Christianity in India: Faith in a Multi-religious Milieu

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Let us begin with an invocation to Christ, "the Light of World." What you see on the screen [**visual: Christ the Guru**] is the image of Christ the Guru as envisioned by an Indian artist.

OM jagat jyoti yesu bhagawan
Nawya sanatana tawa satya rupam
Bhuwil jwalikkum prabha jiwa nalam
Om Jagat jyoti, namo, namo.[1]

OM, Lord Jesus, the light of the world
Your true image is ever new and eternal
You are the effulgent, life-giving light that shines on earth
OM, light of the world, homage, homage.

In the cold winter months of 1990, I started attending classes at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I was new to America, and was going through a tremendous experience of cultural disjuncture. Feeling lonely among a group of brilliant students, I was struggling to follow the American accent of my professor. One of my class mates, Robert, understood my predicament and tried to help me by revisiting the topics discussed in the class and by bringing up topics that I was comfortable with such as Indian classical music and religions, including Judaism which is Robert's religion. We developed an intellectual friendship and spent many hours discussing music, philosophy,

and religion. One day, during the conversation, Robert asked me a question, an intriguing question: "So, Joseph, what is your real Indian name?" There was a silence for a few seconds. At first, I did not understand the implications in the question. I never thought of my "Indian" name. I never thought I had a name that was not Indian. I guessed the underlying assumption was that India is a Hindu country and that I must have had a Hindu name that I changed before going to America. From the expression on my face Robert realized there was something wrong. I said, "Joseph *is* my Indian name." The question, which initially was embarrassing to me, led to several conversations during which I explained how Christianity in India is possibly as old as Christianity itself and how Eastern and Western forms of Christianity have continued to survive in India for several centuries.

I often encounter Catholics who ask very innocently, whether it was my father who converted to Christianity or my grandfather. Here again, the underlying presumption is that Christianity is a recent phenomenon in India. Over the years, I have learned not to be offended by these questions.

When you are in a foreign land for the first time, you encounter not only "others," but also, in the process of finding others, you encounter yourself. So, you ask questions about yourself and your relevance. I had to prove to Robert that I come from a culture with a long history that was fascinating to the Western world, that even before the conquest of Alexander the Great the Greeks were attracted by Indian philosophy and sent students

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[1] Text by John Manavalan; music by Anto Amarnad; source: *Christian Bhajans* (LP

there, that Columbus and Vasco de Gama and those who supported their adventures knew how important it was to get to India to avoid Arab middle men in the spice trade, and that we still carry the burden of Columbus' ignorance by calling the original inhabitants of this land "Indians." I would tell Robert that when Columbus set sail to India, he was going through an unknown route to a well-known land and its people and religions, including Christianity. Because, Marco Polo in his travelogue had already mentioned his visit to the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle, in Chennai (Madras) on the southwest coast of India. I would also remind Robert that America had a "party" in Boston that augmented the struggle for independence from the British with tea brought from India, and that Martin Luther King Jr. drew his inspiration for the struggle for freedom for the Black people from the non-violent approach of Mahatma Gandhi.

Our concern this morning is to understand the religious dimension of the composite culture of contemporary India, with special reference to the various Christian practices that are integral to the religious mosaic of the country. Therefore, most of what I am going to share with you is what I shared with Robert in the course of several conversations. The experience in this session may help you to ask informed questions and build intelligent conversations with those Christians you meet in your ministry or work place. It may also provide you with a better understanding of the Christian institutions in India that you serve with funds raised through your efforts. Further, it may encourage you to travel to this mystic land of many faiths to experience first hand the Eastern and Western forms of Christianity that have survived the test of time in a multireligious

record) by Joseph J. Palackal, Deccan Records, Bangalore (1979).

milieu. For a religious minded traveler there are several centers of Christian pilgrimages in India; for a curious traveler there is art, architecture, music, and dance of various Christian communities to feast one's eyes, ears, and intellect; and a socially sensitive traveler can see how different religions can be woven smoothly into a single social fabric.

India and St. Thomas the Apostle

Christians in India constitute a diverse set of communities differentiated in terms of race, language, region, and even caste. There are about thirty million Christians in India; about seven million of them identify themselves as St. Thomas Christians. Tradition holds that St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus, arrived at Kodungalloor (Cranganore), in Kerala, in AD 52; he preached the new Way (maarggam) to the Hindus and established several Christian communities in the region; from Kerala he went to the adjacent region now known as Tamil Nadu, preached the gospel there, and died a martyr in Chennai, in AD 72. At the dawn of the Christian era, a journey from the Middle East to India was possible because there were trade routes established between West Asia and the East. The land route reached North India, and the sea route touched what was known as the Malabar Coast (Kerala) and other parts of South India. The local tradition about the mission and martyrdom of St. Thomas is corroborated by writings from the Christian West in the early centuries. That is why Marco Polo included South India in his itinerary. He visited Kerala in 1293. He described pilgrimages of Christians and Muslims to the tomb of St. Thomas. He himself visited the tomb that year. [**visual: the shrine at Kodungalloor**]. What you see on the screen is the St. Thomas Shrine at Kodungalloor, the port town where St. Thomas is believed to have landed. The town has been a place of

pilgrimage not only for Christians, but also for people of other faiths. This town is important in the Jewish history, too. Kodungalloor was the first home for Jews who migrated to India after the destruction of the second temple [**visual: the St. Thomas Cathedral in Chennai**]. The Saint Thomas Cathedral in Chennai is built at the place where the Saint was buried. [**visual: the postage stamp**] In 1972, the government of India issued a postage stamp to commemorate the nineteenth death centenary of the Saint. The stamp shows the drawing of what is known as the Persian cross (more about it later) at Chennai. Probably, the government decided to use the image of this cross from circa seventh century because it is one of the earliest material evidences to the presence of Christian communities in India.

The St. Thomas Christians celebrate their patron saint through festivals, liturgies, songs and dances. I shall sing one of those songs. This is an invocation to St. Thomas and Jesus Christ (in that particular order) sung on auspicious occasions such as weddings.

> Mar thomman nanmayalonnu tutangunnu
> Nannay warenameyinnu
> Uttamanaya misha tiruwullam
> Unmaiyezhunnalka wenam[2]
>
> [We] begin with the blessings of St. Thomas
> May every thing go well this day
> The benevolent Christ's well wishes
> May lovingly descend [up on us].

The song text is in Malayalam, the language of Kerala. But if you listen closely, there are two Aramaic words in this stanza. St. Thomas and Jesus Christ are referred to by the

original Aramaic form of their name or title. In the first verse St. Thomas is referred to as *mār thōmā*, which in Aramaic means "holy Thomas," and in the third verse Jesus is referred to as *mishia*, which in Hebrew and Aramaic means "the anointed one." Aramaic was the mother tongue of Jesus. It is the language in which Jesus and his disciples preached the gospel. And you may have noticed that the melody has a Middle Eastern flavor. How did this mixing of Indian and Middle Eastern languages and musical modes happen? To answer that question we need to trace the story of migrations of Christians from Persia.

The Persian connection

The connection between Christianity in India and the churches in the Middle East began very early with sporadic migrations of small Christian communities from Persia (present-day Iran and Iraq). A group of Christians under the leadership of a merchant called Thomas Kinayi is believed to have arrived in Kerala in AD 345. Thomas Kinayi seems to have been the first direct historically identifiable link between the remnants of the Christian community established by St Thomas in India and the Church in Persia. (There is an endogamous community of Christians in Kerala, known as Knanaya, which traces direct lineage to Thomas Kinay). Another historically identifiable migration of Christians from Persia took place in the ninth century. The Middle Eastern connection is corroborated by the fact that the St. Thomas Christians are referred to, even today, as *nazrani*, a term used for Christians in Persia.

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[2] P. U. Lukas, *Purathanappattukal* (Kottayam, 1980, p. 1).

The earliest material evidence in India to the Persian connection comes by way of several granite crosses with inscriptions in Sassanian-Pahlavi or Middle Persian on them. These crosses were carved some time in the seventh or the eighth century. [**Visual: Persian cross 1 at Kottayam**]. The cross at Kottayam Valiyapally has inscriptions in Sassanian Pahlavi.

History tells us that the immigrant Christians and their local counter parts (i. e., Hindu converts to Christianity) found a way of smooth coexistence through social and cultural interactions and intermarriages. The Indian Christians received bishops from Persia and acknowledged the Chaldean Patriarch as their spiritual leader.

The Syriac liturgy in South India

The immigrant Christians from Persia brought the Chaldean liturgy in Syriac to South India. The earliest evidence to the use of Syriac in a Christian context in South India is in the inscriptions on the granite crosses, mentioned earlier, known as Persian crosses. Some of these crosses have inscriptions in Sassanian-Pahlavi at the top and in Syriac at the bottom. [**Visual: the Persian cross 2 at Kottayam**]. The cross you see here is also at Valiyapally, Kottayam. The text of the inscription at the bottom in Syriac is taken from Gal. 6:4 ("But as for me, I have nothing on which to boast on, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ").

The St. Thomas Christians continue to preserve the Syriac language in their liturgies and other areas of everyday life. For that reason, they are also known as "Syrian Christians"

or, more appropriately, "Syriac Christians." Let me sing the Our Father in Syriac that I

recorded in Kerala in 1999, for the CD *Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India*,

released by PAN Records, Netherlands [**visual: front cover of the CD**].

U'al ar'ā ślāmmā w'sawrā thāwā lawnaynāśā
 b'kolendān l'ālmīn āmēn awūn d'waśmayyā.

Netqandaś śmāk tēte malkutāk qandis qandis
  qandiśat awūn d'wasmayyā.

Damlēn śmayyā w'ar'ā rambut suwhak
  īre w'nasā qāyēn lāk qandis qandis
  qandiśat awūn d'wasmayyā.

And on earth peace and good hope to men
Always and for ever, amen,
Our Father who art in heaven.

Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.
Holy, holy, thou art holy, our Father who art in heaven.

Heaven and earth are filled with the greatness of thy glory.
Angels and men cry to thee, "holy, holy, thou art holy;"
Our Father who art in heaven.

The chant that you just heard contains some of the exact words that Jesus used when he

taught his disciples: *awun d' wasmayya, nestaqandas smak, tete malkutak*, etc. Kerala is

one of the few places in the world where the language of Jesus is preserved. It may be

worthwhile for international agencies to treat this language as part of the human heritage

and make efforts to document it for future generations.

I want to conclude the first part of this presentation by reiterating the fact that

Christianity was established in South India in the early Christian era and that Christians

lived in harmony with their Hindu neighbors sharing many local customs and practices.

When the Portuguese arrived in Kerala at the close of the fifteenth century, they were

pleasantly surprised by the presence of a flourishing Christian community that claimed an

Apostolic origin of their faith.

Vasco de Gama

Vasco de Gama arrived in Kerala in 1498. De Gama made two more trips to Kerala in

1502 and 1524. During his third and final trip, de Gama died in Cochin in 1524 and was

buried there. The missionaries who arrived with him established churches in Cochin for

the Portuguese merchants and soldiers and for the new converts to Christianity from the

local Hindus and Muslims. Liturgy in these churches was celebrated in the Roman rite.

This is the beginning of the Western form of Christianity and Latin liturgy in India.

The Portuguese conquered Goa on the western coast in 1510. They converted a large

number of Hindus and Muslims to the Christian faith and established churches and

institutions there. Goa remained a Portuguese colony until 1961. The church architecture,

art, language, and music and dance of Goa are testimonies to the interaction between the

Indian and Portuguese cultures. They continue to attract domestic and foreign tourists.

St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552)

Goa was the first stop of the young, zealous Jesuit, St. Francis Xavier, one of the greatest

missionaries of the Catholic Church. He arrived in Goa in 1542 and worked hard to

evangelize as many people as possible. From there he traveled to the southern part of

India and Sri Lanka. He wanted to evangelize China. However, he died on his way to China, but his body was brought back to Goa where it is preserved in tact. The body is exhibited for public veneration every ten years. Thus, Goa has become a pilgrim center for Catholics around the world [**visuals: Basilica of Bom Jesus, Goa**].

The Roman Catholic religion introduced by the Portuguese and later enhanced by the efforts of zealous Western and indigenous missionaries flourished in India during the last four centuries. Today, there are 116 Roman Catholic dioceses spread all over India.

The churches built or rebuilt by the Portuguese from the early 16th century show considerable influence of European art and architecture. [**Visuals: church architecture**]

The Protestant Mission in India

The history of the Protestant mission in India begins in 1706 with the establishment of the Lutheran mission in Tamil Nadu by Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutscher under the patronage of King Frederick IV of Denmark. In 1823, Scottish and Irish Presbyterians established centers in Maharashtra and Gujarat. In 1834, American Congregationalists opened stations in South India. In 1854, the Church Missionary Society of England extended its activities to North India. In 1855, the American Presbyterians started their mission in Punjab. At present, the various Protestant missions are run mostly by leaders from India.

St. Thomas Christians and the Portuguese

Although the Portuguese were happy to find Christians in South India, the initial exuberance faded when they realized that the local Christians followed a liturgy different from theirs in a language quite different from Latin and professed allegiance to the Chaldean Patriarch. Also, the missionaries could not comprehend how the St. Thomas Christians shared many customs and practices of their Hindu neighbors, including the caste system. The missionaries wanted the St. Thomas Christians to sever their connections to the Chaldean Patriarch and adopt the Western form of Catholic religion, which they truly believed was the authentic form. The missionaries also wanted to substitute the Eastern liturgy in Syriac with the Roman liturgy in Latin. However, the local Christians strongly objected because they were particularly attached to Syriac language and took pride in preserving the language that Jesus spoke. Conflicts of ideologies and allegiances led to the first of many divisions among the St. Thomas Christians in 1653. One group resisted the religious hegemony of the Portuguese missionaries and subsequently professed their allegiance to the Antiochene Patriarch. Slowly, they shifted from the Chaldean to Antiochene (Syrian Orthodox) liturgy. The group that sided with the Portuguese missionaries continued their Chaldean liturgy in Syriac with many elements adapted from the Latin rite. Further divisions took place among the St. Thomas Christians in the subsequent centuries so that at present there are eight independent Churches among them. Two of these churches follow the Chaldean liturgy and the others follow the Antiochene liturgy. Among the Syriac Churches in India, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malankara Church are in communion with Rome, i. e., they accept the primacy of the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

Until the 1960s, the various churches of the St. Thomas Christians celebrated the liturgies only in Syriac. Since then, the liturgies are celebrated mostly in the vernacular. During the process of vernacularization, the translators decided to retain the melodies of the original text and adjusted the vernacular text to the melody and rhythm of the Syriac chants. Thus, in the Syriac churches in India and the churches of the expatriate Syriac Christians in America one can listen to ancient melodies that originated in the Middle East sung with vernacular texts from India. Let me sing one chant. I shall sing the first stanza of a chant *Qambel Maran*, first with the original Syriac text followed by the text in Malayalam.

Syriac

Qambel māran hān qurbānā 1'el baśmayyā
d'qarew awdāk b'haymānutā w'lembā dakya.[3]

Malayalam

Kaiko*ll*aname hrudayangamam

Wiswāsamotē dasan cheyyum
Baliyen nādha thirusannidhiyil[4]
Accept, O Lord, this offering,
Which thy servant offers with faith
And a pure heart, into the heaven above.

Christianity in Contemporary India

Christianity in contemporary India is neither purely Western, nor purely Eastern, nor completely Indian, but a combination of all the three. Religious and cultural contacts with West Asia, Europe, and America have shaped the

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[3] Joseph J. Palackal, *Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India* (PAN Records, Netherlands, 2002, track 14)
[4] Malayalam translation by Fr. Abel Periyappuram.

history of Christianity in India. In the process, Christians have absorbed

elements from all these cultures and reshaped them in the crucible of the all-

embracing Indian culture. The image of Blessed Mother Theresa, a

European woman wrapped in a saree is but one symbol of the cultural

confluence in Indian Christianity. In a Roman Catholic Church in Bombay

one can listen to the latest hymns in English as well as Sanskrit bhajans, a

Hindu devotional musical genre, sung with Christian text. There has been an

attempt to interpret Christian themes in Indian terms. The chant that I sang

in the beginning of the session included the sacred syllable OM from the

Sanskrit tradition, dating back to the first millennium BC. The picture that

was projected on the screen showed Jesus as teacher in a Buddhist posture. The picture

shows the Christ Church at Guna in Madhya Pradesh. The architecture shows influences

from the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim traditions. In many places Hindus participate

in Christian festivals and make pilgrimages to the sacred sites of the Christians.

Personally speaking, I grew up watching my Hindu neighbors taking an active part in the

celebration of the principal feast of my parish, St. Mary's Forane Church at Pallippuram,

in Kerala. According to the local tradition, this church was established in the early

Christian era. [**visual close up of angel playing the violin**]. The artwork above the altar

shows the crowning of Mary in heaven and six angels playing Western musical

instruments on the occasion. Obviously, the present altar was built or rebuilt during the

Portuguese era. The principal feast of the parish is the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

celebrated on August 15. [**visual: percussion ensemble leading the procession**].This

picture was taken on the feast day in 2001. The occasion is the grand procession, which is

one of the highlights of the festival. Following the Portuguese tradition, the cross bearer walks in front of the procession. However, it is the percussion ensemble that leads the procession placing themselves in front of the cross. What is interesting here is that these performers are all Hindus who belong to a particular caste of musicians. And they have their own repertories that they play during Hindu and Christian festivals alike.

The next picture [**visual: church at Chennai**] is another example of religio-cultural fusion. It shows the interior of St. Thomas Cathedral in Chennai. Christ is shown standing on a lotus flower. Lotus is the national flower of India. Lotus also has religious significance because the Buddha and several Hindu deities are often depicted as sitting on the lotus flower. In this picture, instead of sitting, Jesus is shown standing on the flower. The posture indicates that, unlike the Buddha, the Christ resurrected from the dead. There is another important detail in the picture that deserves attention. Two peacocks flank the statue of the resurrected Christ, one on each side. Peacock is the national bird of India. It also is a symbol for St. Thomas. The place where St. Thomas was martyred is called Mylapore, which means "the town of peacocks." Traditionally, altars dedicated to St. Thomas are often decorated with pictures or carvings of peacocks.

Pope John Paul II drew the attention of the international community to the Catholic Church in India by beatifying two nuns and a priest. In 2003, the Pope beatified Mother Theresa of Calcutta. The beatification ceremony took place in Rome. In 1986, during his visit to Kerala, the Pope beatified two members of the Syro-Malabar Church of the St. Thomas Christians: Blessed Cyriac Elias Chavara, one of the three founders of the first indigenous religious congregation known as the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate and

Blessed Alphonsa, a sister of the Franciscan Clarist Congregation. Their burial places are attracting pilgrims from around world.

Conclusion

Christianity in India, like India itself, is a unity in diversity. For the last few minutes we have been trying to understand the complex history of religious and cultural interactions between India, the Middle East, Europe, and America that have shaped the self and identity of Christians in India. An awareness of that history may be helpful to better understand the growing expatriate communities of Christians of Indian origin in America. Contrary to the common understanding, Christianity in India is not just an offshoot of Christianity in the West. India is home for some of the earliest Christian liturgical, linguistic, and musical traditions in the world and is a fascinating place for visit to learn, experience, and expand ones concept of Christianity itself.

Finally, since we started this session with a conversation about my "real" name, I think I should solve the riddle before I take leave (This is a *Turandot* moment!). My real name (i. e., my baptismal name) is *Yawsep*, the Aramaic form of "Joseph."

Concluding bhajan (in Sanskrit)

Martyaputram dewaputram
Naramapyanaram param
Kanya putram jagat tatam
Jatamapyajameeswaram

(Kristum kanyasutam wande)[5]

Son of God [thou art] and son of man
Human though, the absolute, above man
Son of the virgin, spring of the world,
The born, yet unborn Lord,
(I bow to thee, Christ, son of the Virgin)[6]

[**visual: Christ the Guru**].

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[5] Text by Chev. I. C. Chacko (1876-1966); music by Anto Amarnad; source: Joseph J. Palackal, *Christu Sahasra Namam* (pre-recorded cassette, Deccan Records, Bangalore, 1985).
[6] Translation by V. F. Vineeth.

Subscript for photos

* St. Thomas Pontifical Shrine at Kodungalloor, Kerala.

- The St. Thomas Cathedral in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.
- Postage stamp issued by the Government of India in 1972 on the occasion of the 19th death centenary of St. Thomas the Apostle.
- Persian cross with inscriptions in Sassanian-Pahlavi. Valiyapally, Kottayam, Kerala.
- Persian cross with inscriptions in Syriac at the bottom. Valiyapally, Kottayam, Kerala.
- Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa.
- Christ Church at Guna, Madhya Pradesh
- Six angels playing Western musical instruments. St. Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Kerala.
- Close up of angel playing the violin.
- Hindu musicians leading the procession.
- Church (name ?) at Chennai.