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“Church Related, but Not Church Controlled”: Conflicts over Christianity and
Secularism in a Tamil Christian College

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

Hannah Leslie Smith

Committee in charge:

Professor Rupert Stasch
Professor Steven Parish
Professor Joel Robbins

2012

This Thesis of Hannah Leslie Smith is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Setting the Scene.....	4
The Conflict over Church Authority at American College.....	12
Indian Secularism & Indian Christianity.....	27
The Terms of the Debate.....	34
Conclusion.....	51
Appendix.....	53
References.....	59

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There are many others who deserve my gratitude; I'll try to make it up to you somewhere other than here. Tetsuro: I'll keep trying.

To my parents: Thanks for letting me keep making you proud.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Church Related, but Not Church Controlled”: Conflicts over Christianity and
Secularism in a Tamil Christian College

by

Hannah Leslie Smith

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Rupert Stasch, Chair

In this thesis I examine an ongoing conflict over control of a Christian missionary-founded college in Tamil Nadu, India. Both sides in this debate assert Christian identities and claim rights under the Indian secular state, though in different ways and towards different ends. Church officials seeking to control the school argue that their minority status protects them from government

interference, while a dedicated group of striking faculty argues for government oversight to protect the school and its property from the church. I rely on newspaper articles, blog posts, and the history of the college to discuss the ways in which the boundaries of the school have become an important test site for questions of the rights of minorities and the role of the secular Indian state. I argue that the boundaries between religious and secular authority are what is at stake for both sides in this particular disagreement, not just the problem of possibly corrupt religious officials. The ways in which conflicting, yet still in some sense shared, values of secularism and Christianity are articulated by both sides through legal cases, demonstrations, or violence directs us to think of 'secularism' as a system of mediating and resolving these disagreements, rather than a state where these sorts of disputes should not happen.

Introduction

In April 2008, in the city of Madurai, in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, as the 2007-08 school year was winding down and the Chithirai festival season was beginning, a controversy erupted over the principal's position at a local college.¹ American College, founded in 1881 by missionaries affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) but independent from that body since the 1930s, had not seen such a contentious disagreement over its leadership in its almost 130-year history. Bishop Christopher Asir, of the Church of South India (CSI) Madurai-Ramnad diocese, dismissed the sitting principal, Dr. Chinnaraj Joseph, and appointed the vice principal, Dr. George Selvakumar, to take his place. In the ensuing legal battle, Bishop Asir and his supporters argued that being the highest local church authority makes him the *ex officio* head of the college Governing Council and therefore ultimately responsible for hiring and firing decisions. Some faculty, however, organized to challenge the legality of Bishop Asir's actions. This group, known as the Initiative for Protecting the American College (IPAC), organized public demonstrations, online news updates and commentary for the school's far-flung alumni, and legal petitions to re-instate the ousted Dr. Joseph. As the name of this group partly

¹ Chithirai is a month-long festival celebrating the wedding of Meenakshi in the famous Madurai temple, held in the first half of April. In addition to the crowds of pilgrims the festivities bring to the city, the season is also known for its oppressively hot temperatures (days often well above 35°C/95°F). The festival was cited by the police as a reason for postponing an early demonstration by some faculty against the appointment of Dr. Selvakumar.

signals, these efforts were often explicitly put forth in terms of protecting the college from what these faculty saw as the unlawful and unprecedented encroachment of the church.² In their posts on the Save American College blog, the members of this group argue that the school is a “liberal secular Christian institution” which is related to the church through its shared missionary history, but not subject to church control.³ In the four years this initial event, American College has been the site of an ongoing, public, heated disagreement over its leadership.

In this thesis, I discuss the limits of religious and secular authority in an Indian Christian context, as dramatized through these arguments over the appointment of college administrators. I explore this case using the anthropological tradition of analyzing narratives of conflict as “social dramas.” Victor Turner’s (1957) early work explains the value of this technique most clearly. In *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Turner focuses on a series of narratives of several conflicts over authority among the Ndembu, analyzing them for significant patterns in the processes of the eruption and subsequent resolution of these contentious disagreements (1957:89-93). He sees the patterns in these conflicts as useful for the analysis of social values and interests that might be overlooked by only focusing on cultural consensus and stasis. He summarizes the relevance of these sorts of cases to his own work by saying:

² *The Hindu*, 18 Apr. 2008.

³ Prof. Babu Earnest Charles, 28 Apr. 2008.

The social drama shows vividly how these social tendencies operate in practice; how, in a given situation, some may support and others oppose one another; and how conflict between persons or groups in terms of a common norm or in terms of contradictory norms may be resolved in a particular set of circumstances. [Turner 1957:93]

I take from Turner the important point that the work of anthropological analysis shouldn't begin and end with what is broadly agreed upon; often disagreements and conflict, and the processes by which they are successfully (or unsuccessfully) resolved, can point us towards richer understandings of how social norms and ideals are lived.

The conflict I describe is notable for the ways in which it resists resolution. The initial incident four years ago was resolved through a Madras High Court decision by August 2009, but then a little over a year after that the campus saw a precise reenactment of the earlier events, followed by a lengthy escalation in tensions instead of any successful solution. It could be argued that the heated debates within this community over this property reveal some flaw in Indian Christianity or its local church leadership, or that the state's present reluctance to intervene demonstrates the grid-lock caused by corruption in Indian bureaucracy or reflects the overall failure of the Indian secular state to properly govern its people. I shall argue, though, that the details of this conflict require us to go much further than these simple answers. There may be problems of corrupt officials and clergy, but the ways in which members of this community mobilize to make those sorts of accusations show that this conflict stirs larger concerns over the sources and appropriate uses of various kinds of authority.

Setting the Scene

American College has a history that is both remarkable and somewhat typical. India's educational landscape has many highly regarded English-medium colleges that were founded by Christian missionaries in the 19th century. Though these schools share common historical roots in a fairly uniform mission project (Caplan 1980), across region and denomination there are crucial differences in the historical narratives of independence from foreign-controlled church structures. For the striking faculty, at least, it is a point of pride that American College transitioned from mission to autonomous control so early (1931) and smoothly, creating an independent Governing Council that was recognized by the still-colonial state as a legitimate recipient of government educational grants.⁴

Despite this official shift to local autonomy, the college has over the years maintained good relations with the intellectual and spiritual descendents of their former mission founders, as can be seen through the especially close ties between American College and Oberlin College, in Ohio. Oberlin was founded in 1833 by two Presbyterian ministers, and today is best known as a small, high-quality, secular liberal arts college with a long history of commitment to social justice. Most notably, the school was founded as a coeducational institution, making it the first college in America to award Bachelor's degrees to women; Oberlin then thirty years later became the first college in America to admit African-American students

⁴ Prof. Babu Earnest Charles, 28 Apr. 2008.

(Fairchild 1868, Kornblith and Lasser 2006). During this time, the college also prepared missionaries for the ABCFM and other American missionary organizations.⁵ The drive to send American Christians abroad to evangelize emerged out of a spiritual fervor that gripped many in the northeastern United States during the first half of the 19th century (Strong 1910). Significant overlaps between the passions of abolitionists and other American social justice advocates of the time and those of foreign missionaries make the close relationship between the two institutions unsurprising. Also somewhat unsurprising, given Oberlin's history of tolerance and the diversifying American religious landscape, is the observation that Oberlin College no longer explicitly publically identifies as a Christian institution and no longer maintains a school of theology; a cynical interpreter could read this as indicative of the current frosty public relationship between American evangelical Christianity and not only liberal social justice causes but also broadly secular education.

This decoupling of the church from higher education in the US is also reflected in the evolution of the Oberlin College-affiliated post-graduate missionary positions at American College, which at some point in the first half of the 20th century changed from an explicitly evangelical role to one emphasizing secular cross-cultural contact and education. The new position, known as the

⁵ Oberlin College maintains a small archive of correspondence from college-affiliated missionaries, dating from the 1880s-1960s. "RG 38 Miscellaneous Mission Records" <http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/holdings/finding/RG38/scope.html>, accessed 14 Feb. 2012.

Oberlin Shansi Fellowship, is one of a handful offered by the university to its recent graduates “to immerse themselves in life in Asia, while they assist our partners with specific tasks, whether teaching or volunteering.”⁶ The half-dozen East and South Asian sites include Shanxi, China, where the original Shansi educational outpost opened in 1908 response to the deaths of Oberlin-affiliated missionaries during the Boxer Rebellion.⁷ Even though those positions have explicitly secular in nature for some time, they do emerge from important international relationships cultivated by the school and its foreign partners over the past century, ties that largely rest on earlier mission connections.

Exploring how Oberlin has kept its sense of international service while distancing itself from any explicitly Christian mission is an example of American secularization that could sustain another, very different thesis. While there are arguably overlaps in the historical trajectories and interests of both schools, I mention it here not to equate the processes of secularization both colleges or contexts have undergone over the past century. Rather, I want to situate the striking faculty members’ claims to a social justice aspect of the school’s mission within a significant and specific historical relationship. The missionaries sent by the ABCFM and other American Christian organizations represent a historically specific manifestation of American Christianity, one whose emphasis on enacting a

⁶ “Oberlin Shansi – Fellowships.” <http://shansi.oberlin.edu/fellowships>, accessed 14 Feb. 2012.

⁷ “RG-15 – Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association” contains an archive of records from the original Oberlin missionaries’ records, through the founding of the organization until 1981. <http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/holdings/finding/RG15/scope.html>, accessed 14 Feb. 2012.

Christian sort of social justice might seem unfamiliar to contemporary ears accustomed to hearing the prosperity gospel preached. So I want to make it clear that when the striking faculty appeal to a mission history of crusading against inequality and for secular education that's available to a broad section of society, it is much more than a misguided idealization of a colonial past. These American missionary-founded educational projects shared a common purpose and social milieu with other, stateside missions that achieved remarkable success in terms of the major social reform movements of the day. While it is debatable to what extent those reforms were appropriate for exportation to a South Asian context (a debate I will not be entering into here), any analysis of the present-day situation in such a school needs to consider the closely entwined trajectories of the two lines of Christian thought, American and Indian. The American College situation can be read for both relatedness to and divergence from developments in American Christianity and secularity, but rather than conceiving of these events as either wholly derivative from or unique to any specific context, I argue merely that these historic connections should not be forgotten when considering the contemporary situation. The two contesting parties both deploy historical narratives in their claims to the right to govern the school. In the above section I have elaborated on striking faculty's narrative of social justice Christianity by describing historical ties between the school and American Christian organizations. In my next section, I will briefly describe the post-independence history of the Church of South India as it relates to the college, followed by a longer narrative of the past four years of

conflict. I will then position this case in relation to larger trends in the anthropological analysis of secularism and Christianity, before moving on to discuss particular instances in this conflict that I see as complicating those debates.

Before fully shifting my focus back to the Tamil context, however, I want to mention a few final instances in this ongoing debate that further demonstrate that the relationship between Oberlin College and American College is an important point of contention for the two opposing sides. I want to linger on these international connections here because they gesture to the ways this case can speak to broader issues in the study of religion. The connections between America and the American College in this situation indicate that there are important, shared interests in this debate that point to how the questions asked in this situation are not limited to a particular Indian context; rather, the contestability of secular norms and ideals has been a common feature of secular democracies throughout recent history. Closer attention to the form these debates take in an Indian Christian context can offer insight for further questions concerning secular processes of legal challenge and contestation more broadly.

The American College-Oberlin connection has played a critical role in the conflict from the initial events in April 2008, when Bishop Asir took advantage of Dr. Joseph's request for three weeks of personal leave to travel to Oberlin to take charge of the college Governing Council as *ex officio* head, to appoint Dr.

Selvakumar as Dr. Joseph's replacement.⁸ The issue escalated when Asir's order stood even after the leave was cancelled, and Dr. Selvakumar's administration began to take extreme measures to maintain their control the school.

In the days immediately following the beginning of the crisis, IPAC's blog posted letters "signed" by the director of Oberlin's Shansi program and by Prof.s Richard Reisz and Charles Ryerson on behalf of the American College Endowment Fund (ACEF), the American Trust set up to continue the financial relationship between American Christians and the college. The former post indicated that Oberlin would consider withdrawing the Shansi fellowship if the conflict was not resolved soon; the latter two letters threatened to withdraw the American trust's financial support of the school if the Bishop continued to support the school.⁹ Both Ryerson and Reisz served as "the last appointed missionaries of [the ABCFM] tradition" in the late 1950s.¹⁰ Ryerson in particular is familiar to me through his letters (1965) from a subsequent mission trip, published jointly by the American OMB and a Bangalore-based Christian institution as a long, thin volume printed on photocopied 8 ½ x 11 paper that I found in the UW Madison library's endlessly fascinating mission history section. The letters offer a richly detailed portrait of the state in the 1960s, with a little bit of political news, history and interpretation, interspersed with details about his research efforts, and the occasional meditation

⁸ Asir, Selvakumar & Christoher vs. Revenue District Officer, et. al. 25 July 2008.

⁹ *Save American College*, 23 Apr. 2008.

¹⁰ *Save American College*, 23 Apr. 2008.

on the relationship of his beliefs to his work. Ryerson's history crosses a series of important transitional moments for both American and Indian Christianity and secularism more generally, and for the two colleges specifically, and is worth attending to more closely than I am able to do here. It is enough to say for now that his letter and the other two posts mark ongoing relationships between an American college and the American College that are supported by the striking faculty. It is unclear the extent to which the ACEF financially supports the current administration, but it is clear that the escalating tensions on campus did ultimately lead to the withdrawal of Oberlin's American College Shansi fellow, which indicates that these relations have indeed been threatened by the Bishop's actions.

It could be argued that the increasing CSI interference in the school is especially disagreeable to those American institutions and individuals because it represents a challenge to a particularly American version of the secular compromise that fails to understand the specific problems on the Indian context. However, I want to argue an alternative point: that the boundaries of religious and secular authority are seldom, if ever, completely closed off from the possibilities of contestation and challenge. The debates I examine in this thesis, while in many ways specific to Christian minorities negotiating rights in a post-colonial Indian context, also wrestle with larger questions concerning the rights of minorities and the promises of and limits to religious autonomy in relation to the state. Rather than just focusing on the way this situation indicates challenges either to Indian

secularism or of the position of Christian minorities in its post-colonial context, then, I would like to offer this case as an example of a more general process of legal contestation, a long-term process that serves to define the boundaries of religious and state authority through creating official precedent for those definitions. This process relies on the manipulation and mediation of a constitution, a judicial system, and a legal code, wholly secular ritual systems and texts, to constitute the terms of secular authority through the resolution of often contentious disagreements. But while the systems are secular, the actors taking advantage of them often are not; as a theoretically more neutral arbiter of the rights of minorities or other protected groups than the popular vote, court systems at all levels are appealed to in order settle the sorts of disputes that emerge from the conditions of secular modernity.

The American College case is interesting for the ways in which the legal authority of the secular Indian state is appealed to for a resolution to what is ostensibly a dispute over the interpretation of the school's Christian mission. That both groups in many ways rely on features of secular modernity to assert and arbitrate between differing understandings of the appropriate boundaries of religious authority serves as a starting point for this analysis. As I will argue later, this conflict troubles easy social scientific assumptions about the relationships between Christianity and secularism by indicating ways in which the secular ideal is contestable within Christian traditions. Challenges to an ideal secular status quo are not limited to religious and cultural traditions that lack Christianity's close

historical ties with the development of secularism. While most of my argument focuses on the particular Tamil shape of that contestation in Madurai, the ideas introduced here should not be assumed to be limited to that post-colonial context. Rather, by foregrounding the Christian aspects of these debates, I hope to show that they speak to larger questions concerning the processes of legal contestation that are features of secular modernity more broadly considered. Christians, like any other interested group, religious or otherwise, with a stake in how their nation regulates religious authority and the rights of religious minorities, are arguably engaged with these debates across a variety of contexts. The specificities of the American College debate that I explore here may not be relevant to other secular democracies, but the ways in which this legal drama is deployed in this situation highlights both the importance of disagreements over the norms of the secular state and the processes by which those disagreements come to be resolved.

The Conflict over Church Authority at American College

The Church of South India (CSI) represented “the culmination of the ecumenical movement in South India during the first half of the twentieth century” (Caplan 1980:664). Founded in 1947, one month after Indian independence, it represented the union of the “Congregational, Presbyterian, and Reformed Churches” that had formed the South India United Church (SIUC) in 1908, with South Indian Anglicans and Methodists (Caplan 1980:654 n.39). The church today has expanded to include Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostal and Seventh-Day Adventist congregations, reflecting a continuing commitment to a

unified Christian identity, at least in the four south Indian states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka). Of course, as Caplan insightfully observed thirty years ago, the Church of South India is not without its intra-union conflicts, “attempts to control the resources – spiritual and material... - which have been brought together by church union” (1980:669); it is certainly likely that the socioeconomic tensions within the Tamil Christian community which Caplan details are still at play in this situation. It is clear from the conflict at American College, at least, that the CSI is not necessarily accepted by all local Christians as having ultimate authority over Christian properties and institutions.

Part (though by no means all) of the tension in this situation arises from the relative newness of the Church of South India, compared to the American College. While the American Madura Mission, the church founded by the local ABCFM missionaries, clearly is a member of the CSI denominational union, the school’s independence from church control predates its presently affiliated church by almost twenty years. Some argue that the interests of the present-day church leadership are at odds with the intentions of its original missionary founders; between 1881 and Indian independence in 1947 these missionaries “were practising Christian inclusiveness, tolerance and were pluralistic in their approaches to educate and uplift to benefit mostly those who were depressed and downtrodden” by working to create an open and secular school, inspired by religious ideals but

free from the control of any outside church.¹¹ Administrative control of the school and its resources, according to this argument, lies in the Governing Council of American College, which was originally formed in 1934 as a means of giving the school autonomy from mission control.¹² This body consists of 14 members: from the school, the principal, vice-principal, bursar, and two elected faculty representatives; from the Church of South India, the Bishop of the Madurai-Ramnad diocese and one representative each from the local diocese and the Tamil Nadu synod; two from the All India Association for Christian Higher Education;¹³ one from the public university the college is affiliated with; three positions are open for the other council members to fill by appointment, though the document states a preference for those “with experience in Christian Higher Education, those engaged in occupations outside the church, and former students of the college.”¹⁴

The council thus consists of: 5 members employed by the school, three from the church, and six affiliated with either the secular world or the world of higher education more specifically. The striking faculty argue that those positions granted to the Church of South India after its founding in 1949 were merely a symbolic gesture, and not intended to override the school’s secular status. The constitution

¹¹ Prof. Babu Earnest Charles. *Save American College*, 28 Apr. 2008.

¹² Prof. Babu Earnest Charles. *Save American College*, 28 Apr. 2008..

¹³ AIACHE “brings together colleges related to the catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches in an inter-state, transdenominational forum, with a view to maximizing their effectiveness and service to the national community.” Taken from their website’s “About Us” section, <http://www.aiache.net/aiache-aboutus.html>, accessed 1 Jan. 2012.

¹⁴ “Constitution of the Governing Council of The American College” 29 Jan. 2011. <http://flintonians.blogspot.com/2011/01/governing-council-of-american-college.html>, accessed 1 Jan. 2012.

may designate the Bishop as president of the council, but his responsibilities are limited to presiding over the meetings; it is the principal who, acting as secretary, calls those meetings and sets the agenda. By repeatedly taking charge of the Governing Council in order to appoint his choice of principal, Bishop Asir asserts that, as the local church leader and council president, he has *de facto* control of the council when the position of the *de jure* secretary, the principal of the college, is vacant or filled by a temporary appointee. But recall that it was Bishop who was responsible for the vacancy in the principal's position in the first place, triggering the initial crisis by firing Dr. Joseph because he was "acting against the interest of the Church."¹⁵ The striking faculty have used these points to portray Bishop Asir and the CSI-affiliated council members and administrators who support his actions as seizing the college leadership positions in order to gain control of and profit from its finances and property. But the Bishop and his supporters argue that it is the church that has the authority to represent and preserve the Christian mission of the college, and that their actions are justified by the need to protect the school from the encroachment of secularizing outsiders.

The militaristic language of seizing, controlling, defending, and protecting may seem somewhat hyperbolic for a conflict between academics and clergy, but those terms accurately describe the forceful means by which these groups have asserted power over the school; articles in local newspapers and photographs and

¹⁵ Sec. 9. Christopher Asir & The American College Governing Council vs. The State of Tamil Nadu, et. al." 25 Aug. 2011.

video on IPAC's blog attest to the violent conflict over the attempt to install one principal over another. After a High Court ruling on 28 Aug. 2008 explicitly barred Dr. Joseph from the principal's position until the petitions filed against his dismissal could be settled, Bishop Asir arrived on campus the following evening accompanied by police to ceremonially place Dr. Selvakumar in the principal's position by force, breaking through crowds of agitated students, staff and faculty and into the locked doors of the principal's office.¹⁶ That evening, the student conflict with the police escalated to stone-throwings, *lathi*-beatings, and late-night sit-ins outside the principal's office.¹⁷ The crowd ultimately dispersed, and the next week the college resumed operation under Dr. Selvakumar's control. However, the violent events of August 2008 marked a dramatic, symbolic turning point for the institution, and became the focal point of a series of further IPAC public demonstrations and official petitions.

This initial incident and the subsequent legal battle over the principal's position made the 2008-09 school year a tense one for the college, punctuated by public meetings and sit-ins, commission reports and writ petitions. The intervention of local human rights organizations, the Madurai judiciary, and various government officials, gradually restored a workable order to the college. In December 2008, the Madras High Court ruled Dr. Selvakumar's appointment to

¹⁶ *The Hindu*, 30 Aug. 2008.

¹⁷ Police in India carry *lathis*, thin wooden canes around 6 feet long that are used to manage unruly crowds.

have been illegal under the Governing Council constitution, and Dr. P. R. Anbudurai was temporarily picked to fill the principal's position in his place.¹⁸ By August 2009, in time for the start of the new school year, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court had definitively ruled on the legality of Dr. Joseph's dismissal, judging it to be unlawful under the bylaws of the 1934 constitution of the college's Governing Council.¹⁹ With Dr. Joseph re-appointed principal of the college, IPAC ceased its demonstrations and the 2009-10 school year passed without further incident.

Though the initial conflict had apparently been successfully resolved through the court system, with the end of Dr. Joseph's contractual tenure as principal in December 2010 came a reenactment of the earlier dispute. *The Hindu* reported on 7 Dec. that the college Governing Council had met and voted on a Monday to appoint the sitting vice principal, Dr. Anbudurai, as the new principal.²⁰ But by the end of that week the headlines read, "Protests, police return to college."²¹ Bishop Asir had challenged the legality of the initial Governing Council vote through the office of the local Director of Collegiate Education (DCE). The DCE supposedly voided the 6 Dec. council meeting and ordered the appointment of Dr. R. Mohan to the position until the actual Governing Council

¹⁸ *The Times of India*, 18 Dec. 2008; *The Hindu*, 18 Dec. 2008.

¹⁹ *The Hindu*, 25 Aug. 2009.

²⁰ *The Hindu*, 7 Dec. 2010.

²¹ *The Hindu*, 12 Dec. 2010.

could find a suitable permanent replacement.²² Repeating the events of 2008, when Bishop Asir and company arrived on campus to install Dr. Mohan into the principal's office that Friday, a heated conflict broke out; IPAC-supporting faculty, staff and students again mobilized a welcome party of demonstrations. Dr. Anbudurai closed the campus for Christmas vacation one week earlier than scheduled, "anticipating 'problems from outsiders.'"²³ However, it was Dr. Mohan who officially reopened the school on 5 January, over the objections of the IPAC-supporting students, faculty and staff who argued that he had no right to do so.²⁴ From January 2011, those members of the American College community opposing the Bishop-led Governing Council began a strike, refusing to teach under Dr. Mohan until the courts ruled on the legality of his appointment; through the remainder of the 2010-11 school year, faculty protested on campus by conducting classes outside, under the trees, and refusing to cooperate with Dr. Mohan's administration.²⁵

The early months of 2011, like 2008, saw many demonstrations, public appeals, and legal petitions against the takeover, the strike, and the disruption those caused to student progress, but no definitive resolution to the conflict. These actions reached another violent peak in March 2011, after students, faculty and staff of both the American College Student Federation (ACSF) and IPAC

²² *The Hindu*, 24 Mar. 2011.

²³ *The Hindu*, 11 Dec. 2010.

²⁴ *The Hindu*, 6 Jan. 2011.

organized an outdoor relay hunger strike to protest delays in the scheduling of final examinations.²⁶ Some CSI-supporting students formed an “eating strike” counter-protest; *The Hindu* reported that the feasting escalated to stone-throwing, and then into to a half-hour riotous “free-for-all” on the campus, with some students pushing over motorbikes and cars, smashing windows, and damaging furniture and other campus property.²⁷ As in 2008, a violent incident on campus provided a powerful mobilizing tool for faculty, staff and students seeking government intervention against Bishop Asir; local police were accused of failing both to prevent the riot and to prosecute its instigators on orders of the Bishop, indicating to some a degree of corruption requiring outside intervention.²⁸

For striking faculty, this event served as one additional piece of evidence that Bishop Asir’s attempt to control the college was illegitimate; under the command of his chosen principal, the school had disintegrated into violent chaos.²⁹ Of course, those supporting Dr. Mohan argued that it was the opposition faculty who were actually disrupting the school, refusing to teach their classes so that exams might be held and preventing the disbursement of government funds for faculty salary by challenging the legitimacy of the administration and thereby crippling the school.³⁰ This faction argued that, as a minority Christian institution,

²⁶ *The Hindu*, 11 Mar. 2011.

²⁷ *The Hindu*, 15 Mar. 2011.

²⁸ *The Hindu*, 16 Mar. 2011; 30 March 2011.

²⁹ *The Hindu*, 19 March 2011.

³⁰ *The Hindu*, 22 Jun. 2011.

American College has the right to autonomous governance through the church; opposition faculty, by requesting government intervention and protective control over school property, were infringing on those minority rights.³¹ Despite the appeals of both sides to local and state officials for a resolution to the situation and repeated promises that one would be forthcoming quickly, the spring 2011 semester closed with the status of those claims still uncertain.³²

The subsequent pleas of students that their future careers not be impacted by the internal conflict eventually led to a solution for the particular problem of scheduling exams, though the underlying dispute remained unaddressed.³³ While the burst of violence in April 2008 ultimately led to official attention to and resolution for the first conflict, the 2011 strike remains ongoing as of this writing, over one year after it began. The lack of any direct intervention was taken as tacit approval for the Bishop-sanctioned Governing Council to continue to govern the college, and on 28 October it voted to appoint Dr. M. D. Christoher, Bishop Asir's son-in-law, to replace Dr. Mohan.³⁴ This act of apparent nepotism only confirmed the suspicions of some that Bishop Asir's ultimate goal was to take control of the school for his own gain, though there are still many who assert that it is well within the rights of the church to manage the school however it likes. The latter argument was forcefully made in November 2011, when a DCE official on a

³¹ *The Hindu*, 25 Mar. 2011.

³² *The Hindu*, 27 Feb. 2011; 26 Jun. 2011.

³³ *The Hindu*, 28 Jul. 2011.

³⁴ *The Hindu*, 29 Oct. 2011.

monitoring visit to the campus was “gheraoed” – surrounded (literally “encircle” in Hindi) and intimidated – by students unhappy with her line of inquiry.³⁵ Principal Christober made his position on this protest clear, disavowing the lawlessness of the student agitators while adding that, “the Regional Joint Director is exceeding her brief and interfering with the internal matters of a Christian minority institution.”³⁶

Both sides have made extensive use of online blogs to publicize their positions. I am familiar with American College through my time as an undergraduate studying in Madurai for the 2005-06 school year, mostly through my friendships with the Oberlin Shansi Fellows stationed there at the time. However, since I have not returned to the campus since before the beginning of the conflict, much of the ethnographic data for this project comes from those online posts, in addition to local newspaper articles and the legal decisions issued by the Madras High Court that are available online. The two most prolific of those blogs are the IPAC-administered *Save American College* and the Bishop-supporting *Save The American College*. Because both organizations have chosen such similar titles for their sites, and have chosen to use the same free blogging service, Blogspot to host those sites, the web addresses for the two sites are very easy to confuse.³⁷ While these titles could be read as one side seeking to confuse those

³⁵ “*The Hindu*, 24 Nov. 2011.

³⁶ “*The Hindu*, 24 Nov. 2011.

³⁷ <http://saveamericancollege.blogspot.com> and <http://savetheamericancollege.blogspot.com>

looking for information by creating a blog with alternative opinions but a strikingly similar name, at the very least the similar naming points to the idea that each side is concerned with “saving” American College from the other. The web addresses are one more indicator that both sides approach this conflict in terms of protecting the institution from those who are seen as not really having the school’s best interests in mind.

The first, *Save American College (SAC)* was begun on 17 Apr. 2008 with a post announcing “The American College is being encroached. The Madurai-Ramnad diocese Bishop and big shots with political background are stepping in with a profit mind,” and calling for a meeting of supporters.³⁸ Since then, the striking professor who edits this blog under the handle “peakay” has posted updates on and analysis of the situation, correspondence he has received, and instructions for how those abroad can help fund IPAC’s legal challenges, serving to put supporters of their vision of the college in touch with one another. The bulk of the material posted on this blog consists of letters the editor has received; if they are to be taken as legitimate sources and not just propaganda, then they demonstrate that support for this side comes from a diversity of sources. Letters are represented as coming from current faculty and students, interested alumni, both Christian and Hindu, in Madurai, across India, in the Gulf States, Africa and other parts of the Indian Diaspora, and from Americans with ties to the school

³⁸ SAC, 17 Apr. 2008.

through either missionary service or the Oberlin Shansi program. While it should be remembered that many of those non-local supporters might be receiving their facts on the situation only through the narrow lens of this particular blog, the volume of responses posted by peakay do indicate that the overall message concerning the Christian mission of the school registers with a broad section of the American College community.

Those faculty teaching in the campus classrooms who support Bishop Asir and his appointees are represented in the other blog, *Save The American College (STAC)*; this editor calls himself “The American College,” and there are no clear indicators as to who is posting the content. STAC started at the very end of 2010 with a post of scans of the 2 December High Court ruling on Dr. Joseph’s request to extend his tenure as principal.³⁹ Justice Chandru determined that there was no reason to do so, ruling that “balance of convenience must be considered. Since the fourth respondent [Bishop Asir] had made some arrangements for the appointment of Principal-in-Charge, this court is not inclined to grant interim order as prayed for.”⁴⁰ It’s fitting that the blog opens with this document; it was this legal victory that began the current crisis in the school with the court’s recognition of the Bishop’s authority in this matter, which was interpreted as giving license to the new administration to storm the campus in the same manner

³⁹ STAC, 28 Dec. 2010.

⁴⁰ STAC, 28 Dec. 2010. Quotation taken from Sec. 9 of the scanned decision, Joseph & AC Governing Council vs. State, DCE, JDCE & Asir.

they did previously. Through 2011, the blog continued to post legal documents and newspaper articles about the strike, and photographs documenting various functions and meetings, unrelated to the conflict, hosted on campus by the administration; it hasn't been updated since 2 Aug, however, when information detailing the striking faculty's non-cooperation in the matter of the controversial examinations was posted.⁴¹ The site's unmoderated comment section for its posts is livelier than the censored analogous section of IPAC's blog; of course, the overall tone of these anonymous, spirited disagreements is often crude on both sides, suggesting why the IPAC blog might have chosen not to allow open commenting. Aside from revealing how well-versed English-medium educated Tamil individuals are in the finer points of English profanity, these posts also indicate that there are at least some who wish to defend the legitimacy of Bishop Asir's moves, as well as some who feel the need to engage with those arguments, albeit in the shady, anonymous internet realm.

These blogs can be taken to be at least somewhat representative of the current state of the American College community. As the current administration has had the past year to oversee admissions and hires, they have presumably addressed some of the earlier church concerns over the proportion of Christians served and employed by the school by replacing striking faculty members with church-affiliated appointees and admitting a larger proportion of Christian

⁴¹ STAC 2 Aug. 2008.

students; it should be assumed that by this point many in the current school community aren't opposed to the new direction the school's leadership has taken, especially since there has been no shortage of local press covering the problems (see Appendix). But there are also those faculty on strike to oppose increased church control of the school who hold their classes under the trees on campus, students who attend those classes in solidarity with those who won't recognize the legitimacy of the current administration, and the alumni who feel this group will properly maintain the legacy of the school.

To summarize, the current conflict in American College is over the boundaries of appropriate church or governmental influence over a particular institution, and the differing ways in which the histories of that institution specifically and of the Indian secular state more broadly can be deployed to assert and to contest control of its property and finances. Bishop Asir and his supporters argue that the school's status as a Christian missionary-founded institution gives the Church of South India the right to run the school according to Christian principles, and free from state interference, under Article 30(1) of the Indian constitution: "All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice." The striking members of the American College community, however, feel that this degree of church control is unprecedented and contrary to the school's foundational ideals of providing educational uplift for the broader community, regardless of religion. According to these arguments against Bishop Asir's actions,

the state, by providing financial support to the school, holds a vested interest in protecting this operation from the encroachment of communal politics, and should intervene in this instance to ensure that the school can continue to function according to the liberal, secular ideals of its early founders and free from the supposedly corrupt CSI hierarchy. Both groups make their appeals using the history of American College, in particular the constitution of the school's Governing Council, as grounds for their legitimacy, in addition to asserting contrasting notions of how the Indian secular state should rightfully go about protecting this institution and the members of the minority community it serves. This specific situation points to larger questions that can be and are asked about the relationships between the Indian Christian community, their church institutions, and the broader Indian state: What are appropriate uses for the resources that were left by Western Christian missionaries? Who rightfully belongs to the communities entitled to take advantage of those resources? Are the initial ownership claims of Western missionaries even valid in a post-colonial context? What rights need to be afforded to converts in the post-colonial context, both to protect a minority community and to protect the majority from the proselytizing efforts of that community? Who is able to legitimately provide the answers to these questions?

Indian Secularism & Indian Christianity

As a minority community with close historical ties to the mechanisms of colonial power, and with a religious impetus to expand and develop their community as much as possible, Christians in post-colonial India have complicated relationships with the secular state, with the majority Hindu community, and with each other as individuals claiming a shared identity as a minority group with rights and responsibilities in relation to the first two groups. In this section, I will look at how this case complicates prevailing assumptions about Indian secularity, namely that Protestant Christianity and secularism, as closely entangled aspects of Western modernity and colonialism, have a less complicated relationship than that of secularism to either Hinduism or Islam. These assumptions have informed much of the academic research into these sorts of questions; however, as I will show through this particular case, we should be open to the possibility that the secular state produces complex disagreements over the appropriate boundaries of religious and secular authority for Christians as much any other religious group.

Lately there have been similar crises in other missionary-founded, government-aided colleges in India, as post-independence Christian churches look to these schools and the booming educational sector in India more broadly as potential resources for Indian churches. For example, St. Stephen's College in Delhi, one of the oldest and most prestigious educational institutions in India, came under increased Church of North India control in the early 1990s, though not

without legal challenges made on similar grounds to those in Madurai discussed above (Chatterjee 2011:23-50). Asserting church control over the educational infrastructure put into place by missionaries and petitioning for minority-status considerations for these institutions allows the Christian community to make claims on resources, ranging from reserved quotas of Christian students and faculty to the potential to raise revenue for the church from the leasing and selling of school property. A general trend towards stronger church control of these resources can be seen not only in higher education, but also in primary and secondary schools, hospitals, and various other valuable properties developed by Western missionaries and Indian Christian communities. *Save the Church of South India*, a website run by the leader of a CSI laity anti-corruption group in the North Kerala diocese, extensively documents instances of CSI bishops overstepping what the organization sees as the appropriate boundaries for the power of clergy.⁴² This website encourages outreach across CSI communities and argues for increased laity oversight for CSI clergy to prevent corrupt individuals from abusing community resources; the organization has been agitating for the removal of their diocese's bishop for the past year, accusing him of profiting from the sale of teaching positions in the new diocesan secondary schools.⁴³ These conflicts, like the current problem at American College, are moments where tensions within the Indian Christian community, and between representatives of that community and

⁴² <http://www.savecsi.net>, accessed 19 Dec. 2011.

⁴³ *The Hindu*, 20 Feb. 2011. *Church of England Newspaper*. 28 Jan. 2011.

the Indian secular state, come into focus, as it becomes clear that minority community boundaries and the rights and privileges afforded to those communities are constantly shifting and open to contestation.

The past few decades in India have seen a sharp uptick in violent communal conflicts, controversial legal interpretations of religious personal law, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and a marked increase in legislation against Christian proselytization and conversion. These events have pushed many to interrogate the relationship of secularism to the Indian state and its population, particularly the feasibility of adopting this arguably foreign, colonial concept to a situation with fundamentally different concerns than those of the Western countries of its origin (Bhargava 2010, Chatterjee 1998, Mandan 1998, Nandy 2002). Though the character of the various arguments is intellectually diverse, put most broadly the overarching problematic addressed in this criticism concerns how the principle of secularism can be, should be, and is defined in contemporary India. The above authors show that these questions require attention to the ongoing ramifications of colonial contact and management, in addition to the contributions of the Independence movement to the writing of the Indian constitution and its definitions of the rights of minority communities. Current crises are the products of the difficulties the Indian state faces in incorporating a pluralistic population into functional secular governance; for the contemporary Indian state, ensuring religious freedom entails state interventions concerning which rights of religious communities are

protected, perpetuating communal identity politics within the supposedly secular public sphere.

For the most part scholarly attention to these processes has focused on Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism and communal violence, and the risks those pose to India's tenuous secular compromise. Implicit in many of these analyses is the idea Western and Christian relations with state secularism are necessarily less fraught; as such, Christian engagements with the Indian secular state are underanalyzed. I propose that closer attention to conflicts within Indian Christian communities over terms such as "Christianity" and "secularism," and the different relations to the state these positions argue for, can offer insight into processes of religious community formation in the face of a contestable secular state.

Most research on Christianity in India focuses on the tensions that result from the religion's status as an alien, invasive force, particularly on the effects of conversion on local communities (e.g. Bugge 1994, Copley 1997, Hudson 2000, Mallampalli 2004, Misra 2011, Viswanathan 1998). This general framework is similar to that of much the academic literature on another foreign ideology, closely related to Christianity in many ways, that was also transplanted to India from its original Western context by British colonials: secularism (e.g. Asad 2003, Chatterjee 1998, Mandan 1998, Nandy 2002). All of this scholarship has effectively shown that understanding these ideas in India does require attention to the institutions and individuals that brought them to the subcontinent, and the difficulties faced in negotiating between differing traditions by foreign governors

and missionaries, local converts, and Hindus and Muslims adjusting to a context altered by a both mission and colonial presences. When the literature on both secularism and Christianity in India is read in relation to the driving problematics that seem to be behind the American College incident, however, it is striking how often the Christian and the secular have been assumed to be equivalent and similarly unsuitable for an India. For example, in Mandan's analysis of secularism, we encounter the claim that secularism is an impossible ideal for South Asia because there the "major religious traditions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism – are totalizing in character, claiming all of a follower's life, so that religion is constitutive of society... [T]hese traditions have the same view of the relationship between the categories of the 'religious' and the 'secular'" (Mandan 1998:302-303). This trend can also be seen in another study on conversion to Christianity that reads that action as "undermining the complex sociopolitical order in the country" (Misra 2011:361). Both of these authors center their claims around the idea that Christianity or secularism disrupt an indigenously Indian way of being in the world, positing an isolated, unchanging Indian tradition that collided with an equally static Western tradition during the colonial process.

The debates at American College show how contestable interpretations of Christianity and secularism can be used to assert control over a valuable institution, and to define the Christian community and its rights granted to it by and the obligations it has to the secular state. There is as much at stake here concerning religious challenges to Indian secularity as there is in other communal

debates; the ease with which Christian ideology allows its adherents to profess secular values, however defined, complicates the models used for understanding Hindu and Muslim conflicts in productive ways. All of these different communal conflicts aren't necessarily a matter of stubbornness on the part of Indian religious thought, nor is it a problem with Indian secularism failing to perfectly mimic Western models. Rather, Indian secularism (arguably just like secularism anywhere) exists as a site of continual legal contestation and change, rather than the static equilibrium of communal peace imagined to be the ultimate, as-yet unrealized goal of the modern secular state.

This disagreement over the control of a Christian college in Tamil Nadu involves two camps contesting the definition of the Christian community of the college: whether the school is a liberal, secular institution receiving government funds to perform its Christian mission to develop and educate all Indians, regardless of caste or creed, or a Christian institution serving the Church of South India, with claim to the legal rights of exclusively Christian self-governance as a minority institution. The protesting faculty argue that the state needs to step in, in the form of monitoring committees and public trusts, to ensure that the school continues its Christian mission of offering an uplifting service to the wider community, while the Bishop's side contends that as a minority institution the school is entitled to autonomous governance of its property by church authority and according to Christian principles. Neither side agrees on the meanings of Christianity or secularism, on the boundaries of the college in relation to the

church or the government, or on the definition of the community the college should be serving. Yet they are both deploying these contested ideas as evidence for larger claims to rights and responsibilities under Indian law. How are they able to do so? If Christianity and secularism are stable, monolithic forces of modernity, inextricably tied to one another through shared colonial projects, what is rending them in this situation?

By focusing on the problems of cultural translation inherent in attempts to create Christian communities, studies of Christianity in India focus on the differences between competing cultural traditions. These analyses position Western traditions and Indian traditions as isolated systems that the colonial project brought into contact with one another, and make the case for present-day tensions on the subcontinent being the remnants of problems inherent to that process. There is much evidence supporting this reading, but I believe the situation at American College points us towards questions not answered by that interpretation. While issues of minority community status are at the center of the appeals of the two sides of the American College debate, what is most striking is that the debate is also over issues of Christian identity; the two sides, by appealing to the government over who has the right to control the school and its resources, position themselves differently as minority communities with rights in relation to a secular state. The American College debate is actively defining the legal relationship of the Christian community to the secular state, not through community consensus but through legal and social dramas. This situation should

move us beyond analyzing the relationship of Christianity to colonial governance or to a dominant Hindu majority to look at the tensions that emerge within Christian communities, focusing on what those tensions can tell us about the present-day constructions of Indian secularism.

The Terms of the Debate

There are three broad categories of people and institutions with a stake in this conflict: students, alumni and faculty of American College, the Church of South India, and the state government of Tamil Nadu. In this section, I will examine the roles each of these groups has played in the unfolding drama, looking particularly at the ways in which the relationships between the three are challenged through the actions and rhetoric of the different groups, and in the Madras High Court decisions on the matter. First I will describe the different on-campus factions involved in this conflict, focusing in particular on the events that have provoked the strongest oppositions. Throughout the four-year-long imbroglio, both sides have reacted with violence to what are perceived to be violations of the boundaries of the school by outsiders. These sorts of incidents point to what is really at stake in this issue, as the actors define what they are protecting through what they rally to defend against. As I will discuss, the most provocative outside institutions in this conflict are the Tamil Nadu state government and the Church of South India; from the very beginning of this issue, the presence of either of those bodies on campus has elicited a defensive response from whichever group interprets the school as being explicitly protected from that

particular sort of outside interference. The conflict comes from the fact that the definition of what constitutes inappropriate outside intervention isn't shared by every member of this particular community, nor is it completely clear from either the Indian or the American College Governing Council's constitutions what the limits of that outside authority are. Both the history of this institution and recent debates over the position of protected minority communities have allowed for conflicting readings of what it means for this school to be a Christian institution operating under Indian secular law. This impetus to defend the boundaries of the school, occasionally taken to a violent extreme by both sides, indicates the heightened emotion surrounding these questions. Clashes between the two groups are about more than just the school, though its boundaries are serving as a compelling test site for these questions. They also touch on issues of the position of a minority community in relation to its roots in a Western mission and the contemporary Indian secular state.

Students, alumni and faculty can be broadly divided into three camps: 1) The administration presently occupying the principal's office and those faculty teaching in the campus classrooms who support that administration. 2) Those faculty, mostly from the departments of English, Tamil, botany, zoology and physics, who refuse to recognize the current administration, and who conduct classes under the trees in protest.⁴⁴ And 3) those who support neither side over the

⁴⁴ *The Hindu*, 22 June, 2011.

other, but resent the drama resulting from the bifurcation of the campus. The first two groups have been the most vocal in the local press, and are responsible for most of the online blog content I draw on for my argument. However, it seems that the interminable nature of the crisis also created an active group of non-partisan students who merely wish to see the college functioning as usual again, regardless of who is in control; these students organized protests in March of 2011 appealing to the state government for a rapid a resolution to the conflict. After elaborating on the two competing sides in the American College debate, I will discuss the hunger strike staged by students in the third group and the violent response it elicited, which will serve to introduce my discussion of the position of those on campus who support CSI control of the school. Judging by escalating responses to any government attempts at mediation between the two fighting groups, Bishop Asir's supporters view the government to be a threat to the school; to them it is clear that the church is the guardian of the campus, especially in times of crisis, and the opposition faculty are seen as attempting to violate that relationship by requesting government intervention. This group rejects the idea that the government has any authority in the matter, and refuses either to cooperate with government officials in their attempts to mediate or to wait for a court ruling legitimizing their right to control of the school.

The response of the striking faculty to this move to assert CSI control over the school is to use a highly idealized history of the college and its American missionary founders to define concepts like Christianity, community, and secular

governance. Many posts contain brief summaries of the early history of the school, with beatific accounts of the missionaries and their goals for the school, such as this account written by a striking faculty member that touches on many of the dominant themes in other posts:

It is really tragic that the American College, an institution founded by selfless and scholarly missionaries, should come under such an onslaught. A careful study of the history of the American College would reveal that it is a church related but not church controlled college. The founders, in their infinite wisdom and remarkable foresight, had made it a liberal Christian college with a secular outlook... So, it is a life-and-death struggle for the college to preserve its identity and individuality as envisaged by the noble missionaries who established it through their sweat and sacrifice. It is a fight against evil forces, who in the name of religion, try to grab it and make their own property. In other words, the question whether The American College would continue to serve the society as it has served so far as a liberal Christian institution or would it be converted into a business enterprise is involved in this.⁴⁵

In this account and others like it, the mission of the founders is irreproachable, and very much in keeping with that of the Indian secular state. Rather than entailing the rigid separation between religious and state institutions, their definitions of the Christian mission of the school and of secular governance instead depend on the state's willingness to protect the school and its property from those seeking to exploit it for the financial benefit of a select few. Some Christians in Tamil Nadu believe that there are systemic problems with corruption in the upper levels of the church leadership; with a rash of cases registered against clergy accused of leasing and selling property left by missionaries not only to

⁴⁵ SAC. 18 Sept. 2008.

sustain the local Christian community, but also to fund the lavish lifestyles of the bishops and their families. That a few members of Bishop Asir's family are employed as high-ranking administrators in the school (e.g. his son-in-law Dr. Davamani Christoher as Bursar-then-Principal) combined with the somewhat nefarious ways he and his supporters have asserted power over the campus, have made the Bishop an easy target for these sorts of accusations.

My aim in this section is to elaborate on the differing understandings members of the American College community have of the Church of South India and the state government of Tamil Nadu, specifically of the appropriate relationships each of those institutions should have to the school. The arguments of those faculty who oppose Bishop Asir's intrusion aren't simply about what a bad guy he is, just as the claims they find themselves arguing against come from more than the allegedly corrupt motivations of one man; rather than being about a single individual's relationship to this school, this debate over the control of this school is concerned with much larger questions of the boundaries of secular and religious authority in post-colonial India, and what the proper relationship between the two should be. Is the secular state the enemy of this minority religious group, or its protector? Is this institution the exclusive property of the Church of South India and its affiliates, or does it serve a broader community? In order for a resolution to this conflict to succeed, those questions will have to be addressed; until then, though, paying attention to the process of challenging and

testing those boundaries reveals quite a bit about the underlying tensions in contemporary Indian secularity.

At present, the only successful challenges to the current administration of the school rest on accusations of managerial incompetence, focusing mostly on the issue of salary disbursements, exam schedules, and the maintenance of school property. Though the initial 2008 crisis, like its more recent iteration, entailed legal challenges to the CSI-supported administration's refusal to pay the striking faculty and staff's salaries, this past year saw many additional examples of institutional collapse raised in public.⁴⁶ These cases, generally serving as requests for government mediation between the two sides, are separate petitions from those questioning the legitimacy of the process of Dr. Mohan's appointment under the college guidelines. While the 2011 issue differs from the 2008 case in that the courts have been reluctant to issue a definitive ruling on who can control the school, there have been efforts made to enforce a workable order between the two sides in the interim. Though the decisions in these cases explicitly support neither side over the other, they still serve to delegitimize Dr. Mohan's administration by appointing governmental officials to monitor the functioning of the school. The CSI claims authority over the school as a right of minority community autonomy, but the school's acceptance of government aid grants ensures that the state can also claim an interest - or at the very least has a responsibility to address

⁴⁶ SAC, 24 Nov. 2008; *The Hindu*, 22 June 2011.

complaints over how the institution is managed. As such, interruptions to essential institutional services function as compelling evidence against the present administration; the fact that challenges and interventions along these grounds are often met with the most remarkable instances of violence on campus only points to the stickiness of this issue for those who support the CSI control of the school.

In March 2011 a group of students calling themselves the American College Students' Federation (ACSF) organized a relay hunger strike by which they sought to draw attention to the ongoing disruptions to student services, especially the scheduling of exams, caused by the in-fighting. The ACSF president described their position to *The Hindu*: "We are not concerned about which group manages the college. All that we request the authorities is to focus on how to conduct examinations on time and issue our marks statements so that we can apply for jobs or for higher studies. Appointing a Special Officer is the best temporary measure."⁴⁷ The frustration felt over the recent disintegration of their school is only compounded by the fact that many students wish to leave the school; these students' appeal to the state government presents them as caught in a battleground they just want to be able to escape from. In addition to concern over examinations, ACSF's list of grievances in the paper paints a picture of a campus environment that is unpleasant and hostile: "the presence of 'outside elements,' boycotting of classes by a section of faculty, lack of adequate safety in hostels

⁴⁷ *The Hindu*, 11 Mar. 2011.

[dormitories], threats for girl students.”⁴⁸ As it was this organization’s hunger-strike that inspired the violent counter feasting-strike on 15 March, it is hard to read those claims as mere hyperbole.

The riots on campus and the subsequent “fast unto death” of seven of the protesting students drew a lot of negative media attention to the ongoing campus drama, though not enough to immediately resolve the problem.⁴⁹ Without outside intervention forcing them, both sides refused to cooperate with the other. The administration claimed that opposition faculty were to blame for the ongoing scheduling difficulties, and refused to hold examinations for those classes that had not met; the opposition claimed that they started conducting classes outside after finding classroom doors locked when the campus reopened following the March violence.⁵⁰ But holding classes under the trees was as much a symbolic protest as a genuine attempt to rectify the situation for the students. Striking faculty were in fact purposefully delaying examinations in an attempt to (unsuccessfully) leverage the government into ruling on their petitions concerning Dr. Mohan’s appointment. Dr. Anbudurai articulated IPAC’s position in *The Hindu*, “We understand the students’ concern, but conducting end of semester examinations involves a long process. They cannot be conducted just by having peace talks between two groups in the college,” adding that the deadline for next year’s

⁴⁸ *The Hindu*, 11 Mar. 2011.

⁴⁹ *The New Indian Express*, 17 Mar. 2011; 19 Mar 2011. The students were subsequently arrested and hospitalized – considering the lack of subsequent news coverage, they are presumed living.

⁵⁰ *The New Indian Express*, 2 May 2011.

admissions was also rapidly approaching to his appeal for government intervention.⁵¹ It was almost August before Madurai Kamaraj University, the local public university under whose auspices the college operates, finally held exams for the 125 courses (out of a total of 419) that had been delayed due to the strike; this event was predictably accompanied by a police presence and “Tension on American College campus.”⁵²

The months-long process of resolving this interruption to essential student services illustrates the uncomfortable position of many students caught in the middle of this conflict, as the two opposing sides refused to put aside their differences even to temporarily serve the broader school community. While this overall recalcitrance is an unpleasant characteristic of the leadership of both sides, the occasional flashpoints of violence on campus point to how this problem goes beyond a labor dispute over a change in management. It is interesting that this violence in the 2011 problem invariably comes from CSI-supporters and is often in response to non-partisan petitions for mediation and attempts by outside officials to intervene; indeed, this violence seems to be a form of policing the boundaries of the campus from the encroachment of the outside, secular world. This perspective is not entirely different from that of the striking faculty, who seek to prevent the blurring of the boundaries between church and school and “fight to keep this

⁵¹ “*The Hindu*, 14 July 2011.

⁵² *The Hindu*, 28 July 2011.

college an independent institution.”⁵³ This debate over the boundaries of school rests on more than the competing claims of individuals to particular resources; rather, the two groups in this conflict are arguing over larger ideas about the definition of a Christian minority community in India and the rights and responsibilities of the Indian secular state in relation to it. Next I will examine the actions and rhetoric of both sides to illustrate how these boundaries are defined and maintained in differing ways, paying particular attention to the state’s position as mediator.

As discussed in the example of the student hunger strike above, often the targets of violence aren’t limited to those who explicitly question the legitimacy of the Bishop’s appointees, but are instead any who request outside intervention in the school’s affairs. As the current administration struggles to wrest full control of the campus from a sizable proportion of protesting faculty, the state has been successfully compelled to intervene for the sake of those whose lives and futures depend on the school functioning; the administration’s response to this intervention has been unequivocally negative, as this form of government intervention is portrayed as infringing on the autonomy of a minority institution. In an article published shortly after the March riots, Dr. Mohan was quoted arguing that the Bishop, not the state, has ultimate authority over the appointment of the college principal; according to this position, the college

⁵³ “*The Hindu*, 20 Mar. 2011.

constitution is clear about the Bishop's role in this situation, and questions of that authority are attempts to "take the college away from the church."⁵⁴ However, the college's dependence on a sizable government grant for faculty salaries tests the limits of this argument. As a result of the infighting, that grant money wasn't released from January until November, when the Department of Collegiate Education began to oversee a single attendance register in order to pay both sets of staff.⁵⁵

This action was the result of a ruling issued on 28 August 2011 resolving several legal petitions concerning the release of government funds.⁵⁶ Dr. Mohan's administration argued that appointing a government monitor was a violation of Article 30(1) of the Indian constitution, citing precedent that state government regulations had been found in violation of those guaranteed minority rights; their petition requested on those grounds that the government release the grant for the present management to disburse. Dr. Anbudurai's challenge to the principal's position was also registered in this decision, though the court explicitly limited its ruling to the issue of the salary funds and acknowledged that "any order passed in the interim application can only survive until the disposal of the main write petition," justifying the court's avoidance of addressing the underlying issue in this

⁵⁴ *The Hindu*, 25 Mar. 2011.

⁵⁵ *The Hindu*, 11 Nov. 2011.

⁵⁶ Christopher Asir & The American College Governing Council vs. The State of Tamil Nadu, et. al. 25 Aug. 2011.

particular decision.⁵⁷ While the court granted that if the Bishop's petition were to be upheld, then Article 30 would protect the college from government intervention, the ruling also acknowledged that both the "grave economic hardship" of the staff during this period and legislation detailing the government's right to temporarily set conditions on the receipt of its funds allowed for the appointment of a government official to monitor the college's attendance register and salary payments until the crisis could come to a more permanent resolution.⁵⁸ The salaries were to be deposited directly into faculty bank accounts, bypassing the question of the authority of the present administration entirely; the decision was explicitly intended to "[in] no way prejudice either of intending parties."⁵⁹ By November, it appeared as if this intervention had successfully introduced some sort of order to the school, as the entire faculty prepared to return to business as usual; faculty from both sides had agreed to officially schedule classes for the first time in almost a year.⁶⁰ However, what happened when the Regional Joint Director of Education arrived on campus to oversee the first day of the new semester made clear how those who support the church's claims feel about the terms of the August court ruling.

⁵⁷ Sec. 26, Christopher Asir & The American College Governing Council vs. The State of Tamil Nadu, et. al. 25 Aug. 2011.

⁵⁸ Sec. 26-29, Christopher Asir & The American College Governing Council vs. The State of Tamil Nadu, et. al." 25 Aug. 2011.

⁵⁹ "The Times of India, 1 Sep. 2011.

⁶⁰ The Hindu, 11 Nov. 2011.

On 23 November, students in the Mathematics department “gheraoed” Dr. K M Ponnathal in response to her “enquiries about the management staff of the self-financing [as opposed to government-aided] section.”⁶¹ In Hindi, to *gherao* means to encircle, and the term is used broadly in India to refer to a style of protest where a target is surrounded and intimidated into addressing specific questions. These students were demanding that Dr. Ponnathal justify her authority in investigating non-government aided faculty. In the interim between the court’s ruling and the start of the semester, the Bishop’s administration had demonstrated that it wasn’t willing to wait on an outside decision to justify its control over the school. Dr. Mohan’s temporary appointment as principal came to an end when a Bishop-convened Governing Council selected Dr. M. D. Christoher, mathematics professor and Bishop Asir’s son-in-law, to permanently take his place.⁶² So when the Regional Joint Director of Education turned her focus to his home department to inquire about the staff appointed there during the past few years, Principal Christoher argued that, while the violence was regrettable, she was “exceeding her brief and interfering with the internal matters of a Christian minority institution.”⁶³ In short, the incident was justified as a response to a particular threat, as the boundaries of this minority institution need to be protected from government intervention.

⁶¹ *The Times of India*, 24 Nov. 2011.

⁶² *The Hindu*, 29 Oct. 2011.

⁶³ *The Hindu*, 24 Nov. 2011.

That this group resorts to violence at this sort of provocation is not surprising considering how they asserted control of the school at the beginning of both the 2008 and the 2011 incidents. On 12 April 2008, as faculty were beginning to protest Bishop Asir's moves, Dr. Selvakumar and then-bursar Dr. Davamani Christoher, locked themselves into the principal's office, refusing to open the doors to Dr. Joseph.⁶⁴ From this point on, both men simultaneously claimed to be the secretary of the Governing Council, and each used his authority as principal to sanction the other. After a few months of various challenges to the legality of his appointment, Dr. Selvakumar convened nine members of the Governing Council, including himself, Dr. Christoher, and Bishop Asir, who decisively voted to dismiss Dr. Joseph and to appoint Dr. Selvakumar.

A week after this decision, on 29 August 2008, Bishop Asir and a posse of supporters arrived on campus to ceremonially install the new principal to the position. Video documenting the day's events shows their party being met by a crowd of protesting students and faculty seated at the campus gate, trying to block their entry; the Bishop's car is unable to drive into the campus, and a mass of police proceed to use their *lathis* to subdue the crowd enough to allow the group to push through. Eventually the bishop, a shock of pink robes encircled by his white-shirted supporters, who are in turn surrounded by beige police uniforms,

⁶⁴ *The Hindu*, 18 Apr. 2008.

moves through the gates and to the administrative building unmolested.⁶⁵ In the next video, several men are shown rushing to beat the lock off of the outside door, then darting inside to do the same to the door leading to the principal's office. A crowd of supporters and journalists push through the crowded outer room into the sanctum sanctorum; the video then cuts to Bishop Asir standing next to the empty principal's chair and desk. The Bishop guides Dr. Selvakumar to the central position and places his hand on his forehead as the crowd, tightly packed into the large office, erupts into boisterous applause.⁶⁶ The Bishop's ceremonial anointment of the new principal (in the chapel, under calmer circumstances) is usually a part of the appointment of a new principal, symbolically supporting the Bishop's claims to his importance in the process; a post on the pro-CSI *Save the American College* blog prominently displays photographs of Dr. Joseph kneeling before Bishop Asir for this ceremony during less contentious times.⁶⁷ A third video shows the press conference following the ceremonial installation, as first the Bishop and then Dr. Selvakumar issue statements in Tamil on the new administration while sitting in the principal's chair;⁶⁸ a fourth features students

⁶⁵ Youtube, 30 Aug. 2008.

⁶⁶ Youtube, 30 Aug. 2008.

⁶⁷ STAC, 28 Dec. 2010.

⁶⁸ Youtube, 30 Aug. 2008.

describing the police's *lathi* charge through the crowd and showing off bleeding cuts on their legs, arms, and heads.⁶⁹

Almost a year later, the Madras High Court finally issued a ruling settling the numerous writ petitions filed in the months following Dr. Joseph's dismissal.⁷⁰ The circularity of a council meeting called by a contested principal to finalize the appointment of himself was not lost on the judge who ultimately issued the decision in this case, and he ruled that council meeting to be illegal. The court's surprisingly entertaining decision in this matter reveals the bafflement of the judge at the way the initial conflict escalated; he refers to Dr. Joseph's request for leave that led to the Bishop's attempted coup as "the 9/11 in the history of this storied and age-old institution" (Sec. 36) because it was "an insignificant event... [that] flared up into a huge controversy" (Sec. 3).⁷¹ The lengthy summary of the contested events points out numerous examples of confusion between the two parties where there rightly shouldn't be any, especially concerning the basic rules of the college Governing Council. For example, in the section addressing the difficulty in establishing that body's legitimate membership, the judge outlines the structure of the body as it is laid out in the council constitution, describes in exasperating detail which groups, like the CSI synod or the AIACHE, would have knowledge of

⁶⁹ All of the above videos come from the youtube account of a local television news network, Adhikaalai. From the video of the press conference, it is clear that several other stations sent reporters; presumably they also broadcast on the event, though this network's video is the only one I have been able to find online. IPAC's *Save American College* blog posted the links, 7 Sept. 2008.

⁷⁰ The American College Governing Council et. al. vs. DCE, JDCE et. al. 24 Aug. 2009.

⁷¹ *The Hindu*, 25 Aug. 2009.

who was appointed to the council before the beginning of the controversy, and then concludes, “Therefore, the issue was actually not as complicated as is projected by the appellants” (Sec. 47). The judge expresses this same bemused attitude to the other points of contention in the case, such as the appropriate process for convening the council or how to form unbiased committees to oversee hiring and firing; he finds that Dr. Selvakumar’s administration fails to conform to those very basic rules, and doesn’t conceal his surprise that they believe they should be allowed to continue to run the school in this fashion.

The claims of Bishop Asir and Dr. Selvakumar that government intervention in the college was a violation of their minority rights under Article 30 of the Indian constitution were also dismissed by this judge as “just fanciful” (Sec. 29). The precedent the judge then cited when ruling on the relation of Article 30(1) to this case is significant:

(ii) The right conferred on minorities under Article 30 is only to ensure equality with the majority and not intended to place the minorities in a more advantageous position vis-a-vis the majority. There is no reverse discrimination in favour of minorities. The general laws of the land relating to national interest, national security, social welfare, public order, morality, health, sanitation, taxation, etc. applicable to all, will equally apply to minority institutions also.

(iii) The right to establish and administer educational institutions is not absolute. Nor does it include the right to maladminister. There can be regulatory measures for ensuring educational character and standards and maintaining academic excellence. There can be checks on administration as are necessary to ensure that the administration is efficient and sound, so as to serve the academic needs of the institution.

The argument concerning the right to administer but not maladminister was used to settle this first flare-up, and it was echoed in the 2011 ruling on salary payments discussed above; whether due to the presence of so many non-cooperative faculty or because of managerial incompetence, it does seem that the CSI-backed administrations have had a difficult time maintaining a functional order in the school. Despite their protestations that the CSI has a constitutionally protected right to autonomous self-governance, their mishandling of that governance determines the tactics of those who disagree with their moves, and opens up the possibility of unwanted government interference. Considering not only the heated response to their initial entry in 2008, but also the later court decision ruling Dr. Joseph's dismissal to be illegal, Bishop Asir and his supporters could not have been surprised that the events of December 2010 repeating that assertion of control instigated another series of demonstrations and legal challenges.

Conclusion

The government's overall reluctance to decisively intervene in the American College situation the second time around indicates that this case doesn't lend itself well to easy solutions; it is not immediately clear which of the conflicting demands placed on the state is the most valid. This confusion has its source in the messiness of Indian secularity, with its colonial roots and post-colonial present. However, reading that messiness as a sign of failure runs the risk of obscuring the productive potential of debates such as these. Contestations of the limits of religions and secular authority, done not only through the mechanisms established by the state

but also through public performance and protest, take advantage of an openness built into secular systems. Constitutional authority, religious authority and history can be interpreted and deployed in differing ways to support competing claims on the definitions what shape a nation's secular compromise should take. This feature seems to hold true across secular contexts, for example in American debates over what claim Judeo-Christian religious traditions have on the state's definition of marriage, in the British discomfort with the Catholic church's in-house handling of priests accused of molesting children rather than alerting secular authorities, or in Indian conflicts over the limits of the state's authority in minority-controlled institutions. The situation at American College is one example out of many of a process of appealing to secular, legal authority in order to constitute and clarify the exact terms of the relationship between religious and state authority. While the grounds for these claims differ across contexts, there are commonalities in the procedure that are worth attending to when considering how, exactly, contemporary secularism works. The American College debates, while intensely focused on the particularities of their own institution and nation, demonstrate how attending to contentious disagreements and their resolutions, the "social dramas" of contemporary secular states, can offer insight into the importance of the processes that create the compromises necessary to maintaining a secular consensus

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