Article

The “Wisdom Writer”, Michael Amaladoss and His Thought

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Abstract: This paper offers a synthetic introduction to Michael Amaladoss and his thought. Amaladoss is a member of the Society of Jesus and one of the finest Indian theologians; in the course of decades of engagement with themes such as interfaith dialogue, Indian theology, social justice, and secularism, he has greatly contributed to putting Asian theology on the map. In this study, I focus on Amaladoss, his theological style, his main intellectual concern, and his theological context. In a nutshell, Amaladoss’s main contribution to Indian theology is the very possibility of a true Indian Indian theology.

Keywords: Amaladoss; theology; India; Catholicism

1. Introduction

Michael Amaladoss (1936–) is one of the most celebrated and prolific Indian theologians. His work is characteristic of a certain period in the development of Indian theology, a period marked by the independence of the country, the rise of an Indian liberal state, and the ambition of a new generation of Indian theologians to articulate a true Indian Indian theology. In this period, Indian theologians shifted from a contemplative to a social engagement with Indian reality, where Amaladoss operated as a balancing force between the two streams of Indian theology. Amaladoss also represents one thread of an Indian theology that remains independent in its articulation of the truths of revelation from the still dominant Western exegetical and doctrinal interpretations.

While it is too early to assess the impact of Amaladoss’s works on the Indian and the universal Church, a closer look at his life and thought offers a window into the internal dynamics at work within the exuberant and innovative circle of Indian theologians. In particular, this paper aims to offer a synthetic introduction to Amaladoss and his thought; that said, this study is focused on Amaladoss, his theological style, his main intellectual concerns, and his theological context. Amaladoss can be seen as a window into what it is to theologize in India, in an intellectual environment less devoted to systematic thinking and rational architectures of thought than in the West. Lastly, the intention is to show the situation of Indian theology, currently challenged by a post-liberal impetus that amounts to a risk to alter Indian theologians’ priorities. “Post-liberal” stands for an authoritarian tendency within Indian federal politics according to which the country needs to recover its Hindu roots.

This paper is divided in five sections. First, a brief profile of Michael Amaladoss; second, a discussion of his theological styles and ideas; third, a look at the meaning and possibility of an indigenous Indian theology; fourth, Amaladoss’s place in the Indian theological landscape; and finally, a summary of the impact on Indian theology of an incoming post-liberal vision of Indian secularism.

2. Profile

Michael Amaladoss is a theologian, born in Tamilnadu (India). He is a member of the Society of Jesus and one of the most prominent Asian thinkers in the field of interreligious dialogue. The list of his publications is overwhelming: it amounts to 32 books in English—10 of them translated into one or more other languages—and 2 in Tamil, 9 edited books,
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His main works are usually considered to be *Faith, Culture and Inter-religious Dialogue, Beyond Inculturation. Can the Many Be One?* and *The Asian Jesus*. His most recent book, *Quest for God*, is a sort of compendium of his thought (Amaladoss 2013). In his day he acted as Principal and Rector in Vidyajyoti, Delhi (1976–1979); Vice-Provincial for Formation for South Asian Jesuits (1979–1983); President of Jnanadeepa Vidyapeeth, Pune (1983); Special Assistant to the Superior General of the Jesuits, Rome (1983–1995); Consulor to three Pontifical Councils, Rome and to the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, Geneva (1983–1987); and President of the International Association of Mission Studies (1989–1993). Apart from that, he also arranged and eventually composed about 150 hymns in Tamil, of which about 90 have been recorded.

Amaladoss has exercised—and still exercises—tremendous influence on the intellectual conversations within the Society of Jesus, the Indian theologians, and the Asian churches. Amaladoss has spent his career between theology and administration, serving in some of the most prestigious seats in India, Asia, and Rome. His network of contacts with institutions and people in Asia and beyond is unmatched. Amaladoss has been intentionally careful to be perceived as a creative thinker, not the initiator of a distinct stream of thinking. While Amaladoss’s influence on other Indian theologians is evident in their citations of his published works, he has intentionally avoided the option to become the founder of a ‘school of thought’ with specific theories and dedicated disciples. The closest he came to building a ‘school’ was a Chennai, where he returned in 2001 to transform Aikiya Alayam (Santhome High Road), an urban ashram begun in 1967 by his guru, Fr. Hirudayam, into a research center: The Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR). First approved by the University of Madras, it moved to the Loyola College campus in 2005. His appetite for confronting grand Indian and even Asian themes rather than more specific ecclesial matters, has served him well, making him a ‘public intellectual’. India and Asian traditions have offered him the intellectual grounding he was looking for in his effort to find a new framework to talk about Christianity and its role in Indian society and intellectual life. But these Indian and Asian materials have also assigned him in a sort of intellectual duty, or better, of intellectual quest. Traditionally, this is an uncontroversial definition of the role of the free thinker, who finds himself outside the intellectual mainstream—a place where he would feel increasingly at home but not necessary in company of many.

Along with inculturation of Christianity in India, Amaladoss’s theological production converges on the dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. He is highly conscious of the presence of Islam and millions of Indian Muslims, but that is not the core of his reflection. The same can be said about the ecumenical dialogue. Amaladoss has been involved in the relationship between Latin Catholics and members of the Church of the Malabar Syrians within Roman Catholicism in India. That said, Amaladoss’s reflection focuses on the Hindu–Christian dialogue.

### 3. An Indian Theologian

Despite his relevant interests in administration and art, Amaladoss is primarily a theologian, initially teaching theology at St. Paul’s Seminary, Tiruchirapalli (1974–1979), then at Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi (1974–1983, 1995–2012). In his autobiography, Fr. Amaladoss calls himself “a theologian”, but does claim to be not a systematic theologian. This is the quote: “I was not a systematic theologian in the traditional mode . . . . I was rather a ‘wisdom writer’, exploring questions that rise out of experience” (Amaladoss 2016, p. 86). He embraces the definition used by Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach (1928–2016), Superior General of the Society of Jesus from 1983 to 2008: Amalados is a “wisdom writer”. In Amaladoss’s own autobiography, Fr. Kolvenbach’s definition comes with a footnote: “Saggista in Italian”. If I understand correctly, it means that the original definition was framed in Italian, i.e., saggista, while ‘wisdom writer’ is the English translation; whether the
translation is of Fr. Kolvenbach or Fr. Amaladoss himself, it is difficult to say. Whomever the translation belongs to, however, Amaladoss has made it his own.

I want to return to the original definition, ‘saggista.’ In the above quote, the saggista is a term applied to someone who explores questions that rise out of experience. That is true: a saggista is someone who picks up a theme and explores some related questions, while seeking to answer them in the best possible way, even if that theme is not necessarily related to previous themes already discussed. This fits perfectly into the definition of a non-systematic theologian. On the other hand, however, a saggista does not necessarily pick up a theme that rises out of experience. The circumstance can be of personal interest, a public controversy or discussion, or an intellectual debate following the publication of an influential essay. Saggista is, more properly, someone who writes essays. The term can be translated, looking to France for inspiration, as ‘public intellectual,’ someone who enters a specific conversation to forge, or eventually disrupt, the public consensus on something. In summary, a saggista is a public intellectual who does not follow a methodical line of work. While India has (and has had) public intellectuals, it does not boast many religious intellectuals, even though there is, of course, a history of religious intellectuals active there; this kind of figure is, however, no longer popular, probably because these days most people make the early calculation that they are not going to get very far doing that. Amaladoss is a religious intellectual, more specifically, a Christian intellectual, who predominantly (but not exclusively) speaks to Christians. That said, he is a Christian intellectual with a shifting constituency, in the sense that—as I will try to explain—the tectonic plate of Indian society is moving toward a post-liberal horizon.

Now I turn to the phrase ‘wisdom writer’. The meaning is straightforward: literally, it stands for an author who writes about wisdom. In the last decades, a genre commonly known as ‘wisdom literature’ has risen to prominence, in India as well as in the Western countries, including the United States. Surely this is not what either Fr. Kolvenbach or Fr. Amaladoss intended. They meant the statements of the sage and the wise as mirrored in the Sapiental Books, or Books of Wisdom (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, Book of Wisdom, Sirach), included in the Hebrew Bible in the Septuagint translation. So, Amaladoss writes as a sage writes: on one hand, he picks up questions that emerge from his living experience; on the other hand, he attempts to write in a way that does not come exclusively from his mind, but eventually springs from the very headwaters of Christianity, a higher source, a source that can perhaps be called Spirit. Living experience and Spirit are, therefore, the ultimate sources of Amaladoss’s writing, although I am sure he does not pretend that his writings are ‘inspired’.

If I am correct on this, the phrase ‘wisdom writer’ tells us something about Amaladoss’s theological lineage. He is often linked with another theologian, Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis (1923–2004), whose life intersected Amaladoss’s life on more than one occasion. Fr. Amaladoss studied under and then worked with Fr. Dupuis, but in his autobiography, he paid credit not to Dupuis, but to another Jesuit, Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam (1910–1995). Amaladoss met Hirudayam in 1954 and from him received impulse to turn his study to the riches of Indian art, philosophy, and spirituality. This ‘Indian turn’ became the watershed of his adult life (probably the other, which happened around the same time, was joining the Society of Jesus in 1953). From Hirudayam, Amaladoss learned to think in terms of Indian Christianity, a religion that did not come to India as a foreigner but flourished in India in Indian forms. I will return to this point later. Here I want to focus on Amaladoss’s choice to ignore Dupuis, or any other distinct theologian via whom he was initiated into theology, as a source of inspiration or, in Amaladoss’s peculiar vocabulary, as his guru. What I want to highlight here is that Amaladoss does not locate himself in any theological school: he does not see himself as the heir of a certain theological tradition. What could one make of this? As said, the phrase ‘wisdom writer’ reveals something about Amaladoss’s theological lineage. It means that his work can only be secondarily referred to a philosophical or theological tradition; the primary link he assigned to his work is a fountainhead of dynamic spiritual life which never runs dry.

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4. In Search of Indian Theology

While Amaladoss does not identify himself with the typical theologian in search of systematic understanding, and prefers “looking for wisdom and a way of life and action”, there is no doubt that the central point of his work as a professional theologian is an Indian Christian theology fully developed (Ibid.). The emergence of an Indian theology is related, first, with the specific situation of Christians in India, who not only are active in a daily relationship with the beliefs and practices of Hinduism and India’s other great religious traditions but are often themselves—via family, communities, ancestors—the partial result of such traditions. Second, it has to do with the historical experience of Christianity as a wholly foreign import and with the practical remedies (inculturation, indigenization, and so on) to it. As a consequence, Indian theology grows as a result of this dual effort, that is, it framed its formulation through the assimilation of Indian religious and cultural heritage, on one side, and maintains a certain degree of independence from Western-centric theology on the other. In the end, this dual effort amounts to a specific approach of theologizing in India (Amaladoss et al. 1981).

That said, one must look carefully at the phrase ‘Indian Christian theology’. It can mean a theology framed and grown in India, like French theology was born and matured in France and German theology in Germany. Scholars call Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, and Marie-Dominique Chenu ‘French theologians’ and situate German thinkers like Romano Guardini, Karl Adam, Dom Anselm Stolz, and Hans Urs von Balthasar in their German theological tradition. Certainly, Amaladoss would subscribe to a definition of Indian theology as developed in India by Indian theologians; however, he would not be satisfied with it. In a chapter written for the Festschrift honoring the 100 years of life of Fr. Josef Neuner, S.J., Amaladoss offered a much more ambitious definition of ‘Indian theology’ (Amaladoss 2008a, pp. 18–34). He mentioned “the efforts of Indian (Asian) theologians to focus directly on God’s self-revelation in the Bible and to respond to it in terms of the Indian context and culture, independently of the mediation of Greek culture and philosophy.” (Ibid.). Then he further clarified: “We do not wish to ignore two thousand years of doctrinal and theological development. But a pole of dialogue is different from a norm” (Ibid.). Those passages contain much more than I want to disentangle here, but the sense is obvious enough. In the footsteps of other theologians—I think specifically of Jules Monchanin (1895–1957)—Amaladoss believes that it is possible to access revelation as it is contained in the Bible without the mediation of Greek culture and philosophy. In the first half of the twentieth century, Monchanin saw Christian tradition as composed of two parts: an “infrangible core of the Revelation itself,” the dogma at its pristine state, and several “constellations” formed around this nucleus—the subsequent development that began in the times of the Apostolic Fathers carried on through the course of the European history of Christianity. Thus, Indian theology is, in effect, the development of another constellation, framed in an Indian context independent of the Greek mediation. If I am correct, the term ‘pole of dialogue’ plays in Amaladoss’s remark the same role that ‘constellation’ plays in Monchanin’s.

There are several questions of clarification with Amaladoss’s statements. One is mentioned by Amaladoss himself: the Greek mediation is considered normative by the Church’s official teaching. The first crux of the matter is the status of Greek influence on the development of Christian thought. For Amaladoss, it is one among the many inculturations; for Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (2006) and the Church’s official teaching, the Greek matrix is rather not another inculturation, but “an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures”. The Hellenization of Christianity is an indispensable and non-negotiable foundational ingredient of the Christian synthesis emerging from the encounter of the Scripture with Hellenism achieved in the early Church. For this reason, Greek culture is not really a mediation and cannot be compared, nor replaced, by another, as it rather participates to the core of Christianity. The second crux of the matter is the definition of culture. For Amaladoss, the Gospel is embedded in culture, as cultures and religions are intertwined, mutually informing and reinforcing each other. For some of his critics,
however, the Church’s official documents carry the urgency of protecting the integrity of the Gospel against theological approaches favoring cultural diversity. A case in point is the Council document Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), in which the term ‘culture’ is considered (1) as a universally human phenomenon, and (2) as a variety of diverse cultures. Thus, the pluralistic character of human cultures is subordinated to the universal character of the human culture (as human phenomenon), which in turn is subordinate to the Gospel. The third and final crux of the matter is, of course, the distinct ecclesiastic view embedded in the two competitive lines of reasoning; for Amaladoss, the Church is more precisely a communion of (local) churches. For the Church’s authority, she is the undivided Church with her ramifications all over the world.

The second question of clarification with Amaladoss’s statements refers to the status of Indian theology as ‘constellation’. When Monchanin introduced the notion of constellation, he offered some examples of what he meant by that term: “Origenist, Augustinian, Scotist, Thomist . . . or Newmanian”. The list is quite generous, as it seems that Monchanin did not limit himself to mentioning the giants, i.e., Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and their majestic Neoplatonic and Aristotelian synthesis, but included those syntheses that arose as a legacy of the work and thought of thinkers such as Origen, Scotus, and Newman and their followers. What is evident in the list is that a constellation is a specific theological and philosophical system or school raised in a specific historical context to respond to a distinct set of questions related to a diverse, rich, and profound intellectual heritage. A constellation comes out of a re-interrogation of the sources of Christianity, and it is a new synthesis that offers a new interpretation of the mystery without falling in contradiction with a dogma in its pure condition. That new synthesis resonates well beyond the historical limits of the period in which it was conceived, and it gradually becomes assimilated within the tradition of the Great Church. In other words, the system becomes a doctrine. Another way to express the same idea is this: Christian doctrine shows a remarkable sense of unity, which is the result not only of the fact that systems of thought so different among them like Origenism, Augustinianism, Scotism nevertheless share the same core, but also of this process of assimilation that demands a geological patience. If Monchanin’s idea of constellation is taken at face value, an Indian constellation is a system of thought, not a ‘national theology’ (a theology in Indian forms made by Indians for Indians), offering a new synthesis among Christianity and the vast and deep religious treasures of India. This synthesis, although eventually born in India, is not limited to India in its value and application, but has, so to speak, a compass that includes the entire Universal Church. If the past is any indication, an Indian constellation will take the name of the genius who first conceived the synthesis.

The third question with Amaladoss’s statements is regarding the modality with which Indian theology would grow. In the mentioned piece on Indian theology, Amaladoss addressed the Council of Chalcedon. The council, he pointed out, “affirmed that he [i.e., Christ] was one ‘person’ with two ‘natures’, divine and human. It did not explain how this is possible, but affirmed that the two ‘natures’ in Jesus should neither be ‘confused’, nor ‘separated’. The two natures were two principles of action. They related to each other in total freedom” (Amaladoss 2008a, pp. 18–34). Then he noted that “the third council of Constantinople clarified that there were two ‘wills’ in Jesus, human and divine . . . How one person can have two centres of activity, acting in total coordination in freedom, is of course a mystery” (Ibid.). Amaladoss is summarizing here (1) the relation between being and action in Christ (“the two natures were two principles of action”); (2) the relation between Christ’s two ontologies (“the two natures were . . . related to each other in total freedom”); and (3) the relation between Christ’s two actions (“two centres of activity, acting in total coordination in freedom”). Here one has the heterogeneity of being (two ontologies) and action (two centers of activity), not—so it seems—of the relation between being and action. A few lines later, however, he added: “Indian theologians . . . assert that, though the human nature cannot act independently of the divine nature, the divine nature transcends the human and can act independently of the human” (Ibid.). Of course, the argument
Amaladoss raised here is of capital importance. Maybe I read too much into these sentences, but it is possible that Amaladoss identified this interpretation of the nature and will of Christ as a safe rock on which an Indian theology could be built.

I do not enter into the feasibility of his argument for many reasons, including that, in his paper, Amaladoss is clearly just sketching his argument which he addresses in more depth in other works. I simply note that in Amaladoss’s statements, the readers are transported, in a matter of seconds, from a discourse of nature to a discourse of action: “the divine nature transcends the human and can act independently”; I mean that the quoted passage can only be read in the light of this distinction between the discourse of nature and the discourse of action in all its articulations. Readers will be able to identify what is really at stake in that passage about the interpretation of the output of the Council of Chalcedon only after they have explored this distinction. The relation between Christ’s two ontologies, Amaladoss correctly noted, is a mystery. However, the relation between Christ’s two actions—Amaladoss pointed out—is also a mystery. It is “the mystery of his will” (Ephesians 1:9–10). The mystery of being and of the deity coincides entirely with the mystery of His action. How is that? Amaladoss is stating that the action is founded on the nature and being of Christ, or that a continuity exists between Christ and His action, between ontology and praxis (‘ontological model’). In the third quote, in fact, Amaladoss adopted an ontological model (“the divine nature transcends the human”) to justify a specific action (it “can act independently”). This is coherent with his premise, that is, Christ’s action is based on His being. It is the same premise that allows him to state that the divine nature can act differently to human nature. However, the notion of free will, which is, all things considered, marginal in classical thought, became the central category of Christian theology, exactly because of the idea of the will of God that freely and shrewdly decides his actions. What is new in Christian theology—already in Origen—is the division between being and the will, nature and action, that is, the groundlessness of the praxis, the fact that in Christ there is no foundation of acting in being (‘economic model’). If one accepts this premise, that is, the anarchic character of divine praxis, one has an anarchic status of action, a groundless action. It is an ‘economic model’ in which action is praxis; one can use the term dispensatio, the Latin translation of oikonomia, the administration of the household. In this economic model, the two actions, as rightly outlined by Amaladoss, act “in total coordination in freedom” precisely because they are totally free. What is at stake in Amaladoss’s statements is the substitution of an economic model with an ontological model. I could be wrong, but it is the economic model that allows the mystery to remain such.

These considerations of mine amount to nothing more than a sketch in the hands of a speculative theologian. The question of clarification is not referring to the theological debate on the relation between being and action in Christ. The question resides in the opportunity (or even the possibility) to access “the infrangible core of Revelation itself” at the level of Patristics or even of dogmas to find safe rocks on which Indian theology can flourish. Is an Indian interpretation of the economic and ontological categories at work at Chalcedon the best path? Can this be considered an Indian assimilation of a dogma in its primitive predicament? Monchanin, who spent a great amount of time on this issue, never mistook the Gospel for its interpretations. “No medieval summa and no critical history of dogmas,” he argued, “can surpass the theology of Paul and John”. This last sentence brings up one further consideration. The Gospel itself is embedded in Jewish forms of thought. On the same matter, Abhishiktānanda (1910–1973) wrote this terrible note in one of his notebooks: “Jesus [has] expressed his own mystery in terms of the Old Testament ideas that were most common in his time: the Son of man, the suffering Servant” (Abhishiktānanda 1998, p. 329). This note is ‘terrible’ in the sense that in it Abhishiktānanda identified the Jewish roots at the level of Jesus’s mental patterns, therefore excluding any possibility of severing Christianity from its Jewish roots. How will it be possible to elaborate a serious and genuine Indian theology if the very source of the gospel is hopelessly Jewish? What is exactly “the infrangible core of Revelation itself”? The
answer, quite inevitably, turns the readers in the direction of the incomparable Source that is the Mystery of Christ. The birth and growth of Indian theology only secondarily must refer to a theological understanding of Christian origins filtered through the Indian forms of thought, but rather, in Balthasar’s words referring to the Greek Fathers, in an effort “to penetrate to the vital source of their spirit, to the fundamental and secret intuition which directs the entire expression of their thought” (von Balthasar 1957, p. xi). By immersing themselves in the forms and categories of the Scripture in all their diversity and concrete specificity, Indian theologians hope to discover and imbibe that Spirit which was the inspiration and source of those forms and categories. In the end, Indian theology is nothing more (and nothing less) than a spiritual and intellectual communion with Christianity in its most vital moment, a communion which would nourish, invigorate, and advance twenty-first century Indian theology.

5. Between Two Theological Streams

Theoretical and methodological questions aside, it remains to be discussed the focal point of Amaladoss’s work as a professional theologian, that is, the development of a self-consciously Indian theology. In first approximation, his effort has been driven by the aim of a genuine Indian theology with Indian roots, history, and resources, and no importation of theology from elsewhere. The commitment of a true Indian theology has led him to develop an ecclesiology dismissive of the Western-centric church and its theological categories, and to dream of a church that would be truly Indian. Amaladoss summarized the theological landscape in which he operates as follows: “In Asia, one can identify various theological streams. Besides liberation theologians, there are some who see evangelization as proclamation leading to a change of religious allegiance. Others are interested in inculturation and the building up of the local church. These are also sensitive to the problems and tensions of interreligious dialogue, particularly in the area of spiritual paths, methods of prayer, etc. Asian bishops and theologians have tried to reconcile these diverse streams by describing evangelization as a threefold dialogue with the poor, the great religions, and the cultures of Asia. But tensions and mutual suspicions continue” (Amaladoss 1997, p. xi). His remark on the “threefold dialogue” has a story of its own. Commenting on the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) as it emerged out of the inaugural meeting, Amaladoss argued in 1991 that the Asian Bishops saw mission as a dialogue with “the threefold realities of Asia,” i.e., “its rich cultures, its ancient and great religions, and the poor”. He also added that the Asian Bishops accepted Asian religions as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” because they have “a living experience of other religions” (Jenkinson and O’Sullivan 1991, pp. 359–97). To put it differently, the local churches saw themselves as intimately a part of the pluralistic and diverse Asian continent, to which they contributed by promoting solidarity and harmony. These quotes also reveal something about Amaladoss’s characteristic manner of writing, that is, with an almost total absence of reference to his own distinctive profile and to his own decisive contributions. During his life, in fact, Amaladoss has been a recipient of decisions made by bishops, but not an active advisor to the same bishops he mentioned in his books.13

With this intellectual background in mind, it is not surprising that Amaladoss’s work is a plea for the recognition of differences: the ontological structure of each major religious tradition is different, and consequently, the expression of the Absolute shaped by these different ontological structures is different. The phenomenon of religion is best referred to as ‘religions’ and aspects of each religion are best defined from within particular religious and cultural traditions. From this contextualist philosophy of religions descends the significance of inculturation and interreligious dialogue in Amaladoss’s theory of inculturation. In his words, “inculturation is not an abstract encounter between two systems, but a dialogue between groups of people, who are the bearers of these cultures” (Amaladoss 1990, p. 123) Thus, inculturation is dialogue. In a situation of diversity of culture and religious pluralism, in fact, dialogue is important for the self-understanding of culture and religion as well as
for the growth of each religion towards fullness. In turn, a multireligious society needs a secular state that promotes pluralism and defends the enriching value of difference. Here emerges the social character of religion in Amaladoss’s thought: the scope of religion in an open, diverse society is of liberation, that is, offering inspiration, prophecy, challenge, and hope from the point of view of the Absolute. Different religions can work together in this regard, helping society to progress and eventually build a common religious grounding that would inspire collectively the society to become committed to liberation. This positive sense of religion (i.e., any religion) beams, to borrow a phrase from one of Amaladoss’s Jesuit fellows Samuel Rayan (1920–2019), “where faith braves our endeavours to become authentically human with and within the community of fellow human beings” (Rayan 2002, pp. 11–22). It relates to the concept of a universal human nature, a new human community formed within the context of Jesus’s liberative action.

This positive understanding of other religions is matched in Amaladoss’s thought with a preference for a non-ecclesial character of Christian witnesses and an effort to reframe Jesus in non-Western images. Regarding the non-ecclesial character of Christian witnesses, for Amaladoss, secularity is inherently religious. In his writings, one detects a religious and pluralistic embrace of secularity in the light of the fundamental religiosity of secular action. Concerning his effort to reframe Jesus in Asian images, Amaladoss believes that a threefold dialogue with the realities of Asia “means that we do not import readymade structures of ‘salvation’ from somewhere, but we let the people of Asia dialogue with the Good News in a creative and relevant way” (Amaladoss 2000, pp. 339–50). Thus, inculturation and dialogue—in Amaladoss’s view—are crucial elements of evangelization for Asian churches, to the point that there is no evangelization without inculturation and dialogue. In the end, they maintained a certain degree of independence from mainstream theological categories (of the Roman Catholic Church) still dominated by Western thinking. The above quote may explain why, in Amaladoss’s writings, mission is primarily seen in terms of a building up of the Kingdom of God rather than expanding the Church. In this regard, he argued for a distinction between the Church and the Kingdom, the former being only one among many ways to build the latter. He also distinguished between the mystery of Christ and the historical manifestation of Jesus, between the transhistorical Christ, who is before Abraham (John 8: 58), and the historical Jesus, who has established an enduring covenant with humanity (Amaladoss 2008b). It goes without saying that these areas of Amaladoss’s theology in which the role of other religions in the economy of salvation and the uniqueness of Jesus and the Catholic Church are discussed are the areas in which Amaladoss has been criticized. Yet, Amaladoss has never embraced that critical position of many who see the Christian church today, and particularly the Roman Catholic Church, as an obstacle to authentic religious faith and practice. Rather, he has argued that the Catholic Church desperately needs a re-theologized theology, one that flows from wisdom and takes an evangelical, although not necessarily an ecclesiastic, form.

Theological reflection in India has a long and glorious history, as Christian communities have existed in India since at least the 4th century CE. Historians of theology in India have suggested periodizations and named theological styles in those different periods. For the sake of this article, I would limit my study to the development of Indian theology after Independence. In that period—roughly 70 years—Indian theology has been dominated by two strands of thought known as ‘Ashramites’ and ‘Liberationists’. In a nutshell, the former proposes to experience God in Christ as lived out in the setting of the Indian ashram tradition. While Christian monks are exposed to the spirituality of sannyasa, they may be able to articulate a real Indian theology. ‘Ashramites’, in fact, base their work on the dual assumption that an Indian theology can be built upon Vedanta philosophy and that Vedanta can explain Christian truths better than Western philosophy. By the late 1980s, however, this strand of thought was beginning to run out of steam and liberation theologies progressively gained momentum, coming to be regarded as the new theological vanguard. The Liberationist tendency is to offer a liberative story of Jesus in ways that are appealing to people with diverse religio-cultural backgrounds. Amaladoss’s corpus can be understood
as a majestic attempt to create a synthesis (or, at least a bridge) between these two strands.

In Amaladoss, spirituality and theology are associated in an intimate bond. On several occasions, he reiterates the idea that his goal was to protect the dynamic links among theology, spirituality, and everyday life. See for example: (Amaladoss 2003, pp. 977–90). He has made sure, during his long career as a theologian, that his theological reflection was not cut off from spirituality, on one hand, and on the other that spirituality was not separated from daily life of the people (of God). His effort to avoid the current fissure between theology and life places Amaladoss in the company of one giant of twentieth-century Catholic thought, Jean Daniélou. Daniélou (1905–1974) maintained that “Theoretical speculation, separated from action and uninvolved in life, has seen its day” (Daniélou 1946, p. 17). In contrast, what the Church needs is a theology “entirely engaged in the building up of the body of Christ” (Ibid.). Here Daniélou was referring to the post-war France, but I suppose the remark works just as well for Amaladoss’s post-Independence India. The key point is that thought is not meant merely to contemplate the world and the Church, but to transform them. Not surprisingly, Amaladoss has been careful to hold theology, spirituality, and pastoral practice in a dynamic and vital unity while at the same time maintaining a fruitful contact with the great cultural forces at work in his time. In sum, the theology of Amaladoss is characterized by a sophisticated balance with concepts. This balance has two sources: his faith in the continuing self-revelation of God in history, especially among the poor, and the message of the (Christian and Hindu) Scriptures which he connected with the living experience of human beings.

6. Towards Post-Liberalism?

At the beginning of this article, I presented Amaladoss as a public thinker, a religious intellectual, and a wisdom writer, with a shifting constituency. This statement needs to be clarified. Here I refer to the rise in India of a specific nationalistic movement with cultural and political ramifications. This movement, named Hindutva (meaning ‘Hinduness’) promotes the idea that India is a Hindu country, and that Christianity and Islam are foreign religions. Therefore, India as a state that needs to regulate the activities of foreign religions. What is at stake in the petition of Hindu nationalism is a specific arrangement formalized in the Indian Constitution, that is, the equality of each religion before the state. If implemented, the petition would change the course of Indian religious history. Indian independence was the result of the activity of another nationalist party, the Indian National Congress (INC). After Indian independence in 1947, the INC became the dominant political party in the country. It was under the leadership of NIC statesmen like Jawaharlal Nehru that India become a secular, socialist, and liberal state. It is in this distinct political and cultural context that Amaladoss came of age. His theology, in fact, better suits the social liberal order (my words; he prefers the phrase ‘social democracy’) that has led India until a decade ago. Amaladoss is not part of the generation that came to maturity at the time of the Independence of India (I think of the generation of Samuel Rayan S.J., for example). He belongs to the subsequent generation, the one that reached maturity in the 1950s and 1960s, in which a social liberal view of India as a state and society pervaded the entire society. He came to prominence in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, more specifically during the great age of globalization (1960–2000). In the early 2000s, he detected the rise of Hindutva and accordingly changed the focus of his reflection and of IDCR’s research on interreligious dialogue. However, his theology looks reluctant to concede that Indian state and society, like other states and societies, have already entered a post-liberal era. Ashutosh Varshney, a professor at Brown University, recently claimed that “India’s democratic exceptionalism is now withering away” (Varshney 2021). The object of Varshney’s criticism is Indian democracy, not Indian secularism. However, the crisis of Indian exceptionalism (as one of the few democracies in the world able to survive at low levels of income, this is Varshney’s argument) implies the correlated crisis of Indian secularism’s distinctiveness. The secular state no longer means what it was supposed
to mean, that is, equal recognition and respect for all religions, and the political use of the religious in India is here to prove it. The change of context is slowly eroding the delicate link between the spiritual and the social polarities, leaving each free to operate autonomously and ultimately affecting the realities of the Christian community in India as well as Amaladoss’s synthesis.

Of course, the problem of the incoming post-liberalism is not confined to Amaladoss’s theology. Both Amaladoss’s theological synthesis of contemplation and social justice, on one hand, and the tendency—shared by Amaladoss and most Indian theologians—to elaborate an Indian theology truly Indian, on the other, have their roots and source of nurturing in a peculiar, distinctive understanding of secularism, that is, Indian secularism. According to the Indian Constitution, secularism in India does not imply strict separation between state and Church, politics and religion, as it does in the West, but rather acts as a hosting space for the typical Indian religious plurality. Indian secularism is not the affirmation of a neutral space free from religion; it is rather the space in which the distinctive South Asian religious pluralism manifests itself. The role of the state is to guarantee this freedom of religious self-expression as well as to facilitate an atmosphere of reciprocal co-existence of a variety of religious traditions. The state neither interferes in the internal operations of the institutional religions nor favors one religion over another. In brief, Indian secularism is not about a neutral space, rather a benign regulator of a highly pervasive religious social life. Secularism is not only the margin of Indian society in which the state protects religious manifestations from secularistic reactions, but also where people are protected by the most clerical and dogmatic manifestations of institutional religions. Thus, the secular in India is a special space, a space of freedom, tolerance, and self-direction. The secular in India is therefore a religious locus, a sphere of flourishing religious practices and paths, both collective and individual in character.

Indian nationalism maintains the goal of revising this form of secularism and transforming it into a Hindu space, a space of celebration of the main religion of India. As we speak, seven Indian states have passed anti-conversion laws, known as ‘freedom of religion acts’. While these laws have a local effect (India is a federation of states), Indian nationalists call for a nationwide law, a law issued by the national government, to restrict religious conversions seen as result not of a change of heart but of ignorance and poverty. In turn, these freedom of religion acts challenge the social orientation of the Church of India. The consequence of this post-liberal turn for Amaladoss’s synthesis and for the possibility of a true Indian theology are unclear. Yet, the turn implies a change, and the change a forced reconsideration of the religious reality in which theological reflection is pursued.

This trend of de-secularization needs to be contextualized. The Bangladesh War of Independence of 1971 was an episode that transformed the political and geographic borders of South Asia. The war confirmed hostilities between India and Pakistan and set a precedent for India’s future interference in Sri Lanka and Nepal. Today the focus is no longer the national borders between India and its neighboring states, but rather the invisible borders within, such as Muslims across India facing the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens. The point is the potential spread of internal “states of exception” issued at local and federal levels adopting colonial era laws to suspend constitutional powers, like in Kashmir. This post-liberal turn challenges the social orientation of the Church of India. The turn implies a change, and the change a forced reconsideration of the religious reality in which theological reflection is pursued. In the case that this trend continues and increases, the defense of the status quo, the democratic rights established in the immediate aftermath of Independence, may not be enough. Form of resistance, and eventually a prophetic Church, might be emerging to confront the mounting challenge of internal nationalism.

The consequences of this post-liberal turn for Amaladoss’s synthesis and for the possibility of a true Indian theology are unclear. On various occasions, Amaladoss has downplayed the effects of Indian nationalism. He framed the episodes of religious intolerance in terms of small groups, located in the northern part of the country, acting
under the benevolent silence of the government. He made clear that this intolerance is not an official political position, rather a behavior carried out by local fundamentalists groups. The damage to interreligious relationships is real, he argued, but circumscribed; nevertheless, the damage is done and it justifies the impression of a much worse situation. The pastoral and liturgical priorities of the Christian community in India seem not to be affected. In Amaladoss’s view, Indian theology remains driven by the existential reality of village people, Christians and non-Christians; the pastor and the theologian are called to collect those experiences and reflect on Scripture and Tradition.19

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes
1 In undertaking an article on Michael Amaladoss and his thought, I have to disclaim any aspiration to be utterly comprehensive and try to do justice to highlights and major themes of his theology. Meanwhile, I remain convinced that attempting to convey something about a synthetic picture of the man and his theology is a worthy enterprise. Given Amaladoss’s monumental contribution to the development of Indian theology, a reflection on his thought quite inevitably intersects with that of Indian theology itself, but in this article I limit my analysis to the role and influence of Amaladoss within Catholicism. For this reason, I use the words ‘Christian’ and ‘Catholic’ as synonyms. Additionally, when I say ‘Indian theology’ I mean ‘Indian Catholic theology.’ I thank Father Amaladoss for taking the time to examine his intellectual development with me.

2 (Amaladoss 1985, [1998] 2005, 1997, 2006). Additional relevant works in Amaladoss’s career are included in successive notes.

3 Biographical details from Amaladoss’s Website 2020. At http://michaelamaladoss.com/about-me/ (accessed on 22 May 2020).

4 See, for example, the number and level of the people he recognized in the first pages of his The Asian Jesus. Amaladoss, The Asian Jesus, ix.

5 “I did not want to enslave theological reflection to any system of philosophy ancient or modern. I was looking for wisdom and a way of life and action, not for systematic understanding”, (Amaladoss 2016, p. 87).

6 For Amaladoss’ notion of ‘interculturation,’ see (Amaladass 2005, pp. 1–17).

7 “… autour du noyau infrangible de la Révélationelle-même, … ensuite équilibrée en des figures intelligibles, pareilles à des constellations”. (Monchanin 1985, p. 86).

8 See the recent Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s (2007) ‘Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization’ in which it is said that the Gospel is “independent from any culture” (§6.2). At http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20071203_notaevangelizzazione_en.html (accessed on 28 June 2020).

9 Pope Paul VI (1965), Gaudium et Spes. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Second Vatican Council, 1965, #53.

10 “… origénisme, augustinisme, scotisme, thomisme, newmanisme … “ (Monchanin 1985, p. 86).

11 “In The Way, the Truth and the Life, Amaladoss enters once again in the discourse on the nature of Jesus, but this time limits himself to few comments and leaves finer arguments—so he says—to speculative theologians’ distinctions”. (Mkenda et al. 2017).

12 “Nulle somme médiévale et nulle histoire critique des dogmes ne dépasse ni n’atteint la théologie de Paul et de Jean”. (Monchanin 1985, p. 86).

13 “I have not been very active in the FABC. I have attended one general assembly and one meeting of the dialogue commission. Of course, I know some Indian bishops. But I have not interacted theologically with any. (…) I have been present in the meetings of Indian Theology Association and in some seminars of the FABC and Bishops have been present there. But I have not personally interacted with any bishop theologically. Maybe I preserved my freedom as a theologian that way”, Father Amaladoss’s email to the author (13 November 2020).

14 For a brief summary of Amaladoss’s view of Indian secularity, see (Amaladoss 1992, pp. 34–48).

15 Amaladoss had “disagreements” (his word) with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 2004 and 2014–2015. The crux of the matter was the positive role played in his theology by other religions in the economy of God’s plan of salvation, as well as the unclear role of Jesus Christ and His Church in that plan. Amaladoss has twice been questioned by the CDF regarding his orthodoxy. In 2004, the issue was easily resolved. In 2014–15, however, Amaladoss was investigated, although not silenced or censured. A dialogue among Amaladoss, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, who was the Superior General of the Society of Jesus at that time, and Fr. Soosai Arockiasamy, who acted as theological advisor, on one side, and the theologians of the CDF, on the other, ultimately composed the matter. Amaladoss has been cleared of any suspicion. As far as I know, the available sources referring to these disagreements are (1) the already mentioned Amaladoss’s autobiography, Lead Me On, pp. 96–103, and (2) Mong’s comparative study of how the CDF treated the third-world theologians of two theologians. The theologies under consideration are the liberation theology of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez and the liberation-inculturation theology of Amaladoss. (Mong 2017, chp.
5–8). Moreover, a chapter included in a collection of “important (albeit hitherto inaccessible) papers and writings” of Amaladoss was presented as his complete and unabridged response to the CDF. See (Amaladoss 2017, chp. 15). The quote on important and inaccessible material is on page xx. For the above quote on “disagreements,” see (Amaladoss 2016, p. 96).

Amaladoss’s most completed synthesis of these two strains of missiology is included in Michael Amaladoss, Beyond Dialogue. Pilgrims of the Absolute (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008). See also (Amaladoss 2003, pp. 977–90).

Amaladoss calls himself a Hindu-Christian. Other Christians before him labeled themselves similarly. Abhishiktānanda considered himself a Hindu-Christian in the sense that both labels are a representation of the same mystery. Raimon Panikkar famously called himself a Hindu-Christian (and a Buddhist and a secular). In his case, however, the definition was supported by family lineages, that is, a Hindu father and a Christian mother. With Amaladoss, readers have a different interpretation of the same phrase. Amaladoss is Indian; his family has been Christian for three generations; and before that, his family was Hindu. See (Amaladoss 2016, p. 80).

For ‘social democracy,’ see (Amaladoss 2007, pp. 30–62). It must be added that the word ‘socialist’ is included in the Preamble to the Constitution of India: “We, the People of India, having resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic”.

From an interview to Amaladoss (published in Italian), see (Matté and Prezzi 2018).

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