

Research Articles

Mary Mother of God Church, Kalimpong: Architectural Inculturation, Cultural Adaptation, and Tibetan Buddhist Influences

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Abstract

The Mary Mother of God Church, opened in 1976 on land acquired in 1972 under the guidance of Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet in Kalimpong, West Bengal, represents a distinctive example of architectural inculturation in the Eastern Himalayan region, where Christian theology is expressed through Tibetan Buddhist architectural and artistic forms. Situated along the bustling Reli Road within a multicultural environment shaped by the historical presence of Tibetan Buddhist communities, the church reflects broader processes of cultural adaptation and religious localization that emerged in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Despite its architectural uniqueness and historical significance, the church remains relatively underappreciated and understudied. This paper examines how Tibetan Buddhist architecture and visual culture mediate the relationships among religion, culture, and identity by drawing on the concepts of contact zones and sacred spaces. It critically engages with debates concerning syncretism, cultural appropriation, and missionary encounters. Rather than viewing the church as merely a symbol of interfaith harmony, the study argues that it functions as a complex site of negotiation where questions of representation, belonging, and cultural translation continue to unfold. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study approach that combines architectural and visual analysis with archival research and field observation to explore how religious and cultural identities are negotiated and articulated through sacred space in the Eastern Himalayan region. The study contributes to broader discussions on religious localization, architectural hybridity, and the material expression of Christianity in the Eastern Himalayas.



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Keywords

architectural inculturation; Tibetan Buddhist architecture; cultural adaptation; religious localization; sacred space

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A Church that Resembles a Monastery: Encountering Sacred Ambiguity in Kalimpong

Perched on a hillside in Kalimpong, Mary Mother of God Church presents an unusual visual encounter. At first glance, the structure does not look like a conventional Catholic church. Its multi-tiered roof, brightly painted wooden elements,

Buddhist-inspired motifs, and monastery-like appearance often lead visitors to mistake it for a Tibetan Buddhist *gumba* (*dgon pa*; monastery). For many first-time visitors, the building creates a moment of uncertainty: is this a monastery or a church? Such ambiguity forms the starting point of this study.

The present study emerged partly from a chance rediscovery of Mary Mother of God



Figure 1. Mary Mother of God Church, Kalimpong, West Bengal. The multi-tiered roof and painted woodwork that lead many first-time visitors to take the building for a monastery. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

Church. One of the authors had visited the church as a student in 2015 but paid little attention to its architectural significance at the time. Years later, while exploring possible research topics, the same author encountered a documentary video on the church produced by Bidhan Chettri of Silk Route Productions, who would later become one of the key respondents for this study (Silk Route Productions 2022). Intrigued by the church's unusual appearance, the author began searching for the site, initially unaware that it was the same church visited years earlier. After an interview and further guidance from Chettri, the church was eventually relocated to a site below Haat Bazaar on Relli Road. Upon revisiting the site, its resemblance to a Tibetan Buddhist monastery immediately raised questions concerning religious identity, cultural adaptation, and architectural inculturation. These observations ultimately provided the impetus for the present research.

Located within the culturally diverse Himalayan town of Kalimpong, the church occupies a unique religious and architectural space. Kalimpong has historically functioned as a crossroads of trade, migration, and religious exchange linking India, Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan (McKay 2011). Multiple religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems, have long shaped the region. Following the arrival of Tibetan refugees after 1959, Tibetan cultural and religious aesthetics became increasingly visible in the region's public and sacred spaces. Within this environment, Mary Mother of God Church emerged as an uncommon example of Catholic architecture deeply shaped by Tibetan Buddhist visual and architectural influences.

Unlike many churches in the Himalayan region that follow European ecclesiastical forms, Mary Mother of God Church consciously incorporates monastery-inspired architecture and Himalayan artistic traditions. Buddhist symbols such as the Dharma Wheel and lotus motifs appear alongside Christian iconography, while depictions of Jesus, Mary, and saints are

rendered in artistic forms that resonate with Tibetan religious aesthetics. These adaptations invite important questions concerning the relationship between religion, culture, and sacred space. How does a Catholic church come to resemble a Buddhist monastery? What happens when Christian theology is expressed through Tibetan visual language? How do local communities interpret such religious adaptation?

The church also raises broader questions regarding the nature of religious encounter in multicultural societies. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that religions do not exist in isolation but constantly interact with local cultural environments (Pratt 1992). Sacred architecture often becomes one of the most visible sites where such interactions take shape. Religious buildings not only reflect theological commitments but also embody negotiations of identity, belonging, and cultural meaning (Morgan 2010). In regions marked by religious diversity, architecture often serves as a space through which communities negotiate difference while creating familiarity.

Within Catholic thought, such processes are often discussed through the idea of *inculturation*, which refers to the adaptation of Christian faith into local cultural forms without abandoning its theological foundations (Schreiter 1985). Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church increasingly encouraged engagement with local cultures and emphasized dialogue with non-Christian religious traditions (Second Vatican Council 1965). Mary Mother of God Church may therefore be understood as part of a broader effort to express Christianity through Himalayan cultural forms. Yet such adaptations also raise important debates concerning syncretism, cultural borrowing, and symbolic ownership. The incorporation of Buddhist forms into a Christian sacred space may be interpreted either as an example of respectful cultural dialogue or as a more complicated process of religious appropriation.

This study examines Mary Mother of God Church as a site of architectural inculturation, cultural adaptation, and religious

encounter in the eastern Himalayas. Rather than approaching the church merely as an architectural curiosity, the paper situates it within broader discussions concerning Himalayan Christianity, Tibetan Buddhist influence, and the negotiation of sacred identities. Particular attention is given to the ways architecture, visual culture, and local perception contribute to the church's unique identity. Although scholarship on Christian inculturation in Asia has expanded considerably, relatively little attention has been given to architectural expressions of inculturation in the Eastern Himalayas. Existing studies have largely focused on missionary history, religious conversion, and inter-faith relations, while the material and visual dimensions of localized Christianity remain understudied. Mary Mother of God Church, therefore, offers an important case through which to examine how architecture and sacred imagery mediate encounters between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhist cultural worlds.

Methodologically, the study combines architectural observation, visual analysis, oral narratives, and field interviews. Fieldwork for this study was conducted in Kalimpong between March and June 2026. Interviews with individuals connected to the church, including residents and those familiar with its construction and history, provide valuable insight into how the church has been understood, remembered, and experienced over time. During the initial visits in late March, the authors spoke with two residents living in the vicinity of the Church to plan further fieldwork. The authors met six visitors on their second visit at the site in early April; these conversations helped document everyday perceptions of the building, including responses to its monastery-like appearance and its place within Kalimpong's religious landscape. Three scheduled semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted in April with individuals very closely associated with the church, its construction, and its local history. Contact with the interviewees continued through May and June 2026, for follow-up questions, clarifications, and verification of details that emerged during the

interviews and subsequent analysis. Nirmal Shankar, whose long association with the church provided an important source of local and institutional memory, also assisted the authors in reading the interior murals, identifying the biblical narratives and parables represented in them, and understanding how these Christian narratives had been rendered through Himalayan visual forms. Interviews and informal conversations were documented through fieldnotes with the knowledge and consent of the participants. Permission to photograph the murals was granted in April 2026 by Mr. Richard Shen, son of Mr. Michael Shen, who painted the murals also granted permission for photographs of these murals to be reproduced as the cover of the journal. Although the full historical narrative surrounding Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet is discussed later in the paper, the church itself emerged from a distinctive vision that sought to imagine Catholicism in dialogue with Himalayan culture. As one interviewee remarked, Father Jex-Collet "could not go to Tibet, so he brought Tibet here," a statement that captures the church's unusual architectural and spiritual imagination.

By examining architecture, imagery, and lived perception together, this paper argues that Mary Mother of God Church represents more than an instance of stylistic borrowing. Instead, it reveals how sacred space in the Himalayas may become a site where religious traditions meet, adapt, and negotiate meaning without fully dissolving their differences.

In the Shadow of Tibet

Kalimpong as a Himalayan Contact Zone

Situated in the eastern Himalayas, Kalimpong has historically functioned as an important zone of cultural exchange connecting India, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the wider Himalayan world (Viehbeck 2017). During the colonial period, the town emerged as a significant trade center along the Indo-Tibetan trade route, facilitating the movement of goods, people, and religious ideas across borders (Sen 2021). Merchants,

missionaries, monks, and travelers contributed to the making of Kalimpong as a socially and culturally diverse settlement shaped by mobility and exchange (Sherpa 2019). This movement of people transformed the religious character of the region. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, Christian churches, and indigenous religious practices coexisted within the same landscape, producing a form of religious pluralism that continues to characterize Kalimpong today. Rather than existing in isolation, these traditions often interacted with one another through everyday encounters, shared spaces, and overlapping cultural practices. In this sense, Kalimpong may be understood as what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) describes as a “contact zone,” where different cultures meet and negotiate meaning through unequal yet continuous interaction.

The cultural landscape of Kalimpong was further shaped by missionary activity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Christian institutions, particularly Catholic and Protestant missions, played an important role in education, healthcare, and social services, while simultaneously negotiating with established religious traditions in a region where Buddhism and indigenous belief systems held strong historical roots. As Bidhan Chettri recalled, Kalimpong’s proximity to Tibet as a trading center made it an important base for the South Tibet Mission. Chettri provided the following account of the historical background of Catholic missionary activity in the region:

The church is located on Relli Road, below Haat Bazaar. Before the arrival of the Catholic Fathers, Protestant missionaries were already present in the area. According to historical records, the Roman Catholic Church had long attempted to evangelize Tibet, with efforts dating back to at least the eighteenth century. These missions were largely unsuccessful, as most attempts were made through the northern routes via China. At one point, political developments in Tibet led to the closure of the region to foreign influence for an extended period, interrupting

missionary activity. Later, when the Church sought to revive the mission to Tibet, India was under British rule, and with papal approval, a new approach was adopted from the south. This initiative became known as the South Tibet Mission. (B. Chettri, personal communication 10 April 2026).

He further noted that Catholic missionary efforts in Tibet were historically linked to broader attempts to establish a Christian presence beyond the Himalayan frontier. Unlike missionary encounters elsewhere that often attempted cultural replacement, Christianity in the Himalayas frequently adapted to local social and linguistic realities, though such adaptation remained uneven and complex.

Tibet in Exile: Refugees, Religion, and Cultural Presence after 1959

The political transformation of Tibet following 1959 significantly reshaped the cultural and religious atmosphere of Kalimpong and neighboring Himalayan regions. The arrival of Tibetan refugees brought renewed visibility to Tibetan religious life, artistic traditions, monastic culture, and visual aesthetics. Prayer flags, monasteries, chorten (mchod rten), Buddhist iconography, and Tibetan architectural styles increasingly became visible features of the public and sacred landscape. Although Kalimpong already possessed historical ties with Tibet through trade and migration, the post-1959 refugee presence strengthened the cultural visibility of Tibetan identity within the region. Tibetan Buddhism became more publicly recognizable, not only through monasteries and religious institutions but also through architecture, dress, language, and artistic expression. Consequently, Tibetan visual forms gradually became familiar markers of sacred space within the Himalayan landscape.

This broader cultural context is important for understanding the Mary Mother of God Church. The church did not emerge within an isolated Christian setting but in a region where Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics already held deep social and religious meaning.

Architectural forms associated with monasteries, symbolic motifs such as the lotus and Dharma Wheel, and visual representations of sacred figures were already part of the local religious imagination. Consequently, the church's engagement with Tibetan Buddhist forms must be understood not simply as imitation but as an attempt to communicate Christianity within a culturally recognizable Himalayan setting.

Christianity in a Buddhist Landscape

The presence of Christianity within the Himalayan region has often involved negotiation between imported religious traditions and local cultural realities. Christian institutions in regions such as Kalimpong have historically confronted questions of cultural belonging, identity, and representation. A central challenge has remained: how might Christianity become locally meaningful without entirely abandoning its theological distinctiveness?

Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church increasingly encouraged engagement with local cultures and emphasized dialogue with non-Christian traditions (Second Vatican Council 1965). Such developments opened new possibilities for expressing Christian faith through local artistic, linguistic, and architectural forms. In Himalayan contexts, this often involved attempts to rethink church architecture and sacred representation in ways that reflected local cultural worlds. It was within this broader religious and cultural environment that the Mary Mother of God Church emerged. Rather than reproducing conventional European church architecture, the church adopted forms that visually resonated with Tibetan Buddhist monastic traditions. Its monastery-like appearance reflected not only architectural experimentation but also an effort to imagine a Catholic sacred space capable of speaking to a Himalayan cultural world. The origins of this vision are closely connected to the work and imagination of Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet, whose role in shaping the church forms the focus of the next section.

The Priest Who Dreamed of Tibet: Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet

The Priest Who Could Not Reach Tibet

The story of Mary Mother of God Church is closely connected with the vision and imagination of Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet, whose role in shaping the church continues to be remembered within local narratives. A Catholic missionary priest working in Kalimpong during a period of significant social and religious change in the Himalayan region, Father Jex-Collet is remembered not merely as a church builder but as someone deeply interested in local culture and Himalayan religious life.

Local oral traditions surrounding the church emphasize Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet's longstanding interest in Tibet and his desire to create a form of Catholicism that resonated with the Himalayan cultural environment. Among oral accounts surrounding the church, one recurring narrative concerns Father Jex-Collet's unrealized desire to travel to Tibet. Although historical and political circumstances reportedly prevented such a journey, local memory suggests that this unfulfilled aspiration significantly shaped his religious imagination. Rather than abandoning the idea of Tibet, Father Jex-Collet sought to recreate elements of Tibetan religious aesthetics within Kalimpong itself. As one interviewee explained, "Father could not go to Tibet, so he brought Tibet here." While anecdotal in nature, this statement captures a widely shared understanding of the church's origins and architectural direction.

Nirmal Shankar, a lifelong resident closely associated with Mary Mother of God Church, having been born in a godown within the church compound and raised while his father worked for the church, recalled that Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet purchased land from a local landowner holding the title Rai Bahadur in 1972 and commissioned the construction of a church incorporating Tibetan cultural and architectural elements. According to Shankar, the church became operational in 1976 and was constructed by the engineer John Samsing Lepcha,

following a design intended to resonate with Tibetan communities. He further noted that Buddhist monks and other visitors frequently mistook the building for a monastery because of its architectural appearance. As he remarked, “Lamas would often walk around the church, counting their mala (prayer beads), assuming it was a gumba.”

Shankar additionally stated that the church’s interior paintings were executed by Mr. Michael Shen, an artist associated with a nearby monastery who resided near Thongsa *Gumba*. This rendered the building a distinctive fusion of Christian and Tibetan Buddhist artistic traditions (N. Shankar, personal communication 24 April 2026). This remembered aspiration provides an important interpretive framework for understanding the church. Instead of replicating conventional European Catholic architecture, Father Jex-Collet envisioned a sacred space that visually resonated with the Himalayan religious environment surrounding it. Such a vision appears to have emerged from a recognition that Christianity in the Himalayas could not remain entirely detached from the cultural and visual language of the region.

Building Tibet in Kalimpong: Vision, Theology, and Sacred Imagination

The architectural form of Mary Mother of God Church suggests a deliberate attempt to engage with Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics. Rather than functioning simply as a place of Christian worship, the church may also be understood as an experiment in sacred translation, where Catholic theology was expressed through forms recognizable within the Himalayan cultural world. The church’s monastery-like structure, tiered roof design, Buddhist-inspired motifs, and localized visual language point toward a conscious departure from European ecclesiastical architecture. Instead of Gothic arches or conventional cathedral forms, the building reflects elements more commonly associated with Tibetan monasteries. This architectural choice appears neither accidental nor purely decorative. Rather, it reflects an attempt to create a sacred environment that could communicate

familiarity within a Buddhist-majority cultural setting.

In this sense, Mary Mother of God Church may be interpreted as a form of “imagined Tibet,” not as a literal reproduction of Tibetan monastic space, but as a Catholic interpretation of Himalayan sacred aesthetics. Through architecture and visual symbolism, the church attempted to make Christianity culturally legible within the region. The adaptation of local forms also suggests a broader concern with belonging. Religious institutions operating in culturally distinct environments frequently face the challenge of appearing socially meaningful without erasing theological difference. By incorporating monastery-inspired features into a Christian church, Father Jex-Collet appears to have explored ways of situating Catholicism within the everyday visual language of the eastern Himalayas.

Interpreting the Church through the Lens of Inculturation

Although the church’s architectural vision emerged through local circumstances, it may also be understood within broader shifts occurring within global Catholicism during the twentieth century. The reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council encouraged greater engagement between Christianity and local cultures and emphasized dialogue with non-Christian religious traditions (Second Vatican Council 1965). Within this framework, the concept of *inculturation* became increasingly important. Inculturation refers to the process through which Christian faith is expressed through local cultural forms while maintaining its theological foundations (Schreiter 1985). Rather than demanding cultural uniformity, Catholic theology increasingly recognized that Christianity could assume different visual and cultural expressions in different parts of the world.

Mary Mother of God Church may therefore be read as part of this wider theological movement. Its adaptation of Tibetan architectural forms did not necessarily imply theological fusion with Buddhism. Instead, it represented an attempt to express



Figure 2. A church that resembles a *gumba*. Monastery-inspired architectural form of Mary Mother of God Church. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.



Figure 3. Decorative roof details and painted woodwork. The design that transcends European church architecture. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

Christianity through the cultural vocabulary of the Himalayan region. Nevertheless, such adaptations also remain open to multiple interpretations, raising questions concerning cultural borrowing, syncretism, and symbolic boundaries, issues that are explored later in this paper.

A Church like Gumba: Architecture, Memory, and Sacred Misrecognition

Raised Roofs and Mountain Faith: Reading the Monastery Form

The architecture of Mary Mother of God Church immediately distinguishes it from conventional Catholic churches in India. Rather than following European ecclesiastical styles characterized by pointed arches, stained glass windows, and bell towers, the church adopts a form that visually resembles a Tibetan Buddhist monastery or *gumba*. Its sloping, tiered roof, brightly colored architectural detailing, carved wooden features, and layered visual

composition evoke the aesthetic language commonly associated with Himalayan Buddhist religious spaces.

This monastery-like appearance is not incidental. Instead, it reflects a conscious architectural choice that sought to situate Christianity within a Himalayan cultural environment. The building visually communicates familiarity to communities accustomed to Buddhist monastic architecture, thereby challenging assumptions that Christian sacred space must necessarily resemble European church forms.

The monastery-inspired structure also shapes how the church is perceived by visitors. For many first-time observers, the building initially appears indistinguishable from a Buddhist religious institution. Such moments of hesitation reveal the power of architecture in shaping religious recognition and expectation. Sacred buildings are often read visually before they are understood doctrinally, and Mary Mother of God Church complicates these visual



Figure 4. Tibetan roof motifs framing the Christian cross. Detail of the painted woodwork and ornamental motifs beneath the church roof, reflecting the architectural synthesis of Christian and Himalayan aesthetic elements. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

assumptions by occupying an architectural space between familiarity and difference. The church, therefore, functions not merely as a place of worship but also as an architectural expression of cultural adaptation. Rather than rejecting local visual traditions, its design reflects an attempt to make Catholicism visually intelligible within a Buddhist-majority cultural setting.

The Hands that Built the Church: Remembering Mr. Shen's Craftsmanship

The story of the church's construction survives not only through institutional memory but also through personal recollections connected to those who physically built it. Interviews concerning Mr. Michael Shen, remembered as one of the principal figures involved in the construction of the church, reveal the importance of local craftsmanship in shaping the final architectural form.

According to Richard Shen, grandson of Mr. Michael Shen, the church's distinctive architectural form emerged from the broader vision of the South Tibet Mission and its longstanding desire to establish meaningful engagement with Tibetan communities. He recalled that missionary efforts directed toward Tibet encountered significant political and religious obstacles, leading missionaries to focus their activities within the Himalayan frontier regions surrounding Tibet. In this context, architecture became an important medium through which Christianity could communicate within a culturally familiar environment.

Shen emphasized that Mr. Michael Shen played a central role in the design and execution of Mary Mother of God Church. Drawing upon his experience with Himalayan and Nepalese architectural traditions, including projects inspired by the architectural heritage of Bhaktapur, Michael Shen sought to create a church that resonated with local cultural aesthetics. According to Richard Shen, the intention was not to disguise a church as a monastery or to deceive visitors, but rather to express Christian faith through forms recognizable within the Himalayan cultural landscape. He further noted that many residents of Kalimpong at the time shared physical and cultural affinities with Tibetan and Himalayan communities. Consequently, sacred figures represented within the church were depicted with local Himalayan features and dress styles, while architectural elements drew inspiration from Tibetan monastic forms. These adaptations reflected an effort to create cultural familiarity without abandoning Christian theological identity (R. Shen, personal communication, 17 May 2026).

Unlike missionary-built churches that merely reproduced imported designs, Mary Mother of God Church emerged through collaboration between religious vision and local building knowledge. Construction involved adaptation to local geography, available materials, and regional aesthetic sensibilities. Such processes highlight the

practical dimensions of inculturation, demonstrating that cultural adaptation occurs not only at the level of theology but also through labor, design, and everyday craftsmanship (Amaladoss 1997). Memories surrounding the church's construction also reveal how architecture itself becomes part of community identity. The building is remembered not simply as an institutional structure but as something collectively produced through local effort, cultural familiarity, and artistic imagination. Such recollections humanize the history of the church and shift attention toward the often-overlooked individuals whose craftsmanship made religious adaptation materially possible.

“People Still Walk Around It”: Sacred Misrecognition and Ritual Encounter

One of the most striking aspects of Mary Mother of God Church concerns the ways people continue to interact with it. According to local accounts, visitors unfamiliar with the church often mistake it for a Buddhist monastery and occasionally circumambulate the structure as they would at Tibetan Buddhist sacred sites. Such encounters reveal how architecture shapes not only visual recognition but also embodied religious behavior.

Field observations and local testimonies further suggest that the church occupies an unusual position within the religious landscape of Kalimpong. A caretaker by the name of Maria Bhutia associated with the church recalled observing Tibetan Buddhist visitors, including elderly men, women, and occasionally nuns, circumambulating the church while carrying prayer beads (thengnga; phreng ba) and prayer wheels (manikhorlo; ma ni' khor lo), reciting the Buddhist mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” as they walked around the structure (M. Bhutia, personal communication 2026). Such practices are commonly associated with Buddhist devotional traditions and are typically performed around monasteries, stupa, and other sacred Buddhist sites.

These observations indicate that the church's monastery-inspired architecture

and visual familiarity may encourage forms of engagement that transcend conventional religious boundaries. Rather than functioning exclusively as a Christian worship space, the church appears to be perceived by some visitors as a sacred site that can accommodate devotional practices rooted in other religious traditions. This does not necessarily imply theological convergence between Christianity and Buddhism; rather, it highlights the ways architectural form can shape perceptions of sacredness and influence how religious spaces are experienced and interpreted by different communities (Amaladoss 2002).

This phenomenon may be understood as a form of sacred misrecognition, where a religious structure is interpreted through the visual vocabulary of another faith tradition. Yet such misunderstanding should not be viewed simply as confusion. Rather, it reveals how deeply architectural familiarity informs religious perception. For many visitors, the monastery-like design immediately evokes recognizable forms of sacredness associated with Tibetan Buddhism.

The act of circumambulation is particularly significant. In Tibetan Buddhist practice, moving around sacred structures forms an important devotional activity associated with prayer, reverence, and merit-making. When visitors perform similar actions around Mary Mother of God Church, even unintentionally, they reveal the extent to which architectural resemblance shapes ritual imagination. The church thus becomes a site where religious boundaries are not erased but momentarily blurred through lived experience. At the same time, such encounters also raise important questions concerning recognition and identity. If visitors continue to mistake the church for a *gumba*, what does this suggest about the success or ambiguity of architectural inculturation? Does familiarity strengthen religious accessibility, or does it risk obscuring Christian distinctiveness? Rather than offering easy answers, the church invites reflection on how sacred spaces are visually and culturally interpreted.

Of Wheels and Lotuses: Buddhist Symbolism in Catholic Space

The architectural adaptation visible in Mary Mother of God Church extends beyond form and structure into the use of symbolic motifs commonly associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Elements such as lotus imagery and Dharma Wheel-inspired forms appear within the church's visual landscape, existing alongside explicitly Christian symbols.

In Buddhist traditions, the lotus often signifies spiritual awakening, purity, and transcendence, while the Dharma Wheel symbolizes the teachings of the Buddha and the path toward enlightenment (Powers 2007). Within Mary Mother of God Church, however, these symbols acquire new meanings as they become incorporated into a Christian sacred setting. Their presence demonstrates not a replacement of Christian theology but a process through which familiar cultural symbols are reinterpreted within another religious framework. Such symbolic borrowing reflects broader processes of cultural adaptation frequently visible in regions marked by religious encounter. Sacred symbols rarely remain fixed within single traditions; rather, they often acquire new meanings through changing contexts and interactions. Nevertheless, the presence of Buddhist motifs within a Catholic church also raises important questions concerning symbolic ownership, appropriation, and theological interpretation, questions that will be explored in greater detail later in this paper.

Mary Mother of God Church, therefore, represents more than architectural experimentation. Through its monastery-like appearance, local craftsmanship, ritual ambiguity, and symbolic adaptation, the church reveals how sacred space in the Himalayas may become a site of negotiation between familiarity and difference, continuity and transformation. While architecture shaped first impressions of the church, its interiors reveal an equally important process of religious adaptation through sacred imagery.

Mary Mother of God Church: Visual Theology between Thangka and the Gospel

Painting Faith in Himalayan Colors: Thangka Influences and Christian Murals

The visual language of Mary Mother of God Church extends the process of architectural adaptation into the realm of sacred imagery. While the church externally resembles a Himalayan monastery, its interiors further reveal an intentional attempt to express Christian faith through forms locally meaningful to the Himalayan cultural world. Murals, painted figures, color palettes, and compositional arrangements show visible resonances with Tibetan Buddhist artistic traditions, particularly the aesthetics associated with thangka (thang ka) painting. Rather than adopting European sacred imagery commonly found in Catholic churches, the church presents biblical figures through a distinctly Himalayan visual grammar. Bright colors, layered backgrounds, decorative framing, elongated bodily compositions, and locally recognizable dress styles contribute to a visual atmosphere that appears simultaneously Tibetan and Christian. Yet these representations do not erase Christian theological identity. Instead, they attempt to make Christian sacred narratives visually intelligible within a Himalayan religious setting.

Such adaptation reflects broader processes of religious localization in which faith traditions engage with local artistic practices to communicate meaning more effectively (Schreiter 1985). In this case, visual adaptation becomes an important means of creating cultural familiarity without necessarily abandoning doctrinal distinctiveness.

Saints in Tibetan Garments: Reimagining Sacred Figures

Within Mary Mother of God Church, sacred figures are represented through forms that visually resonate with Himalayan communities. Saints, biblical figures, and even Christ and Mother Mary

appear clothed in garments resembling Tibetan and Himalayan attire, such as *drachhen* (monastic robes) and *chhupa* (*phyu pa*; traditional Tibetan dress). The localization of sacred representation creates a sense of familiarity for viewers accustomed to Buddhist artistic traditions. This visual adaptation reflects an effort to culturally translate Christianity into a visual language recognizable within the region. Sacred familiarity, in this context, becomes a means of belonging. Christian figures remain Christian, yet their appearance signals proximity to the social and cultural environment in which the church exists. As Shankar explained during an interview, “They look Tibetan, but they are Christian.” This observation captures an important tension within the church’s visual world: the figures appear culturally local while remaining theologically distinct.

“They Look Tibetan, But They Are Christian”: Reading Sacred Images through Nirmal Shankar’s Testimony

Mother Mary in a Chhupa

Among the most distinctive images within the church is the representation of Mother Mary clothed in a *chhupa*, the traditional dress associated with Tibetan communities. The image departs significantly from conventional Catholic iconography, where Mary is typically portrayed in Mediterranean-style robes and veils. Here, however, she is visually relocated into the cultural landscape of the Himalayas. Rather than appearing as a distant figure from sacred history, Mary is presented through a visual language that resonates with local experience and memory.

The significance of this adaptation extends beyond questions of dress. In Christian tradition, Mary often functions as a



Figure 5. Mother Mary in *chhupa* (traditional Tibetan attire). Mother Mary, seated gracefully upon a lotus. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.



Figure 6. Christ depicted in *drachhen* (monastic robe). Christ carrying the cross upon His shoulder. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.



Figure 7. The Infant Jesus and the Adoration of Shepherds in Himalayan art. Christ seated on the lap of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by shepherds in *drachhen*. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

maternal figure who mediates between the divine and human worlds. By depicting her in Tibetan attire, the image narrows the symbolic distance between universal Catholic devotion and local cultural identity. The painting, therefore, suggests that sacred figures need not remain culturally foreign to retain their religious significance. Instead, holiness is represented as capable of inhabiting local forms without losing its theological meaning.

Christ and the Saints in Himalayan Form

The localization visible in Marian imagery extends to representations of Christ and the saints. Rather than reproducing familiar European artistic conventions, these figures are depicted with features, clothing, and bodily postures that evoke the cultural environment of the eastern Himalayas. The result is not simply an aesthetic transformation but a reimagining of sacred presence within a different cultural world (Tweed 2006).



Figure 8. Catholic traditions expressed through Himalayan artistic forms. The figure depicts the coexistence of Catholic and Himalayan cultural traditions, with each retaining its distinct visual language, meaning, and symbolic significance. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

Such representations challenge the widespread assumption that Christian sacred figures possess a single authentic visual form. Throughout history, Christian art has repeatedly adapted to diverse cultural settings, producing African, East Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous representations of biblical figures. The images at Mary Mother of God Church participate in this broader tradition of visual translation. By presenting Christ and the saints through Himalayan forms, the paintings implicitly affirm that Christianity can be expressed through multiple cultural languages while remaining rooted in the same religious narrative.

As Nirmal Shankar observed, “They look Tibetan, but they are Christian.” His remark captures the central tension embodied in these images. Cultural appearance and religious identity do not necessarily coincide. The paintings invite viewers to recognize that Christian devotion may assume locally meaningful forms without requiring complete assimilation to European artistic traditions.

Beyond clothing, the visual composition of several sacred figures reflects artistic influences associated with Tibetan Buddhist imagery. Several paintings employ frontal compositions, brightly colored borders, hierarchical placement of sacred figures, and ornamental framing that recall visual conventions commonly associated with Tibetan thangka painting. While the subjects depicted remain distinctly Christian, the organization of the images encourages viewers familiar with Himalayan religious art to engage with them through an aesthetic vocabulary already embedded within the local cultural landscape. The result is neither a reproduction of Buddhist iconography nor a rejection of Christian imagery, but the emergence of a visual language situated between inherited Catholic traditions and Himalayan artistic forms.

Decorative elements surrounding sacred figures further reinforce the Himalayan visual atmosphere of the church. Patterns, ornamentation, color choices, and symbolic details reflect artistic vocabularies familiar within Tibetan Buddhist sacred art. Such details contribute to the church's broader visual identity, where Christianity appears not culturally detached but deeply situated within the Himalayan environment.

Localizing Biblical Narratives

The process of adaptation is particularly visible in narrative scenes depicting episodes from the life of Christ. Paintings such as the Nativity, Christ the Teacher, the Good Shepherd, and the Wedding at Cana are rendered through artistic conventions more commonly associated with Himalayan religious art than with Western biblical illustration. Architectural settings, clothing styles, landscape elements, and decorative motifs collectively relocate familiar Christian stories into a visual environment that appears culturally closer to the eastern Himalayas.

This transformation is significant because religious narratives are often experienced visually before they are understood textually. By presenting biblical events through locally recognizable imagery, the



Figure 9. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The figure depicts Christ as Teacher and Shepherd, situated within a distinctly local cultural setting. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.



Figure 10. The Wedding at Cana: Christ's first miracle. Christ is depicted performing the miracle at Cana. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

paintings encourage viewers to encounter sacred history not as something geographically distant but as something capable of speaking within their own cultural world. The Nativity, for example, is no longer imagined solely through Middle Eastern or European artistic traditions but through a Himalayan visual vocabulary. Similarly, representations of Christ as teacher or shepherd acquire new dimensions when situated within an artistic environment shaped by Buddhist and Himalayan aesthetic sensibilities.

At the same time, these paintings do not dissolve the distinction between Christianity and Buddhism. The narratives remain unmistakably Christian in content, even when expressed through artistic forms associated with another religious tradition. The images, therefore, exemplify a process of cultural translation rather than theological synthesis. They demonstrate how visual culture can serve as a bridge between religious traditions while preserving the doctrinal identity of each.

The depiction of the Wedding at Cana further illustrates how biblical narratives are visually translated into local artistic forms. While the miracle itself remains rooted in the Gospel account, the composition employs stylistic elements more commonly associated with Himalayan religious art. The scene demonstrates that inculturation within the church extends beyond individual sacred figures to encompass entire narrative episodes from the life of Christ.

Taken together, the paintings of Mary Mother of God Church reveal a process of visual inculturation that parallels the architectural adaptation discussed in the previous section. Through Himalayan dress, thangka-inspired compositional techniques, and localized representations of biblical narratives, the church presents Christianity through forms that are culturally recognizable within the eastern Himalayas. These images do not erase the distinctions between Christianity and Buddhism; rather, they demonstrate how religious traditions



Figure 11. Christ depicted in a seated, cross-legged posture resembling the traditional meditative posture associated with the Buddha. Although the architectural setting resembles that of a monastery, the composition remains firmly rooted in Christian doctrine and iconography. 24 April 2026. Photo: Tenzin Nyima Bhutia.

may adopt local artistic vocabularies while maintaining their theological identities. The church's visual program, therefore, serves as an important example of how sacred art participates in broader processes of cultural translation, religious encounter, and the negotiation of identity in the Himalayan region.

Between Inculturation and Appropriation: The Idea of Sacred Borrowing

Inculturation or Syncretism?

The visual and architectural character of Mary Mother of God Church raises an important question: should the church be understood as an example of *inculturation* or as a form of *syncretism*? Although the two concepts are often used interchangeably, they refer to different processes of religious interaction.

Within Catholic theology, *inculturation* refers to the adaptation of Christianity into local cultural contexts while maintaining theological continuity (Schreier 1985). Rather than demanding cultural uniformity, Christianity assumes forms that resonate with local societies through language, architecture, music, dress, and artistic expression. From this perspective, the monastery-like architecture of Mary Mother of God Church and its Tibetan-inspired visual language may be understood as attempts to express Catholicism through culturally familiar Himalayan forms.

Syncretism, by contrast, generally refers to the blending of religious beliefs or practices into new hybrid systems (Stewart and Shaw 1994). In the case of Mary Mother of God Church, however, evidence suggests that theological boundaries remain largely intact. Although Buddhist visual forms appear throughout the church, Christian doctrine, liturgy, and devotional focus continue to remain central. Christ remains Christ, Mary remains Mary, and biblical narratives retain their theological meanings even when visually translated into Himalayan settings.

The church, therefore, appears to function less as a theological fusion of Christianity and Buddhism and more as an experiment in cultural translation. Religious forms may change, but religious identity remains recognizable.

Who Owns Sacred Symbols?

The presence of Buddhist symbols such as lotus motifs and Dharma Wheel-inspired imagery within a Catholic church raises further questions concerning symbolic ownership. Can sacred symbols belong exclusively to one religious tradition? Or do symbols acquire new meanings as they travel across cultural and historical boundaries? Religious history demonstrates that sacred borrowing is neither unusual nor historically exceptional. Architectural forms, ritual practices, artistic motifs, and symbolic representations frequently move across religious traditions and geographical settings. Christianity itself historically incorporated local architectural and artistic influences as it expanded into different parts of the world.

At Mary Mother of God Church, Buddhist visual motifs appear not as replacements for Christian theology but as forms reinterpreted within another sacred framework. The lotus, for example, may retain associations with purity and spiritual transformation while simultaneously acquiring Christian resonances. Similarly, wheel motifs embedded within Buddhist visual culture may function aesthetically within the church without necessarily reproducing Buddhist doctrinal meaning. Nevertheless, symbolic borrowing also remains ethically complex. Sacred symbols often carry deep emotional and religious significance for communities. Their use outside original religious contexts may therefore invite questions regarding legitimacy, interpretation, and respect.

Hospitality, Borrowing, or Appropriation?

The relationship between religious traditions in culturally plural societies often involves ongoing processes of exchange, adaptation, and negotiation (Bevans

2002). Some may view its architecture and symbolism as examples of interreligious openness and cultural hospitality, where Christianity respectfully engages with the visual language of Himalayan Buddhism. Others may interpret such borrowing more critically, questioning whether Christian institutions appropriate Buddhist forms without fully participating in Buddhist theological worlds. In the context of Mary Mother of God Church, its Tibetan Buddhist architectural forms, lotus motifs, wheel imageries, thangka inspired visual conventions within the borders of a Catholic Church, when viewed through contemporary scholarly debates, might appear ethically contentious. Such readings often ask whether a Christian institution can adopt the visual vocabulary of Tibetan Buddhism without getting on board the unequal relations of religious and cultural power. Yet the field material gathered at Mary Mother of God Church complicates this expectation in a specific way: the language of appropriation; this does not emerge from the local voices encountered through this study. Instead, respondents repeatedly described the church through familiarity rather than offence or cultural dispossession.

Mr. Nirmal Shankar recalled Buddhist lamas and anis walking around the church with their thengnga/mala, having taken the space for a gumba. Mr. Richard Shen similarly understood its architecture as an attempt to make Christianity recognizable within the Himalayan cultural environment rather than as an effort to disguise or misrepresent the church. Most strikingly, Buddhist visitors continue to circumambulate the building, carrying prayer beads and prayer wheels (mani khorlo), reciting Om Maani Padme Hung. These encounters suggest the church's visual proximity to Buddhist sacred architecture doesn't necessarily produce a local demand for clearly policed religious boundaries. Therefore, the more revealing question is not simply whether the church constitutes cultural appropriation but rather why appropriation doesn't emerge as a significant local category in the material gathered here. It rather offers insight

into the particular character of religious pluralism in Kalimpong. In a landscape historically shaped by the proximity of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and indigenous traditions, religious difference may coexist with shared aesthetic and cultural vocabularies. MMGC consequently suggests a form of lived pluralism in which cultural forms can cross religious boundaries without those boundaries necessarily disappearing.

The absence of an appropriation controversy at the site is thus itself ethnographically meaningful: it reveals a local religious landscape in which familiarity, coexistence, and everyday negotiation may be more salient categories than ownership. The church, therefore, appears less as an external imitation of Tibetan Buddhism and more as a locally situated attempt to negotiate belonging within a Buddhist-majority cultural landscape. Rather than presenting Christianity as visually foreign, the church sought to communicate sacred familiarity through architecture and imagery recognizable to Himalayan communities.

Listening to Local Voices

Perhaps the most important perspective in understanding Mary Mother of God Church comes not from theory alone but from local interpretation. Interviews conducted during fieldwork repeatedly suggest that community members often understand the church less as a controversial act of religious borrowing and more as a meaningful expression of local identity and cultural familiarity. The observation that "people still walk around it" because they mistake it for a *gumba* reveals how architecture continues to shape religious encounter. Similarly, Shankar's explanation that sacred figures "look Tibetan, but they are Christian" captures the church's central tension between visual familiarity and theological distinction.

These perspectives suggest that the significance of Mary Mother of God Church lies not in whether it perfectly fits categories such as inculturation, syncretism, or appropriation. Instead, the church reveals how religious communities creatively negotiate

identity within culturally plural settings. Sacred forms may travel, adapt, and acquire new meanings, yet they continue to remain shaped by local experience and interpretation. Mary Mother of God Church, therefore, stands as an example of how Christianity in the Himalayas has negotiated cultural belonging through architecture, imagery, and shared visual traditions. Rather than erasing religious difference, the church demonstrates how sacred forms can become sites of dialogue, recognition, and mutual visibility within a plural religious landscape.

A Church in Conversation: Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Sacred Belonging in the Himalayas

At first glance, Mary Mother of God Church in Kalimpong appears difficult to classify. Its monastery-like architecture, Tibetan-inspired motifs, Himalayan visual language, and localized sacred imagery often lead visitors to mistake it for a Buddhist *gumba*. Yet it remains unmistakably a Catholic church in liturgy, theology, and devotional purpose. This tension between visual familiarity and religious distinction forms the central significance of the church and raises an important question: what happens when Christianity adopts the cultural language of another religious landscape?

This study has shown that Mary Mother of God Church represents more than an architectural curiosity or aesthetic experiment. Situated within the culturally plural environment of Kalimpong, the church emerged through a process of engagement with a Himalayan world deeply shaped by Tibetan Buddhism. The historical setting of Kalimpong as a zone of migration, trade, missionary encounter, and Tibetan cultural presence provided conditions in which religious forms could interact, adapt, and acquire new meanings. The vision of Father Emmanuel Jex-Collet further demonstrates how religious imagination shaped this encounter. Remembered through local narratives, Father Jex-Collet appears to have envisioned a sacred space capable of communicating Christianity through

culturally familiar forms. The church's architecture, built through local craftsmanship and shaped by Himalayan aesthetics, reflects an effort to make Catholic sacred space visually meaningful within a Buddhist-majority environment.

The study also highlights the importance of visual adaptation. Representations of Christ, Mother Mary, and saints in Tibetan and Himalayan forms reveal how Christian imagery was culturally translated rather than theologically transformed. As reflected in Nirmal Shankar's observation that sacred figures "look Tibetan, but they are Christian," the church negotiates a delicate balance between local familiarity and religious continuity. Similarly, the localization of the Stations of the Cross demonstrates how biblical narratives may become culturally proximate without losing theological meaning.

At the same time, the church complicates simple categories such as inculturation, syncretism, or appropriation. While Buddhist architectural and symbolic forms are visibly present, Christian doctrine remains intact. The church, therefore, functions less as a site of religious fusion and more as an example of sacred negotiation, where visual and cultural adaptation create spaces of encounter rather than erasure. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Mary Mother of God Church lies in how people continue to experience it. The fact that visitors still occasionally circumambulate the church, mistaking it for a *gumba*, reveals that sacred architecture shapes not only perception but also embodied practice. Such moments of ambiguity are not failures of religious identity but evidence of the church's unusual position within the Himalayan religious landscape.

By examining Mary Mother of God Church through architecture, visual culture, oral narratives, and local perceptions, this study contributes to broader discussions on religious adaptation, cultural translation, and interreligious encounter in the Himalayan region. Mary Mother of God Church ultimately succeeds not because it dissolves the boundaries between

Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism, but because it transforms those boundaries into spaces of conversation. Through architecture, imagery, and localized sacred expression, the church demonstrates how religious traditions can remain distinct while engaging one another within a shared cultural landscape. In doing so, it offers an important example of how sacred belonging in the Himalayas may emerge through dialogue, adaptation, and the continual negotiation of cultural and religious identities.

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All photographs reproduced in this article were taken by Tenzin Nyima Bhutia, corresponding author, during fieldwork at Mary Mother of God Church, Kalimpong. Permission to access the church premises and photograph its interior, murals, and architectural features was obtained during the course of the research.

The murals reproduced in the article, including the image of Mother Mary seated on a lotus with St Peter's Basilica and Mary Mother of God Church depicted below, were painted by the late Mr Michael Shen. Permission to reproduce photographs of these murals for publication in *HIMALAYA* was subsequently granted by his son, Mr Richard Shen.

The authors confirm that the photograph proposed for the cover of *HIMALAYA*, Volume 45, Issue 1, was taken by Tenzin Nyima Bhutia. Mr Richard Shen has also granted permission for the mural depicted in the photograph to be reproduced for the journal cover.

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