

# **JESUIT SPIRITUALITY AND GANDHIAN PRAXIS: EMBRACING AN INTER- FAITH DIALOGUE THAT DOES ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN INDIA**

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## **Introduction by Editor**

*Howard Thurman, the late Afro-American preacher cites in one of his lectures, "what Mr. Gandhi calls Truth and I call God are the same". The deep influence that Gandhi had in a very brief encounter with Thurman and subsequently the impact Thurman had on the shaping of the civil rights movement in the US as a mentor for Martin Luther King Jr. is increasingly being realised in the USA (as Ashish Kothari points out in another article in this compilation). Gandhi always engaged and worked with religious groups across the boundaries of faith, deepening his own faith in the process. Religion was extremely important for Gandhi, whose famous quote on 'religion and politics' today may seem like clairvoyance or sorcery depending on ones' influences and interpretations. He had very strong opinions about almost all religions and these religions in turn were influenced and deeply impacted by him. He saw in all of them an attempt to uplift human spirit and otherwise opined that, to try and estimate the merits of religion is unnecessary and even harmful. In this, he articulated a deeply cultural aspect of India that U.R. Ananthamurthy, the famous writer and thinker summarises, he states, that in the Indian culture, evil is constructed as another facet of divinity and everyone is accommodated.*

*His engagement with the Christian faith is one of longest standing as it started from his days in London as a student and continued for the rest of his life. Several people of Christian faith came to him not merely to discuss politics or social issues, but also religion and spirituality. He himself summarises what Christ means to him thus –*

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*"What, then, does Jesus mean to me? To me He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To His believers, He was God's only begotten Son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of His teaching and of His doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so.*

*To me, it implies a spiritual birth. My interpretation, in other words, is that in Jesus' own life is the key of His nearness to God; that He expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognise Him as the Son of God. ...*

*It is true that there certainly is reason for scepticism when one observes the bloody butchery that European aggressors have unloosed, and when one thinks about the misery and suffering prevalent in every corner of the world. ... In the face of this, how can one speak seriously of the divine spirit incarnate in man? Because these acts of terror and murder offend the conscience of man; because man knows that they represent evil; because in the inner depths of his heart and of his mind, he deplors them. ... moreover, when he does not go astray, misled by false teachings or corrupted by false leaders, man has within his breast an impulse for good and a compassion that is the spark of divinity, and which some day, I believe, will burst forth into the full flower that is the hope of all mankind.*

*An example of this flowering may be found in the figure and in the life of Jesus. ... The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by His presence, His actions, and the words spoken by His divine voice. ...*

*And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a god inherited from their ancestors."*

*- Modern Review, October 1941, CWMG, Vol. 81. Pg. 252*

*Obviously, there were people within Christian faith during his times and later who saw him as a Christian. Indeed the American thinker Dorothy Day, wrote, "There is no public figure who has more conformed his life to the life of Jesus Christ than Gandhi, there is no man who has carried about him more consistently the aura of divinised humanity, who has added his sacrifice to the sacrifice of Christ, whose life has had a more fitting end than that of Gandhi 1." Gandhi presented both a possibility and challenge. While those who considered themselves liberals, rebels, who broke free from the shackles of established form of bondage of one kind or another, whether it be faith, science, modern economic organisation or governance, found in Gandhi a refreshing resonance to break free categories and creatively express, experiment and engage with the world. Those who benefitted from the status quo, found him to be a problem that they had to deal with sooner or later in public domain. He presented himself through those whom he influenced and through their work. This was also presented to the Christians in India during his time itself.*

*“...there was an even greater challenge posed to institutional Christianity in India – the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Since his years in South Africa, many Christians recognised the greatness of Gandhi and attempts were made to convert him to Christianity. While Gandhi had gained immensely from the life and teachings of Jesus, in the ultimate analysis, he rejected the claim of Christianity as the sole path to truth and salvation. While this was a serious enough challenge to the dogma of the Church, some even went to the extent of arguing that ‘a true Christian in India today must necessarily be a Gandhian’ since the Mahatma was ‘giving a practical demonstration of the applicability of the teachings of Jesus.’*

*– The Spirit of Jesus, The Web of Freedom, J.C. Kumarappa and Gandhi’s struggle to Economic Justice by Deepak Malghan and Venu Govindu*

*When theologians engaged with him, they had to be faced with the need to re-calibrate their own faith and knowledge for themselves. The inner rebellion and challenges within each established system that needed revision, found in the ambience he created, a greater support for themselves. The case of the Jesuits who engaged, shaped their work through the engagement of and with the common cause of the Gandhian praxis, is an amazing case of such an engagement. Joseph Sathish in the next article presents this with an illustrated example of the Jesuit movement in the southern Indian hills of Eastern Ghats and the work of the Jesuit, K. M. Mathew.*

## Introduction

In July 1916, Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) wrote in the *Modern Review* that the elevation of the doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence was possibly responsible for India's subjugation under colonial rule. In response, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) explained that practising ahimsa was not 'unmanly'. Gandhi extolled the virtues of ahimsa, writing: "Our shastras seem to teach that a man who really practises ahimsa in its fullness has the world at his feet, he so affects his surroundings that even the snakes and other venomous reptiles do him no harm. This is said to have been the experience of Saint Francis of Assisi!"

It is interesting that Gandhi refers to a thirteenth century Catholic monk from Italy to explain the strengths of ahimsa. Coincidentally, Gandhi's close friend and British missionary Charles F. Andrews (1871-1940) called Gandhi the "St. Francis of this modern age" (Andrews, n.d.). Later, the American Catholic activist Dorothy Day (1897-1980) mourned the passing away of Gandhi, writing: "In him we have a new intercessor with Christ; a modern Francis, a pacifist martyr" (Day, 1948). Apart from being "pacifist" and sharing a common love for the poor, Francis and Gandhi did not share much in common. Yet, both are counted among the greatest thinkers on the environment, even though neither of them wrote any systematic treatise on the environment.

Besides Gandhi, several others were inspired by Francis of Assisi – including Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the sixteenth century Spanish soldier who later founded the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order of religious priests who are popularly known as the Jesuits. Like Francis, Ignatius had some of his

deepest spiritual experiences while contemplating nature. He was convinced about the never-ending grace of God while contemplating the flow of water along the Cardoner river in Spain (Boyle, 1983). The Cardoner experience, among others, inspired Ignatius to write the *Spiritual Exercises*, which is now the foundation for the spiritual training of all Jesuits.

The highlight of the *Spiritual Exercises* is the 'Contemplation to Attain Love' where the reader is asked to consider: "... how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence..." (Warnke, 1987). Besides guiding Jesuit formation, Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* have informed the Jesuits' missionary activities across the world, including India. As we will see in this article, the Jesuit spirituality in India was also inspired by a Gandhian zeal for rural development – leading to the emergence of a socio-environmental mission.

This article is structured as follows. The first section briefly explores how and why the missionary spirituality of the Jesuits changed from a focus on Christian evangelisation to advocacy of social justice in the 1960s and 70s. The succeeding section describes the revival of Gandhian ideals during the same period and how it played a role in triggering the environmental movement in India. This in turn also influenced the Jesuits' engagement with rural development and inspired an inter-faith dialogue between Jesuit spirituality and Gandhian praxis. In the subsequent section, we look at the specific case of the Jesuit K. M. Matthew and his environmental mission in south India. In the final section, the article suggests that the case of Jesuit environmentalism in India provides an opportunity for a greater dialogue

between environmental action and religious world-views, especially of the inter-faith kind.

### **The Jesuits and Mission for the Poor**

In 1965, the Superior General (leader) of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe (1907-1991) declared that “to judge the success of missionary work purely on the basis of conversion statistics” is a “misguided tendency” (Arrupe, 1966, 6). Coming decades after Gandhi’s critical views on Christian evangelisation, Arrupe’s re-interpretation of a “mission” was motivated by the suffering of the people in the developing world. Several countries gained independence from colonial powers in the mid-twentieth century. But the extent of underdevelopment in Asia, Africa and South America caused rising discontent among the people, including Catholic theologians in Latin America. These theologians resented the prevailing approach to development, which only increased the developing world’s dependency on countries in North America and Western Europe. The Latin American theologians called for the re-interpretation of “development” and initiated a new branch of theology called liberation theology. Inspired by the liberation theology movement, Catholic hierarchy began to “speak of liberation rather than development” (Thakur, 1996). In essence, liberation theology declared that conversion to Christianity will only go so far – true ‘salvation’ entails “liberation from everything that oppresses the human person” (Paul VI, 1975). While the Jesuits did not lead the liberation theology movement, they certainly contributed to its progress. In 1972, Arrupe himself declared that Christians are called to be “witnesses to justice” (Arrupe, 1980). In 1975, Jesuits from all over the world gathered in Rome for

their 32nd General Congregation (global meeting of all Jesuits) and declared that “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement” (Padberg, 2009a). This renewed mission of a “faith that does justice” was gradually implemented in all areas of Jesuit activity, including their engagement with the global environmental movement which gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s.

In 1967, Lynn White Jr. famously located the roots of the ecological crisis in Western Christianity (White, 1967). But, White argued that since religions contributed to the crisis, the remedy must also be religious. He suggested an alternate Christian world-view based on an idea inspired by Francis of Assisi – that all creatures of the earth are equal. Recognition of Lynn White’s thesis came gradually. In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of ecology, saying that “(m)an’s situation in the modern world seems indeed to be far removed... from the requirements of justice” and added that one reason for this injustice is because “(m)an often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption” (John Paul II, 1979). The Jesuits echoed similar concerns about a “denial of the dignity of the human person and the wanton destruction of the environment” (Padberg, 2009b). Outside the Church, the popularity of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), the first Earth Day (1970) and the influential *Limits to Growth* report (1972) contributed to a global environmental movement. Soon enough, the movement found expression in India with the Chipko Andolan (movement) in 1973 and gained traction after the industrial gas disaster at Bhopal in 1984. Soon, the Jesuits also recognised the importance of participating in the

Indian environmental movement. But the Jesuit engagement with environmentalism in India had other contributing factors, including the revival of Gandhi's ideas on rural development.

### **The Gandhian Roots of Jesuit Environmentalism in India**

The optimism that Indians expressed for techno-centric development after gaining independence in 1947 began to erode gradually in the 1960s (Krishna, 2017). Soon, a surge of grass-roots movements emerged, emphasising people-centric rural development with responsible use of the environment (Gadgil & Guha, 2008). In a sense, the period indicated a return to the Gandhian ideal of "a model village" (Guha, 1995). These grass-roots movements were led by individuals who had either known Gandhi or were inspired by Gandhian principles – people like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte (1914-2008) and Jayaprakash Narayan (1902-1979). The influence of these Gandhian leaders transcended religious boundaries and had its impact on the Catholic Church too. For instance, the Catholic Bishops Council of India (CBCI) had previously stated that the best contribution of the Church to "the country's welfare" would be through "her educational and social welfare activities." But in 1971, the CBCI released a statement on "Poverty and Development" where it expressed "the hope that we can respond to... the cries for justice and liberation from the fetters of an exploitative society that by its social structures perpetuates the enslavement of millions. The Church is very much with the prevailing movement in India to do away with the root causes of poverty through its concern and active participation in programmes geared to its causes" (Schmalz, 2006).

The influence of liberation theology on Catholics in the developing world and the return to the Gandhian ideal of a "model village" had a significant impact on Jesuit missionary activity in India. A few Jesuit missionaries who were initially appointed to teach in colleges, later requested permission to work in India's villages after coming into contact with Gandhian leaders. For example, the Belgian Jesuit, Michael Windey (1921-2009) was first associated with the Xavier Institute of Social Service (XISS) founded at Ranchi in 1955. After he was introduced to Jayaprakash Narayan, Windey offered his services to Narayan and worked in Bihar during the 1960s famine. He then proceeded to render his services in cyclone-affected Guntur (Andhra Pradesh) in 1969. Eventually, he established the Village Reconstruction Organisation (VRO) with the motto of "better villages for a better world."<sup>2</sup> In 1967, the German Jesuit Herman Bacher established a Social Centre to work in drought prone districts of Maharashtra, with an emphasis on collectivisation of rural people and watershed management (Ziegler & Henkel, 2014). His Jesuit colleague, Hans Staffner, was a close collaborator of Baba Amte, and went on to write one of the best known works on the person titled *Baba Amte: A Vision of New India* (Bogaert, 1993). The Spanish Jesuit Carlos G. Valles, who was sent to teach Mathematics at St. Xavier's College in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) proceeded to teach students in villages; in the process, he authored several mathematics textbooks in Gujarati. On the birth centenary of Gandhi, Valles wrote *Gandhiji ane navi pedhi* ('Gandhiji and the new generation').<sup>3</sup> While these (and other) Jesuits' contributions to rural India were influenced by Gandhi, the impact of Gandhi also extended to the Jesuits' theological reflection.

For Gandhi, the ashram (or monastery) was

more than “a community of men (and women) of religion” – it was “a scientific and prayerful experiment.”<sup>4</sup> This Gandhian take on the ashram as a ‘laboratory’ was adopted by some Catholic missionaries who identified the ashram as a possible means of encountering Christ through Hindu-Christian dialogue. Benedictine monks such as Henri Le Saux (rechristened as Swami Abhishikhananda, 1910-1973), Jules Monchanin (Swami Paramarubyanaanda, 1895-1957) and Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda, 1906-1993) were to lead some of the most successful experiments in Hindu-Christian dialogue and established Christian ashrams in South India, most notably the Saccidananda Ashram (also called Shantivanam) in the village of Tannirpalli in Tiruchirapalli (Tamil Nadu) in 1950 (Amaladoss, 2008). The Catholic ashram experiment took a definite Gandhian turn in 1960 when Bede Griffiths and another Benedictine monk Stephen opened the “Benedictine Sarvodaya Ashram” at Batlagundu (Tamil Nadu). They established the ashram after discussions with the Tamil Nadu Sarvodaya Mandal and Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) himself. As the name suggested, the ashram was a Catholic centre for worship and service, modeled on the Sarvodaya Movement of Vinoba Bhave (Besses, 1961). Theologians would later acknowledge that the “ashram, traditionally a refuge for the pious individual... is made by Gandhi a centre for constructive social work and revolutionary political action” (“Ecumenical Chronicle,” 1989, 121).

The Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss writes that the liberation theology movement in Latin America was inspired by a Marxist analysis of Jesus’ message of salvation, but the roots were different in India. Amaladoss states that the “Indian church realized that the struggle for liberation

of the poor and the oppressed had started with Mahatma Gandhi” (Amaladoss, 2018, 217). Another Jesuit, Ignatius Jesudasan argues in his seminal work *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation* (1984) that Gandhi’s challenge to Christianity is to shift from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxy (right action). In a sense, the Jesuits responded to this Gandhian challenge of orthopraxy by deciding that one year of a Jesuit’s theological formation should necessarily be spent in a village – to interact, to assist and to learn with the poor (Arockiadoss, 2002). Indirectly, Gandhi had effected a change of heart among the Indian Jesuits and inspired the kind of transformation he desired among Indian Christians. Perhaps, that was why the Jesuit indologist Francis X Clooney stated:

...we might very well join other Christian communities in adding figures like Gandhi to our calendar, mentioning him at Mass, and praying in his memory for peace and nonviolence. We can do this because, from a moderate Catholic perspective, he is obviously a figure radiant with the grace of God, grace that loses nothing of its splendor because it radiates in the life, work, personality of this man who deeply respected Jesus yet chose not to become a Christian (Clooney, 2010).

As we have briefly explored, the contemporary expression of the Jesuit mission in India draws from multiple roots: the Ignatian spirituality to “see God in all things,” the Gandhian preference for the rural poor, and the Arrupean mission of a faith that does justice. These influences are visible in all facets of Jesuit activity today, as we will explore in the environmental mission of the south Indian Jesuit botanist K. M. Matthew (1930-2004).

### **K. M. Matthew and Jesuit Environmental Mission in South India**

In 1838, a group of French Jesuits arrived in south India as part of their evangelical mission. In 1895, they established the Sacred Heart College in the village of Shembaganur near Kodaikanal (Tamil Nadu). Situated amidst the Palani Hills, the Shembaganur College is a centre for training young Jesuit novices. The French Jesuits (who had already been trained in natural sciences in Europe) promoted the teaching and learning of the biological sciences at Shembaganur. A part of the novice's education also included plant taxonomy. During leisure, the novices ventured into the Palni hills to identify and collect plant specimens. The young novices had several Jesuit botanists to guide and inspire them. Pierre Labarthere (1831–1904) cultivated botanical gardens on the college campus. Emile Gombert (1866–1948) collected orchids and established a garden dedicated to orchids. Louis Anglade (1873–1953) documented local plants through a collection of nearly 2000 hand-painted plates. George Foreau (1889–1959) assembled a collection of mosses, lichens, algae, and fungi, while Alfred Rapinat (1892–1959) collected flowering plants and ferns. These Jesuits and the novices often collaborated with botanists at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew (London) for accurate identification of plant specimens (Matthew, 1988; Ignacimuthu, 2016).

In 1954, the first independent Government of India appointed the Jesuit taxonomist Hermegild Santapau (1903-1970) as its Chief Botanist and Director. With a PhD in botany, Santapau taught the subject at the St. Xavier's College in Bombay and was also the editor of the *Journal of the Bombay*

*Museum of Natural History* for several years. In 1967, Santapau's services to botany and science education in India were recognised with the Government of India's civilian award Padma Shri (Bole, 1970). Santapau was not a resident of Shembaganur, but some of the botanically inclined novices were keen to learn the subject from Santapau. One of those novices was K. M. Matthew (1930-2004).

Born in 1930, K. M. Matthew joined the Society of Jesus in 1950. While a novice at Shembaganur, Matthew assisted Fr. Emile Ugarte in making plant collections at the natural history museum housed within the Sacred Heart College. The museum would later become one of the leading tourist attractions in Kodaikanal. After completing his M.Sc in Botany, Matthew was encouraged to pursue his doctoral research with Santapau. Under the supervision of Santapau, K. M. Matthew acquired his PhD in botany, focusing on the exotic plants of the Palani Hills. In 1962, he proceeded to Kurseong (Darjeeling) for his studies in theology – where he continued his pursuit of botanical exploration and published several peer-reviewed journal articles. After his ordination as a priest in 1967, he proceeded to the Kew Gardens for his post-doctoral research, gaining much experience in plant taxonomy. Returning to India in 1974, he joined the Botany department at St. Joseph's College in Trichy (Matthew, 1998).

As we noted previously, the 1970s witnessed the germination of the global environmental movement. In 1972, the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm highlighted the growing conflict between environmental conservation and economic development in the “developing” world. In India, oppressed women and men were battling for their cultural and



forest rights during the Chipko Andolan in 1973. These events had an influence on Matthew; he began to see his botanical career as more than an intellectual exercise and embarked on a systematic contribution towards biodiversity conservation in South India. In 1974, he established the Rapinat Herbarium at Trichy, and soon began work on a massive project to study the flora of Tamil Nadu. Funded by the Government of India's Department of Science and Technology (DST), Matthew and his small team of field experts at St. Joseph's College mapped the entire flora of the Tamil Nadu Carnatic region in a surprisingly short span of time (1976-84). This resulted in the historically significant Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic, published in four volumes from 1981 to 1988; and the Flora of the Palani Hills, published in three volumes from 1996 to 1999.

In the 1980s, India saw greater civil society engagement with environmental issues. Significantly, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) released the first Report on the State of India's Environment in 1982, which argued that environmental conservation must go hand in hand with economic development.<sup>5</sup> CSE's report followed the 1980 publication of World Conservation Strategy (WCS), the first major international report to prioritize conservation as a public policy issue.<sup>6</sup> In 1984, Matthew established the Anglade Institute of Natural History to serve as a field institute of the Rapinat Herbarium in Trichy. The launch of the Anglade Institute was meant to cement Matthew's vision to promote environmental awareness among different groups of people.

Supported by the then Department of Environment in 1984, K. M. Matthew launched a three-day residential training programme to

illustrate techniques of environmental conservation and sustainable development to participants (Matthew, 1986). The programme was adapted to different groups of stakeholders – school and college students, teachers, government officials, village leaders and women from different parts of India. The programme continues till date, and close to a million people have been trained till 2018. In the meantime, the Palani Hills gained popularity as a tourist destination in the 1980s, imposing disastrous effects on its ecology (Lockwood, 2003). Concerned citizens keen to restore the pristine habitats of the Hills founded the Palani Hills Conservation Council (PHCC) in 1985, with KM Matthew as its Founder-Vice President.<sup>7</sup> He also initiated what he called the "lab-to-land" philosophy; on particular "Open Days," the Rapinat Herbarium was made available for students and others to visit and learn, because "the wider community has a right to be informed of our work, and to profit by it" (Matthew, 1998, 11). He also promoted the publication of flora in the Tamil language, a project which his student and fellow Jesuit, John Britto would complete (Britto, 1998).

While the Gandhian influence might not be obvious in Matthew, he was clear that the "custodians of the environment" are villagers and adivasis (or tribal people) (Matthew, 1998, 14). Reflecting on how India (and the global South) can preserve its environment, KM Matthew wrote:

A new self-respect movement, a swadeshi dynamism, a war of independence alone, can shield (the South). In particular, India has the unique model proposed by the father of the nation, who, though side-lined during the post-independence industrialisation drive, is being rightly reinstated... and should animate all technical programmes of the future (Matthew, 1993, 10).

The success of his environmental programme resulted in him being one of only four Jesuits who were invited to participate in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Later, he declared that the environment is “the new religion” and that “Jesuits should discern the inarticulate search for meaning” in “today’s environmental crisis”. He argued that “the Church should be far more outward-looking” and that the Church should express its commitment “to the new hurricane of the environmental movement”. Subsequently, he advised the Jesuits that the environment is the “apostolic gateway into the next millennium, a ministry in which the Society (of Jesus) should invest liberally”. He also said that the Jesuits “have to make a beginning in crucial topics like Biodiversity (and) Conservation”. Significantly, he suggested that the a “Jesuit Secretariat for Environment is most timely... not (as) just one more establishment, but an effort to unify the various ongoing developmental and educational ministries under the environmental umbrella”. Regionally, he insisted that “a minimal environmental programme” is required to train suitable Jesuits (Matthew, 1994).

Matthew’s efforts did yield results among the Jesuits. Apart from organising a training programme for Jesuits across South Asia (Matthew, 2001), Matthew also trained several Jesuits in advanced plant taxonomy and biodiversity conservation. For instance, Fr. John Britto (who succeeded K. M. Matthew as Director of the twin establishments of Rapinat Herbarium and Anglade Institute) has documented the ethno-botanical practices of Irula and Kurava adivasis of Tamil Nadu (Arulappan, Britto, Ruckmani, & Kumar, 2015). He has also used remote sensing techniques to promote biodiversity conservation. Another Jesuit, Fr.

Ignacimuthu has worked with grass-roots workers in Tamil Nadu to understand and promote native traditions of healing (Ayyanar & Ignacimuthu, 2011). Further, Ignacimuthu’s team developed a natural bio-pesticide called Ponneem as an alternative to chemical fertilisers promoted by the agro-biotech industry in India (Packiam, Anbalagan, Ignacimuthu, & Vendan, 2012). The technique for preparing Ponneem is made available to farmer cooperatives for free and Ignacimuthu’s students have trained thousands of farmers in preparing Ponneem and to deal with pests in an eco-friendly way. These efforts, influenced by the missionary zeal of K. M. Matthew, contribute towards the biodiversity conservation and socio-economic empowerment of poor and indigenous people. Yet another of Matthew’s Jesuit colleagues, V. S. Manickam (1944-2012) established the Centre for Biodiversity and Biotechnology at the St. Xavier’s College in Palayamkottai, to pursue research related to biodiversity conservation (Ignacimuthu, 2016).

After his death in 2004, K. M. Matthew was posthumously awarded the Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar Award by the Government of India, in recognition of his “outstanding and consistent merit” in environmental preservation.

### **Religion and Environment – A Window to Sustainability**

More than half a century after Dorothy Day hailed Gandhi as “a modern Francis”, the first pope from the global South chose the name “Francis”, the patron saint of ecology who inspired Ignatius and Gandhi (Zhang, 2016). Pope Francis has been acclaimed as the most powerful ally

of the environmental justice movement, thanks to his 2015 encyclical 'Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home' which called for action on a variety of environmental issues (Francis, 2015). While Francis was not the first pope to speak on the environment, he certainly strengthened what has come to be called the movement for "religious environmentalism". Going beyond Catholic perspectives on environmentalism, Pope Francis referred to a plurality of religious world-views in *Laudato Si*, including that of the Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawas.

Gandhi had once declared that "Jesus expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God... I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world, to all races and people."<sup>8</sup> By referring to an Islamic mystic, it appears as if Pope Francis was paraphrasing Gandhi in suggesting that the world belongs to people of all (and no) faiths, and that people of religion have a role to play in preventing environmental destruction.

Scholars often hesitate to link the literature on religion and ecology to the literature on environmental justice, because religion is often looked upon with scepticism. Indeed, it is known that many climate change deniers are influenced by Catholic-inspired think tanks (Vincentnathan, Vincentnathan, & Smith, 2016). But to insist on a radical, secular world-view is refusing to engage with vast populations that believe in religion. However, acknowledging religious motivations can help to shape environmentalism within diverse religious world-views of the global population (Handley, 2016). The case of the Jesuits' engagement with the environment is one such instance of religious

motivations helping to promote environmental justice.

In India, the Jesuit environmental mission has been informed by their preferential option for the poor and a Gandhian theology of liberation, as noted in this article. The environmental mission of Jesuits like K. M. Matthew has resulted in a wider Jesuit declaration that human rights include "rights such as development, peace and a healthy environment" and recommendations of alternative development models which "integrate cultural, environmental, and social justice values in their functioning" (SJS, 1999). Further, the Jesuits have also institutionalised their commitment to the environment through the re-christening of their social justice ministry as the "Secretariat of Social Justice and Ecology". The cause of environmental justice stands to gain from spiritually inspired ideas espoused by religious communities like the Jesuits.

It is acknowledged that religions have contributed to tensions and conflict between various groups. But, as we saw in this article, religions have also promoted social change – including environmental change. Religious world-views offer an important way for humans to participate in renewing the environment. But can individual religions do that independently? The challenge of environmental destruction calls for a multi-pronged effort. The Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss reflects:

If I respect the freedom of God, who reaches out and the freedom of the humans who respond, dialogue is the only way of encountering the other.

At the same time, my own self-awareness has also changed. Hinduism is no longer an “other” religion for me. I see it as the religion of my ancestors. It is also part of my inheritance. I become a Hindu-Christian. Interreligious dialogue then becomes intrapersonal. I must integrate my multiple roots and render them transformative (Amaladoss, 2007, 24).

This “transformative” potential of inter-faith dialogue cannot be stressed enough, especially in the case for environmental action. This article provided an instance of how the dialogue between the Jesuit spirituality and Gandhian praxis offers an important and creative opportunity for individuals and institutions to contribute to a vibrant earth community.

### NOTES

1. See <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/gandhi-defended-non-violence-lala-lajpat-rai>. Extract from (Sen, Dutta, and Roy 2016)
2. See <https://www.vroindia.org/> and <https://www.ranjesu.org/getObituary.php?obld=3>
3. See <http://www.carlosvalles.com/ningles/indexing.htm>
4. Quoted on page 70 and 108 in (Prasad, 2001)
5. See <https://www.cseindia.org/cse-timeline-218>
6. See <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/iucn-ed-world-conservation-strategy-living-re-source-conservation-sustainable-development>
7. See <http://www.palnihills.org/>
8. Quoted on page 55 of (Chatterjee, 1983)

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