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The Syrian Church of Malabar

Its Contribution to the Church in India

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I

Whatever be the verdict of history upon the claim¹ made by the Syrian Church of Malabar to its apostolic foundation, there is little doubt that from the very early centuries of the Christian Era there was a small but flourishing community of Christians in the south-west corner of India. They were known to the world outside in the earlier centuries by different names, such as 'Thomas Christians' and 'Syrian Christians' and it is the descendants of this body of Christians that mostly constitute the present Syrian Church of Malabar. That Church is one of the smaller historic churches of Christendom. The vicissitudes it has passed through no less than the distinctive features of its church life give it a unique place among the churches in India. The land of Kerala consisting of the United State of Travancore-Cochin and the adjoining district of Malabar, the home of the Syrian Church of Malabar for several centuries past, has the distinction of being one of the few areas in India where the Christian Church reckoned as an integral part of the landscape counts for much in the life and outlook of the people as a whole, Christian as well as non-Christian. Christians in Travancore who form approximately a third of its population are by no means to be considered a negligible minority in that region as in certain other parts of India. We are however concerned in this article not so much with the Syrians as a community as with the Syrian Church, on the one hand in its relation to other churches, and on the other to the culture and traditions of the people of India among whom it has its existence.

The Syrian Church is a generic term describing a church which at one time existed as a single and undivided unit but which has since the 16th century been split up into different sections. In one sense therefore, it would be more correct in the circumstances that prevail today to speak of the Syrian Churches than of the Syrian Church. We shall however continue to speak of the church in the singular and treat the various sections as but branches of the one and the same tree.

Apart from the numerous body of the Syrians who pledged obedience to the Pope under political proselytizing pressure from the Church of

¹ See *The South Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas*, by K. N. Daniel. Pub. Church History Association of India, Serampore. Price Rs.1/8/-.

Rome in the 16th century and who since then have been reinforced by converts of various Roman Missions from the West, there are the non-Roman Syrian Christians constituted at present into two main bodies, known popularly as the Jacobite¹ and the Mar Thoma² sections of the Syrian Church. The former is by far the larger section and embraces within it certain minor divisions including distinctive church groups such as the Independent Church of Thozhiyur in the District of Malabar and the Sudhist or the Knanaya³ Church mainly found in Travancore. The main body of the Jacobites is threatened at present with a split over the question of the jurisdiction of the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch over the temporalities of the Church. Of the two parties who are engaged in fighting this out in the law courts, one swears unquestioning allegiance to the supremacy of the Patriarch, while the other stands for local autonomy in administration for the church in Malabar with a Catholicos at the head. The latter prefers to call itself the Orthodox Syrian Church—a name which they hold is the proper appellation for themselves and those who are championing the Patriarch's cause. The other party continues to call itself the Jacobite Syrian Church and insists on closer relations with the Patriarch of Antioch. It must be borne in mind, however, that as regards doctrine and dogma there is hardly any difference between the various sections of the Jacobite or the Orthodox Church. The Independent Church of Thozhiyur⁴ stands in a class by itself. In point of doctrine and ritual it has spiritual affinity with the main stream of Jacobite thought while in the matter of order it maintains friendly relations with the Mar Thoma Church. Over against the Jacobite or the Orthodox section stands the Mar Thoma Church which is entirely independent of the See of Antioch and in point of doctrine has an emphasis that is evangelical, though in worship as well as in other matters it has much in common with other sections of the Syrian Church.⁵ It may be added here in order to complete the picture that there are other sections of the Church in Kerala, such as the three dioceses of the Church of South India—North Kerala, Central Travancore and South Travancore—in which also, especially in the second there are varying proportions of Syrian Christians who at one time belonged to the Syrian Church.

II

We may now proceed to discuss the subject of the contribution of the Syrian Church to the Church in India under the following four heads—Self-support, Evangelism, Social Action and Ecumenism.

¹ *The Orthodox (Jacobite) Syrian Church—Catholicos Party.* H.H. The Catholicos and 5 Bishops for 5 dioceses. Priests 300 (?), monks 7, Deacons 65, Parishes 400 (approximately), Sunday Schools 300, Religious Communities 3, Evangelistic Institutions 2.

The Orthodox (Jacobite) Syrian Church—Patriarch's Party. Priests 380, Deacons 55, Parishes 425, Monasteries 6, Theological Seminaries 6, Bishops 5.

Members of the above two Churches half-a-million approximately.

² *The Mar Thoma Syrian Church.* Metropolitan 1, Bishop 1, Parishes 346, Ministers 170, Members (approximately) 2 lakhs, Sunday Schools 540.

³ *The Sudhist or the Knanaya Church.* Bishop 1, Parishes 27, Priests 33, Members 30,000.

⁴ *The Malabar Independent Syrian Church, Thozhiyur, South Malabar.* Bishop 1, Parishes 6, Priests 4, Deacons 3, Members about 2,000.

The Chaldaen Syrian Church (Trichur). Priests 4, Deacons 7, Parishes 12, Members 12,000, Bishop 1.

⁵ All the sections of the Syrian Church use a common liturgy—the liturgy of St. James—either in Syriac or in Malayalam.

(i) *Self-support*.—One of the things of which the Syrian Church may justly be proud is that in all its sections the Church is entirely self-supporting. It does not receive any foreign subsidy to carry on its work or to support its ministry. To churches planted by Western missions in other parts of India, which are in many cases still dependent on funds from the West, the phenomenon of a church that is purely indigenous and entirely self-supporting should prove to be a source of inspiration and encouragement. The chief sources of income for the Syrian Church are endowments in property, fees charged for spiritual ministrations and voluntary gifts. Some of these items may not commend themselves to those who do not believe in a cash nexus in the spiritual ministrations of the church. The Mar Thoma Church, it may be pointed out, had serious misgivings in this regard some years ago and as a result has now completely switched over to voluntary giving, abandoning the security that is provided by a system of compulsory payment of fees imposed by the church. When the change came the ministers were in sore straits for some time, but the people rose to the occasion and are now fully convinced of the rightness of the step that was taken and are consequently alive to their responsibilities. This shows that self-support can be achieved provided the incentives are there. The greatest incentive, of course, should be the conviction on the part of every member that his church is an instrument in God's hands for the salvation of men and that it is a privilege for him to take his share in equipping the church for this great task.

(ii) *Evangelism*.—The record of the Syrian Church over the centuries in the matter of evangelism is not one that reflects credit on itself or inspires much confidence in others. In this respect the experience of the Syrian Church may serve as a warning to other churches in India. Set in the midst of an overwhelmingly non-Christian population, the Church began to adjust itself to its environment and did it so perfectly that the edge of its missionary obligation was blunted beyond recognition. The members of the Church were concerned more with their social standing than with the obedience to the Master's last command. The result was that the Syrian Christians were for many centuries not only indifferent to evangelism but did hardly consider it as a part of their Christian duty and privilege. Contact with Western Missions, particularly the C.S.M. and the L.M.S. who started work in Travancore in the early decades of the 19th century has brought about a welcome change in the outlook of the Syrian Church. Educational institutions also like the Madras Christian College, Serampore College and Bishop's College, Calcutta, deserve honourable mention in this connection. We find today certain sections of the Syrian Church actively engaged in evangelistic work both in and outside Travancore. The Orthodox Church has three ashrams under its auspices—two in Travancore and one at Tadagam in Coimbatore District and all three are active centres of evangelistic work. A missionary order¹ founded in 1924 by a graduate of Serampore College has been the means of bringing into the Orthodox Church as many as 19,000 converts from the backward communities within the last 28 years. The Mar Thoma Church awakened earlier to

¹ The order of the Servants of the Cross founded by Remban M. P. Petros of Cochin.

its missionary obligation, founded an evangelistic association in 1888, and has been carrying on vigorous missionary work in and outside Travancore during the last fifty years. It is associated very closely with the National Missionary Society of India, and has several ashrams and mission fields, in which the devotion and zeal of its young men and women is much in evidence. There is a group of young men who are at present planning a mission to Nepal, a land where the preaching of the Gospel is still forbidden. While there is much to admire in the self-sacrificing devotion to the missionary cause on the part of some zealous members belonging to the present generation of the Syrian Church, it must in all humility be admitted that the Church cannot be said to have developed any new technique or made an outstanding contribution in any way to the evangelistic task of the Church in India. But it has proved an excellent imitator and any special contribution it has made may perhaps be found in its wholehearted espousal of the ashram method of evangelism. Another thing that may be mentioned in this connection is the witness of a dedicated life illustrated by some of the illustrious sons of the Syrian Church such as Mar Gregorias, Bishop, ascetic and saint, Sadhu Kochunju, ascetic and preacher, Bishop Abraham, preacher and leader in evangelism, and K. C. Chacko, Professor and a man of prayer, faith and vision.

(iii) *Social Action*.—The Syrian Church, like other long-established churches, has in the past generally been identified with vested interests, more perhaps through inertia than of deliberate choice. But in recent years, partly as a result of the national movement for political freedom under Gandhiji's leadership and partly as a result of a renewed study of the Bible, the challenge of social justice has stirred hitherto slumbering consciences and made them sensitive to the exploitation of man by man in the economic and social spheres of life. Customs and practices which were once taken for granted are now being questioned, and in many cases abandoned. The Prohibition Movement, the Peace Movement associated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Movement for Communal Harmony have found able and convinced advocates amongst the members of the Syrian Church and have made some headway in areas in Kerala where the leaders as well as the rank and file of the church members have caught a new vision of the Kingdom of God and have come into intimate personal contact with Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour as the result of a spiritual revival in the Church. The famous Maramon Convention under the influence of speakers like Dr. G. Sherwood Eddy in earlier years and Dr. Stanley Jones at the present time has been a great force in emphasizing the social application of Christian principles. To take a recent instance, at the last meeting of the Maramon Convention held in February, 1952, at the instance of Dr. Jones, a seven-point programme was adopted, which when implemented, is sure to bring about a great change in the social habits and practices of the people. Not only social service and social reform but social action, too, on the basis of Christian principles has been envisaged by some of the progressive forces in the Syrian Church.

In this connection the work of the Youth Christian Council of Action associated with the Christavasram at Manganam, Kottayam, deserves honourable mention. This group consisting of a few keen Christian young men and women was called into being in the dark days im-

mediately before Independence (1947) when a Dewan of the State of Travancore proved to be a veritable nightmare for the Church in this small state. The Y.C.C.A. promotes the study of social and economic problems facing the Church and the country, and tries to organize public opinion along constructive Christian channels. It has conducted surveys on 'caste', 'dowry' and 'litigation' within the Christian community and has thereby focussed attention on these evils. 'The Council has been striving' in the words of its General Secretary, 'to bring home to the Christian community the message of Jesus that in political or in any other field the only way to save its life is to lose itself in the service of others—not in seeking its own rights and privileges'. The Y.C.C.A. may not have many achievements to its credit so far, but the very fact of its existence is full of promise for the Church in Kerala. It is a standing challenge to the social conscience of the Church in Malabar.

(iv) Lastly, it remains for us to see what the attitude of the Syrian Church is in regard to the problem of Ecumenism. From the fact that the Syrian Church of Malabar has been brought into contact with various churches, Eastern and Western, in the course of its long history, and yet remained geographically far removed from the scenes of the theological battles of the church in general, we may expect that Church to be in a favourable position to act as a bridge between churches and denominations which have been pulled asunder by the accident of history or geography. Such expectations may also be strengthened by the thought that the Syrian Church in a heroic moment of its history marshalled all its forces and stoutly resisted the claims of the Roman hierarchy to order the Church about in the matter of faith and order. The reference, of course, is to the famous Coonen Cross declaration of 1653, a declaration that is on a par with some of the Western manifestoes against Papal autocracy. The Church then stood unequivocally for its autonomy, and if the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper (1599) are any guide, one may add, also, for a faith that was evangelical without being sectarian and catholic without being Roman. Much water has flowed under the bridge since 1653 and it is little wonder if the Syrian Church today does not stand where it did three centuries ago. The Church is now divided and sub-divided into various groups and it is not surprising that she cannot speak with one voice in regard to questions of faith and order.

In order to be realistic in our approach to the problem of ecumenism, it is necessary that we should look at the relations between the different sections of the Syrian Church on the one hand and their relation to the churches outside on the other. With regard to the former, it is sufficient for our purpose to consider the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Mar Thoma Church, leaving out of account the minor sections in the Orthodox or the Jacobite Church. These two churches have passed through various stages of mutual relationship, which in diplomatic language may be described as belligerency, armed neutrality, and correct diplomatic behaviour. It must, however, be borne in mind that individuals and groups on either side have proved that spiritual fellowship is not always conditioned by the official policies of their churches. The founding of the Alwaye Union Christian College in 1921 as a venture of faith on the part of a group of friends belonging to the Orthodox and the Mar Thoma Churches, together with an Anglican missionary, raised

great hopes towards Christian unity in Travancore. These hopes were raised to a higher pitch when representatives of the churches came together in the thirties to discuss points of agreement as well as of difference between their churches with a view to promoting closer co-operation. But for various reasons the negotiations were broken off. The present position is that one of the parties—the Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin—is an integral part of the Church of South India, and the Orthodox and the Mar Thoma Churches are much in the same position as they were about a quarter of a century ago. While there is no open rivalry between them or mutual recrimination as there existed at one time, it would be rash to say that these two Churches are working together with the utmost harmony and goodwill.

This may seem rather strange when ecumenism is in the air all over the world. It is true that representatives of the Orthodox and the Mar Thoma Churches fraternize with one another when they meet in Amsterdam, Lund or Geneva. Yet it is also true that the two Churches have not appreciably come any nearer by participation in ecumenical gatherings. There are many reasons which might explain this strange phenomenon. First of all, there is the reason that is contained in Mr. Oliver Tomkins' observation about trans-confessional trends. He says, 'It is a notable fact of recent ecumenical history that, partly because they began to know something about other people, many traditions have become much more sharply aware of themselves. . . . In differing degrees, churches which had little troubled to do so before are organizing themselves on a world-wide confessional basis'.¹ The Orthodox Church thinks that its primary duty is to foster closer union with churches in the Near East than with its neighbours next door. Secondly, the isolation in which the Syrian Church found itself for centuries has unfortunately left a legacy of stagnation and mental apathy, and it is not easy to exorcise this spirit from its policies and programmes. Thirdly, there is the weakness of internal divisions in the Jacobite Church and preoccupation with purely domestic issues. Fourthly, there is a lack of knowledge and appreciation of the theological standpoint of one's own church as well as of others so that preconceived notions of supposed correctness of dogma or practice are preferred to the give and take of theological discussions. Both the Orthodox and the Mar Thoma Churches should realize that neither orthodoxy nor evangelicalism is the monopoly of either. They should both have the humility to recognize that 'Evangelicalism is the salt of Catholicism, which purifies it and quickens it; Catholicism is the leaven of Evangelicalism, which enriches it and humanises it.' Alignment with influential churches of the same pattern is also a temptation that constantly faces smaller churches in all ecumenical circles. The chief reason, however, in the present writer's opinion, is a lack of earnest conviction about and concern for the ultimate objectives for which a church stands. If the churches in Malabar or elsewhere in India realize that the evangelization of India is their supreme duty it is bound to influence their attitude to other bodies engaged in the same task. In that case they could recognize in their supposed rivals, partners in the same heroic enterprise.

¹ Oliver Tomkins: *The Church in the purpose of God*, S.C.M. Press (1950), pp. 44-45.

We may now look at the relations to other church groups in India of these two churches, the Orthodox Church and the Mar Thoma Church. In modern times the Orthodox Church has shown great interest in promoting friendly relations with several Eastern Churches and it is now in communion with the Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Churches. Among Western churches the High Anglican section of the Church of England is, perhaps, the only branch of the Church Universal that enjoys the confidence of the Orthodox Church: yet even here it comes short of intercommunion officially approved by both Churches. The Orthodox Church is not a constituent member of the Christian Council of India, though its representatives are often invited as visitors to attend meetings of the Council. One wonders whether ecumenism like charity should not begin at home! With regard to the Mar Thoma Church it may be said that its autonomy and compactness have made it easier for the Church to enter into friendly relations with other churches. In 1937 there was established 'a measure of limited and partial intercommunion' between the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon and the Mar Thoma Church. Though the Church has not officially considered the question of organic union with other churches one gathers the impression that it is not likely to disapprove of any such union on the basis of what is known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. The Mar Thoma Church works in full co-operation with other churches in the National Christian Council and the National Missionary Society of India.

To sum up, the record of the Syrian Church in the field of ecumenism has not been an impressive one, nor is it likely to improve unless the different sections of the Church are converted to a new point of view as a result of the impact of new forces operating in the world today. Its isolationism must go and with it much of its mediaevalism on the one hand and revivalism on the other. It must turn its eyes outward and begin to realize the immensity of the task of the Christianization of India which is its God-given destiny. It must set its own house in order, not by perfecting its organization but by laying hold on spiritual values and by placing the interests of the Kingdom of God first and foremost in all its calculations and decisions. When it becomes aware of the problems confronting it—social, economic and ecumenical—it will naturally develop a sense of proportion about the values it should conserve and be able to look at ecumenism in a new light.

III

The Syrian Church is a church with great potentialities. It is an indigenous church and is deeply rooted in the cultural soil of India. Its emphasis on worship, the simplicity of living of the rank and file of its members, the loyalty that it is able to evoke in them, the sacrifices that its youth is prepared to make in its service, as shown in educational and evangelistic enterprises, its independence, the record for integrity of character that some of its members have established in the service of the State—all these are great assets which can be made to pay high dividends for the Kingdom of God in India. But on one condition only. The Church must first wake up. It must get a new vision of its destiny in the purpose of God and be prepared to surrender immediate gains and little triumphs of factions and parties in the interest of wider

conquests for the Master and His Kingdom. How will the Syrian Church respond to this challenge of the hour? Much depends on the way the youth of the Church looks at the Church and her Master. Is the Cross of Christ to the Christian young man and woman today an irrelevance in the context of world problems, or a shield for defence and shelter, or a trumpet call to action? The church awaits the answer and so does the Master.



Blessed François frequently said that the duty most important to every good Christian is constantly to be seeking to perfect himself in his own natural calling. In other words, he should perform all the duties of his calling more and more perfectly. Now the perfection of each person's calling consists in properly adapting means to their end—that is, using one's own special vocation and its conditions to cultivate that love which is the essential and true perfection of Christianity, without which all else is nothing. God's glory, which is our ultimate end, can only be attained through charity. Always think of St. Paul's words: 'Above all things have charity, which is the bond of perfection.' Charity is not only the bond binding us to God, our true perfection, but it is also the bond whereby all graces are woven together and united to their one source, God and His glory.—Jean Pierre Camus in *The Spirit of St. François de Sales*.



Those who work with a single heart unto God find joy and strength and pleasure in their efforts. Even those who are not allowed to do what they crave can hear in the prison of circumstance a midnight song of deliverance. For working unto God always constitutes a light burden and an easy yoke. When work is worship God transfigures every task with His own presence, and the pay envelope occasions no protest. The New Testament can teach us this. Some speak of that book as reactionary, that it accepts the status quo, even slavery. How much deeper is its message. Personal attitudes in work and social relations will both be transformed, not through coercives of legislation nor even through social pressure, but mainly through an indwelling grace which transforms every circumstance and every relation, the master and the slave becoming brothers of each other in the Lord. Christianity does not mean the doing away with legitimately different economic functions. These are necessary to organized industry. But Christianity brings true democracy and the true sharing of the products of labour because of its spirit of common concern under God with whom there is no respect of person. A pity it is that most people consider this spiritual and social democracy as merely a beautiful theory. Nothing can more surely bring in the classless and raceless society as a real attitude than the Christian faith in actual practice.—Nels F. S. Ferré in *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*.