

Dalits and Religion: Towards a Synergetic Proposal

In the Indian subcontinent religious beliefs and worldviews are grounded and embodied in the community experience. For many in India without tangible social expression religion is irrelevant and futile. Even though the dominant religious persuasions may demand exclusive adherence, Dalits and Dalit Christians in India show the human capacity to influence such views, change their course of action and live with more than one prevailing religious worldview. This article strives to move beyond theories of hybridity within the study of religion and offers a constructive proposal that is synergetic in approach, facilitating an academic trope to work with increasing realisation of multi-religious belonging among Indian communities.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Christian, Agency, Worldview, Synergy, Lived Religion, and hybridity

Locating Religion among Dalit Christians

The discourse on the role of religion in subaltern communities takes into account the fact that the ‘sacred’ is part of the ‘social’ and they are mutually dependent, as observed among Dalits and Dalit Christians.¹ Working with the hypothesis that religion is a process that function as a window into the complex social life of people and their aspirations to be human in a society, this article offers an insight into the malleability of religion, and therefore the sacred, rendering meaning to Dalit social existence. Such a

¹ Dalit is an affirmative identity taken by the former untouchable communities in India. It signifies the brokenness of such people and becomes a mobilising identity in reclaiming their humanity. For some preliminary discussion see Robert Deliège, *The World of the “Untouchables”: Dalits of Tamil Nadu*, Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, Joe C Arun, *Constructing Dalit Identity*, and Surinder S. Jodhka, (ed). *Community and Identities*.

process is possible because people and religion do not preoccupy themselves only with the sacred but also show significant interest in the social. This article firstly, offers a comprehensive understanding of Dalit worldview, shedding light on the notion of religion within the Dalit Christian community and formation of communal identity. Secondly, it develops an anthropological perspective of multi-layered religious belonging among Dalit Christians. And finally, it concludes with a theoretical proposal of a synergetic view of religion. The lived religion among Dalit Christians is messy, conflictual, multilayered, dynamic and context bound. The overall purpose of this article is an attempt to understand the grounded and complex nature of 'religion' within the Dalit Christian community of India.

a. Dalit Self and Community

The self-conceptualisation of the Dalit Christian community in India is a dynamic, discursive and contextual strategic process.² It is important to grasp the polyvalence of the cognitive conceptualisation of the self through differentiation with the 'other' in India, an 'other' that may not always be fixed. As elsewhere, self-conceptualisations of people in the community are intricately woven within their religious and cultural consciousness, which is firmly rooted in the particularities of spatial location. Individuals and communities operate and shape their worlds primarily by belonging to a system, by internalising it, actively shaping or subverting it, which is often directed by (even if working against) dominant notions. Self-conceptualisation takes root within and outside of a community with multiple reference points, primarily

² Arun, C Joe. *Constructing Dalit Identity*

expressed through relationships.³ Identity of Dalit Christians in India is constituted by their specific location within the caste system and determined by their physical location, i.e. their social and spatial locatedness. As Dalit Christians, they negotiate being Dalit and Christian, embedded in a specific locality with its own spirituality. It is also important to recognise the fact that none of the above mentioned processes function in a vacuum, or in isolation, but constantly interpolate each other, contributing to the construction of their social identity. My research among Dalit Christians suggests that they switch back and forth between their Dalit and Christian identities, and sometimes there is a confluence of elements from both finds meaning in their communal and individual life. As Dalits they continue to conceive their status in terms of their local norms, but challenge it with their Christian identity as and when required. This continuation of alternate identities is due to various factors such as economic dependence, lack of education and employment. It is also an avenue to exert their agency. I argue that Dalit Christians in India continue to think as Dalits into which their Christian identity must fit. Dominant religious categories of Vedic Hindu system⁴ and Christianity of the missionaries essentially determine both identities, with the former identity often overshadowing the later. While I do not want to undermine the role of conversion and the individual religious experience of Dalit Christians, it is important to recognise the fact that certain aspects can only be understood in opposition to the other caste communities; in fact the category of Dalit Christian is a relational one.

Collective identity provides framework for individuals to draw upon their self-perception. It is in this context that communal identity asserted by religious affiliation

³ Jenkins, Richard. *Social Identity*, p119

⁴ Hinduism is an academic construction developed during the colonial period that strives to capture the complex religious practices across India. However, Hinduism as a term is broadly used in contemporary context to refer to the unique religious beliefs that abounds in India.

and cultural norms, as in the case of the 'outcaste' Dalits, gains significance. In the Dalit community there is a necessity in subscribing to such a self-perception due to their status, as well as effectively choosing to identify oneself with a particular identity. Amidst this process of identity formation one needs to recognise that the community that is also being formed along the same lines, drawing and redrawing boundaries in order to accommodate their embraced social status. Dalits operate from co-existing multiple religious reference points, challenging the notion of singular religious adherence. Elsewhere in India religion is often seen as the main factor in identity formation, both at individual and collective level. Due to their outcaste status Dalit Christians are in an adverse position, nevertheless they are able to use the system effectively for their advantage by being Christians as well as Dalits. Such utilisation influences both internally and externally, as well as spiritually and socially. Thus with their religiously predetermined outcaste status Dalit Christians negotiate their livelihood using multiple religious belonging without capitulating to either of them. Religious affiliation and corresponding identity formation in the case of Dalits reconfigures conventional perceptions of religious belonging.

b. Dalit Christian Worldview

Dalit Christian religious worldview is one that is locally conceptualised. I contend that the individual and community consider their social setting as the epistemological ground for their self-conceptualisation and worldview. In Dalit Christian communities' notions of the less-visible world often stem from tangible, conflict-ridden daily existence and vice versa. This dynamic relationship between the visible and less visible worlds reflects and provides space for the formation of relationships between human beings, gods and goddesses. In the absence of proper

relationships between individuals within the community hinders their experience of the gods and goddesses. Thus, between the less visible world of gods and goddesses and the visible world of individuals and communities there is a causal and reciprocal relationship. Most importantly, Dalit Christians hold the less visible world and the visible world together as a complete unit in which human beings and spirits interact daily, for they do not have a dualistic understanding of the universe. Hence, the religious experience of Dalits are characteristically often organic and unmediated as opposed to a centralised and mediated *Varna* worldview. A significant implication of such a worldview among Dalit communities is that gods and goddesses become communal beings, with a specific sense of ownership by the community, accessible to all, women, men and children. Here we cannot ignore the dilemma of being both a Dalit and a Christian. They simultaneously live with different worldviews in which they find meaning for their life. Firstly, there is the *Vedic* religion, which is driven and structured by *Varna* ideology (foundational framework of caste system), secondly, the Dalits' holistic, conflictual and subversive perception of the universe, and thirdly, the exclusive and all pervasive Christian understanding. Dalit Christians live with all of the above-mentioned frames of reference, resulting in a fluid, yet functioning *middle* position.

c. Yesusami: a Dalit Christian deity

The Dalit Christian worldview is more complex than is often perceived. Observations among Dalit Christians in India suggest that it is possible to integrate Christian understandings of *Yesusami*⁵ within their inherited notions of Hindu gods and goddesses. *Yesusami* lives among them and not in some removed or even elevated

⁵ Yesusami, a local expression for Jesus among South Indian Dalit Christians

place. For Dalit Christian community, *Yesusami* is their god, who performs all of the tasks expected of a god in the Dalit community. *Yesusami* encompasses all of the traits of a Christian God couched within the local Dalit understanding of the gods, but without a Christian Trinitarian understanding. According to Dalit Christians, *Yesusami* is not Jesus Christ, part man, part divine, but rather he is Jesus, who is experienced as God the Father and also as the Holy Spirit combined. It is as though *Yesusami* is a god, not because he is God incarnate in man, but because he acts similarly to how other Dalit gods and goddesses function. In the Dalit conception, *Yesusami* is not understood as part of three different beings as it is often rather inadequately understood in the Christian Trinitarian tradition, but as one god who potentially functions in different ways, a belief congruent with the local religious belief. As recounted by many women and men in the Dalit Christian community, *Yesusami* is perceived as a protecting and preserving god, as well as a punishing and healing god who intervenes in and transforms human life. It needs to be stressed that there is no discontinuity in the Dalit Christians' perception of the gods and goddesses, but rather that there is a confluence of local Dalit and Christian worldviews, giving forth a polyphonic, highly functional, and contextually relevant perception of *Yesusami*. Their understandings of *Yesusami* gives space for expressing anger, dissent, or protest individually or communally. Dalit Christians expect *Yesusami* to work effectively in this world, rather than promising an eternal life in return for a virtuous life. Dalit Christians certainly have a functionalist and materialist perception of religion, primarily rooted in their experience.⁶ In the Dalit Christian community, communal cohesion facilitates the experience of *Yesusami*, failure

⁶ As such it would be comparable with the saint relationship within Roman Catholicism, which expects or at least hopes for, an exchange of favours, Yel, *Appropriation of Sacredness at Fatima in Portugal*, pp221-235

to act for the collective good results in misfortune and suffering of the individual as well as the community.

The daily reality in which Dalit Christians live argues for the self-aware reconceptualisation of their religious worldview. This is possible because of the Dalits decentralised and unmediated approach to religion. The notion of gods and goddesses is conceived within the community, thereby providing space for individuals and the community to access the divine in various forms. This approach is fascinating given the fact that Dalits are shunned from Hindu sacred space because of their religiously impure status. Dalit cultural norms and experiences give the Christian image of Jesus Christ a complete makeover. *Yesusami* is relevant, useful, and accessible for Dalit Christians, thus enabling them to participate in village life as Dalits, as well as allowing them to subvert the system as and when needed. Dalit Christians are thus able to move beyond and move within religious boundaries due to their dynamic appropriation of worldviews.

d. Social Agency

Human communities are symbolic constructions within which an individual may find meaning for existence.⁷ When a community is governed by class and ownership ideology, expressed in India through the discriminatory caste practice, an individual (or a community) will either accept the system and his place within it, or contest, negotiate and subvert it in order to change such a system.⁸ My observations among Dalit Christians in India not only support this hypothesis, further, through negotiation they

⁷ Cohen, Anthony P. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, p74

⁸ Upadhyaya, Carol. *The Concept of Community in Indian Social Sciences: An Anthropological Perspective* pp32-55

reproduce (but not necessarily passively), hierarchical structures similar to the caste system.

This was done by controlling access to the resources within the community, which largely determines the nature of that community's relationship. Often, within Dalit Christian communities, the local church leaders and their extended families have appropriated all of the possible responsibilities and benefits within the local church, consequently controlling and directing the lives of their parishioners. Moreover, the local Christian priest, who seldom visits the village and even if he does, only briefly, colludes with this power structure. In this context, the local church leader, who functions as the gatekeeper and purports a 'spiritual landlord' phenomenon, reproduces caste hierarchy. He utilises Christian spiritual notions, such as 'being submissive to the master' in order to impose and perpetuate a rigid structural hierarchy within the Christian community.

Exclusion from social power relations only enhances subordination, thereby further marginalising the Dalit Christians. The lack of pastoral care for Christians in India results in internal fragmentation and disillusionment, enabling rigid hierarchies to flourish within the Christian community. Once such hierarchy (already an innate feature of the Caste-based system) takes root in the Christian community, it provides room for the abuse of power by those who are able to usurp it through their position in the community. There is no room for the community to voice its grievances, since this would undermine the established authority, rendering the hierarchy ineffective. In a nutshell, the Dalit Christian community in India continues to perpetuate the hierarchy found in Caste society, but re-rendered through the new framework of Christianity. The denial of agency to access resources and to transform their lives is still a dream among many Dalit Christian communities. This situation seems almost inescapable, since the

church as an institution reflects and assimilates the oppressive and exploitative Caste hierarchy within its framework.

Nevertheless, the Dalit Christian community have shown explicit discontent and efforts to subvert such hierarchies through a range of discursive processes. Various means of negotiation and subversion, such as establishing a cross on a hill top, conducting grand Christian festivals and processions, and desecrating religious spaces, facilitates a new understanding of community among the Dalit Christians. Such activities not only challenge the established village system based on caste ideology but also provide space to evolve an alternative to the subordination of outcastes in the village, furthering human activities towards reconstituting one's communal boundaries⁹. In India the caste system is a religiously ordained and prescribed system within Hinduism, against which Dalit Christians can utilise various Christian religious practises, to contest their status as ritually impure untouchables. Dalit Christians are able to negotiate effectively their identity and alter their status within the caste-dominated village by giving new meaning and context to the religious symbols and practices they have inherited through converting to Christianity.

In India, caste ideology is sustained by cognitive and social boundaries rigidly implemented by most communities. The Dalit Christians in India are located in such a context, yet have created a quasi-alternative context through which they are able to utilise the symbols, rituals and practices within Christianity to unsettle, redraw, and challenge the existing cognitive and social boundaries. These are innovative strategies for subverting social structures and negotiating identities. This is possible because Dalit Christians have a strong sense of agency and need for immediate social change. Their often antagonising, decentring, and subverting interpretations of symbols and ritual

⁹ Barth, Frederick. *Boundaries and Connections*, p31

performances have the power to redraw their boundaries and create a new understanding of community.

The caste system determines and dominates the social life of people. Individuals and communities cannot avoid it, because religious authorities guide it. The Dalit community exemplifies this aspect as being played out in both Christian and Hindu communities. Developing subversive religious symbols and performances creates a new sacred space within the community in the absence of one. They can access and control this sacred space, while at the same time challenging the norms and structures that excluded them in first place. What becomes apparently clear in these transactions is the malleability of religious space, which is created and infused with specific meaning in order to serve a particular purpose. The direct material impact cannot be undermined. Various accounts from the Dalit community, both at individual and community level points to the fact that their engaged worldview provides them with the impetus to shape the world around them. So even the replication of hierarchy needs to be seen in this light. It is not passive submission, but active participation that provides them with self-conceptualised identity. Again narrow religious definitions fail to account for such subversive practices. Dalit's have clearly shown that they can operate with more than one worldview and that they can belong to more than one religious meaning-making system without internal dissonance. Observing the Dalit community in all its complexity, one is reminded of the need to go beyond narrow perceptions of religion and workings of religious spaces in order to develop a synergetic view of religion that takes into account all of these competing and conflicting processes.

Multi-Layerity: Being Dalits and Christians

In India the Dalit Christian community's conversion to Christianity has facilitated a process of reconstituting and reclaiming a new identity. Among Dalit Christians the process of conversion to Christianity was often perceived as a rejection or negation of one's cultural and religious heritage, in favour of a 'new' and arguably 'foreign' religious identity. This resulted in deep cultural implications, as individuals and communities do not erase their past but accommodate their new identities with the historically-grounded present. However, the important interplay between different socio-religious systems and its impact on individuals and communities are frequently underestimated. Judicious observation of the Dalit Christians and their meaning-making systems sheds light on such processes of multilayered consciousness.

When asking Dalit Christians about their history, often the response is that they do not know or they had very little knowledge of their past. On one level, this is a perfectly common response, given those social discriminatory practices, including the religious, knowledge of the past is legitimised precisely by being 'eternalised' in light of the present. Yet there are other or additional ways of seeing this. In the view of Frantz Fanon, a post-colonial theorist, who observed colonisation's distorting and disfiguring effect on the colonised people's consciousness,¹⁰ it could be stated that Christianity was a colonial process that flourished through supplanting existing religious practices in its mission fields. In India, questions concerning Dalit cultural and religious heritage were often met with hesitation or simply evaded. Even though this was often frustrating, persistent efforts suggested that this dilly-dallying can be understood as an effective mechanism to avoid answering questions regarding their past and thereby avoid shaming themselves, as well as avoiding being 'defined'. 'I don't

¹⁰ Fannon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, p170 and Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*, pp44-45

know what happened then' was the usual reply given by Dalits to any questions about their history. After meandering through various topics, they would come back to the issue of their life before becoming Christians, but change topics quickly. The general response was, 'our grandparents lived similar lives to us, working tirelessly for the high caste landlords, and making them wealthier'. The focus here is not on the details of history itself, but their hesitation, indeed refusal, to narrate it. Some would even go to the extent of saying 'from the time of Adam and Eve we are like this!' Two important points need to be underlined here; firstly, by adding Christianity to their origin myth, their history has been given a new meaning and direction. Secondly, by returning to their past, Dalit Christians may be utilising the Christian element to avoid dwelling on what is remembered as too dreadful to discuss. To comprehend this process one has to take into account the manner in which Christianity was originally presented as an alternative for their existing oppressed life style. This declaration of Christianity as something 'new' and liberating continues to hold resonance with them.

The complexity of the individual and communal spirituality that prevails in the Dalit Christian community can be understood through examining the simple day today activities. For Dalits there are no rigid and strict boundaries defining and restricting their spirituality, nor does their Christianity negate observing other religious traditions. Rather, they have multilayered spiritual reference points. Dalits feel no guilt over attending a local Hindu festival after taking part in the church communion service. While they may be shifting from a 'Christian' spiritual setting to a 'non-Christian Hindu' spiritual location and ritual practice, there was no internal spiritual conflict, as there might be for onlookers or observers. Moreover, Dalits may participate in both religious arenas with no internal conflict. Spirituality is locally based and Christianity is part of it and is in no way exclusivistic. Even though religious affiliation is an important

aspect, one is not confined in terms of strict adherence to one specific religion. In a rural context there are many occasions and gatherings that are performed within a particular religio-spiritual arena, yet people participate irrespective of their own religious affiliation. Involvement in events rooted in Hinduism means participating in the fullness of *village life* and does not necessarily affirm the validity of Hinduism, or negate their Christian identity. Even though the group performing the ritual may have a specific religious belief, the participating individuals do not need to believe and subscribe to the same system of belief, but rather partakes in the event out of communal obligation and celebration. Communal village action takes precedence over rather irrelevant religious divides. It can also be observed that when Hindus pass by the church, or Christians pass by the Hindu temple, they often pay their respects and say a little prayer to the gods residing in those holy places.

The above discussed lived reality highlight the interface between Christians and Hindus, and the prevalence of co-existing multiple religious reference points from which people operate in their daily lives. In such a context, belonging to specific castes, religious and village communities function as different identity forming locations. Members within the Christian Dalit community pick and choose their points of belonging and operate from different positions without necessarily having any internal conflict. This captures the dynamic and discursive nature of self-conceptualisation and identification in the community. It also provides an understanding of the dialectic and strategic nature of identity formation not assuming that structure creates an identity. One significant aspect of this process shows that discourses on identity cannot be essentialised, but rather understood in their dynamic, contextual reality. Nevertheless, it is important to grasp the polyvalence of cognitive conceptualisations of the self, which may not be always explicable in fixed terms. The differentiation of *us* and *them* are by

no means strict marks of categories, but possible or pragmatic points of view, understood within a given communal matrix and liable to switching. These aspects are further intricately knotted within the religious and cultural consciousness firmly tied to the realities of location.

Individuals and communities operate and shape their world primarily by belonging to a system, which is often directed by dominant notions, yet internalised and potentially also subverted. To a great extent, lived realities determine the nature of self-conceptualisation, which in turn informs and contributes to the way individuals and communities relate with one another. Aspects discussed earlier offer some of the possible ways through which individuals and communities come to understand and represent themselves within their lived contexts. While observing the religious practices in a Dalit Christian community, one has to be aware of the difficulty western-oriented studies of religion as a separate and even an exclusive system may pose. It is also important to recognise the fact that none of these processes function in a vacuum or isolation, but constantly interface and with each other, contributing to the construction of social identity.

From the Dalit Christian perspective, the concept of a non-dualistic worldview and multi-layerity are central to their identity. Social efficacy plays a crucial role in directing their actions and their beliefs. As argued earlier, the social locatedness and communal belonging has significant bearing on the construction of religious worldviews. This process highlights the centrality of human agency without which 'religion' as a system would be non-existent. Moreover, from these observations religion cannot be reduced to some sections of human society but needs to be applied to society in its totality. These observations from the Indian context, people living within multiple frameworks of reference and worldviews clearly exhibits the central notion that

lived religion is beyond narrow understandings of religion. It suggests the complex yet pragmatic approach of a synergetic view of religion as lived in the presence of multiple worldviews and religious belonging.

Lived Religion: A Synergetic View

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.¹¹

The need to ‘think differently’ is pertinent in our discussion of the contextual portrayal of lived religion. Earlier we surveyed wide-ranging plausible perspectives of what constitutes and shapes religious belonging. However, examining complex discursive processes among Dalit Christians, we gather that religion not only provides multi-layered belief systems but also comes to shape self-perception, designate social status and provide numerous ways in which communal existence is negotiated. Dalits in particular are able to develop their individual and collective identity by utilising various means available to them through their religious belonging, be it Christian or Dalit. Moreover, the conceptualisation of an engaged worldview prevalent among the discussed communities shows that they are happy to live within multiple worldviews. Lived religion in the above mentioned contexts is understood as moving beyond the functional and substantial levels and is thus woven into the fabric of individual and social life. Hence, any narrow understanding of religion, without contextual references fails to capture the reality of religious belonging.

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. *The use of Pleasure: The history of Sexuality*, p8

Given the discussion of worldview and religion as presented in this article, it would perhaps be reasonable to term the religious phenomena as religious syncretism or even religious hybridisation. Surveys on the subject of religious syncretism like those of Eric Maroney,¹² Birgit Meyer,¹³ Jim Kiernan,¹⁴ and David Mosse¹⁵ elaborate on the ways in which different religious forms are synthesised through absorption and accommodation. These authors themselves explain that there are limitations to the syncretic approach to religion in that it fails to take into account historical encounters, agency, and the role of religious authority.¹⁶ Further the works of Daniel Goh¹⁷ and Pattana Kitiarsa¹⁸ on the subject of religious hybridisation in Chinese Religion and Thai Buddhism demonstrate the inadequacy of syncretism and argue for the need to approach the dynamic movements within religion through the prism of ‘hybridity’. Within postcolonial studies the concept of cultural hybridity as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha has gained significant currency and has been effectively used to study various developments within religion.¹⁹ Even though ‘hybridity’ as a theoretical concept critiques essentialism, as Ella Shoat observes, “as a descriptive catchall term, hybridity per se fails to discriminate between diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalised self-rejection, political co-option, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence.”²⁰

¹² Maroney, Eric. *Religious Syncretism*

¹³ Meyer, Birgit. *Beyond Syncretism: Translation and diabolization in the appropriation of Protestantism*, pp45-68

¹⁴ Kiernan, Jim. *Variation on a Christian theme: the healing synthesis of Zulu Zionism*, pp69-84

¹⁵ Mosse, David. *The politics of religious synthesis: Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu, India*, pp85-107

¹⁶ Schmidt, Bettina E. *The creation of Afro-Caribbean Religions and their Incorporation of Christian Elements: A critique against Syncretism*, pp89-99

¹⁷ Goh Daniel. “Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration”, pp107–137

¹⁸ Kitiarsa Pattana. “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand”, pp 461–487

¹⁹ Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, p20ff

²⁰ Shoat, Ella. *Notes on the Post-Colonial*, p137

Furthermore, religious hybridity problematically assumes that when two are more cultural systems are combined or selectively mixed, it produces a third space which carries the best or the worst of both worlds. But in many cases this is simply not true, as people do not necessarily and consciously mix worldview and religious beliefs to produce something new, but rather they comfortably live with multiple belongings. These belongings may be ruptured and fissured, but it is there the lived religion is found to be dynamic and fluid. As Clarke suggests, religions “are susceptible to continuously being crafted into meaning-giving and meaning-making symbolic dwelling places”²¹ and therefore cannot be considered to be homogenous and finished products. As argued in this article, lived religion is not simply multiculturalism, inter-religious dialogue, or a shallow tolerance of multiple religious worldviews, but is constructed from various religious and social sources through contestation and creative interplay. Moving beyond the syncretic and hybrid theories of religion, I suggest that a synergetic view may be more fruitful.

Synergy simply means a collective engagement of individuals, which produces a significant effect at the end. It can also be defined as a ‘co-operative effects’, literally the effects produced by things that ‘operate together’ particularly when it produces a significant impact. Explaining this term in the context of life sciences Peter Corning argues that

a synergy perspective suggests a paradigm that explicitly focuses on both wholes and parts, and on the interactions that occur among the parts, between parts and wholes and between wholes at various ‘levels’ of interaction and causation.²²

²¹ Clarke, Sathianathan. *Transformations of Caste and Tribe*, p217

²² Corning Peter A. “The Synergism Hypothesis: On the Concept of Synergy and its Role in the Evolution of Complex Systems”, pp133-172

Furthermore synergy also implies the ability of individuals or communities to act collaboratively in order to produce meaningful and relevant results. Viewing religion from this perspective provides interesting insights.

The texture of Dalit Christian lives is dynamic and creative. Such a lived religious reality thrives on the co-operative efforts of individuals and the collective. Religion thus elucidates and transcends narrow preoccupations, thereby encompassing human life in its entirety. Such an understanding may alarm some in asserting that everything in human life is 'religious', however a synergetic perspective simply implies a symbiotic relationship between the part and the whole of lived religious expression. The focus then is on the centrality of human agency and not on supernatural, otherworldly occurrences or objects. As amply demonstrated by Dalit Christians, 'religion' as a system would be non-existent, or at least socially irrelevant, without human agency and creativity. However, I am not suggesting that religion is simply a figment of human imagination or invention, but that the less visible world is experienced and shaped by human beings within the visible world. As illustrated by Dalit Christian experience the notions of the less visible primarily stems from their tangible conflict-ridden daily existence, thus making the supernatural part of the ordinary. Because of the grounded nature of their worldview it consequently provides space for the formation of dynamic relationships between individuals, communities, and deities. Hence religion does not preoccupy itself only with the sacred but also takes a significant interest in the social as well. The preceding observations reiterate the fact that religion comes not pre-packaged, as if somehow void of human creativity and industry. As such, lived religion cannot be restricted to religious institutions and dogmas, but transcends them through experiential practice. In this framework religion

shapes communal and individual identity, thereby reforming the cultural caste norm of being 'outcaste' Dalits, even if only religiously expressed.

Lived religion as we have gleaned from this work presents itself as malleable, decentralised, and unmediated, providing space for negotiation and subversion within a community. Religious symbols, rituals, and practices are utilised to unsettle, redraw, and challenge the existing cognitive and social boundaries. We have seen how religious belonging is employed to loosen dominant ideological predicaments, be they colonial, caste, or institutional structures. Therefore, multiple religious reference points are not necessarily an anomaly but rather a confluence of worldviews, giving forth a polyphonic, highly functional and contextually relevant religious experience. A synergetic view of religion affirms that religious belonging is multi-layered, not through the conflation or collapsing of religious beliefs, but rather as the consequence of dynamically negotiated daily life. The liminality of simultaneously being a Dalit and a Christian was evident throughout the experiences gained in India. It was also a journey into the community of Dalit Christians living at peripheries of the village, excluded and alienated, but still able to find meaning due to their religious belonging. It is amply clear that it is only in such places that lived religion abounds.

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