

Diasporic devotions and bodies in motion

By Alana Harris

Every Tuesday evening at 8pm throughout the year, a Catholic church in Forest Gate, East London is the scene of remarkable religious fervour.¹ Most weeks at least two hundred people of diverse ages and ethnicities buy and light hundreds of candles, a knot of people gather around a plaster statue of the Franciscan Antony of Padua (rubbing their hands along the folds of his brown habit) or they place slips of paper in a large wooden box marked ‘petitions’.² Meanwhile a number of men and women walk on their knees from the back of the church to the altar, praying with moving lips with a lit candle between their hands, while others embrace and greet each other with kisses as they enter the church. This diverse congregation has come for the ‘Novena of Saint Antony’, but the two hour-long devotion of intercessory prayers, hymns, scripture readings, relics veneration and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is unlike most encountered in other Catholic churches – for it brings together people from highly diverse faith backgrounds, including a substantial number of self-identified (and publicly acknowledged) Hindus.

One of those regularly present is 38-year-old Jeyachandra, who was born in Sri Lanka and fled to India as a Tamil Tiger refugee, before coming to East Ham in 2008. As he explains:

I am Hindu but you know it doesn't matter, the thing is I like to pray, I love to pray. I like to take bread and wine, the body of Jesus... My parents were Hindu, we worship at Temple, but my father and mother also know Jesus, Mary, [and] they teach me like this.³

Introduced to St Antony's parish in 2010 by a Tamil friend, Jeyachandra occasionally visits the highly elaborate Sri Murugan Temple in East Ham, but without fail now attends Forest Gate every Tuesday as a supplicant of St Antony. As he described the saint:

He is one of the Masters... like a father. We can say 'Why am I here? Where am I going?' I have many questions inside of me. I put [them at] his feet... [in] everything he guide[s] and helps me.⁴

For Jeyachandra, his Tuesday night homage to St Antony continues throughout the week at home – it is his custom to buy two candles, one for the church and the other for his own house shrine, where it burns for nine days (a *novena*) in front of his personal statute of St Antony.⁵ For this fervent devotee, there is a ritual and spatial continuity between his Tuesday night observances and his every day, home-based prayer life. Moreover, there is an emphasis for him – as for many of Saint Antony's clients – on a material and imagined, incarnational and bodily encounter with their patron. Whether touching his statue, kissing his relic (contained within a crucifix) or metaphorically putting one's worries and concerns 'at his feet', the embodied dimensions of these devotional practices are foregrounded and prioritised.

Devotion to St Antony is popular throughout all of India and Sri Lanka and inter-religious places of pilgrimage on the sub-continent are not uncommon (see Raj 2004; Raj and Harman 2007). The sharing of sacred space between Catholics and Hindus has its most famous example in the Marian shrine, Vailankanni, and visitation of this pilgrimage shrine, the 'Indian Lourdes', was mentioned by some of the Novena devotees.⁶ Alongside this, there is also an intensely popular, long-standing pilgrimage site to St Antony in Uvari, Tamil Nadu – the region of origin (alongside northern Sri Lanka) for a significant proportion of the Forest Gate congregation. Against this background, an openness to Catholic–Hindu common worship and the mutual, syncretic participation in religious experiences is a diasporic legacy brought to East London by these migrants – part of a shared cultural and post-colonial understanding, common to Tamils from southern India and Sri Lanka, which is re-enacted (and transformed) in



St Antony's shrine, decorated for feast day celebrations, in Uvari, Tamil Nadu. ©Sujith Wilson Fernando

Forest Gate. The historic and shared diasporic identities of Tamil Catholics and Hindus⁷ (auspiced through St Antony) allow for the circumvention of differences of religion, class and caste and the identification of common intercessory needs in times of austerity in contemporary London.⁸

Drawing upon the insights of Mary McClintock Fulkerson in reading the exposed 'wounds' of those engaged in devotional practices

(McClintock Fulkerson 2007) – here expressed in the weekly prayer petitions read out within the service and ranging from economic privation to emotional dysfunction⁹ – it is possible to discern a radically reconfigured notion of religious belonging in East London.¹⁰ The conclusion to be drawn from examining the complexities of these weekly prayer evenings, with their rich repertoire of sensory stimuli and the enactment of an embodied, relational encounter (between saint and client, and between gathered devotees) is that ‘racialized, normalized and otherwise enculturated bodies and desire[s]’ must be acknowledged, cutting across exclusionary definitions of religious affiliation’ (McClintock Fulkerson 2007: 21). Within Catholic tradition St Antony is acknowledged as the ‘patron saint of lost things’ – a migrant from Lisbon to Padua remembered for his Franciscan commitment to poverty and passionate evangelism. Today in Forest Gate, he is patron saint to a diverse group of people from all over the world, not all of whom are Catholics, who identify with his legacy and are drawn to a form of popular piety that offers a fleshy, face-to-face encounter with a seemingly attentive, heavenly advocate. □

Endnotes

1. For an extended discussion of the religious landscape in East London, see Garnett and Harris (2013a).
2. Ethnographic material within this chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken over various Tuesday evenings throughout 2009, 2012, and Tuesday evenings in February and March 2014.
3. Jeyachandra Jacuma (b.1978), Interview, 15 April 2014, transcript #114.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. <http://www.vailankannishrine.org>
7. On Tamil diasporic identities generally, see David (2008); David (2012); Van Hear (2010); Van Hear (2012).
8. See also Garnett and Harris (2013b).
9. For an extended discussion of the prayer petitions of devotees, see Harris (2015).
10. *Ibid.*

References

- McClintock Fulkerson, M. (2007) *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 22–3.
- Raj, S. (2004) 'Dialogue "On the Ground": The Complicated Identities and the Complex Negotiations of Catholics and Hindus in South India'. *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17:33–44.
- Raj, S. and Harman, W. P. (eds.) (2007) *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*. New York: SUNY Press.