

# The Way of Integration through Dialogue of Faith and Culture in Asia:

## The Case of the Syro-Malabar Church of the Saint Thomas Christians of India

Dr Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI

### O. PROLOGUE

The Church of the Saint Thomas Christians of India is believed to be founded by apostle Saint Thomas in the early years of the Christian era. The lived and living traditions of the Saint Thomas Christians eloquently express the consciousness of their apostolic origin.<sup>1</sup> "For centuries the Christian communities of southwest India have proudly called themselves 'Thomas Christians.'<sup>2</sup> The Saint Thomas Christians had a healthy and happy relationship with the East Syrian Church from very ancient times and they were celebrating the East Syrian liturgy till the time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599, which was a calculated move of Archbishop Alexis Menezes of Goa to bring the Church of Saint Thomas Christians under the yoke of Latin Church. As a result, there were a number of revolts against the forced Latinisation process and the severing of their revered and age-old relationship with the East Syrian Church. This revolt culminated in the division of the Saint Thomas Christians in 1653 with the Coonan Cross oath. Since then the Church of the Saint Thomas Christians is divided into different churches, of course with the upheavals of history. In spite of adverse circumstances and developments in the political and ecclesiastical scenario of India, there was a section of the Saint Thomas Christians who did not break up its relationship with Rome. Taking their pressing and deserving demand, Rome established the Catholic hierarchy in Malabar in 1886. This Catholics of the Saint Thomas Christians were christened as the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was erected in 1923. The visit of Eugene Cardinal Tisserant to Kerala was a turning point in the history of the apostolic church of the Saint Thomas Christians. Cardinal Tisserant observes, "I came to admire greatly the Syro-Malabar Christians, who remained constantly faithful to their religion despite centuries of adversity. My visit to them in November-December 1953 immeasurably increased this admiration."<sup>3</sup>

Another essential and fundamental feature of the Saint Thomas Christians of India is their identity and community consciousness in the appellation of *Mar Thoma Margam*,, meaning the way of Saint Thomas, or the "Law of Thomas." *Mar Thoma margam* symbolizes the way of life of the Saint Thomas Christians. It

stands for the sum total of their apostolic faith experience, liturgy, theology, spirituality, and discipline in the socio-political scenario of India. The Law of Thomas is the “icon of the Indo-Oriental identity of the Thomas Christians of India.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, “While all the Christian communities have been named after the place of their origin, the Thomas Christians are the only community known after the name of their Apostle and of Jesus of Nazareth, the core of their faith.”<sup>5</sup> Above all, “The ancient Thomas Christians were very much attached to their faith tradition centred on the very Person of Christ. There were known in history as *Nazranis*, meaning the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>6</sup> All these characteristics are at the heart of the rich heritage of the apostolic Church of Saint Thomas and they give shape to their identity consciousness.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, beautifully introduces the topic of our discussion, “The Church in Asia sings the praises of the «God of salvation» (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of the continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning.”<sup>7</sup> And “In «the fullness of time» (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian!”<sup>8</sup> It admits unequivocally the importance of Asia and the culture of Asia played in the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. In the opening paragraph, it is clearly stated “Because Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia became a land of promise and hope for all mankind. Jesus knew and loved this land. He made his own the history, the sufferings and the hopes of its people.”<sup>9</sup>

It is certain that the above lines of official acknowledgements could be considered as the point of departure as far as the subject at our hand is concerned. Asia is the cradle of Christianity, so also it is the cradle of all world religions. Jesus was an Asian in every way. Jesus followed the way of Asian ethos in revealing the loving kindness of God the Father. Jesus invited the disciples of John the Baptist to “come and see” (John 1:39), which is the hallmark of the oriental ethos as far as religious experience and life is concerned. Jesus was a man of dialogue. It is in and through the method of dialogue Jesus challenged the mindset of the people, inspired them to interiorize and radicalize ethical perspectives, and instructed about the will of God to the people of His time. Gospel narrations recount Jesus as one who was mostly walking the way. In the context of enquiry, Jesus declared Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus taught the mysteries of God and the Kingdom of God in parables and stories, which is highly Asian in style. Though Jesus criticized some of the customs and practices of the people of His time, He had great esteem for the covenantal community. The life of Jesus was in close communion with God, fellow beings, and creation. Jesus had a preference for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the outcast, etc., of His

culture. Jesus welcomed all people, also the people of other religions. He praised the belief of the people of other faiths. Indeed, Jesus is the way par excellence towards integrity of faith and dialogue in Asia.

In the early centuries of Christianity, Churches, assemblies of the faithful in the Lord, following the footsteps of the Master, presented themselves as a spiritual movement in the socio-cultural context of their existence and mission. In the recent past, there have been official attempts to recognize and to rediscover the reality of plurality, identity, and autonomy of ancient Churches of apostolic origin, which is the bedrock for the theology of ecclesial communion. In this connection, in the preamble of the *Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches*, Vatican II lays down the important considerations concerning Oriental Churches:

The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life of the Eastern Churches, for in them, distinguished as they are for their venerable antiquity, there remains conspicuous the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church.<sup>10</sup>

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that the Catholic Church is the communion of twenty-three Churches, one of which is the Latin Church; all others are Oriental Churches. The Council goes on to assert the equal dignity of each of these Churches, "They are consequently of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, also in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world (cf. Mark 16:15) under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the document declares the right and duty of the Oriental Churches "to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines. For these are guaranteed by ancient tradition, and seem to be better suited to the customs of their faithful and to the good of their souls."<sup>12</sup> This is an acknowledgement of the contribution of the Oriental Churches. The Oriental Churches, in general, and the Saint Thomas Christians of India, in particular, illustrate the ability to dialogue with cultures and to continue the pilgrimage of faith in Christ. The cultural engagement of the Saint Thomas Catholic Christians, the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Oriental Churches, is widely acknowledged.

A fundamental principle of Oriental theology is to be borne in mind as we undertake a survey of the Saint Thomas Christians. The axiom, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*, explains the structure and texture of Oriental theology. "A Church experiences and manifests her faith traditions in her prayer (*lex Orandi*) faith (*lex Credendi*) and in her particular life style (*lex Vivendi*). These expressions together constitute her faith traditions. They are interrelated and they complement each other."<sup>13</sup> This approach gives utmost importance to worship, encounter, tradition, and mission in the doing of theology. It is an invitation to do a theology of

*anubhavam* (experience), *avataranam* (expression), and *anugamanam* (following), which is congenial to the Asian ethos. In this sense we can speak of theology as worship, theology as tradition, theology as encounter, and theology as mission. This is significant in tracing the way of the integrity of faith and dialogue of the Saint Thomas Christians.

As far as the Syro-Malabar Church is concerned, there is an identity and integrity which is in matters of social, religious, the cultural milieu. According to Placid Podipara, it consists in an organic blending of different components, "Hindu in culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in worship."<sup>14</sup> This could be presented as a summary statement of the integration the Saint Thomas Christians of India. It speaks about the way of integrity of faith and dialogue in India. Therefore, it is fitting, at the very outset, to discuss the threefold integrity and integration. K. S. Sudarshan observes about the Saint Thomas Christians, "This is an excellent example of integrating themselves into the mainstream while at the same time preserving their own religious identity."<sup>15</sup>

In order to understand the way of integrity of faith and dialogue in Asia of an Oriental Church, especially in the context of the Syro-Malabar Church of Saint Thomas Christians, we may illustrate i) the Cultural Path, ii) the Christian Faith, iii) the Oriental Depth, and iv) the Administrative Worth of the Pre-Diamper Saint Thomas Christians. In the discussion of these aspects, there is the need to overcome the tendency of watertight compartmentalization; they are an organically integrated single whole. At the end of this paper, a few remarks will be made on inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and a genuine theology.

## **2. THE CULTURAL PATH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS**

In understanding inculturation, certainly, there is the need of surveying the cultural ethos of the faithful in which they find themselves. It is a matter to be examined whether the Saint Thomas Christians were uprooted from their cultural context or did they retain their rich cultural heritage of India.

In a response to the loud cry to "Indianise the Indian Christians," Placid J. Podipara wrote an article referring to the Saint Thomas Christians of India. In this article, the author convincingly argues that they are "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in Worship."<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Mathias Mundadan also invites the attention of the proponents of Indianisation to the cultural adaptability of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, "In India a movement is in progress to adapt Christianity to the cultural and social set-up of the country. Perhaps in this movement attention has been drawn to the community of the St. Thomas Christians as an example of a community which had adjusted itself to the environment in which it had to live and function for centuries."<sup>17</sup> These authors are of the opinion that there is a long lived historical case for the study of cultural integration among the Christians of Saint Thomas in tune with the ethos of India. Historians unanimously agree on the pre-Portuguese era of the Saint Thomas

Christians of India, "In any case, at the time the Portuguese arrived in the sixteenth century the Saint Thomas Christians were leading a life fully consonant with their past; they enjoyed a privileged position in society and a large measure of social and ecclesiastical autonomy."<sup>18</sup>

Among the Saint Thomas Christians of India, there is "the wonderful mingling of Hindu culture, Christian faith, and Syro-Oriental mode of worship."<sup>19</sup> Obviously, the author analyses three large areas of life of the Thomas Christians, namely, culture, faith, and worship, which are not watertight compartments, but constitutive components of Christian life. Felix Wilfred makes a comparison between the theological heritage of Thomas Christians and the era of Portuguese missionaries, "This is in striking contrast to what happened from the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries. The newly converted were forced to renounce their cultural heritage and traditions to take up Western customs and ways of life, then thought to be a necessary sequel to the faith received."<sup>20</sup> E. R. Hambye succinctly portrays the rootedness of the Saint Thomas Christians in the native soil and their religious identity in the cultural context of India:

The Syro-Malabar Church has the distinction of being the most ancient Christian community of India and the Far East. For more than fifteen centuries its members have occupied the south-western shores of India. They have played – and still do – a vital role in the expansion of Christianity in Asia. They have been so rooted in the native soil that their customs have developed in conformity with the social atmosphere of Ancient India, and, except for their faith and morals, they have been – and are still – hardly distinguishable from their compatriots of other creeds. Their spontaneous adaptation stands as a perpetual and concrete manifestation of the natural universality of Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

In discovering the way of integrity of faith and dialogue with culture, we shall take up a brief survey of the socio-cultural ethos of the Saint Thomas Christians. The cultural ethos of the Saint Thomas Christians of India could be summarized in the following observation, "In their day-to-day life the Christians differed very little from the noble castes."<sup>22</sup> Podipara narrates certain features of their social ethos, "In the social scale the Thomas Christians stood next to the Brahmins who were by birth priests of the non-Christian rulers. They kept several customs common to them and to the Brahmins alone."<sup>23</sup> Since Saint Thomas Christians were considered to be of high caste, they also distanced themselves from the untouchables. "Like the high caste Hindus of the country, the Thomas Christians would not touch or go near those of lower castes."<sup>24</sup> Though untouchability was challenged by the prophets of modern times, like, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Blessed Kunjachan, etc., it was a practice in the land and Saint Thomas Christians

were not free from the clutches of caste mentality, which is no more acceptable to Christianity of our times.

In connection with the practice of untouchability, it is interesting to note the customs of the high caste Hindus. It is reported, "For the high caste Hindus the touch of a Thomas Christian was sufficient to purify articles defiled by the touch or near approach of the low caste people. Hence the non-Christian kings often made Thomas Christian families live near their royal residence in order to profit by their service to purify defiled articles."<sup>25</sup> This is a clear indication of the high regard and respect Saint Thomas Christians enjoyed in the society at large.

As far as the profession of Saint Thomas Christians is concerned, "They distinguished themselves in such profession as agriculture, trade, and military service."<sup>26</sup> The community of the faithful was loyal to the kings and joined the military in protecting the territory and people of the kingdom. "As loyal subjects of the kings in whose territory they lived, they took up arms in time of war. The success in war of a king often depended on the number of his Thomas Christian subjects. This made non-Christian kings build churches and endow them with tax-free lands."<sup>27</sup> There is every reason to believe that "all able-bodied adults were meant to be soldiers and hence all males were trained for military service."<sup>28</sup> As responsible citizens of state, Thomas Christians contributed their share to the welfare of the society by engaging themselves in agriculture, trade and military service. This is to conclude that they were socially and politically conscious and committed people; they were engaged in the welfare of the society and in the security of the state, which is a duty of every citizen. On account of their great service, Thomas Christians were given different privileges by their kings, "By virtue of these privileges they could ride elephants, could use palanquins, could have roofed gates, could sit before kings on carpets, could use day-lamps etc., all of which gave them a social status next only to that of the Brahmins, the priests of the non-Christian kings."<sup>29</sup>

As far as their food habits are concerned, the Saint Thomas Christians followed almost all the customs of the people of the land: "Their food was frugal consisting of rice boiled in water and "curries," mostly vegetable. They rarely ate meat and always shunned beef. Alcoholic drinks were considered unbecoming to their high social status. During national feasts they would eat with their fingers squatting on long mattresses, their plates being plantain leaves folded into two which signified their privilege to use two leaves in imitation of the Brahmins."<sup>30</sup>

The Saint Thomas Christians looked almost similar in their outfit and congenial to the climatic conditions. Here is a concise description of how they dressed up and appeared in the public:

The men went out naked from their waist upwards except on solemn occasions when some would put on a loose ornamented chemis. They bore the lobes of the ears for ornaments to pass through. Except those who kept celibacy and those who had gone on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore, all kept long hairs tied up in a bundle into which was inserted a small metal cross. In fact this cross distinguished them from their non-Christian brethren. Bridegrooms had the privilege to wear a flower of gold attached to the tuft of hair.<sup>31</sup>

Women were very modest in their dress and comportment. Their dress consisted of a jacket that covered the hands and the body till the waist, while a long piece of cloth reaching down to the ankles was tied round the waist in a manner peculiar to them alone. When going to the church or visiting priests they would cover themselves with a big veil that left only their faces open.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the Christian women "however were much more modestly dressed than the *nayar* women."<sup>33</sup> In the matter of hygiene and cleanliness "the Christians were as good as the caste Hindus. . . . all men and women, smeared themselves with oil and went to the river to wash themselves. This they did twice a week: Wednesdays and Saturdays. On such occasions they were very scantily dressed."<sup>34</sup>

In the society, the Saint Thomas Christians were considered "*mapilas* or nobles."<sup>35</sup> It may be noted that "All their civil cases were decided by the intervention of the Archdeacon; only in criminal cases they used to have recourse to the kings."<sup>36</sup> Cardinal Tisserant attests great importance to this fact, "St. Thomas Christians, who were highly esteemed by their Hindu fellow-countrymen, and who therefore obtained social privileges which they still enjoy."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Saint Thomas Christians enjoyed a number of privileges and they were considered of high caste in the society:

The historical folk songs that describe the apostle's mission put great emphasis on the conversion of Brahmins. The literature of Thomas Christians came to emphasise the customs and rituals they share with Brahmins: for example, bestowal of a sacred thread (with cross added) on infants, adornment of children with gilded mongoose teeth and panther toes, similar marriage rites, descent of property through a patriarchal line (unlike Nairs, who have a matriarchal system), wearing a long tuft of hair on the head. In marriage processions a Christian bridegroom, like a prince of the land, could ride an elephant, the bridal party could be sheltered by a canopy, and members of the procession could carry silk umbrellas.<sup>38</sup>

Mathias Mundan points out that the enlightened self-interest of the monarchs might have been the historical reason to the coexistence and cooperation of people of different faiths in Malabar:

The monarchs who did so much for the revival and progress of Hindu religion were enlightened and benevolent enough to keep intact and even foster the age-long tradition of tolerance towards other religions and their followers. It is commercial interests which attracted people of various creeds, races and nations to the Kerala coast; it is the same interests which induced the rulers and people of Kerala to show such hospitality to the 'alien' people professing 'alien' creeds and practicing 'alien' customs. It is again this kind of enlightened self-interest which must have been responsible for the harmony and the cultural 'symbiosis' that came to prevail in Kerala from very early times in up to the advent of the Portuguese.<sup>39</sup>

Identifying the ethos of Kerala, the author makes an important observation on how the confluence of different religious traditions and cultural elements enriched the life of the people:

The multi-coloured fabric of Kerala society has been woven through centuries with Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements coexisting without losing their identity or even their contrast in character. It must be remembered that each religion brought to it not only a creed but also its own specific way of life.<sup>40</sup>

Having surveyed the major features of the symbiotic life of the Thomas Christians in Malabar, James Aerthayil raises a pertinent question: Whether this could be called adaptation or was it a patrimony or legacy of Hinduism for the newly formed Thomas Christian community? His learned opinion is that it is a patrimony or legacy. "Since they were converts from Hinduism, they were not actually confirming or adapting to the Hindu way of life but, accepting faith in Christ and Gospel morality, they were really continuing to live in the same way as they did before. The truth of the Gospel, however, enlightened them to ennoble what was imperfect earlier and to correct what was wrong."<sup>41</sup> He goes on to state, "What we had in this community, therefore, was not a clear case of adaptation, but preservation of a culture, entrusted to them as a legacy, vitalizing it with Christian principles."<sup>42</sup>

From the above discussion on the cultural path of Saint Thomas Christians, we can say that all the scholars are of the same opinion that they were at home with the cultural ethos of India and they were well-woven into the cultural fabric of the society. They did not find themselves as strangers on their own soil, rather they were very well rooted in the ethos of the land. They were the heirs and heralds of their cultural heritage.

### **3. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS**

As regards their faith, the Saint Thomas Christians were fully Christian. As they revealed their path with cultural identity, so they expressed their faith in Christ and the cross of Christ as it was handed down by the apostolic faith experience. While having a cultural similarity with the people of other faiths,



the Saint Thomas Christians were distinguished by their faith in Christ, which conferred on them an identity and a sense of community.

Praising the steadfastness of Saint Thomas Christians in their faith, Nunes Barreto wrote in 1561, which is a clear testimony to their Christian faith:

I cannot tell you, most dear brethren, how much I was consoled in the Lord by seeing and dealing with those Christians who, from the time of St. Thomas till today, as it is believed, are kept in the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and without having had the preaching or the administration of Sacraments or the other means of Divine Providence conserved among us, nay, living in the midst of infinite infidels, not only molested by the gentiles but also persecuted by the Moors and Jews who live among them, they have always kept up the veneration, the obedience and the faith in the most holy Cross and also the remembrance of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. . . . It pleased me much to be in the midst of these Christians and to learn through questions and conversations, that they understood the mysteries of our holy faith: and I found them firm in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity and in that of the Incarnation as well as in that of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar – this is much for a people taught by bishops who come from Syria, who are not theologians and some of whom were of the heresy of Nestorius . . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Placid J. Podipara recounts the salient features of the faith of the Saint Thomas Christians:

One may say that the Thomas Christians as a whole were leading a fairly good Christian life according to their knowledge in the circumstances in which they were. They frequented churches and sacraments as far as it was possible to do so, exhibited a special devotion towards the Madonna and St. Thomas, venerated the Cross, made pilgrimages, fed the poor, scrupulously observed the fasts prescribed by their Rite, etc.<sup>44</sup>

While the Saint Thomas Christians had almost everything in common with social customs and cultural practices, certainly, they succeeded to maintain their identity through small but significant ways. There are authors who call this phenomenon as “a life in two worlds.”<sup>45</sup> It need not necessarily be the case. This does not lead people to a state of confusion and division, provided they have taken it wholeheartedly. Rather, it should be seen as a source of assimilation and integration, of course, combining existential situation and essential faith experience. It is a way of life. It is a path to *samanvaya*, integration. These differences weave a fabric of coexistence and cooperation, which we find among the Saint Thomas Christians.

For example, it is recorded that the calendars Saint Thomas Christians used were "the local ones."<sup>46</sup> And for ecclesiastical purposes "the Greek year, in accordance with the East-Syrian Church calendar, seems to have been in use."<sup>47</sup> This is also a telling example of their sense of social integration and Christian identity. The Oriental churches, in general, and the Syro-Malabar Church, in particular, present a way of integrating faith and culture in Asia.

*Malpanate*, the training and formation house for the priestly candidates, was congenial to the Indian ethos. It was something similar to a *gurukula*, the school of the master where disciples come and stay with him and learn the lessons of Sacred Scripture and tradition. *Malpan*, in Syriac means master. "The assembly of the parishioners presented the candidates to the bishop through a letter patent called *desakkuri*. This letter gave the candidates the title to be maintained by the parish."<sup>48</sup> The role of the parishioners in promoting a candidate to priesthood was decisive. Parishioners had a good knowledge of the candidate, for he was taken from among them and he was inducted to the community of priests of the parish. In the present scenario of seminary training, where there is an anonymity due to the training of candidates in a large group, where personal attention is wanting, it may be good to reconsider the *malpanate* system of training.

The life of Saint Thomas Christians was centred around the church. Placid J. Podipara gives an account:

The priests recited the Divine Office in choir, and their assembly governed the parish, headed by the senior most at whose direction the others performed the parochial functions by turn. . . . There were two classes of priests, ordinary and more retired; the latter never ate meat or drank wine and led an austere life. . . . Students to priesthood were taught by senior priests. The assembly of parishioners presented the candidate for ordination. Priests were ordained for parishes, not for diocese. They were maintained by the parish and by the generous offerings of the faithful.<sup>49</sup>

There is a noticeable difference that Saint Thomas Christians maintained in their decisive celebrations and practices. There is a certain degree of continuity with the cultural ethos and yet there is striking discontinuity in matters of their faith. These things reveal that they were simultaneously Hindu in culture and Christian in faith. Take the case of the celebration of *Namakarana*, naming ceremony, which is a special ceremony for Brahmins. But the Christians name their children only at the time of Baptism. Infants were given biblical names, of course with a taste of the vernacular, adding prefixes or suffixes.<sup>50</sup> This is also visible in the case of *Vidyarambha*, initiation into learning, which was an important moment in the life of a child according to the culture. Initiation takes place by drawing the letters by the fingers of the child on rice spread out on the floor. We notice a difference in the initial verse a student is instructed on the basis of one's faith.<sup>51</sup> *Hari Sri Ganapataya namah* was the mantra taught to a

Hindu child, whereas taking into account the belief of a Christian, it was modified as *Sri Yesupataya namah* (I adore the feet of Jesus) or *tamburan tunaka, guruve saranam* (Let God help, I depend on my teacher).<sup>52</sup> The ceremony of *Vivaha*, marriage, was a very solemn and elaborate celebration for both Hindus and Christians. Tying *Tali* or *minnu*, the marriage symbol, round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom was the characteristic feature of marriage among the people. Christians adopted this practice, but with certain modifications. The distinguishing feature of Christian *tali* was the cross made of twenty-one small gold balls.<sup>53</sup> It is fitting to recall the prayer of the priest at the time of the blessing of the *tali*:

O Lord, You, by Your death on the cross, have earned the Church as Your bride; bless this thali that unites the bride and the groom in mutual trust and love. May this thali, the very symbol of unity, bind them to indivisible love and fullness of fidelity. May the cross, embossed on it, give them strength to bear cheerfully the sorrows of life, and to lead a life pleasing to You. May this also be a symbol of their fidelity.<sup>54</sup>

Another important thing that is blessed in the marriage is the *mantrakodi*, special colourful and costly sari for the occasion of marriage. The blessing formula discloses the faith of the community:

O, merciful Lord, who adorns the human soul with the enduring mantle of grace, bless this manthrakodi. Help this bride and groom put You on through their mutual love and self-giving. O Lord, who clothed the holy Church, Your bride, in the mantle of glory, make this couple worthy to put on the robe of glory in heaven after a life of sanctity on earth.<sup>55</sup>

It is also verifiable in the ceremony of *Antyeshti*, funeral, where the memory of the dead were elaborate. Saint Thomas Christians followed the East Syrian Ritual for the burial of the dead. "All the subsequent feasts celebrated in memory of the dead were in name and nature Hindu, but Christianised by the prayer and blessings of priests."<sup>56</sup> Although externally they looked almost the same, "the meaning and symbolic signification of these customs had nothing in common or similar. For example, fire is the symbolic representation of Christ (Lux) among Christians, while it is the symbolic representation of god (Agni) among the Hindus."<sup>57</sup> Comparative practices and their specific symbolization are given below:

The Hindus give importance to purification with 'Sacred Water'. The Christians use holy water for purification. In place of the sacred thread of the Brahmins, the Christians use of a chord round the neck with a cross or a medal, which is never removed. Now the scapular is also used, together with the chord or alone around the neck. . . . The 'Nercha' in the Church of the Christians is similar to the 'Prasada' of the Hindu temples<sup>58</sup>

The flagstaff in front of the church is something similar to that found on the temple campus. But the cross on the flagstaff was a typical sign of their faith in Christ. So also the flag-hoisting in connection with the celebration was common to the religious ethos of Kerala. Saint Thomas Christians also had the practice of flag-hoisting which signalled the beginning of the festivities. Obviously the flag bore the image of the cross. The ancient church building looked like a pagoda structure, but the cross on the top of it and the interior of the construction was a manifestation of their Christian faith. Another important practice in connection with the temple worship was the *parikrama*, walking in reverence around the temple in veneration of the Lord, which was, of course, on individual piety for the Hindus. The Saint Thomas Christians also had a similar practice in connection with the solemn festivities. The whole assembly of the faithful took out processions around the church proclaiming their faith in the Lord as a pilgrim community.

The faith of the Saint Thomas Christians in Christ and their veneration of the Cross were outstanding. *Mar Tomma Margam*, the Law of Thomas, is the quintessential of their faith and life. It was their faith in Christ which earned a name and fame for them in the society. They devised means and ways to disclose their faith in Christ in a simple but significant manner. It was their faith which gave them an identity and a sense of community.

#### **4. THE ORIENTAL DEPTH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS**

Saint Thomas Christians lived their faith in Christ on the path of the cultural milieu of India which was nurtured and fostered by the depth of the East Syrian Liturgy. It was in the loving providence of God that the Saint Thomas Christians could maintain the liturgical and ecclesial traditions of the East Syrian Church. In addition, the ethos of the East Syrian Liturgy was in tune with the melody of the Indian music of prayer, fasting, asceticism, etc.

An essential constitutive element of Saint Thomas Christians is their worship, which is oriental in essence. From the sources available, it is evident that Saint Thomas Christians celebrated the East Syriac or Chaldean liturgy. It is the general opinion that "the Malabar church accepted the Rite and the sacraments of the Chaldean Church as her own at an early date. Aramaic, which in its north-east dialectical is called East-Syriac, is substantially the same as the Aramaic spoken by our Lord and the Apostles."<sup>59</sup> But it is important to note that "In the theoretical understanding and administration of the sacraments they followed, as in other things, the East-Syrian or Chaldean Church, but with necessary local adaptations and modifications."<sup>60</sup>

From Vatican Syriac Codex 22, it is clear that the Thomas Christians had the liturgical rite and language (East Syriac called also Chaldean) of the Seleucian Church at least in 1301, the year in which the Codex in question was written in Cranganore by a Thomas Christian. The Synod of Seleucia

of 410 had decreed that all Churches under Seleucia had to follow the rite of that Church. Among the Thomas Christians there is not to be seen any vestige of any other liturgical rite or language that existed among them previous to 1301. Owing to the frequent relations of Malabar with Mesopotamia and Persia it may be supposed that the East Syrian liturgical rite (the rite of the Seleucian Church) was from early times known to the Thomas Christians.<sup>61</sup>

The appellation *Mar Thoma margam* or *the Law of Thomas* was an endearing title and it represents the ethos and the path of the Saint Thomas Christians. The St. Thomas Christians used the term *Law of Thomas* to mean the sum total of their faith in Christ celebrated in liturgy and life. "By this heritage, they meant the sum total of their ecclesial life comprising their liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline. Mar Thoma Christians esteemed their East Syrian Liturgy as the most precious part of the *Law of Thomas*, though they adopted or christianised many of their local social customs so as to suit the externals of their Christian life."<sup>62</sup> They treasured very much in heart the *Law of Thomas*. They considered the *Law of Thomas* a great patrimony and it was the warp and woof of their spiritual life. "The remarkable feature of this *Law of Thomas* was that it was thoroughly Christian, Oriental and Malabarian at the same time, being well adapted to the socio-cultural life of Malabar."<sup>63</sup> It may be of historical importance to note that "One of the major concerns of the synod of Diamper was that the St. Thomas Christians should give up their belief that the Law of St. Thomas was unique and it was different from the Law of St. Peter."<sup>64</sup> In connection with the *Law of Thomas*, it is important to note that "The St. Thomas Christians esteemed their East Syrian liturgical heritage as an integral part of their apostolic heritage. Their attachment to this language and liturgy was very deep rooted."<sup>65</sup>

According to some authors, "Baptism and Confirmation were administered together according to the East Syrian Rite."<sup>66</sup> During the baptism they were given Christian biblical or Christian names. "Christian names received modifications so as to suit Malabar tastes. Thus Jacob became Chacko, Chakkappan, etc., Thomas Thommi, Thomman, etc., Anne Annama, Annakutty, etc. In all these no Mesopotamian touch could be discerned at all."<sup>67</sup> The Thomas Christians had the greatest respect towards the Most Holy Eucharist.<sup>68</sup> It is said that "Bread (as a rule leavened) freshly baked was brought to the priest on a fresh leaf just before the Offertory. The Eucharistic wine was prepared from dry grapes. Chalices used to be adorned with small bells suspended around the brim."<sup>69</sup> There was the practice of priests blessing "the sick, to read the Gospel over them and to attach to their bodies pieces of palm leaf or paper on which were written versicles from the Sacred Scripture."<sup>70</sup> It is recorded that young men used to be ordained priests.<sup>71</sup> Children used to be married before puberty. The parents chose the partners for their sons and daughters.<sup>72</sup> It is observed, "Instead of the wedding-

ring prescribed in the East Syrian Rite the Thomas Christians had a small gold ornament *tali* which the boy tied to the neck of the girl."<sup>73</sup>

The East Syrian Ritual was followed for the burial of the dead.<sup>74</sup> All the fasts and abstinences prescribed by the East Syrian Rite were scrupulously being observed by the Thomas Christians.<sup>75</sup> The chief fasts of the Thomas Christians were: "24 days before Christmas, 3 days a fortnight and more before the great lent, 49 days before the feast of the Assumption of our Lady, 12 Fridays after Christmas, the eve of the feast of the Transfiguration. . . . In addition to the fasts mentioned above, they kept another one of 7 days in honour of our Lady, and it began on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. This fast was special to women."<sup>76</sup> For the observance of fasts and abstinences, as well as of feast, the day was computed from sunset to sunset.<sup>77</sup>

The Holy Week was observed in a special way by keeping vigils in churches, by giving alms lavishly and by long prayers.<sup>78</sup> Among the important feasts was Epiphany, called *rakkuli* (night bath) in some places. On that feast day, tradition says, the Thomas Christians bathed at night in rivers or canals in memory of our Lord's baptism. In some other places for the same feast torches are lighted during the night and people cry out *el paiya* (God is bright) referring to the manifestation of our Lord.<sup>79</sup> In this manner the feast of Epiphany was a celebration of the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and it commemorated Jesus as the sun of the world. The feast of *dukrana*, the memorial day of Mar Thoma Sliha, is celebrated most solemnly on 3 July; the solemn form of the liturgy, *Raze* is celebrated on this day.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to recognize the contribution of the East Syrian connection with the Saint Thomas Christians as far as the latter's survival is concerned. Had the East Syrian Church not been in relationship with the Saint Thomas Christians, Christian faith and tradition in India might have been absorbed into the cultural matrix of India. Historians attach importance to the dependence of Saint Thomas Christians on the East Syrian Church, "Perhaps the community of the Thomas Christians was able to maintain a strong Christian tradition on account of this dependence."<sup>81</sup>

It is the depth of the Oriental liturgy which was instrumental in keeping the faithful informed about and confirmed in, their walk of faith along the path of Saint Thomas in the Indian peninsula. The experiential depth of the East Syrian Liturgy sustained the Saint Thomas Christians on their path of following the faith in Christ.

## 5. THE ADMINISTRATIVE WORTH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS

While the Saint Thomas Christians were ecclesiastically dependent on the East Syrian Church, it is to be noted that some of the local practices also influenced in the administration of the Church. Hence it has contributed to the development of a peculiar administrative system in the Church.

The Thomas Christians “had hierarchical dependence on the Seleucian Church till the end of XVI century.”<sup>82</sup> Practically the bishops had to be “content with the exercise of “the power of order” in which, not seldom, was also included the faculty to confer baptism. The regulation of worship according to the rite, and a general vigilance in matters canonical, were also reserved to the bishops.”<sup>83</sup> “Though the Oriental Institute of the Archdiaconate headed the central administration of the Malabar Church, the functioning of the local churches was in tune with the social and religious customs of Malabar.”<sup>84</sup>

The word *yogam* has different meanings. The meaning that suits our context is “assembly” or “meeting” or “gathering.” *Yogam* was an assembly of the community, not simply of the laity.<sup>85</sup> *Yogam* was a three tier structure being placed at the parish level, at the regional level, and at the level of the whole Thomas Christian community.<sup>86</sup> There were three types of *yogam* – *Edavaka yogam* or ‘parish assembly’, *Pradesika yogam* or ‘regional assembly’, *Potuyogam* or *Sabhayogam*, which is the general assembly representing the whole community.<sup>87</sup>

The administration of local churches was carried out by the assembly of the parishioners consisting of adult males and local priests. The senior priest was president, so to say, of the local priests (*desathupattakar*), and he arranged the services in the church. The system is still continued among the non-catholic Thomas Christians. The assembly spoken of above looked after the temporalities of the church, and also after the whole Christian life of the local community. This assembly decided cases of public scandal, inflicting punishments which sometimes amounted to excommunication.<sup>88</sup>

*Yogam*, or assembly, was the most important organ in the administration of the Saint Thomas Christian community. “As there was no system of *Yogam* in the East Syrian church or in the western churches, this could be described as the most significant element of Thomas Christians’ identity,”<sup>89</sup> as far as administration is concerned. The Thomas Christians had an organisation and constitution distinct from those of the Seleucian Church with which they had hierarchical and liturgical relations.<sup>90</sup> According to historians, “the Malabar Church adopted the Canon Law of the Chaldean Church for its use, but with necessary modification, giving due importance to local customs and traditions.”<sup>91</sup>

## 6. TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE WAY

Inculturation is not a finished product, but it is an ongoing process. Therefore, there is the need for a constant and consistent dialogue with the culture of the people. For St Anselm theology is “faith seeks understanding.” According to Jonas Thaliath, theology is “faith seeking harmony of life.”<sup>92</sup> In this search, Christ is the key to theology. Going a step further, to my mind, theology is faith seeking celebration of life in Christ. In all these attempts to articulate theology, it is

evident that faith is fundamental to theological investigation. So too, in inculturation faith is basic to the dynamics. Since no culture is perfect or ideal, the interaction of faith with culture should promote the transformation of culture. It is to say that faith in Christ must inspire the process of inculturation, integration, and integrity with a sense of identity. Saint Thomas Christians succeeded in taking roots in the culture of India; it has also contributed to the development of culture. There is an area where faith has not really touched the life of the people, namely, to challenge and change the caste system prevalent in the society. It is highly important to proclaim and practise that in faith we are one in Christ.

The followers of Christ were initially called that "who belong to the Way" (Acts 9:2). Jesus revealed himself as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He is the way to God, the Father. He is the true way to life and His way is the way to life through death; it is the way of the cross. To walk the Way is the privilege and challenge of every disciple of Christ, wherever one may be. It is a pilgrimage to the fullness of life. It is a *marga*, path or way. India is a land of *marga*, path and *yatra*, pilgrimage. In India, there are many *margas* recommended for God-realisation, *jnana marga* (path of knowledge), *karma marga* (path of action), *bhakti marga* (path of devotion), to name only a few most popular ones. It is important to note that Saint Thomas Christians described their "religion as *Marthommayude margavum vazhipadum* 'the way and lineage of St. Thoma's.'<sup>93</sup> One of the traditional songs is *Margam Kali Pattu*,<sup>94</sup> the sport-song of the way. The new convert was called *margavasi*, the wayfarer. All these appellations and attributes attached to the Saint Thomas Christians are a candid testimony to the Christian identity in the context of cultural plurality. The theology of the way is ever new and ever old to the Christian theology and spirituality, which could be considered the hallmark of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, congenial to their cultural ethos.

In the past, the Saint Thomas Christians were having a lived-theology than an articulated one. They were living a theology of dialogue, dialogue with other faiths, when it was unheard of in the West. It was a theology of co-existence and co-operation. "They had, however, developed a theological vision and a lifestyle of their own which somehow or other were congenial to the ground realities of their social-cultural and religious milieu. It was a vision and life of coexistence and of respect for other faiths."<sup>95</sup> The Saint Thomas Christians were living in harmony with the people of other faiths. While they retained their Christian faith and identity, they were part and parcel of the society and culture. There are scholars who argue that Eastern theological approaches and attitudes are congenial to that of Indian religions and spirituality.<sup>96</sup> The theology of Saint Thomas Christians was "the theology built-into tradition and way of life."<sup>97</sup> Felix Wilfred admits the importance of liturgy in the life of Saint Thomas Christians, "If anywhere liturgy has been *locus theologicus*, it was most certainly among the Thomas Christians. It was almost exclusively by liturgy that this Christian community was nourished



in faith. The theology in-built into its liturgy was christocentric."<sup>98</sup> Emphasizing the socio-cultural identification of Saint Thomas Christians, Antony Mukkenthottam observes as follows, "Oneness with their socio-cultural milieu implies an implicit incarnational theology lived, an awareness that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values."<sup>99</sup> In the context of an emerging theology of religions, Mathias Mundadan opines, "Today in the light of modern theological approaches to world religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries."<sup>100</sup> In addition, he remarks, "This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision."<sup>101</sup> The author gives a critical overview of the theology of pre-seventeenth century Saint Thomas Christians. He classifies the salient features under four categories, namely, an implicit Incarnational theology, a lived theology of other faiths, a practiced theology of a particular or individual church, and theological training of clergy.<sup>102</sup> All these characteristic traits of the theology of the Saint Thomas Christians are solid and significant directions to develop a theology in an age of globalization.

Besides the above features of theology of Saint Thomas Christians, it is of paramount importance to investigate into liturgical resourcefulness and richness that contribute to a genuine theology of the church. Varghese Pathikulangara convincingly argues that "Worship is a communal act of the Church, by which she reveals, actualizes, lives and proclaims her authentic nature."<sup>103</sup> James Aerthayil has attempted to articulate a spirituality and theology of the Saint Thomas Christians founded on the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Liturgy, for the oriental churches, is *fontes theologiae* and *magistra dogmatis*. The correlation of '*lex orandi*' and '*lex credendi*' is evident in the public worship of the church. This truth is highlighted in the teaching of Vatican II. In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Council emphasizes, "The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows."<sup>104</sup> If this is true, it is enough to examine the Divine Liturgy to trace the theological, moral, spiritual, and ecclesial understanding of a Christian community, for it houses the sublime articulation of the theology and praxis. "Hence the rule of faith is developed and taught in and through the rule of worship."<sup>105</sup> Further, J. Aerthayil observes, "In the Chaldean Liturgy, especially in the Divine Office, all the mysteries of our faith are explained in a simple manner but with a profound theological understanding and through an original formulation."<sup>106</sup> The pioneering work of Varghese Pathikulangara, *Resurrection, Life and Renewal*<sup>107</sup> is an excellent example of elucidating a theology of the Saint Thomas Christians. If theology is 'faith seeking understanding,' or 'harmony of life,' or 'celebration of life in Christ,' a concise and comprehensive treatise on it is found in the content and structure of the liturgy. "As far as the mystery of Christ is concerned, every Eucharistic celebration portrays a live picture of it, concise though. A more elaborate and

programmatic presentation of the mystery of Christ is found in the arrangement of the liturgical year of the Church, which gradually and seasonally unfolds the mystery of Christ with more detail and depth."<sup>108</sup> Theology is for life. Theological investigations are for the transformation of life, culminating in the transfiguration of life in Christ. Liturgy supports and promotes this process of programmatic progression. The thanksgiving prayer of the faithful in the Eucharistic liturgy unveils the dynamics of this transformation:

This prayer echoes the transformation that has already taken place in the participants by virtue of the active participation in the *Qurbana*, and especially through the communion of the holy mysteries and the complete transformation they desire earnestly, which would not be limited to the four walls of the church, where they have assembled and worshipped, but spontaneously permeates and pervades every arena of everyday life, which finds its final fulfillment in the presence of the Lord in the eschaton.<sup>109</sup>

Therefore, there is no mistake in understanding that the liturgy of Saint Thomas Christians provides a solid and candid theology. This does not mean that it is an elaborated articulated theology. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is a theology congenial to the Indian ethos, which has the following characteristics: *anubhava* (experience or contemplation), *avatarana* (expression or communication), and *anugamana* (following or commitment). All these characteristics of theology are found and expounded in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians. These features are typically Indian, Eastern, and Christian, a manifestation of a genuine and authentic Asian ethos. Liturgy is "the authentic participation and involvement of the man of today in the mystery of Christ and in the history of salvation."<sup>110</sup> Divine Liturgy is a means to enter into and experience the mystery of Christ, which is the foundation of all theology. So also it is an efficient means to express or communicate the faith of the community, for celebration of the liturgy is an unfolding of the faith-deposit of the community. The Liturgy requires and enables the people to follow the path of the Lord. The Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians is an invitation to "Come and see" (John 1:39). This is a response to the quest for contemplation, which is fundamentally Christian, Indian, and Oriental in essence as far as religious experience is concerned; it also directs people to action and commitment, "Let all the people on earth know that You alone are the true God, the Father, and that You sent Your beloved Son Jesus Christ."<sup>111</sup> The *Mar Thoma Marga*, the way of Saint Thomas, presents a pattern for doing theology as well. Taking a lead from the biblical accounts of Saint Thomas the apostle, it is possible to delineate certain features for doing theology in the pluralistic context of India, namely, courage and conviction, the humility to admit our ignorance and the nobility to be open, and genuine comments and total commitment.<sup>112</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the light of what we have seen, it is legitimate to state that the Saint Thomas Christians were *margavasis*, people who belonged to the Way, walking the Way of the Lord Jesus Christ in the promised land and at the same time the people of India. They were in dialogue with social, religious, cultural, economic, and political context of their milieu. In this connection, the description of theology as “faith seeking harmony of life,” is most fitting and right. They lived a theology of the Way – the *marga* of the Master – following the example of Saint Thomas the apostle, who encouraged his companions, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). The Church of Saint Thomas Christians was committed to the Lord and did not hesitate to declare Jesus Christ as “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

The Church of Saint Thomas Christians was Indian in culture, Christian in faith, and Oriental in worship. All these appellations are different aspects of a single reality, meaning, Saint Thomas Christians were rooted in the land of India, supported by Christian faith, and promoted by East Syrian Liturgy. Taking all the three characteristics of Saint Thomas Christians together, we may note that all of them are Asian in origin and sing in unison. It is a question of all in one and one in all. There is a perfect cohesion, and no reason for confusion and conflict as a few might speculate.<sup>113</sup> This will pave the way for the theological principle of interreligious dialogue, to be oneself and to be growing and going beyond the boundaries.

In all sincerity and humility, one has to admit that there is no much written theology that the Saint Thomas Christians can claim till the beginning of the nineteenth century, there is no dearth of a lived theology. Theology is for *theosis* and to have fullness of life in Christ. A. Mookenthottam comments, “All that we have seen so far points to an incarnational theology lived though not committed to writing in theological form. A theology lived strikes deeper roots than the exercise of mere speculation.”<sup>114</sup> Beyond doubt, the faith in Christ was the core of Saint Thomas Christians as an Oriental Church in Asia. The East Syriac Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians served them in experiencing and entering into the mystery of Christ and expressing it through their life.

Christ is the foundation, force, and focus of the Saint Thomas Christians. The cross or the name of Christ marked the distinctive feature of their life. The Saint Thomas Cross is a beautiful symbol of their integrity of faith and integration of the ethos, for “Mar Thoma Sliba (St. Thomas Cross) is the dynamic symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Indian context. It proclaims the Theological, Christological, Pneumatological and Ecclesial specifications of Christian faith.”<sup>115</sup> At the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, there is the solemn singing of *Puqdankon* (Your commandment) by the celebrant and the community replies, *puqdaneh da-Msiha* (The commandment of Christ). “This points to the

Christianisation of one of the social customs of the Thomas Christians."<sup>116</sup> All these things tell volumes on the way of integrity of faith and dialogue of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, an oriental Church – the Syro-Malabar Church – of apostolic origin and in communion with the Catholic Church.

To conclude this reflection it will be fitting to quote from *Unitatis Redintegratio* of Vatican II:

With regard to the authentic theological tradition of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scriptures, fostered and given expression in liturgical life, and nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the writings of the Fathers and spiritual authors of the East. They are directed toward a right ordering of life, indeed toward a full contemplation of Christian truth.<sup>117</sup>

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