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SYNDICATED MOKSHA?

Part II

Romila Thapar

The European adoption of the term 'Hindu' gave it further currency as also the attempts of Catholic and Protestant Christian missionaries to convert the Hindu/ Gentoo to Christianity. The pressure to convert, initially disassociated with European commercial activity, changed with the coming of British colonial power when, by the early nineteenth century, missionary activities were either surreptitiously or overtly, according to context, encouraged by the colonial authority. The impact both of missionary activity and Christian colonial power resulted in considerable soul searching on the part of those Indians who were close to this new historical experience.

One result was the emergence of a number of groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Divine Life Society, the Swaminarayan movement, et al., which gave greater currency to the term 'Hinduism'. Some of these were influenced by Christianity and Islam and some reacted against them; but even the latter were not immune from their imprint.

Embedded in many of these movements was the challenge from Christian missionaries. This was not merely at the level of conversions and religious debates. A more subtle form was the use made by Christian missions of the school, college and other educational institutions. Many who were attracted to these new 'Hindu' groups had at some point of their lives experienced Christian education. In the organisation of the educational institutions of the Arya Samaj, for example, the Christian missionary model plays an important role. The Shaiva Siddhanta Samaj in south India was inspired by the nineteenth century interpreter of Shaivsm, Arumuga Navalar, who was roused to this vocation after translating the Bible into Tamil. The movement attracted middle class Tamils seeking a cultural self-assertion and was to that degree a parallel to many of the other movements in the country. Added to this was the contribution of Orientalist scholars who interpreted the religious texts from their own viewpoint which furthered the notion of 'Hinduism'. The impact of Orientalism in creating the image of Indian, and particularly 'Hindu' culture, as projected in the nineteenth century, was considerable and religion was a major part of that image.

Those among these groups influenced by Christianity, attempted to defend, redefine and create 'Hinduism' on the model of the Christian religion. They sought for the equivalent of a monotheistic God, a Book, a Prophet or a Founder and congregational worship with an institutional organisation supporting it. The consciousness was again of creating as a reaction to being 'the other'; once again by a Semitic religion. The monotheistic God was sought in the abstract notion of Brahma - the universal soul with which according to the *Upanishads* the individual soul or Atma seeks union and *moksha;* or else with the interpretation of the term *deva* or deity which in early English translations was rendered as God, suggesting a monotheistic God.

The worship of a single deity among many others is not strictly speaking monotheism, although attempts have been made by modern commentators to argue this. Unlike many of the earlier sects which were associated with a particular deity, some of these groups claimed to transcend deity and reach out to the Absolute, the Infinite, the Abstract. This was an attempt to transcend segmentary interests in an effort to attain a universalistic identity, but in social customs and ritual, caste distinctions were maintained between high and low.

The teaching of such sects drew on what they regarded as the core of the tradition: the Atma-Brahma relationship, the theory of action and rebirth (*karma* and *samsara*) and salvation lying in the union of the individual soul uniting with the All-soul. The Book was either the *Bhagvad-Gita* or the Vedic texts, especially the *Upanishads.* The Prophet being altogether alien could at best be substituted by the teacher figure of Krishna in the *Gita.* But Krishna was neither a Prophet nor a Son of God.

Congregational worship became the channel for propagating these versions of Hinduism. The discarding of the image by both the Brahmo and Arya Samaj was like an allergic reaction. It was seen as a pollution of the original religion but, more likely, it was the jibe of idol worship which brought about this reaction.

Much of the sacred literature had been orally preserved and served a variety of social and religious ends. Some texts, secular in origin, were sacrilised, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* Interpolations could be added as and when required, as for example, the *Gita.* This is a different attitude from the Semitic to the centrality of the Book or, for that matter, from that of the Sikhs to the single, sacred text.

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These new groups were in part the inheritors of the older tradition combining social aspirations with religious expression and establishing new sects. But at the same time they were trying to create a different kind of religion and gave currency to the term 'Hinduism'.

Traditional flexibility in juxtaposing sects as an idiom of social change as well as the basic concepts of religious expression now became problematic. In the absence of a single 'jealous' God, demanding complete and undiluted loyalty from the worshipper, there were instead multiple deities some of which survived over time and others which faded out.

Thus, the major Vedic deities, Indra, Mitra and Varuna, declined with the rise of the Shaiva and Vaishnava sects in the first millennium A.D. Shiva and Vishnu have remained major deities supported by various sects although not always in agreement with what the deities represent for them. This has not prevented the creation of fresh deities as has been witnessed in recent decades with the very popular worship in northern India of the goddess, Santoshi Ma.

The attitude to deity would in part explain the argument that it is not theology which is necessarily important in Hinduism but the mode of worship. The *yajna* was a carefully orchestrated performance of ritual with the meticulous ordering of every detail down to the correct pronunciation of the words constituting the *mantram.* Worship as part of Bhakti was different. The emphasis on oblation and sacrifice now transformed itself into devotion to the deity, sometimes even taken to the extreme of ritual suicide.

The deity was conceptualised in a variety of ways - abstract, anionic, an image, an image elaborately sculpted and housed in an equally elaborate temple; and devotion could also be expressed in various ways. There was no requirement of uniformity in methods of worship or in who performed the ritual. There was little ecclesiastical order involved and no centralised church.

The question of conversion therefore became unimportant. In its absence, sects grew through segmenting off or through assimilating other cults or amalgamating similar sects. The religious sect was also an avenue to caste mobility. Origin myths of middle and lower castes often maintain that the caste was originally of higher status but a lapse in the ritual or an unwitting act of pollution led to a loss of status.

Imitation of higher caste norms or the dropping of caste obligations would normally not be permitted unless justified by the creation of a new religious sect. The latter would initially be regarded with hostility by the conservative but if it became socially and economically powerful it could be accommodated.

The absence of conversion accounted for the absence of the distinction between the true follower and the infidel or pagan. Yet, distinctions of another kind were more relevant and sharply maintained, particularly in sects with a substantially upper caste following. These primarily excluded all those who were outside the social pale or the *mlecchas,* such as untouchables, tribals, foreigners, those observing the social mores of the foreigners and even upper castes who did not conform to *dharma* regulations. They were regarded as polluting because they performed neither the ritual duties nor the social duties required by the *dharma.*

It is often stated that one is born a Hindu, i.e., into a particular sect whose regulations are to be observed and cannot therefore be converted to Hinduism. In fact, the idea of conversion came about only after the nineteenth century groups became active and this was the occasion of some debate. Previously it was maintained that each sect had its own regulations, obligations and duties which often drew both on religious antecedents and social requirements. Gradually, if a sect acquired a large following cutting across castes, it tended to become a caste in itself. It would perhaps be more correct to speak of the Hindu religions (in the plural) rather than of 'Hinduism' (in the singular). Some would argue that the correct term for the latter would be *sanatam dharma.*

There was one category of renunciatory orders which did include sects recruited from any caste. Some of these orders restricted themselves to recruiting only brahmans but, in the main, most of them recruited from a variety of castes. Although theoretically the latter were open to all, needless to say members of the first four if not the upper *varnas* were preferred. Open recruitment was possible because renouncers were expected to discard all social obligations and were regarded as being outside the rules of *dharma.* Renunciatory sects were generally not expected to maintain a caste identity.

Joining such an order was also in some cases the only legitimate form of dissent from social obligations. The multiplicity of renouncers in India has therefor to be viewed not merely as inspired by other worldly aspirations but also with the nature of the links between social forms and dissent.

The Sharmanic religions were similar to these sects in that they did recruit members from a range of castes although, as was the case also with Indian Islam, Indian Christianity and Sikhism, converts often retained their original caste identity, especially in the crucial social area of marriage connections. Among renouncers of the non-Sharmanic persuasion, the Dasnami order founded by Shankaracharya and the Vaishnava Bairagis were among the better known.

Sects battened on patronage, whether royal or other. Even the renunciatory orders were not averse to accepting

wealth which ensured them material comforts as is evident from the many centre of such orders scattered across the Indian landscape both in the past as well as now.

In addition to economic wealth, these institutions had access to political power and the intertwining of politics and religion was obvious. The real texture of Indian social history in the second millennium A.D. has been bye-passed by the obsessive concern with Hindu-Muslim relations to the exclusion of the more pertinent investigation of how politics and religion at the level of the sects, interacted.

Caste identities, economic wealth and access to power also contributed to providing the edge to sectarian rivalries and conflicts. Initially, in areas where Shaiva sects were establishing themselves, there was a persecution of Buddhist and Jainas. Such actions go back to Mihirakula and Shashanka who in the norther India of the mid-first millennium A.D. are remembered for their destructions of Buddhist monasteries and the killing of monks. Early in the second millennium A.D., Karnataka witnessed the destruction of Jaina temples and images by Shaivite groups and the sixteenth century records a similar series of events in Kakatiya territory.

The rewriting of texts to correct the prevailing perspective from Jaina to Vaishnaya was a less gruesome form of religious intolerance. Once the Buddhists and Jainas were virtually out of the way, hostility among the 'Hindu' Sects was not unknown, even between ascetic groups as is evident from the pitched battles between the Dasnamis and the Bairagis over the question of precedence at the Kumbh Mela.

Such antagonism was not that of the 'Hindu' against another religion but that of a particular sect expressing its hostility towards others. Tolerance and non-violence therefore have to be seen at the level of sectarian aggression. It is true that there were no Inquisitions. This was partly because dissent was channelled out into a separate sect which, if it became a renunciatory order, lost much of its social sting. In addition, there was no centralised church whose supremacy was endangered. However, social subordination, justified by theories of pollution, replaced to some degree the inequities of an authoritarian church.

Religious violence is not alien to 'Hinduism' despite the nineteenth century myth that the 'Hindus' are by instinct and religion a non-violent people. One suspects that the genesis of this myth was in the requirements of nationalism stressing the spiritual superiority of Indian culture of which non-violence was treated as a component.

Non violence as a central tenet of behaviour and morality was first developed in the Sharmanic tradition, that of Buddhism and Jainism. These were the religions which not only were allowed to decline but were persecuted in some parts of the country. One is often struck by how different the message of the *Gita* would have been and how very much closer to non-violence if Gautama Buddha had been the charioteer of Arjuna instead of Krishna. Gandhiji's concern with *ahimsa* is more correctly traced to the Jaina imprint on the culture of Kathiawar.

Not that the Sharmanic tradition prevented violence, but at least it was the central issue in the ethics of Buddhism and Jainism and was emphasised to a far greater degree than in the ethics of most 'Hindu' sects. Sporadic killing apart, even the violence involved in the regular burning of Hindu brides in the city of Delhi as of late, does not elicit any threat against the perpetrators of such violence from the spokesmen of 'Hinduism'.

Sectarian institutions acted as networks across geographical areas, but their reach was limited except in the case of the major institutions such as those of the Dasnamis, the Bairagis or the Nathpanthis. Bhakti as a religious manifestation was predominant throughout the sub-continent by the seventeenth century; yet, curiously, there was little attempt to link these movements to forge a single religion. This was partly because each tradition used a different language which imposed geographical limits and also because there was no ecclesiastical organisation to integrate this development.

The Radha-Krishan cult began gradually to take on a wider geographical identity with the expansion of Hindi and the encouraging of pilgrimages in the second millennium A.D. The closest to ecclesiastical organisations were the institutions associated with the Shankaracharya movement but these were concerned basically with Brahmanism. The Bhakti communities saw themselves as self-sufficient, with religious forms closely tied to local requirements.

The emergence of Bhakti has been linked by some scholars to what have been described as the Feudalising tendencies of the time and parallels have been drawn between the loyalty of the peasant to the feudal lord being comparable to the devotion of worshippers to the deity. The Bhakti emphasis on salvation though devotion to a deity and through the idea of *karma* and *samsara* was a convenient ideology for keeping subordinate groups under control. It was argued that they might suffer in this life, but by observing the *dharma* they would benefit in their next birth. The onus of responsibility was therefore on the individual and not on society. The emphasis on individual salvation gave the individual an importance which was absent in real life and therefore served to keep him quiescent.

Interestingly, the explanation of *karma* is not acceptable to lower caste groups who, while supporting the notion of rebirth do not accept that they were born low because of misdemeanors in a previous birth. Common as is the belief in *karma* and *samsara* among many sects, it

did not however preclude the growth at a popular level of the concepts of heaven and hell as is evident in the widespread references to *svarga* and *naraka,* gong back to early times.

The segregation of social communities in worship and religious belief and the absence of an over-arching ecclesiastical structure demanding conformity, was characteristic of the Hindu religions. Attempts at such structures were made by the founders of certain sects, the most prominent being Shankaracharya when orders were established and institutions founded in the four corners of the sub-continent (the *pithas*). In part, these were in imitation of the Buddhist *sangha* and the recognition of the strength of an institutional base.

But, such movements were rooted in caste differentiations unlike the Buddhists who in theory did not restrict the availability of their religion to any caste. The 'Hindu' institutions therefore came largely to cater to the upper castes and legislated (on the occasions when they did) for these castes. The lower castes were not important to such institutions which were not concerned with the beliefs, rituals and practices of such castes so long as they remained in a subordinate status.

The segregation of social communities and the relatively distinct religious identity of these led to the possibility of each group leading a comparatively separate existence. The clash could only come in the competition for patronage. This might partially explain the notion of tolerance with which the nineteenth century invested indigenous Indian religions. However, sectarian rivalries did exist, sometimes taking a violent form, thereby projecting a different picture of the past.

Nor did this lack of tolerance grow with the coming of Islam. Curiously, although some Islamic popular belief was internalised, particularly among sects identified with the socially less privileged, there was little overt interest in Islamic theology on the part of Hindu groups, except in a marginal way, by some scholars maintaining that certain aspects of philosophy in the second millennium A.D. might be traced to Islamic influence. There are few major studies of Islam in sanskrit or in the regional languages until much later. References to the Muslims were either to Turushkas/Turks in the early sources, which was the correct ethnic identity of the earlier rulers, or more generally to *mlecchas.*

Similarly, the more learned among Muslim authors such as Abu'l Fazl merely give resumes of Brahmanism when they come to the details of some of the Hindu religions which they speak of, since this was socially the most prestigious of them all. There is little detail of the other sects except in a very generalised way. Abu'l Fazl refers to the strife among the various indigenous religions which he attributes to diversity in language as well as the resistance of Hindus to discuss their religions with foreigners!

The confrontation of Islam and Hinduism is often posed as two monolithic religions, face-to-face. In fact, for Islam the Indian experience must have been extremely bewildering, since there was no recognisable ecclesiastical authority or structure among the Hindus as a whole to which Islam could address itself. It faced a large variety of belief systems of which the most noticeable common feature to Islam was idol-worship - but even this was by no means uniform. Hence the frequency with which references are made preferentially to castes and ethnic communities - Rajputs, Jats, Zamindars, etc. - in the context of the indigenous religions and only on a very generalised scale to the Hindus.

It is often said that the Hindus must have been upset at seeing Turkish and Mongol soldiers in their heavy boots trampling the floors of their temples. The question is, which Hindus? For, the same temple now entered by *mleccha* soldiers was open only to a few upper caste Hindus and it sanctum was in any case barred to the majority of the population consisting of the indigenous *mleccha,* and their feelings were immaterial to the caste Hindus who had worshipped at these temples. The trauma was therefore more in the nature of the polluting of the temple rather than the confrontation with another religion.

I have tried to argue that if one is attempting to understand 'Hinduism' in history, then one has to see it so far as possible in its indigenous form. The distinction between the two traditions of Brahmanism and Shramanism are significant. These separate identities were carefully maintained. In the eyes of the former the latter were obviously inferior and for this one has only to look at texts of Brahman authorship of the second millennium A.D. referring to monks and mendicants. Brahmanism also maintained a distinction between itself and other 'Hindu' religious sects such as those associated with the Bhakti and the Shakta movements which, although not Shramanic in the strictest sense, were nevertheless the inheritors of some of that tradition.

The separateness of the two was forced to narrow, though not to amalgamate, from time to time when historical situations demanded it. A formal closeness was imposed on them by the coming of Islam and the categorisation for the first time of all indigenous cults as Hindu where Hindu carried the connotation of 'the other'. Islam had a more extended dialogue with the inheritors of the Shramanic tradition but was relatively silent with Brahmanism.

A further crisis came with the arrival of Christianity riding on the powerful wave of colonialism. In the projected superiority of the Semitic religions, it was once again the 'Hindus' who were regarded as 'the other' and this again included both the Brahmanic and the Shramanic traditions. This time the dialogue was with Brahmanism. Of the social groups most closely associated with power, the

upper castes were the genitors of the new middle class and among them, initially, brahmans were significant.

Inevitably, the Brahmanical base of what was seen as the new Hinduism was unavoidable. But merged into it were various bits and pieces from upper caste belief and ritual with one eye on the Christian and Islamic models. Its close links with certain nationalist opinion gave to many of these neo-Hindu movements a political edge which remains recognisable even today. It is this development which was the parent to the present-day Syndicated Hinduism which is being pushed forward as the sole claimant to the inheritance of indigenous Indian religion.

It goes without saying that if Indian society is changing, then its religious expressions must also undergo change. But, the direction of this change is perhaps alarming. The mergence of a powerful middle-class with urban moorings and a reach to the rural rich would find it useful to bring into politics a uniform, monolithic, Hinduism created to serve its new requirements. Under the guise of a new, reformed Hinduism, an effort would be made to draw a large clientele and to speak with the voice of numbers.

The appeal to the middle-class would be obvious. To those lower down in society there would be the attraction of upward mobility through a new religious movement. But the latter, having forsaken some of their ideologies of non-caste religious sects, would have to accept the *dharma* of the powerful but remain subordinate. A change in this direction would introduce new problems as it has already begun to do. In wishing away the weaknesses of the old, one does not want to bring in the predictable disasters of the new.

Perhaps the major asset of what we call 'Hinduism' of the pre-modern period was that it was not a uniform monolithic religion, but a juxtaposition of flexible religious sects. This flexibility was it strength and its distinguishing feature, allowing the existence even of non-caste, anti-Vedic groups disavowing the injunctions of the *Dharmashastras,* which nevertheless had to be included within the definition of what has been called 'Hinduism'.

The weakening or disappearance of such dissenting groups within the framework of at least religious expression would be a considerable loss. If Syndicated Hinduism could simultaneously do away with social hierarchies, this might mitigate its lack of flexibility. But the scramble to use it politically merely results in the realignment of castes.

Syndicated Hinduism draws largely on Brahmanical texts, the *Gita* and Vedantic thought, accepts some aspects of the *Dharmashastras* and attempts to present a modern, reformed religion. It ends up inevitably as a garbled form of Brahmanism with a motley of 'values' drawn from other sources, such as bringing in elements of individual salvation from the Bhakti tradition, and some Puranic rituals. Its contradictions are many. The call to unite under Hinduism as a political identity is anachronistic.

Social and economic inequality was a given fundamental of Brahmanism and whether one approves or disapproves of it, it was an established point of view. To propagate the texts associated with this view and yet insist that it is an egalitarian philosophy is hardly acceptable. Some religions like Islam are in theory egalitarian. Others like Buddhism restrict equality to the moral and ethical spheres of life. The major religions after all arose and evolved in societies and in periods when inequality was a fact of life and the social function of these religions was not to change this but to try and ameliorate the reality for those who found it harsh and abrasive.

Further, as a proselytising religion, Syndicated Hinduism cannot accept a multiplicity of religious manifestations as being equally important; clearly, some selected beliefs, rituals and practices will have to be regarded as essential and therefor more significant. This is a major departure from the traditional position. Who does the selecting and from what sources and to what purpose also becomes a matter of considerable significance.

Another factor of increasing importance to this Syndicated Hinduism is the 'Hindu' diaspora. 'Hindu' communities settled outside India experience a sense of cultural insecurity since they are minority communities, frequently in a largely Islamic or Christian society as in the Gulf or in Europe, North America or the Caribbean. Their search is often for sects which will support their new enterprise or, better still, a form of Hinduism parallel to Christianity and with an idiom comprehensible to Christians which they can teach their children (preferably, we are told, through Hindu schools and video films). Such communities with their particular requirements and their not inconsequential financial support will also provide the basis for the institutions and the ecclesia of Syndicated Hinduism.

The importance of this 'diaspora' is clearly reflected not only in the social links between those in India and those abroad supporting the new Hinduism, but also in the growing frequency with which the Sanghs, Parishads and Samajs hold their meetings abroad and seek the support and 'conversion' of the affluent. The aspect of conversion is new and aggressive, both among 'native-born' Indians and whites. This is not to be confused with the guru-cult in affluent societies where there is little attempt to convert people to Hinduism, but rather to suggest to them methods of 'self-realisation' irrespective of their religious affiliations.

The creation of this Syndicated Hinduism for purposes more political than religious, and mainly supportive of the ambitions of a new social class, has been a long process in the last hundred years or so and is now coming more clearly into focus. Whatever political justification there

might have been for this development, as a form of nationalist assertion under British rule, no longer exists. Social groups in the past have expressed their aspirations in part by creating new religious sects.

The emergence of Syndicated Hinduism is different both in scale and scope and is not restricted to the creation of a new sect but a new religious form seeking to encapsulate all the earlier sects. The sheer scale as well as the motivation call for considerable caution. Syndicated Hinduism claims to be re-establishing the Hinduism of pre-modern times; in fact it is only establishing itself and in the process distorting the historical and cultural dimensions of the indigenous religions and divesting them of the nuances and variety which was a major source of their enrichment.

Attempts to insist on its legitimacy increase the distance between it and the indigenous religious articulations of Indian civilisation and invest it with the ingredients of a dangerous fundamentalism. With each aggressive stance, based on the false alarm of Hinduism in danger (as when five hundred 'Hindu' untouchables were converted to Islam at Meenakshipuram out of a population of five hundred million 'Hindus'), this Syndicated Hinduism forces a particular identity on all those who are now technically called Hindus. But not all would wish to participate in this identity. There is something to be said for attempting to comprehend the real religious expression of Indian civilisation before it is crushed beneath the wheels of this new Juggernaut bandwagon.

REVIVAL OF THE ORDER OF BUDDHIST NUNS THE DEBATE AND ARGUMENTS

Senarath Wijayasundara

The followers of the Buddha's teachings constitute Buddhist society and that society, as enunciated by the Buddha, consists of the following four components: i) Monks, ii) Nuns, iii) Laymen, and iv) Laywomen. Out of the two Buddhist traditions into which Buddhist society is divided, Mahayana alone has all these four components even to the present day whereas Theravada had lost the order of Nuns some time back. This places the female members of Theravada Buddhist society at a spiritually disadvantageous position for no fault of their own.

The origins of the order of Buddhist Nuns is well known, as also the fact that, as natural in the male dominated world, it was won with much difficulty. It was inaugurated thanks to the intelligent handling of the matter by Ananda Thera. Here the position of the Buddha must be understood clearly. Writing a well documented book under the title *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Miss I.B. Horner has the following:

> I hope to show that he (Buddha) did not, as is usually said of him, grudge women their entry into the Order, but that his compassion for the many-folk included, from the beginning, women as well as men and animals. He saw the potentially good, the potentially spiritual in them as clearly as he saw it in men. Hence, were their life spent in the world or in the religious community, he spared himself no trouble to show them the way to happiness, to salvation, a way which they might train themselves to follow by self-mastery.[1]

Senarath Wijayasundara teaches Buddhist philosophy at the Post-Graduate Institute of Buddhist and Pali Studies, Colombo.

At the third Buddhist Council held in India in the 3rd century B.C. it was decided to despatch nine missions to different places for the spread of Buddhism.

One mission headed by Mahinda thero reached Sri Lanka. The tremendous success achieved by this mission was such that, within a few days, there was a request from a group of five hundred ladies led by Anula to make room for them to join the Order. Mahinda's sister Sanghamitta was invited to Sri Lanka to initiate the Order of Nuns. In Sri Lanka both Orders grew in strength and popularity.

However, by the turn of the tenth century, Buddhism was being seriously affected by invading non-Buddhist rulers; thus at the turn of the eleventh century the country was under a South Indian ruler. When the invaders had been successfully repelled, the new King was keen to revive Buddhism which had fallen into a pathetic state. It was brought to his notice that there were no members of the *Bhikkhu-Sangha* (nuns). So he sought assistance from Burma (Myanmar) to restore the order of monks. But there is no mention of reviving the Order of Nuns. If during this period of political dependency the male members of the *Sangha* (monks) had suffered so much as to cause the Order to become extinct, there is hardly any doubt about the plight of its female members. But there is no record that the King tried to revive the order of nuns.[2]