival. A massive image of Mary formed from strings of lights shone in the night sky. The caption read in Tamil *Marie Vâzhka* literally “Long Live Mary” but this could also be worded as *Ave Maria*—somber tones changed to brilliant lights. Similar light sculptures appeared that year for festivals for the Goddess *Mariyamman* and many other Hindu deities. The Chief Minister *Jayalalitha* was as much up in lights on the streets as she had been on the silver screen. A giant light sculpture of the chief minister illuminated the entrance to a grand Tamilnadu state fair. In contemporary urban Tamilnadu, the older public culture that Susan Bayly and others have explicated so well, has developed into a new underlying idiom of public life. As the fluorescent tubes cast their blue-green light on the palanquin of the Blessed Virgin, she seemed to float out into a night crowd of adoring fans—the Lady who stands on the moon became the star of stars.

CHARIOT PROCESSIONS AND PUBLIC RITUALS—A DIALOGUE ON THE STREETS

The last two decades have seen a renewed interest in lavish public rituals transformed by new contemporary idioms of public culture in the state of Tamilnadu. Both religious chariot processions outlined here occurred in a context of other extravaganzas carefully staged by political parties. The last term of the former Chief Minister *Jayalalitha* ended literally in a blaze of lights—she lost a crucial election in part because she stood accused of overspending public funds on her lavish displays. But she is back in

power in the central government now as head of her party, the All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam—a crucial part of the fragile coalition that keeps the Bharatiya Janata Party in office in Delhi. During 1994–95, she held two major public events that I witnessed, the Eighth International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies in the ancient city of Tanjore and the opening of a new waterline in Pudukkottai city—both of these events were within thirty miles of Avur. These amazing affairs deserve a separate essay but their style of public display clearly set a new standard for grandeur—there were many who called it by less flattering terms. In Pudukkottai, hundreds of craftsmen built the facade of a Moghul fort out of wire, paper, and plaster! Inside the tent at the back, a grand stage set with an image of the Mother of Rivers, the Goddess Kaveri, stood above a ceremonial faucet that the chief minister would open. The event was meant for the cameras. The entire city of Pudukkottai became a grand stage for massive light sculptures of MGR and his once leading lady, Jayalalitha, in their most famous roles. There were grand archways depicting the former actress as various personages including the Queen of the Nile. The same style of stage setting filled the streets of Tanjore for the Tamil studies conference. Those of us who live near the residence of the chief minister in Chennai frequently saw her up in lights at the corner of the road where she traveled to her office. The idioms of the movie world became part of public display and spilled over to the religious world as well.

The new sense of public spectacle may not completely explain the emergence of the chariot festivals after so many years of silence, but it is part of the mix of public life that marks the contemporary scene in Tamilnadu. In what ways has this new public idiom effected the reconstruction of public *religious* life in Tamilnadu? Susan Wadley in the introduction to a new set of essays on the media and the transformation of religion in South Asia argues that the new information technologies have helped to “bypass the social bottlenecks that have inhibited” the propagation of all-India religious symbols to the masses. She points to the older context of religious imagery that remained enmeshed in very particular social groups. Such images were signs of identity not to a whole society but to a particular group. The new technologies have had a “socially ‘disembedding’ effect on religious traditions.”³⁹ In the case of the procession of the Virgin Mary in suburban Chennai, the event itself was not mediated through technology but rather shared in an idiom invented for the motion picture—the oldest of the new technologies to influence public culture in Chennai, a world-class capital for movie making.⁴⁰ The very sounds of the event and the lights, usually reserved for the stars of film and politics, turned the procession

³⁹ Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 3–4.

⁴⁰ For a study of the movie industry and its effect on the urban poor, see Sarah Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

into a movie theater with a grand difference—the devotees were no longer viewers but equal participants in this drama of triumph and power. The chosen few who “starred” as Our Lady’s valets and near kin may have had important roles but they were not alone in the glory of the hour. And here is the point where the old tradition of the chariot festival in particular and the newer media-style event share a common link—all such processions have always required a cast of thousands. The “accommodation” that the Catholic Church makes in the twentieth century in urban India is not to “Hindu” practice but to the pervasive styles of the mass media.

While the influence of the movie genre was obvious in Besant Nagar, the technologies of the contemporary world did not permeate the scene in the very poor village of Avur although its inhabitants are no strangers to the cinema in the nearby city of Tiruchirappalli or to the glittering political world of Jayalalitha. Here in Avur, the more traditional form of the chariot festival still played to a devoted audience. I remember no loudspeakers or blaring music, and I do not know the reason why. But, there remained room in this grand display for many participants. Hundreds pulled the *ter*. Hundreds more waited and watched as the chariot neared its goal after long hot hours of a massive human effort. This grand spectacle needed no other prompts. The scene made me wonder if this is the only kind of event that can compete with the image-world of the cinema or match its drama. With a cast of thousands, the chariot procession merges Christianity into the very Indian world of spectacle—a world built on reflections of a triumphal royal procession. The deity enthroned in this mobile *koyil* surveys the streets of the divine royal domain. Participants become servants of God, but in a larger sense God’s devotees also become the power that drives his/her process into the world. The people are the power and this ancient voice becomes a very contemporary idiom. In an explanation of the chariot procession, the head priest of the famous Kapaleeswara temple in Chennai spoke of the processions as an exercise in democracy—everyone must pull together to make the wheels of power roll.⁴¹ In Avur, the Risen Christ rules his kingdom on earth but with the combined force of his many devotees. The chariot festival combines signs of royal power with images that speak easily in a democratic world—politics in a seamless continuity with religion. But, here God reigns, inaugurated each year through the sweat of multitudes of faithful followers.

The long-standing debate over Christians sharing common ritual forms within the larger South Indian religious scene has been settled defacto by an Indian Catholic Church. Freed to use Tamil during the reign of Pope John XXIII, the clergy moved to reclaim its cultural as well as linguistic

⁴¹ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, with photographs by Dick Waghorne, “Dressing the Body of God: South Indian Bronze Sculpture in Its Temple Setting,” *Asian Art* (Summer 1992), p. 27.

heritage. A title of a recent book by a contemporary member of the church in India tells it all: *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy*.⁴² The movement to link India's sannyasi heritage with the Roman Catholic Church's long-standing monastic tradition has become a serious part of the Church in India.⁴³ In openly choosing to speak of God in the shared "religious sensibilities" of Tamilnadu, the Church in India has accepted the—I will openly call it—*civil theology* here meaning the term more literally as discourse about divinity that the shared form implies. To envision God triumphant in the world in India is also to accept the presence of a plurality of powerful personages. This is a very contemporary answer to the old charges that in adopting "Hindu forms," Christians were liable to the charge of "idolatry." But in public life in Tamilnadu, on the streets of the town or the village, God triumphant can not be the only divine figure in the universe. The very image of victory leaves room for a plurality of Gods—indeed they are necessary to assert the glory of one's own. Such a figure is not really foreign to European Catholic imagery. Just as a small dwarflike body peeps out still from under the feet of the Lord Shiva in his cosmic dance, Mary stands on the snake reminding Christians that the Devil remains—defeated but alive.

Moreover, the chariot processions do not imply that a rivalry and the "victory" between divine personages is not necessarily between Hindu and Christian Gods. To this day in Boston in the mixed Italian neighborhood of the North End, images of various patron saints and forms of the Virgin Mary particular to the very different native cities of the now very long since migrated Italians are still processed in the streets each year during the festival day of the saint. These festivals compete with each other for the attention of the public and the assertion, once again, of pride in very particular powerful personages. The same is true in Tamilnadu, the competition for public glory finds all temples and churches in competition. And, within Chennai, residents all have their opinion of the "best" processions and even the most popular divine figures which often changes with time for individuals and the public at large. The language of the chariot procession takes place in multiplicity of powers but ultimately glorifies the One that has won the hearts of the devotees—for that day, for that time, for that place. Christians in Besant Nagar and in Avur seem well satisfied with that kind of victory.

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⁴² A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984).

⁴³ For examples, see Helen Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1987); and M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).