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## Antoniyaar Kōvil: Hindu-Catholic Identity at the St. Anthony Shrine in St. Mary's Co-Cathedral, Chennai

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*Antoniyaar Kōvil*: Hindu-Catholic Identity at the  
St. Anthony Shrine in St. Mary's Co-Cathedral,  
Chennai

Introduction

“What is special about this place?” I asked the smartly-dressed young man standing before me in the courtyard of St. Mary of the Angels Co-Cathedral in Chennai, better known as the *Antoniyaar Kōvil*, or St. Anthony Shrine, home to a popular, miraculous image of St. Antony.

“There is nothing special about this place,” my informant replied. He hastily added: “I have no special saint or *kula deivam* (personal deity), because having a *kula deivam* is not allowed. This church is a place for all problems just as every church is for all problems. There are no special days, because all days are equally special. Why are you so interested in this church? I could take you to my church, and it will give your readers a more positive image of Indian Catholicism!”

My informant was an unusual character on the local scene in a number of ways, and his actions belied his words. While professing on the one hand that all churches and days are the same and none are special, he had made a special trip from his own distant neighborhood in Chennai to this one very specific shrine. He had been to the site three years ago to seek a boon in the form of a job, and had come on this occasion for the same reason; not coincidentally, job-seeking is a favor for which the shrine is particularly famous. He scheduled regular weekly church-going not for Sunday Mass but the “days” of the two saints locally attributed the strongest reputation for efficacy, Tuesday (St. Antony) and Saturday (Our Lady)—a fact clearly at odds with his explicit theology, in which all days are the same and no days are special. What could be going on to create such a glaring and obvious contradiction between the words and actions of my informant?

The most obvious answer lay in his unusual role on the local cultural and religious scene. He was the most fluent in English of all my informants, and would



have preferred to speak directly with me in English than in Tamil through my interpreter. He was employed as an e-marketing executive for a major internet firm, and had developed a substantial web presence on YouTube and other sites indicating an interest in “orthodox” Western Catholic figures such as the outspoken American Cardinal Dolan and a sacramental view of incorporation into the Church in which baptism was an important religious qualification, rather than a more prevalent local view in which devotional attraction is central. In short, he seemed sufficiently at home in the language and categories of elite Catholic conceptions of religious belonging and normative practice to be uneasily self-conscious about the legitimacy of divergent popular customs even when he himself clearly participated in them—a discomfort which may have been aggravated in the presence of an inquisitive, non-Indian scholar.

My informant's discomfort with Tamil Popular Catholicism reflects the discomfort of religious studies scholars and theologians, who generally have shied away or else exoticized sites such as the St. Antony Shrine. In her foreword to Raj and Dempsey's *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*, Wendy Doniger characterizes earlier generations of Indological scholarship as being missiological in focus (treating the Christianity of elites as the only normative



Figure 1. St. Mary's Co-Cathedral, Armenian Street, Chennai (photograph by author, 2012).

Christianity in India) or else naively triumphalistic (assuming that Christianity in India will be the same as Christianity elsewhere in the world, thus reserving academic study to other, more “Indian” religious traditions such as Hinduism). Both tendencies conspire to make popular Christianity invisible.<sup>1</sup> Resemblances and overlap between local instantiations of Christianity and local instantiations of Hinduism have been treated as a form of “syncretism” which violates boundaries between traditions, rather than authentic identities negotiated within a (largely shared) religious culture in which communities have porous rather than absolute boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Even when exoticized or valorized, Indian Christianity is treated as exceptional, rather than exemplary, Christianity. It is telling that Raj and Dempsey's pioneering volume was published in a series on Hindu Studies, rather than World Christianity, as if the only attention popular Christianity could attract would be as a compromised phenomenon better classified as an eccentric form of Hinduism than a form of Christianity.

In this essay, I combine ethnographic description of the practices of Hindu and Christian visitors of the St. Antony Shrine with the observation that this material cannot be understood using the standard world religions paradigm which essentializes Christianity as exclusivistic. Drawing upon the visual and material culture of the shrine in light of premodern and Vatican II templates for inculturation and the negotiation of religious difference, I highlight overlap between Tamil Hinduism and the Tamil Popular Catholicism of the site to argue that the beliefs and practices I document should inform descriptive and normative accounts of Catholic Christianity. Because Tamil Catholicism functions more as a communal designation than an ideological identity and overlaps in practice with Tamil Hinduism and Tamil Islam, individuals form a Catholic identity which persists no matter which beliefs or practices they share in common with Hindu or Muslim neighbors or their active participation in others' worship. The primary theoretical intervention I seek in this essay is to caution comparative theologians and methodological religionists against essentialist constructions of Christianity and analogous traditions which treat these entities as mutually-exclusive systems of belief and practice rather than complicated, interpenetrating cultural complexes, and thereby re-prioritize the study of South Asian Christianity, which is often marginalized for being “syncretistic.”

The first and most substantial component of my argument will be a detailed ethnographic description of the St. Antony Shrine. I will first situate the shrine within greater Chennai and its social/ecclesiastical context. Next, I will describe the figure of St. Antony as he is venerated at the site, likening his cult to that of a class of local supernatural entities known collectively as the *pēy*. I will describe devotions and offerings and manual gestures used by Hindu and Christian patrons

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Doniger, “Foreword: The View from the Other Side: Postpostcolonialism, Religious Syncretism, and Class Conflict,” in *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*, eds. Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xii-xiii, xvi-xvii.

of the shrine, including a reverse circumambulation of the church which can be made by individuals without interfering with church services underway in the sanctuary, also noting ritual honors being paid to a number of non-saintly characters. On those lines, I will discuss Moorat Chapel, a funerary chapel for a wealthy Armenian merchant which has been transformed into a clandestine site for magical, *ex opere operato* invocations and the supernatural charging of religious artefacts. Next I will discuss devotional activities at the shrine's *koṭimaram* or flagpole, which include offerings of baby Krishna images to St. Antony and possibly impromptu exorcisms, before concluding this extended ethnographic section with a brief overview of devotions to the Virgin Mary. Moving towards my conclusions, I will compare and contrast the attitudes of two parish priests towards Hindu-inflected expressions of popular Catholicism at the shrine. Finally, I will outline premodern/early modern and Vatican II theological strategies for conceiving Catholic identity, which could provide a more generous framework for evaluating sites such as the St. Antony Shrine, offering them as an alternative taxonomy to the secular world religions paradigm.

## The Shrine

According to the parish priest Fr. Xavier Packiam and private shrine publications, the contemporary St. Antony Shrine is part of St. Mary of the Angels, a British colonial church sharing the position of cathedral with Santhome since the 1952 creation of the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore in Chennai. Located in Parry's Corner in Georgetown, St. Mary's Co-Cathedral has a congregation of 235 members belonging to 43 families. The St. Antony Shrine draws from between 5,000-10,000 people on an average Tuesday and 20,000 or more on First Tuesdays, virtually none of whom are members of the parish. The church is easily accessible from the rest of Chennai, with major bus and railway terminals located nearby in Parry's Corner, and is anchored by the nearby Madras High Court and the on-site St. Mary's Anglo-Indian School. My account focuses exclusively on popular devotion at *Antoniyaṛ Kōvil*, rather than the school or the sacramental life of the parish.

St. Antony devotion at St. Mary's Co-Cathedral originated with a spontaneous votive offering. In 1929, a number of Goan sailors in danger on the high seas made a vow to St. Antony that if they were saved from a storm, they would present a statue of the saint to the church nearest their point of landing, which was St. Mary's. They duly commissioned a statue from Goa, which unusually depicted St. Antony as bearded, and presented it at the church. The parish priest at St. Mary's, John Mora, claimed that there was no room for the statue in the cathedral and presented it to the catechist of Park Town Parish, who put the statue on a side altar before moving the image to the mortuary chapel in St. Patrick's Cemetery. While the image was installed at St. Patrick's Cemetery, it became a popular devotional object with rumors of miracles spreading its fame. In

fact, devotion was so popular and income from votive offerings was so lucrative that the cemetery watchman and the catechist of Park Town fought over the offerings and attracted the notice of Archbishop Mathias. He temporarily put a stop to the devotion by directing the statue be moved to the parish house at St. Mary's, where it would be out of view of the public. Only when disappointed devotees came looking for the statue and pleaded with Fr. Mora was the statue finally installed on a side altar in the cathedral. The devotion grew to the point where the church was kept open all day on Tuesdays, the saint's day, and an annual High Mass and procession were kept on June 13, the Feast of St. Antony. By 1945, 3,000-5,000 people were coming to the site on Tuesdays and "abuses" and "superstitious practices"—unapproved popular devotions—were observed, leading Archbishop Mathias to direct the new parish priest of the site, Fr. Maggioni, to take close watch and suppress any unwanted developments. By 1951 the number of people coming to the site were between 20,000-28,000 on the first and second Tuesdays of the month and between 15,000 and 20,000 on the other two Tuesdays, with seventy percent of the devotees being non-Catholic and mostly Hindu. Today, the shrine priests estimate the number is probably 5,000-10,000 on any Tuesday of the month, with a similar percentage of Hindus. St. Antony devotion is so popular that for most people who are familiar with the site, it is known as the St. Antony Shrine rather than St. Mary's Co-Cathedral.



Figure 2. "Bearded" St. Antony *ex voto*  
(photograph by author, 2012).

## The Figure of St. Antony in Tamil Popular Catholicism

David Mosse's 1994 "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India" does not address St. Antony directly, but differentiates between the function of major cult figures such as Jesus and the Virgin Mary and lesser male Catholic saints in the religious system of a local village.<sup>3</sup> The former figures

<sup>3</sup> David Mosse, "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India," *Man*

essentialize divine attributes and possess absolute rather than relational authority. They accept only vegetarian offerings and are abstracted beyond violence or confrontation, being conceived as pacific, life-bestowing, and “cool.” Male Catholic saints such as St. Antony occupy a markedly more ambivalent place in the village pantheon. They are “relational” beings who may in certain ritual contexts (for instance, if celebrated as the *kula deivam* or village deity) be the highest legitimate authority on the scene, in which case their usual violent, ambivalent, or “hot” status is delegated to a more inferior saint or deity, allowing them to be honored with vegetarian offerings as benevolent or “cool.” More often, male Catholic saints are relationally inferior—most often to God or the Virgin Mary—and marginal, associated with liminal contexts such as the forest, wilderness, or graveyard and qualities such as violence and renunciation, which are opposed to civilized village life. They are “hot” deities capable of great help or hindrance whose awesome powers must be propitiated with blood. The male Catholic saints can be demoniacal or cast out demons, ambivalent beings who partake both of the civilized world of saints and legitimate authority and the demoniacal world of powers outside the village that threaten its order. The saints will sometimes turn their power against their own devotees to avenge wrong-doing and uphold *dharma*. They are able to overcome violence and cast out sorcery, witchcraft and possession by a class of morally-ambivalent local spirits known as the *pēy* because they themselves possess such dangerous supernatural power to a superlative degree.

In her article “Like an Indian God: Hinduisation of the Cult of Saint Anthony of Padua in Tamil Nadu,” Brigitte Sébastia applies David Mosse’s observations about male Catholic saints in Tamil Nadu to explain the cult of St. Antony in Puliampatti, a village near Tirunelveli.<sup>4</sup> Noting that devotions to St. Antony in the West rarely involve an exorcistic element, Sébastia argues that St. Antony in Tamil Nadu has assumed the characteristics of a minor Hindu god who is capable of boons a major goddess, such as the Virgin, cannot fulfill. Appearing in India through the missionary efforts of the *Padroado*, St. Antony devotion took hold on the Fishery and Coromandel coasts among the Paravar and Nadar castes, who adopted St. Antony as their *kula deivam* and appealed to the saint for protection at sea. However, competition between *Padroado* and *Propaganda Fide* missionaries made an effective control of Christian converts impossible. Susan Bayly documents frequent opportunistic mass conversions among these castes when denied prerogatives, with lay communities essentially playing one missionary group against another to pursue advantage and maintain independence. So it was commonly the case that Christian cults “ran wild,” free of ecclesiastical planning or control and only subsequently could be brought into the orbit of any organized mission. Sébastia’s Puliampatti shrine was founded by a lay devotee

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29:2 (1994): 301-332.

<sup>4</sup> Brigitte Sébastia, “Like an Indian God,” <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00597160/> (accessed Sept. 5, 2016).

and only many years later administratively annexed by the Jesuit order, who had expanded their operations into the area. In the absence of any meaningful ecclesiastical control, the St. Antony cult was free to take on characteristics of the Tamil popular religion, and St. Antony assumed the familiar characteristics of a minor Indian deity.

Sébastien's ethnography of St. Antony devotion at Puliampatti closely follows the characteristics of a generic male saint in David Mosse's typology, while also mirroring the history of the St. Antony Shrine at St. Mary's in Chennai. The origins of the Puliampatti shrine and the St. Antony Shrine in Chennai both lie with lay people from coastal castes evangelized by the Portuguese; both cults also spent their early, formative years outside of an established church and were only later brought into the orbit of ecclesiastical authority. Both cult images of St. Antony were taken from cemeteries to their present locations, strongly associating them with the kind of ambivalent and demoniacal force David Mosse attributes to minor deities and saints. As Mosse's typology of these cults would predict, St. Antony of Puliampatti is primarily an exorcist who heals by casting out sorcery, witchcraft, and the *pēy* through a battle of wills with the demons, which is somatized in the body of the patient. Animal sacrifices are made to Puliampatti St. Antony as to a "hot" deity, which would be impossible for the Virgin Mary. Devotees report Puliampatti St. Antony as an ambivalent character who will sometimes punish his worshipers for lapses and transgressions. St. Antony is both forest deity and *kula deivam* and is the focus of devotional passion or *bhakti*. The shrine *koṭimaram*, a flagpole which concentrates the *shakti* or presence and power of the saint, is for both Mosse and Sébastia a site of danger and healing.

Devotees at the St. Antony Shrine in Chennai report an understanding of St. Antony that conforms to Mosse's typology of the male Catholic saint as forest deity and Sébastia's ethnography of the Puliampatti in nearly all salient respects, but without visible evidence of exorcistic practices. According to devotees, St. Antony cures black magic, mental illness, and possession by the *pēy*, but they are usually more concerned with jobs, family problems, personal health, and having enough money to meet their families' needs.

In addition to these more definite characteristics listed above, ethnographic interviews at the site suggest that St. Antony might specifically be conceived as if he were a "hot" equivalent of Vinayagar or Ganesha, the Hindu remover of obstacles. In a generic sense, the problems and afflictions St. Antony addresses for devotees are all obstacles and St. Antony deals with them without discrimination, making him a remover of obstacles. Although St. Antony specializes in *pēy* problems, any range of secondary afflictions can be attributed to the *pēy*, and informants often claimed St. Antony helps all castes deal with any problem. A connection with the Hindu remover of obstacles, Vinayagar, repeatedly surfaced in informant interviews, where an informant claimed Antony or the Virgin Mary as their personal deity or *kula deivam*, only for Vinayagar to surface in the parallel role. In addition to informant interviews in Chennai, I observed the same pairings

in devotional stickers in rickshaws in Pondicherry, suggesting the association is not unique to the St. Antony Shrine in Chennai. Perhaps as a “hot” and dangerous form of Vinayagar, St. Antony is called upon in extreme circumstances, where a more benign form of Vinayagar will not do. The fact of a connection between the two figures for Tamils on the Coromandel Coast seems clear, although its meaning requires further investigation.

My discussion of St. Antony and his shrine would not be complete without a few words about St. Antony’s status as a universally-accessible supernatural healer. Many of the miraculous interventions devotees reported in their lives through supernatural agency were medical in nature, with St. Antony effecting cures where Western biomedicine had been tried and failed or in some cases left untried.

India’s medical delivery system can be characterized as pluralist, pragmatic, and complementary. Western medical services are available to the elite at high prices in major Indian cities, putting them out of reach of most Indians except in the case of a major medical emergency; psychiatric resources are acutely inadequate, with only a few thousand therapists serving all of India. Traditional Indian medical paradigms such as *āyurveda* and *unani* complement the allopathic medical delivery system, along with homeopathy and local traditions of supernatural healing.<sup>5</sup> Few Indians of any level of affluence are exclusive patrons of any of these medical systems, with the others serving as “medicines of last resort” if the system of first resort fails to get the desired results or deems a condition incurable. Few Indians accept the entire epistemological paradigm of Western medicine, engaging it in an ad hoc and circumstantial manner to meet practical medical needs, as a complement to existing technologies, whose cultural premises are more widely shared. However, just as few Indian Christians, Hindus, or Muslims would exclude themselves from recourse to a shrine of another tradition offering the promise of supernatural assistance for a major problem or crisis in their lives, few Indians would eschew any of the locally-available traditions of medicine.

In the case of “pēy problems” specifically attributed to mental illness in the Western psychiatric tradition, there is a cultural aversion to the diagnosis and treatment on a Western biomedical model. Individuals suffering from pēy problems are significantly less socially-stigmatized on the basis of a pēy diagnosis than individuals suffering from mental illness, which is regarded as contagious, incurable, and the result of gross personal or familial immorality in this or a previous lifetime. As pēy possession is ambivalent rather than wholly negative (the pēy can offer boons such as divination or healing abilities as well as afflicting their

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Lambert, “Popular Therapeutics and Medical Preferences in Rural North India,” *The Lancet* 348 (December 1996): 1706-1709. See also Ines G. Županov, “Conversion, Illness, and Possession in Early Modern South Asia” in *Divins Remèdes: Médecine et Religion en Asie du Sud*, eds. Ines G. Županov and Caterina Guenzi (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2008), 263-300. 265.

victims), the experience itself is categorized as a far less significant medical emergency carrying a reduced burden of stigma. Family and caregivers who might abandon a patient in the case of a diagnosis with a mental illness will generally nourish and care for one who is afflicted with possession by the *pēy*. Treatment efforts aim at restoring and reintegrating the individual into the social structure through rituals in which the entire family collectively participates, leading to significantly better therapeutic outcomes. St. Antony's Shrine in Puliampatti, surveyed by Brigitte Sébastia, ministered to a surprising number of patients whose families rejected their diagnosis as mentally ill by a psychiatric doctor and transferred them to St. Antony in search of a possession diagnosis and more effective treatment. Recourse to a supernatural healing agent such as St. Antony aims at the restoration of health, integrity, and harmony to an entire family unit. The St. Antony Shrine at St. Mary's Co-Cathedral on Armenian Street accommodates this by providing spiritual counseling free to devotees and their families.

In addition to being a supernatural healer in his own right, St. Antony serves as an empowerer of supernatural healers, such as a Christian *sādhu* who comes to the site with a representative member of his client's family before undertaking an exorcism in the family home later in the day. St. Antony's healing activities in the shrine are not limited to exorcism, medical cures, or even restoring the broader health and wholeness possessed by an individual free of medical, financial, and familial problems. Arguably the most important aspect of St. Antony's role as a healer is his social emphasis. St. Antony is a liminal figure who reaches out and heals the socially marginalized and the excluded. Informants at the site strongly emphasize that St. Antony heals all castes without distinction. Persons of low caste status are not prevented from physically entering the temple, receiving *darśana* (a kind of spiritual communion through meeting the gaze of a saint or deity), or even touching the saints' images. In this manner, St. Antony acts as a healer of untouchability, granting the gift of touch and human contact to his devotees. By presiding over a shrine open to people of all caste backgrounds, St. Antony acts as a healer of communalism, creating a space where Catholic and Hindu can worship together without respect to communal labels. In a contemporary India increasingly dominated by communalism and religious nationalism, this non-sectarian vision of a community accessible to all without respect to race, religio-cultural background, or social status, can serve as a healer and reconciler of damaging social divides.





Figure 3: Petitioners at the Shrine (photograph by author, 2012).

## Devotions and Offerings

Most of the offerings at the St. Antony Shrine appear to be connected with individual vows (Tamil: *nerccai*) on the part of devotees. Indian vows are voluntary austerities undertaken in exchange for a spiritual boon, often on a quid pro quo basis. Devotees agree to undertake some specific activity on behalf of a deity or saint if a particular boon is granted, depositing a written promissory note in an offering bin at a shrine dedicated to the saint or deity concerned, frequently along with some preliminary offering as a kind of “down payment” with a promise for more if a petition is granted.<sup>6</sup> It is relatively common for devotees to cross religious boundaries in the offering of vows, searching for a deity or saint reputed to have more efficacy in dealing with a particular kind of problem.

Petitions are highly individualized, but frequently concern agricultural success, marital stability, economic prosperity, family harmony, and the health and fertility of family members, land, and livestock. Most vows at the St. Antony Shrine at the time of my research appeared to focus on physical health, economic issues, and fertility.

<sup>6</sup> Selva Raj, “Shared Vows, Shared Space, and Shared Deities” in *Dealing with Deities: the Ritual Vow in South Asia*, eds. Selva Raj and William E. Harman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 44.



Figure 4: Candle offerings at the shrine (photograph by author, 2012).

Offerings to St. Antony are varied. A plurality of pilgrims offer garlands of flowers, which are clipped by an attendant who then returns the flower to the devotee as a kind of *prasād* (a substance infused with the spiritual presence and power of a deity because it has been given in offering). The floor of the shrine area is littered with the remains of foliage because after pilgrims deposit their garlands on the statue, others quickly come and remove a flower or two from the already-offered garland.

There are two metal bins within the sanctuary to allow devotees who wish to offer coins to deposit them directly in front of the image. Though I did not observe this offering, I was told that sometimes devotees who have been granted an especially noteworthy boon will return with a garland made from Indian banknotes to offer the saint as a kind of thanksgiving.

Within the shrine enclosure, there is a multi-tiered metal candelabrum where devotees can offer taper candles, which they have touched to the image for blessing. Most of the time, this candelabrum is full of candles. On some occasions, it is necessary for an attendant to quickly remove unburned candles to make room for new in order to maintain the flow of offering.

Among more unconventional offerings are *malar* or *pratima*, thin metallic sheets of hammered silver stamped with various shapes representing the nature of the problem the devotee wishes to overcome. Most of these are in the shape of body parts or sometimes houses or motorcycles—the former seeking healing of various physical ailments, the latter representing tangible goods the devotees would like to acquire or protect.

When the shrine is not as well supervised, devotees leave durable offerings, which they intend to return for later, presumably to absorb some of the *shakti* of the saint in the meantime, ritually empowering the object for use in the home.

While inspecting the site, I noted several large painted icons that had been left at the shrine in burlap sacks, presumably to be taken again later by those who had left them.

The manual gestures of devotees at the shrine derive largely from a Hindu devotional idiom. While a certain number of worshipers kneel on their knees, large numbers do full prostrations or rock in front of the image or throw their arms outstretched in supplication. When they reach the shrine, devotees within the queue touch the feet of the saint through an aperture in the wooden cabinet and then touch themselves—sometimes in the forehead and eyes, sometimes on the chest, and sometimes in a manner reminiscent of an Iberian Catholic genuflection. Some touch the image and when they bring their hand back, they kiss the hand that made contact with the statue. Though devotees are expected to expedite the flow of the queue, many rest their hand against the glass or the image and linger for as long as will be tolerated by those around them. Though there are commonalities in approach, no devotional gestures seem to be prescribed, and consequently the shrine appears almost chaotic in its diversity of devotional styles.

Devotees at the St. Antony Shrine are usually trying to overcome some major problem or crisis in their lives. Frequently devotees are in search of employment. An informant told me that the youngest contingent of pilgrims uses the shrine almost exclusively for this purpose. Opinions varied about the number of weeks it is necessary to invoke the saint—seven weeks, nine weeks, eleven weeks, thirteen weeks—but there seemed to be a general consensus that a pilgrim looking for a job should come to the shrine for a specified number of Tuesdays upon which they would offer a candle to the saint and possibly deposit a coin in one of the offering bins. Conspicuously missing from these accounts is any kind of formally-prescribed ritualized prayer—no informant mentioned a particular prayer devotees are expected to make, and there are signs the shrine custodians consider this as an absence. The church has affixed a prominent billboard offering a simple St. Antony novena prayer for devotees to use while standing in the queue and they duplicated this billboard within the shrine itself. A written account of the shrine in the 1930s and 1940s states that the shrine custodians, dissatisfied with various popular devotions they considered immature and/or superstitious, printed their own booklets with a simple novena prayer to distribute among pilgrims hoping to mainstream St. Antony devotion, but efforts of this nature have never caught on. This would seem to hint that for the majority of these Indian pilgrims, what matters is not a fixed formula of verbal petitioning as in much European popular devotion, but the completion of some concrete ritual action.

## The Circumambulation Circuit

The physical layout of St. Mary's Co-Cathedral facilitates the movement of devotees engaging in private devotion independent of the main sanctuary enclosure. Pilgrims may follow a pre-arranged circuit by entering the left transept,



venerating the main St. Antony statue, reverse-circumambulating the interior of the church venerating statues and icons along the way, and finally ending up in the opposite transept without ever entering the sanctuary or intruding upon worship services underway.



Figure 5: The Circumambulation Circuit (photograph by author, 2012).

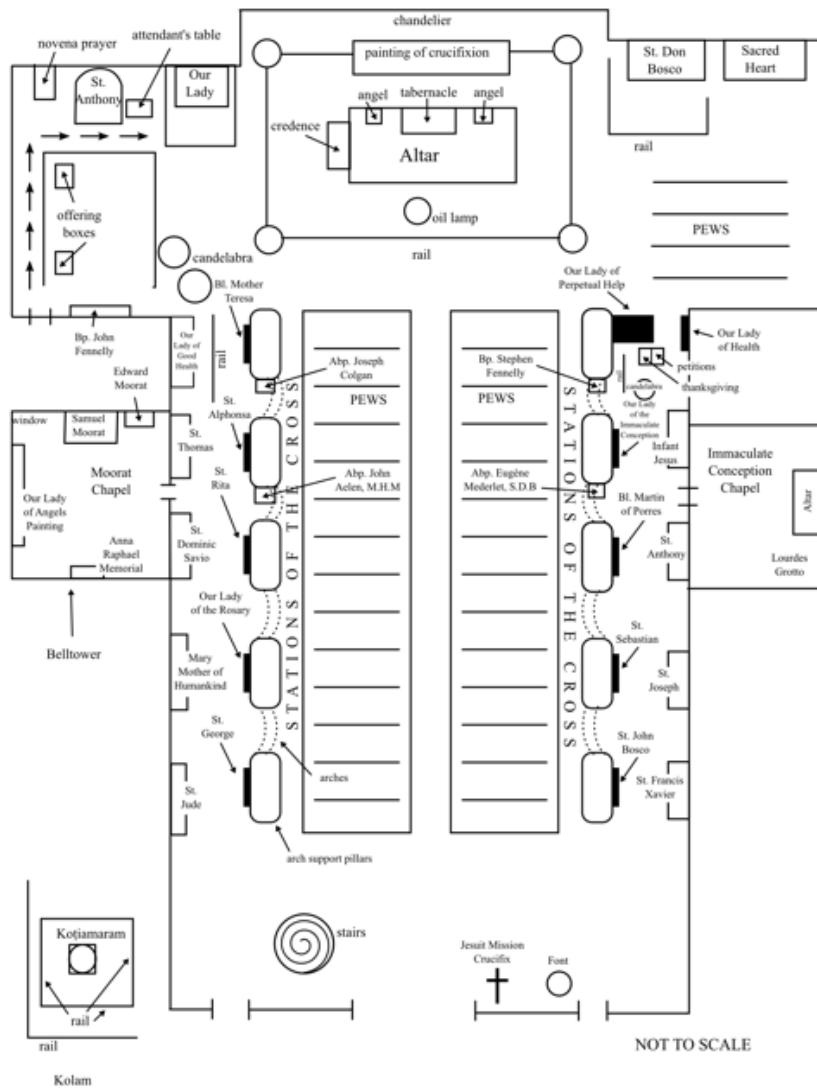


Figure 6. "A Plan of St. Mary's Co-Cathedral" (P. J. Johnson and Ed Heil, 2012).



Figure 7. Our Lady of Good Health  
(photograph by author, 2012).

If a devotee proceeded along the circumambulation circuit, the first statue he or she would encounter after the main St. Antony icon would be Our Lady of Good Health, clearly the most popular devotional figure apart from St. Antony himself. The image is bedecked in a magnificent cloth-of-gold sari and garlanded with flower offerings from devotees; the latter are sufficiently numerous to leave a clutter of discarded petals beneath the icon's feet, which are periodically swept and removed. The area around this image is typically congested with devotees making offerings, and equipped with a nearby candelabrum to prevent devotees from burning candles on the floor directly beneath the image.

The next saint upon the route is St. Thomas, depicted holding the *mahārāja's* spear traditionally credited with martyring him. Next is St. Dominic Savio, a young boy standing with lily flowers to represent his purity, a crucifix, and a motto reading "death before sin," who is advertised as a holy model for boys. Unlike St. Thomas, famed throughout the world because of his alleged role in bringing Christianity to India, St. Dominic Savio is an obscure saint especially associated with the Salesian order as he was a pupil of Don Bosco. The next image



in sequence is St. Mary Mother of Humankind—an image of Mary holding the Infant Jesus. Next is St. Jude, a popular saint in European Catholicism associated with the poor, the desperate, the destitute, and those in need of urgent assistance. According to the parish priest Fr. Xavier Packiam, the saint statues in the church were made by Hindu craftsmen in Krishnagar, Calcutta, an artist’s colony famed for the construction of Hindu gods.

There are a number of framed saints’ icons opposite the statues on the left side of the nave, and devotees frequently add a mini-circuit to their circumambulation to include these in their veneration or else tack back and forth between the statues and the icons, while continuing along the main route. These portraits include Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, St. Alphonsa, St. Rita, Our Lady of the Rosary, and finally, the British patron saint George slaying a dragon (representing the church’s location in Georgetown, a relic of the British colonial origins of the cathedral).

As one crosses over to the right side of the nave, one encounters a massive 1940s Jesuit mission crucifix mounted to the back wall of the narthex, illuminated with L.E.D. lights and surmounted by a special wooden canopy. The crucifix is highly expressive, accentuating the wounds of Jesus. This station is a site of considerable attention on the part of devotees who linger to touch the crucifix with one hand, which is consequently deeply worn at the base.

Coming up the right side of the nave, the first statue encountered is St. Francis Xavier wearing a priestly stole and holding a crucifix in his hand. He is described in a caption as the Apostle of Asia and sometimes vested in a cloth-of-gold shawl, which deceptively resembles as a sari. The next image is of St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus, like all the statues in the co-cathedral well-worn from continual touch. The most visibly worn of the images is a second St. Antony statue. This image is a more conventional representation of St. Antony than the shrine’s more famous image, depicting the saint clean-shaven, holding lilies and the child Jesus. There is deep flaking on the lower part of St. Antony’s legs, indicating serious wear. Although nearly all the statues and icons have offering boxes directly underneath their canopies, the offering box for St. Antony is the most



Figure 8. St. George, patron of Georgetown neighborhood, Chennai (photograph by author, 2012).

conspicuously used, illustrating its popularity. The next statue depicts a standing Infant Jesus holding up the globe. Installed in the wall, where one might visually expect a final statue, is a framed wooden portrait of Our Lady of Health, the last image on the right wall of the nave.

Opposite the sequence of statues on the right are framed icons of St. John Bosco, St. Sebastian, St. Martin of Porres, and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, which devotees either circumambulate separately or else include on the main route.

In the right transept of the co-cathedral, there are statues of St. John Bosco and the Sacred Heart of Jesus to balance the main St. Antony statue in the left transept. The Sacred Heart statue deliberately imitates the style of the St. Antony statue, with an equally elaborate wooden canopy, a glass casing, and an aperture for touching the statue base; it is, however, sometimes overlooked by devotees as it is effectively in the back corner of the church. As the miraculous St. Antony statue begins the circumambulation, the Sacred Heart image appears intended to conclude it, although it is actually dwarfed in popularity by a nearby framed portrait of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which appears to be the usual terminus of the devotees' circumambulation. This icon is surrounded by conspicuous rotating L.E.D. lights, a candelabrum, and separate offering boxes for petitions and thanksgivings, and sits on the border between the sanctuary and the nave.

Although they are somewhat off the circumambulation circuit and the church hierarchy never intended devotees to worship them, there are also a small number of sculpted busts of early archbishops and Capuchin missionaries associated with the cathedral toward the front of the nave, which receive a surprising amount of veneration. While it is not unheard of in the St. Thomas Christian traditions of India for graves of bishops to receive flower offerings and other signs of devotion, this is extraordinary in the Latin rite, and the parish priest attributed this to a theological misunderstanding, wherein devotees somehow reckon these figures divine. At various points in my visit, I found busts of Apostolic Vicar Stephen Fennelly, Archbishop Colgan, Archbishop Mederlet, Archbishop Aelen, and



Figure 9. Bishop Stephen Fennelly  
(photograph by author, 2012).



Apostolic Vicar John Fennelly—early bishops of the Madras archdiocese for whom St. Mary’s served as their see—each garlanded with flowers or else holding a single flower blossom in an outstretched hand. It would not be the slightest exaggeration to say that every framed icon, every sculpted bit of marble, and every statue in the church is on some occasion the object of somebody’s devotion.

Situated in high-traffic areas of the church are a number of free-standing metal fences upon which devotees are free to attach padlocks and other objects of devotion. The most common offerings are padlocks, yellow cords, and pieces of cloth tied to resemble a baby’s cloth diaper. The assemblage usually contains a deposit box, where devotees are invited to leave the keys to the padlocks so the church can remove them if they become too numerous; however, I was informed by the parish priest that most commonly the devotee will keep the key and then remove the lock themselves when a wish is granted. Yellow cords and diapers are typically offered to obtain a marriage partner or a child, while padlocks are more open-ended in their intention.

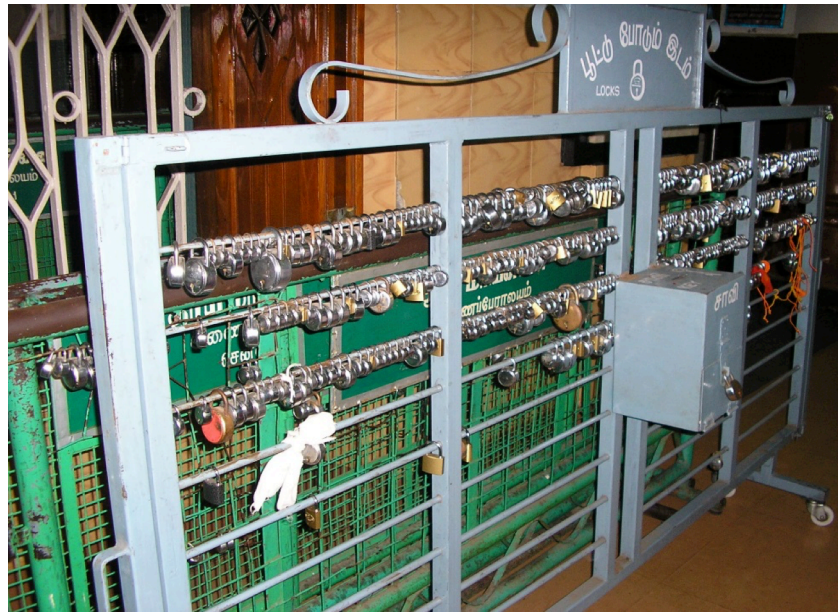


Figure 10. Votive locks (photograph by author, 2012).

The original architectural plan for the church included possibilities for European-style popular devotions. There are two complete sets of the Way of the Cross on the inside walls of the nave. One set is smaller, older, directly inlaid in the walls, and written in English. There is an obviously newer set of framed stations, significantly larger, inscribed in Tamil, set up a little higher to be more easily seen. The effort to encourage this European popular devotion appears never to have caught on, as on no occasion was I able to observe someone following the Stations of the Cross. The fact that these two sets of the Stations of the Cross were erected on distinct occasions indicates either a radical transition in the composition of the church from English to Tamil patronage or else was a conscious effort to

redirect the devotion of Tamil worshipers from popular forms that were disapproved by the church.

## Moorat Chapel

Perhaps the most unconventional offerings at St. Mary's Co-Cathedral are made within Moorat Chapel, a small side chapel memorializing Samuel Mucartish Moorat, his wife Anna Raphael, and their son Edward Samuel Moorat.<sup>7</sup> The Moorats were a family of wealthy Armenian merchants in British colonial Madras, with Samuel Mucartish Moorat being best known for acts of philanthropy and the establishment of a number of educational institutions in Europe. Unusually for Armenians of their time, the Moorats were Roman Catholics attending St. Mary's Co-Cathedral rather than attending the Armenian Orthodox church on the same street. Their generosity is said to have enhanced St. Mary's financially, and consequently the family has its own funerary chapel on the grounds.

The most noteworthy features of Moorat Chapel are the imported marble memorial plaques for the three family members and corresponding sculptures for Samuel Mucartish Moorat and his wife Anna Raphael. None of these have been well maintained by the church. Anna Raphael's relief sculpture bears deep fresh marks where it was impacted by a roughly-pushed freestanding confessional; it is also mostly obscured from view. Samuel Mucartish Moorat's plaque has been shattered and re-set into the wall. This plaque is accompanied by an elaborate funerary sculpture of a disconsolate female mourner being comforted by an angel bearing the motto "*resurgam*" (Latin: "I shall rise"). The base of the sculpture is inscribed "Turnerelli," indicating that it was sculpted by Peter Turnerelli, a prominent nineteenth century sculptor who produced a series of busts for the royal family of Great Britain and many of the royal families in Europe. The European art press of Turnerelli's time described it as bound for the East Indies and a work of considerable merit; until this present research, the work had been considered lost. This sculpture is the object of considerable devotion, contributing to its serious cosmetic damage. Devotees spread flower petals, blossoms, and occasionally whole garlands on the base of the sculpture, or adorn the human or angelic figures with garlands. The figures and base are covered with a thick layer of coarse white salt, a devotional gesture replicated at the base of the *koṭimaram*. The base and feet

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<sup>7</sup> Born in Tokat, Armenia in 1760. Moorat was educated by the Mekhitarists, an order of Catholic monks founded to advance Armenian literature. H. D. Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras* Vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1913), 491 notes that Moorat served as one of eight Syndics who managed the funds of the Capuchin Mission. Moorat's will provided for the establishment of two schools in Europe associated with the Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation—the Samuel Moorat College in Sèvres and the Moorat-Raphael College in Venice. Moorat's sons fought the bequest in a series of lawsuits but ultimately failed. For information about Samuel Moorat, his family, and his grave at St. Mary's, see Jacob Seth Mesrobian, *Armenians in India -From the Earliest Times to the Present* (Calcutta: Asian Educational Services, 1937), 592-594. The lawsuits surrounding the bequest were chronicled extensively in contemporary legal journals, including the East India Company's *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany*, Volumes 28-29 (1821): 477-479.

of the figures are deeply discolored by the perpetual offering of candles, which are burned directly upon the marble; the motto “*resurgam*” is especially blackened. The backdrop and even the angelic figures are covered by a palimpsest of English and Tamil graffiti, written directly upon the marble with the end of a wax candle. Some of this is secular graffiti (mobile phone numbers, personal names, declarations of love), but most of it consists of petition prayers wherein a person states their human need in anticipation that the inscription will result in its fulfilment. Some of these invoke deity, but many are more impersonal and objective in tone, as if the very fact of writing one’s desire automatically results in its fulfilment. This palimpsest spilled over to the confessionals stored in the room, which are covered with similar graffiti.

While I was on site, I observed many devotees entering the chapel to venerate a large, ornate, empty wooden frame occupying almost the entirety of one of the chapel’s walls. I was later informed that this frame normally contains a nineteenth century painting of Our Lady of the Angels, the patron saint of the church. Devotees would touch the frame and then themselves, or else light candles beneath the frame; on one occasion, I saw a candle burning directly on the frame itself, which is common enough that the chapel has a posted “no candles” sign. I was told that the painting was away for cleaning due to discoloration from a candle that was burned directly against the mural itself. The absence of the painting seems to have stopped no one from venerating it as if were still present.



Figure 11. Religious artifacts absorbing *shakti*, Moorat Chapel (photograph by the author, 2012).

There is a small window alcove in the chapel with sufficient space for devotees to leave offerings as *prasād*, hoping they will absorb *shakti* and intending to retrieve them later. I observed Christian rosaries, a Hindu *mālā*, a small St.

Antony statue, a small Sacred Heart statue, bottles of Velankanni and Lourdes water, a Christianized geometrical icon called a *yantra* used for magical protection, a number of saints' icons, and a pair of sculpted crucifixes. Seemingly any object that can receive supernatural power and subsequently protect the home of the bearer was left in order to be blessed.

Religious activities such as candle-lighting and petition-writing within Moorat Chapel correspond with those undertaken by devotees in a South Indian *dargāh*, or Sufi saints' tomb. Tombs are somewhat rare in India, and monumental tombs tend to possess religious significance, making it unclear whether this devotion is a spontaneous cultural reflex to the presence of a prominent monumental tomb on the part of Hindu devotees accustomed to visiting *dargāhs* or perhaps a practice introduced by Muslims at the site. Given the presence of Muslim students at St. Mary's Anglo-Indian School, my occasional sightings of Muslim devotees on the shrine campus and informants' estimate that Muslims might constitute up to six percent of the total number of devotees at the site, either scenario is plausible. I asked the parish priest about devotions in Moorat Chapel, and he dismissed them as symptomatic of "illiteracy"—an odd charge, given that much of the unauthorized religiosity in the chapel consisted precisely of written prayer petitions, which covered sculptures, confessionals, and even the chapel's glass doors with a thick palimpsest of wax graffiti. My translator and I made several attempts to interview people in Moorat Chapel about their activities but for the most part they appeared defensive and hastily departed. The church is planning to transform the space into a climate-controlled confession room, a plan which if implemented, would greatly curtail unauthorized devotions.

## The Koṭimaram

The *koṭimaram* is a common feature of Tamil Popular Catholicism, which is virtually unknown in the West. A *koṭimaram* or flag-tree is a flagpole upon which representations of a saint or deity are hoisted, concentrating the spiritual power of that entity. Most Catholic churches in Tamil Nadu including St. Mary's Co-Cathedral are equipped with a *koṭimaram*, and they are commonly one of the main centers of devotion and offerings at the churches and shrines they adorn.

While many a *koṭimaram* consists of a simple iron pole surmounted by a Latin cross, possibly with poured concrete to reinforce the base, the *koṭimaram* at Santhome, St. Mary's Co-Cathedral, and the Annai Velankanni Church in Chennai are all of a similar and more elaborate style. Each of these is an imposing pillar of rounded, burnished copper upon a polished stone base, and they are similar enough in appearance to suggest that they may have all been produced as part of the same archdiocesan inculturation initiative or contributed by the same donor. The *koṭimaram* at St. Mary's incorporates two sets of four copper plates into the design of its base, forming the sides of a cube. These plates are stamped with the images of deity and saints—the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a

clean-shaven St. Antony with the child Jesus, and the bearded St. Antony of the shrine making up the four sides.

The *koṭimaram* and its associated practices in Tamil Popular Catholicism are according to Mosse directly analogous to vernacular Hindu practices in the area. During an annual multi-day festival to a particular Hindu deity or Christian saint, the domesticated, dharmic power of the being, whose image is enclosed within a shrine, is brought into the village itself, exposing its inhabitants to its power and danger.<sup>8</sup> When the shrine image is brought out in procession and a banner is hoisted on the *koṭimaram* to



Figure 12. The *koṭimaram* (photograph by author, 2012).

announce the festival, the saint has moved officially “outside” the shrine and takes on the ambivalent, demoniacal powers of a forest deity. The *koṭimaram* or “flag-tree” is the ritual equivalent of the forest and is considered along with the itinerant processional image the most intense concentration of the deity or saint’s *shakti*. Paradoxically, this movement temporarily expands the outer boundary of the shrine, bringing the entire village under the spiritual sovereignty of the shrine deity. Direct contact with the processional chariot and the *koṭimaram* is both dangerous and highly-sought, due to the intense power situated there. Brigitte Sébastia’s ethnographic video “Dance of St. Anthony” documents intense crises of possession at the St. Antony Shrine in Puliampatti, including lewd gestures, setting one’s hair on fire, and beating oneself violently against the pole, and other somatizations of possession as attempts to use the overpowering *shakti* of the saint to drive out the lesser being possessing one.

It was impossible during my short period of time at the St. Antony Shrine to document any practices concerning possession at the site, but there were tantalizing hints that a persistent researcher might be rewarded in this endeavor. The shrine’s *koṭimaram* is surrounded by a large fence that can be closed with a padlock at times of diminished ecclesiastical supervision, suggesting an awareness of ecclesiastically-disapproved exorcistic practices at the *koṭimaram* of other saints

<sup>8</sup> David Mosse, “Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India,” *Man* 29: 2 (1994): 318-320.



in Tamil Nadu and the desire to control them. Devotees make prolonged (and at times forceful) physical contact with the koṭimaram, while circumambulating it, and reach states of emotional intensity rivaled only by veneration of the main St. Antony image within the shrine. Though informants are unwilling to mention being at the shrine in pursuit of the exorcism themselves, most would describe the importance of the shrine to other devotees in terms of neutralizing sorcery and casting out invasive spiritual beings known as the *pēy*. I also met a Christian *sādhu* who performs exorcisms and a disciple at the site, and though they both claimed to be there for different motives, they were planning an exorcism for a member of the disciple's family in the near future. There appears to be an undercurrent of possession and exorcism at the shrine analogous to other St. Antony shrines in Tamil Nadu, but I was not able to document it beyond these tantalizing indications.

The offerings I observed at the koṭimaram were numerous and more varied than offerings at the koṭimaram at Velankanni; seemingly, they were also more numerous than anticipated by the shrine authorities who originally built the koṭimaram, as they have added several freestanding railings to accommodate offerings that will not fit on the main fence around the koṭimaram. The koṭimaram itself receives candles and rose petals, large quantities of coarse salt, and occasional peppercorns as offerings. Devotees tie red and saffron cords to the fence and railings, most commonly beseeching the saint for help finding a marriage partner or the birth of a child. This form of offering appears pan-Indian, as I have observed it in *dargāhs* in Delhi and Nagore, Hindu temples throughout India, and Catholic shrines in Tamil Nadu. As at other sites, devotees offer cloth babies' diapers in hope of the birth of a child. Additionally, there is a superabundance of metal padlocks attached to the fence and railings, along with a deposit box for the keys to facilitate easy removal on the part of the shrine when the locks have become too numerous.

From the point of view of a Western scholar, the most striking offering at the koṭimaram was a large number of Krishna cradles tied to the main fence. These consisted of painted wooden cribs with an upraised nail in the center to hold a small, blue, painted clay image of the baby Krishna. It is unclear whether these are being offered exclusively by Hindus, or whether some Christians are involved in what seems to be perceived as an efficacious practice. I observed similar Krishna-cradle *ex votos* at the Annai Velankanni Church in Chennai, and it is possible to conjecture that these are perceived as particularly desirable offerings to saints such as St. Antony and the Virgin who are conventionally depicted with the divine child Jesus in their arms. This particular practice has the power to generate controversy, and on one occasion, I found the cradles systematically overturned and their images smashed on the ground.

The organized liturgical use of the koṭimaram is consistent with the use of the koṭimaram at other shrines, both Catholic and Hindu. Though it was once suppressed by the priests, there is an annual feast to St. Antony culminating on June 13 (the saint's feast day in the liturgical calendar) in which an image of St. Antony is carried in procession, and a flag bearing the image of the saint is hoisted to the koṭimaram. The church also holds a nine-day feast culminating on Our Lady Queen of the Angels, the patron saint of the shrine. This is celebrated with great fanfare to ensure that the devotion to Our Lady remains greater than any mere saint. For either feast, there is a procession from the altar of the church to the koṭimaram carrying a series of flags, with the flag hoisted to the accompaniment of pealing church bells, fireworks, and devotees attempting to touch the flag to absorb its shakti, while others bombard it with coins and flower petals.



Figure 14. Chariot procession for the Feast of Our Lady of the Angels (photograph by author, 2012).

## Devotions To Our Lady

The priests at St. Mary's Co-Cathedral actively encourage Marian devotion, and while this is not as successful as the devotion to St. Antony, it does seem to attract a genuine following. In addition to the church's annual patronal feast for Our Lady Queen of the Angels, the church has recently become a departure point for the Velankanni *pādayātrā*, a walking pilgrimage from Chennai to the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni 329 kilometers away, in preparation for the saint's annual nine-day feast in September. Our Lady of Velankanni has an outdoor statue that can be venerated by pilgrims before they enter the queue to the St. Antony Shrine.



Figure 15. Our Lady of the Angels (photograph by author).

This is reasonably popular, with the glass case that surrounds the image covered with a thick palimpsest of graffiti and petitionary prayers. Another statue of Velankanni is on the main circumambulation route within the church, and is one of the most popular of these images. There is a statue of Mary directly beside the St. Antony image, which is even more popular, with the area directly beneath her feet bestrewn with rose petals returned as *prasād* from garlands originally offered to St.



Figure 16. Bins to deposit vows/petitions and thanksgivings (photograph by author, 2012).

Antony. This image's popularity is rivaled only by the Our Lady of Perpetual Help icon at the end of most devotees' circumambulation of the church, which is venerated in organized services on Wednesdays and Saturdays, which are sponsored by the church.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help is considered an especially auspicious figure for granting



favors and petitions. This is evident in the bins for petitions and thanksgivings the church has placed next to the image.

There is a side chapel at St. Mary's reserved especially for veneration of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. This chapel is opposite Moorat Chapel, but it seems less frequented. This chapel has its own altar where mass could be celebrated, but the altar is more frequently used as a platform for candle offerings to the image of Our Lady of Lourdes that stands above the altar in a faux landscape depicting the Virgin Mary's apparition to St. Bernadette in the grotto at Lourdes. The glass doors that protect the entryway to this chapel are also covered with candle wax graffiti and petitionary prayers, as at Moorat Chapel across the church; in fact, some of the specific petitions from Moorat Chapel were duplicated verbatim. By and large, devotion within this chapel appears less idiosyncratic than in Moorat Chapel, consisting primarily of prayers and candle offerings on a modest scale.



Figure 17. Immaculate Conception Chapel (photograph by author, 2012).

chapel are also covered with candle wax graffiti and petitionary prayers, as at Moorat Chapel across the church; in fact, some of the specific petitions from Moorat Chapel were duplicated verbatim. By and large, devotion within this chapel appears less idiosyncratic than in Moorat Chapel, consisting primarily of prayers and candle offerings on a modest scale.

## Contestation, Conflict, and Compromise

Official attitudes toward popular devotion at St. Mary's Co-Cathedral are circumstantial and varied, depending on the nature of the practice in question. Direct confrontation is usually avoided, with shrine authorities attempting to passively redirect devotions of which they disapprove by making them logistically more difficult to perform or by promoting a more acceptable alternative. The only evidence I could find of attempts to directly, coercively put an end to disapproved devotions originated with Catholic laity.

The shrine's historical relationship with popular devotion is one of contestation, conflict, and compromise, with the latter the most characteristic in the present day. This evidently was not always the case, as the chronicles of a former parish priest, Pietro Maggioni, attest. Fr. Maggioni's account of his career in the archdiocese in the 1930s and 1940s indicates that the local Catholic hierarchy was once deeply concerned with the nature of devotion at the shrine and that formal

measures were taken in an effort to control it. “His Grace the late Archbishop Mathias was also very keen that I should watch the devotion and not allow anything to creep in against the liturgy or faith and morals.<sup>9</sup> In compliance with this directive, Maggioni “made it a point to be present all day [on Tuesdays, the saint’s day] to see that abuses did not creep in and to regulate the crowd and the queue.”<sup>10</sup> The shrine image of St. Antony had already been moved from the mortuary chapel at St. Patrick’s Cemetery and briefly removed from public view when the archdiocese deemed its popularity too disruptive and continued to monitor popular devotion when the image was reinstalled at St. Mary’s. By the beginning of Maggioni’s tenure as parish priest in 1945, “a number of abuses and a few superstitious practices were going on,” which Maggioni was directed to end. Among these, “garlands were re-sold for money [after being offered in the shrine and received back as *prasād*], special *chits* were distributed” and “oil, holy water, dresses, etc.” were collected by devotees. Maggioni’s “*chits*” were formal Tamil *nerccais* (written promises that if the saint will grant a particular boon, the petitioner will make a certain offering in return). The oil and holy water were probably the mainstream European Catholic pious practice of collecting holy water and oil blessed by a priest at a shrine for use in healing and spiritual protection in the home. The “dresses” probably were saris and shawls offered by devotees to adorn saints’ images, which are commonly distributed as a benefaction or *prasād* to poor devotees after being used in this fashion. Each of these practices is mainstream in either European or Tamil Popular Catholicism today, so Fr. Maggioni’s policing of the site appears especially exacting. In addition to ending these practices after more than a year’s effort, Maggioni also suppressed St. Antony’s June 13 Mass and procession, and replaced a third class relic of St. Antony venerated in the shrine with an “authentic” relic he acquired in Padua. Maggioni made concerted efforts to catechize devotees of the shrine into more mainstream practices, mass-producing a novena booklet with St. Antony’s picture and prayers to the saint. He considered a missionary apostolate to convert Hindu visitors to the site until deeming it politically inexpedient, instead installing a “book-barrow,” where pamphlets and booklets could be distributed and devotees interested in conversion could leave their addresses in order to be contacted later by their local parish priests. This ministry is now part of the archdiocesan Commission on Evangelization and is staffed by a nun from the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master, Sr. Gloria. Maggioni’s approach to both Tamil and European Popular Catholicism appears unrelentingly negative and confrontational—a matter of suppressing popular devotion, wherever possible, while attempting to redirect it in the direction of official European Catholicism. Maggioni’s tenure as parish priest predates Vatican II and the move toward inculturation in the Indian church;

<sup>9</sup> Pietro Maggioni, “History of St. Anthony’s Devotion at St. Mary’s Co-Cathedral” (limited-circulation archdiocesan publication).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* The remainder of this historical account of St. Antony devotion is a condensed paraphrase of the same document.

many of the practices characterized “superstitions,” “misunderstandings,” and “abuses” are unremarkable today.

In comparison with Fr. Maggioni’s approach to popular religion, the prevailing approach at the shrine today appears largely tolerant, inclusivistic, and laissez-faire in nature. Direct confrontation between priests and devotees is avoided, with efforts to redirect devotion typically being passive and indirect. This approach is consonant with the pastoral philosophy of Fr. Xavier Packiam, the Salesian priest in charge of St. Mary’s.

Where devotional practices are encouraged or tolerated, church authorities have often made efforts to expedite them. The church has placed receptacles for offerings near many of the most popular sites on the shrine campus. The St. Antony Shrine in the left transept of the cathedral is the most conspicuous example of official encouragement of devotion, as it has required the most architecturally substantial accommodation. Originally a simple side altar with a statue of St. Teresa, the transept has gradually been entirely reworked. The side altar and image of St. Teresa were removed so that the main statue of St. Antony could be centrally placed in the left transept for veneration, and guard rails were placed within the area to allow one group of devotees to circumambulate the image and bring offerings while others congregate in front of the image for individual prayers and prostrations. The church installed an elaborate system of railing just outside the entrance to the transept to provide some order to the chaotic long queues of devotees outside, and eventually built a corrugated metal roof to protect people in the queue from the elements. A number of stalls have been built to accommodate a first aid station, booths to purchase taper candles or make donations, and a desk for commissioning mass offerings on behalf of the deceased. Additionally, the archdiocesan Commission on Evangelization staffs an office near the queue, where Christian catechetical literature and prayers and spiritual counseling are available, capitalizing on the flow of human traffic. Large images of Our Lady of Velankanni and the Sacred Heart have been installed in the queue area for pilgrims not yet inside the St. Antony Shrine. On Tuesdays, the church keeps a table near the St. Antony image staffed with a volunteer to expedite flower and other offerings to the saint and give back a certain amount as *prasād*; otherwise, the area would quickly become congested with offerings and impede the flow of human traffic. The church has also installed permanent metal donation boxes and multi-tiered candelabra for the devotees not circumambulating the image. Loudspeakers are just outside the church to blare devotional songs to St. Antony for the edification of devotees in the queue. The church obviously intends to facilitate St. Antony devotion, as it has invested significant organizational resources in doing so, including major, permanent alterations to the church itself. The overall setup makes candle, flower, money, and *pratima* offerings popular, along with facilitating the deposit of ritual vows and thanksgivings. Similar bins and candelabra are situated at strategic points around the shrine campus, some explicitly earmarked for the deposit of vows (the so-called “chits” Fr. Maggioni so

vociferously opposed). Other offering boxes request the deposit of keys, which open the padlocks devotees attach to special church-installed railings when seeking a boon from the saint. Interestingly, both the “vow” box and most of the railing key boxes are installed away from the main St. Antony statue and near Marian images such as a statue of Our Lady of Velankanni and the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, possibly indicating a desire to redirect much of the boon-seeking to the Virgin Mary to establish her precedence over the saint. The Sacred Heart statue at the end of the circumambulation route and prominent Tamil Stations of the Cross have also been installed to encourage more mainstream popular devotions.

Official attitudes toward devotional practices around the shrine campus are more complicated and ambivalent, though it is still the case that direct prohibitions and confrontations are rare in comparison with solutions that attempt to encourage alternatives or passively redirect devotees away from a particularly disapproved practice.

The shrine *koṭimaram* appears relatively new, and to have been constructed with awareness of lay exorcisms at the *koṭimaram* of other prominent Catholic sites in Tamil Nadu. It is surrounded by a permanent rail fence, which both facilitates offerings and impedes lay exorcisms, as it can be locked to deny access to the *koṭimaram* at night or at other times it cannot be supervised. As St. Antony’s reputation in Tamil Catholicism is largely that of an exorcist, such a measure was probably necessary, and I would not rule out attempts to perform impromptu exorcisms during the day at the shrine. In addition to the rail fence, the church has installed a number of temporary railings around the *koṭimaram* to handle the overflow of offerings that cannot be left on the main fence; a box to deposit the keys to padlocks is attached. Rather than attempting to eliminate “superstitious” or “excessive” devotion to St. Antony at the *koṭimaram*, the church has simply attempted to “re-brand” it by adding representations of the Virgin Mary and the Sacred Heart to the *koṭimaram* base along with those of St. Antony. Even flag-raising and *tēr* procession on the saint’s annual feast, which Fr. Maggioni suppressed to prevent “misunderstandings,” have been restored, although a similar rite is offered for Our Lady Queen of the Angels in August for the church’s patronal feast.

Though not unique to the site, the most striking example of the contestation of theological categories at the St. Antony Shrine was the practice of tying yellow wooden cradles containing painted clay images of the baby Krishna around the fence of the *koṭimaram*. The practice of offering Krishna images at the shrine is of course a contested one within the local Christian community. While I was researching the site, I found one day that the Krishna images around the *koṭimaram* had been systematically vandalized, presumably by overturning the cradles and then smashing the images that fell to the ground. A few had been virtually ground into powder, which is well beyond the damage that a simple fall would do. I counted fragments of at least a dozen Krishna images on the ground in the general vicinity of the *koṭimaram*, indicating quite a bit of effort was taken to eliminate all

the images. Even in the short period of time between the vandalism and my observation of what had happened, however, the fence had received several new Krishnas and showed every sign that it would be full again within hours.

The range of attitudes toward the Krishna *ex votos* among the local Christian community was surprisingly diverse. I believe it is safe to assume that some of the images were offered by Christians, as I found other significant instances of Christian boundary-crossing while interviewing at the site. If this is the case in fact, then there are Christians at the site for whom this is a cherished manifestation of popular Catholicism. It is obviously also the case that some Christians at the shrine deeply detest the practice and react against it with iconoclastic fervor; I discovered by speaking with the parish priest that this was far from the only time such vandalism had occurred, and his considered response to my query indicated that he had often needed to articulate the church's stance on the subject to a variety of constituencies with the opinions of local Hindus and ecclesiastical authorities both entering into the equation. According to Fr. Packiam, any vandalism at the site comes at the hands of vigilante lay people whom the church would prefer to restrain. He mentions having stopped a woman who objected to the practice and who was bent on chasing offenders from the site, explaining to her that the images are offered in faith and that all expressions of faith should be respected. On the other hand, the shrine does not protect the Krishna images actively, Fr. Packiam explains, so no Hindu should be surprised or offended if some are destroyed as they must know about the vandalism and choose to make the offering anyway. Fr. Packiam says that this stance is important in dealing with the archdiocese, which would otherwise be concerned the site was becoming a Krishna temple if the site was seen as protecting or promoting the devotion. The official stance of the church is that it should tolerate but not promote non-Christian forms of devotion at the site, and that communal friction between Christians and other religious groups should in all cases be avoided.

Fr. Packiam's pastoral approach to the issue seems as much the product of Vatican II teachings on religious diversity and inculturation as Fr. Maggioni's was of the exclusivist interpretation of Tridentine Catholicism. Maggioni vigilantly policed liturgy and popular devotion not only for "Hindu" elements that might creep in, but also tried to suppress European popular devotions he considered "superstitious" or to depart from official doctrine. This approach implicitly assumes that true religion lies exclusively in officially-sanctioned forms of the Catholic faith and that it is necessary to preserve boundaries against secular or pagan influence, which would inevitably be corrupting. Though Fr. Packiam criticizes the *do ut des* transactional quality of much devotion at the shrine and attempts to redirect devotion through spiritual counseling and catechesis, he affirms a baseline value in all expressions of faith as an implicit response to the grace of God, which should be developed and matured rather than forbidden or suppressed. This permits him to be open to the potential goodness and spiritual value of practices from the outside, and to movements of popular devotion. As

*Nostra Aetate* affirmed “rays of truth” in other “religions” and claimed that the Church “opposes nothing that is good and true” in these other faiths, Fr. Packiam’s approach is in line with current church teaching.<sup>11</sup> The Krishna ex votos at the koṭimaram offer a particularly illuminating vantage point for understanding the differences between Indian Catholics on the construction and negotiation of religious boundaries at the level of popular devotion.

## Conclusions

The world religions paradigm was developed in early modernity largely because of the desire of statesmen to negotiate a settlement to the European Wars of Religion and growing categorical differentiation between the religion of Europe and that of non-Christian peoples encountered in the Age of Exploration.<sup>12</sup> A singular notion of *religio*, inclusive of true elements found both within and outside the institutional *ecclesia*, gave way to plural religions, which were conceived as hermetically-sealed, mutually-exclusive systems of belief and practice defined in terms of unchanging, essential characteristics. A new concept of “syncretism” was coined to describe persons or systems combining elements from more than one “religion,” and although the term was originally intended to have a positive sense, it quickly degenerated into a term of abuse. As William Montgomery Watt quipped, “If a religion is said to be ‘syncretistic,’ it is held to be *ipso facto* inferior.”<sup>13</sup> Though sometimes anthropologists valorize “syncretism” as an act of creative resistance on the part of subaltern communities to a hegemonic culture, within religious studies it is more often the case that phenomena described as “syncretism” lose credibility in the eyes of scholars, being perceived as thoughtless and inauthentic.<sup>14</sup> Within theology, the world religions paradigm distorts the Church’s recognition of itself in sacrament and devotion and complicates the negotiation of religious diversity by bracketing certain beliefs and practices as belonging to a non-Christian “religion” which would then be off-limits to Christians, rather than facilitating the absorption of these beliefs and practices and their adherents into the Christian Church. Indian Catholicism will be misrecognized as “syncretic” or even “Hindu” rather than being perceived as a particular rite within the universal Church. For example, we have seen that Fr. Maggioni interpreted religions as mutually exclusive systems of

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<sup>11</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Northport: Costello Publishing, 1996), 570-571.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller rehearsal of this account of the world religions paradigm, see J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) and especially J. Z. Smith’s “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284.

<sup>13</sup> William Montgomery Watt, *Truth in the Religions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw’s *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5 characterizes the use of the term “syncretism” as generally positive within anthropology, and deeply negative within the field of religious studies, a field they claim is still prejudiced toward the implicit acceptance of clerical perspectives.

belief and practice and forbade any practice that that did not have a pedigree in official, European Christianity. Any sign of Hindu or non-elite origin would be sufficient to render a practice non-Christian, and thus impermissible, because “Hinduism” and “Christianity” were conceived of as separate “religions” having impermeable boundaries. Fr. Maggioni’s disciplinary interventions at the St. Antony Shrine focused primarily on suppressing aspects of integration that had been permissible in the Indian Jesuit missions. Within both intellectual contexts, secular and theological, the concept of syncretism assumes an essential, mutually exclusive character to religious traditions, and signals the marginality and perceived inauthenticity of phenomena described as syncretistic.

Over the course of my essay, I have isolated several features of Tamil Popular Catholicism, which challenge the standard world religions paradigm construction of Christianity. Most obviously and immediately, I demonstrated overlap in practice with Tamil Hinduism and to a lesser extent Tamil Islam, an overlap brought about through carry-over of practices by non-Christians at the site and imitative borrowing on the part of Tamil Catholics. Manual gestures of devotion, practices centering on pilgrimage and circumambulation, vows and offerings, conceptualizations of divine and demonic power all overlap, allowing fruitful identification of the practices as Hindu, Catholic, Islamic, Indian, or potentially all of the above.

While it would be possible to maintain established theoretical models by simply excluding Tamil Popular Catholicism from normative and theoretical constructions of Christianity and characterizing it as Hindu or syncretistic, both premodern and Vatican II theological traditions possess conceptual resources permitting practices such as the St. Antony devotion and their Christian practitioners to be understood as authentically Catholic.

As we have seen already, the current parish priest, Fr. Xavier Packiam, accomplishes this through application of Vatican II texts such as *Nostra Aetate* to promote inclusive inculturation of non-Christian elements which can be perfected and fulfilled in “mature” Christianity; even if a popular devotion is sub-optimal in some respect (e.g. by presuming a *do ut des* mentality, or employing radically alien iconography such as Krishna cradles), it is presumed to be an implicit response of faith to the gift of grace in Christ which can be corrected and fulfilled through further pastoral direction. Rather than hard and fast boundaries between licit cult and magic, Christian and Hindu identities, and related oppositions, Fr. Packiam deals in degrees of inclusion. Similarities between Christianity and other religions can be understood in terms of *Nostra Aetate* 2, which speaks of an enlightening “ray of truth” influencing both religion and culture; likewise, Christians can legitimately borrow from non-Christian faiths when the activity is conceived not as “syncretism,” which is forbidden, but in terms of discerning and perfecting the

goods already implicit in culture through the gift of Christ.<sup>15</sup> In terms of contemporary theological methodologies, one could imagine this dialogue and close engagement of non-Christian traditions as theological ethnography pursued in order to proceed more conscientiously in the liturgical and missiological task of inculturation.

Although less obvious to contemporary observers, Vatican II theology has no monopoly on the resources to conceptualize Tamil Popular Catholicism as an authentic expression of the faith and one could develop an equally inclusive account of the nature of Catholicism from pre-modern and early modern resources alone. Where Vatican II speaks of inculturation and a ray of truth enlightening all faiths, premodern Catholics speak of singular *religio* (a phenomenon present both within and beyond the confines of the institutional Church, potentially within non-Christian traditions of beliefs and practices from the Church might legitimately borrow).<sup>16</sup> Rather than making an absolute distinction between legitimate cult and idolatry, an intermediate concept of *superstitio* accepts that some practices current among Christians might have a dubious origin and uncertain validity without rendering their practitioners non-Christian.<sup>17</sup> Through singular *religio* and the concept of *superstitio*, the premodern Church had a range of responses to tolerate, reform, or incorporate pagan and/or magical elements within Christian cult. Rather than excluding Indian Popular Catholicism and the St. Antony devotion as hopelessly eccentric, theologians could affirm Catholic identities formed in a context of non-exclusivity by conceiving of Christianity, Hinduism, and other traditions as complicated, interpenetrating complexes of belief and practice oriented toward a singular *religio* most perfectly realized within the institutional Church. Without the hermeneutical distortion introduced by the world religions paradigm, the “syncretic” rituals Indian Catholics share with non-Christian neighbors are simply what early modern Jesuit missionaries championed as the “Malabar Rites,” a distinctly Indian inculturation (or to use the older category, accommodation) of universal Christianity to the exigencies of culture and not different in kind from the Graeco-Roman or Germanic inculturation in classical and medieval Europe.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ad Gentes* 22 calls for an adaptation of Christianity to non-Christian cultures which steers clear of both “syncretism,” the inappropriate mixture of religions, and “exclusiveness.” A more traditional formulation of the same practical goal is offered in *Sacrosanctum Conclium* 3, which allows liturgical adaptation to “cultivate and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations” and allows “anything in people’s way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error” to be studied “with sympathy” and wherever possible preserved intact.

<sup>16</sup> The *locus classicus* of this approach is Augustine’s *De Vera Religione* and its *Retractio* (I, 13, n. 3).

<sup>17</sup> The *locus classicus* treatment of *superstitio* is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Questions 92-96. *Superstitio* is treated as a sinful activity of Christians, allowing a casuistry of degree and a range of potential pastoral approaches, rather than a communion-breaking or religious category-blurring activity.



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