

By JASON KEITH FERNANDES



How the Archbishop should have turned the other cheek

Not too long ago, the décor of a recently-opened pub caused a ruckus in the city of Bombay. Styled “Goregaon Social”, the interiors of the pub made plentiful references to the Gothic aesthetic that marked a significant phase of Western European Christianity, and the neo-Gothic which has an intimate history with the city of Bombay. They included stained glass panels with the figures of Catholic saints, Gothic-styled pews for clients to sit on, and a variety of other paraphernalia that clearly references Catholic worship.

Arguing that the establishment’s decor was blasphemous, a group of Catholics, calling themselves The Watchdog Foundation, filed a police complaint against the owner of the pub. Simultaneously, the Archdiocese of Bombay released a statement charging that the décor of the pub was blasphemous and a deliberate attempt to insult Christians. Therefore, they demanded the closure of the pub with immediate effect, and a cancellation of various permits and licenses until the décor was changed.

While the responses of both the lay Christians and the clerical hierarchy are problematic, I would like to focus on the response of the hierarchy because as leaders of the Catholic community they seem to have not only made a grievous error, but also lost a significant teaching moment.

At the very outset it needs to be stated that one can understand the reasons for the response. Along with other minoritised groups in the country, Christians too have increasingly experienced a shrinking of socio-political space along with simultaneous attacks on their places of worship and property. These attacks have particularly perplexed some Christians in India who play along with the whole rhetoric of Indian nationalism and cherish a deep-seated idea that they are an ideal minority.

On the other hand there has also been a parallel move to appropriate Christian lifestyles for the purposes of entertainment. The case of the interiors of Goregaon Social are but one

example of a trend that is also evident in the way in which the settlements of Catholics, whether that of Bandra in Bombay, or villages in Goa, are being occupied while the residents who created these settlements and ensured its character are pushed out. Added to this is the simultaneous disparaging of these populations visible in the way Hindi films represent the Catholics of the west coast as a sexually promiscuous, alcohol-imbibing community given to song and dance.

In such a context of appropriation and attack, it is not surprising that Catholics should try to respond by asserting ownership over markers of a community lifestyle, nor that they should petition the state to redress their hurt religious sentiments. Unfortunately, rather than innovatively engage with Catholic tradition, these responses have played directly into the hands of the Hindu nationalists, as well as strengthened the growing tendencies towards authoritarianism.

The Archbishop's argument of hurt religious sentiments merely follows political trends that have been crafted to favour the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra*. While it is true that the cries for the redress of hurt religious sentiments come not only from Hindu nationalist groups, but other minoritized groups as well, the fact is that the complaints of these groups are usually heeded only when they formulate their complaints along theocratic lines, not otherwise. But if one can ban images in a pub, or a film because it is blasphemous and offends Catholic sensibilities, it follows that one must also ban the slaughter of cattle because it offends brahmanical sensibilities. In other words, it is the upper caste Hindu nationalist groups that benefit once hurt religious sentiments are recognized as a legitimate basis to quash actions.

Phrasing appeals for state attention on the basis of religious sentiments also occludes the real issues at stake, the systemic inequality of power between the groups that comprise the country. To put it in the still relevant words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "The Indian Christians need two things. The first thing they want is the safeguarding of their civil liberties. The second thing they want is ways and means for their economic uplift." This agenda is more crucial than the mistaken imitation of identitarian politics that the Archbishop seems to have lent support to.



The Archbishop's statement opens up dangers beyond the possibly identitarian problem of living in a Hindu state; that of authoritarianism and populism. What is evident in the statement is that there is an appeal to a state that does not follow the due process of law. In the Goregaon Social case one has a situation where a group of citizens that claims to speak for *all* Catholics have determined that they are upset by an activity and *demand* summary redress by the state in the form of a ban. The group demanding the ban does not want the complaint to be evaluated by a dispassionate judicial system and the issue treated through appropriate channels. What we witness in this case is a complete violation of the very due process that ensures the equanimity of the law. One wonders if the church hierarchy contemplated that, given the balance of power in the country, this same strategy of demanding immediate action and dispensing with the due process of law could easily be used against Christians in India?

This situation reveals the manner in which Hindu nationalist authoritarianism does not spring merely from the actions of upper-caste Hindu nationalists. Rather, it is sustained through the authoritarian tendencies that lie within minoritized groups in India, and especially in fronts of authority in these groups. In this context the Catholic Church has much introspection to do. Despite the winds of change in terms of leadership style that Pope Francis has brought to the church, the Church has had a long history of clericalism and authoritarian leadership that is often confused with respect for a healthy system of hierarchy.

Considering the delicate nature of politics in India, and the bitter reality that one cannot rely on the neutrality of the state, the Archdiocese of Bombay ought to have considered a more nuanced response to the provocation that the décor of Goregaon Social allegedly represented. At a time when the law has been reduced to cynical interpretations of codes to secure the interests of the hegemonic, the Archbishop could have used this opportunity to deepen our ethical appreciation of the problem that the décor of Goregaon Social represented. In this way he would have also fulfilled the prophetic role that is the true calling of the Church.

Rather than insist on a parochial assertion of ownership, and a consequent banning of the imagery, a deeper exploration of the use of the symbols in Goregaon Social would have demonstrated a surprising possibility. In statements published on social media, the management of the pub indicated that they saw the space as “the church of anti-

consumerism” or the “Cathedral of anti-consumerism”. In other words, the owners of the pub were attempting to set up an alternative to consumerism and recognising that this alternative might be present in a Christian, if not Christianized, lifestyle. In many ways Christianity is fundamental to modernity not in an abstract and discursive way alone, but very materially; with a liberative lifestyle associated with Christians. Christians, and especially those one finds in Portuguese-influenced areas like Bombay, enjoy a lifestyle that is largely unmarked by brahmanical taboos. Catholics enjoy a material lifestyle that does not place taboos on the consumption of meat, approves of social drinking, and allows for a respectful approximation of the sexes; social features largely absent in brahmanical cultures of dominant castes but crucial for claiming modernity. Indeed, one could inquire if the name of this pub does not take inspiration from the ‘socials’ that are a feature of the convent schools. In these socials, in the presence of chaperones and other adults, youngsters could learn the skills of not only drinking in moderation, but also to woo members of the opposite sex, dance with them, developing in this process skills of respectful sociality.

In this context the Archbishop could pointed out to a basic fact that many in India do not seem to have sufficiently appreciated, that however attractive it may appear, the Christian lifestyle is empty without a real encounter with Christ and Christian values. The Archbishop could have pointed out that a substantial alternative to consumerism was available through deepening the encounter with the person of Christ mediated through the Catholic Church. Such a response would not only have countered the appropriation that the décor of the pub represented, but also the empty promises of the prophets of consumerism, not to mention the anti-Christian rhetoric of the Hindu nationalistic forces, especially the voices in favour of the forced conversions of *gharwapasi*.

In sum, by following the dominant logics of Indian politics rather than cleaving to its prophetic tradition, the Catholic hierarchy has done more damage than it can imagine, not only to the community it leads, but other minoritized groups as well.

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