Encountering Indian Christianity
On Its Own Terms
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The ASIANetwork Spring 2001 panel on Indian Christianity grew out of a concern with what some consider to be the low visibility of Asian Christianity in both Asian studies and in particular in the study of Christianity within the Academy. At times it seems that Christianity is thought of primarily as a Western religion, with its home (if not its origin) in Europe. When scholars refer to Christianity in Asia, they are often thinking of forms of European Christianity brought to Asian countries by European missionaries. This three-part survey begins with a historical overview of Christianity in India by Elizabeth Galbraith. Part II, a summary of a paper by Abraham Mulamoottil, focuses upon one specifically Indian Christian tradition, the Syro-Malankara church, in order to highlight the pluralism that has always characterized Christianity, as well as some of the valuable lessons that can be learned by the West from Indian Christianity. In Part III, Job Thomas gives an account of the ongoing debate regarding authentic Indian Christian art while giving special attention to the Kalamakari of the life of Jesus by Hindu artist, Gourappa Chetty.

PART I: Christianity in India
St. Thomas, the apostle, is best known in Western Christianity for the “doubting Thomas” incident (John 20: 24-8). In Indian Christian traditions, more significant is St. Thomas’ reputation as the apostle who brought Christianity to India, just as St. Peter brought Christianity to Italy and St. Paul to Greece. Unlike SS Peter and Paul, there are no New Testament accounts of St. Thomas’ missionary activities. There are, however, apocryphal sources according to which St. Thomas (referred to as Judas, meaning ‘twin’) extended his apostolate into India. Thus, according to the beginning of the Acts of Thomas: “according to Lot, India fell to Judas Thomas”... “the Lord sold him to the merchant Abban, that he might go down and convert India.”

The Acts of Thomas were written most probably in Syriac, a branch of Aramaic spoken in Mesopotamia, in the second or third century. The Mesopotamian Christian church, with its liturgical center in Edessa, claimed its origin from St. Thomas the apostle. Traditions hold that the Edessene Christians possessed one or two letters of the Apostle Thomas written from India. The Acts of Thomas were supposedly composed relying on the information obtained from them. Many in later times hesitated to assign the legend of St. Thomas’s travels to India any historical value, and the Acts of Thomas were treated as entirely mythical. Until, that is, some coins of King Gondophares, the Indian King mentioned in the Acts of Thomas, were found in northwest India in the 19th century.

Following upon the evidence supporting the actual existence of a King named Gondophares, more recent archeological excavations have also uncovered Roman coins in India dating from the first century. These archeological finds, together with other European and Indian sources, have led some historians to conclude that the first century of the Christian era was in fact the golden age of Roman commerce with South India. Roman ships traveled to India in order to exchange their wine and pottery against the pepper, pearls and precious stones of the country. If in fact the Romans were trading with the Indians in the first century, then it is increasingly plausible that the apostle St. Thomas could in fact have traveled to India on a Roman trade ship in order to spread the gospel.

St. Thomas Christians are those Indian Christians who trace their origin to the apostle St. Thomas, who they believe landed by boat on the South Western coast of India, a region known as Malabar, in 52 CE. According to St. Thomas Christian traditions, the apostle preached the Gospel to the Brahmin families of Kerala, many of whom received the faith even before St. Peter reached Rome (prior to 68 C.E.). St. Thomas is also credited with establishing seven churches along the Malabar coast: Kodungallur, Kottakkavu, Palayur, Kollam, Kokkamangalam, Niranam and Chayil. The apostle’s martyrdom is thought to have taken place in 72 C.E. at Little Mount (near Madras) and his body brought to Mylapore (near Madras) and buried there. His tomb is venerated to this day.

On December 31, 1952 on the occasion of the 1900-year anniversary of the arrival of the Apostle in India, Pope Pius XII made the following statement:

Nineteen hundred years have passed since the Apostle came to India... During the centuries that India was cut off from the West and despite many trying vicissitudes, the Christian communities formed by the Apostle conserved intact the legacy he left them...This apostolic lineage, beloved sons and daughters, is the proud privilege of the many among you who glory in the name of Thomas Christians, and we are happy on this occasion to acknowledge and bear witness to it.

For St. Thomas Christians it must have been a great honor to have the Pope pay tribute to the legacy of Christianity in India, and to acknowledge its ancient history, trials and tribulations. That history includes several significant developments that are pertinent to the understanding of Indian Christianity as it exists today. Between the 3rd and 9th centuries there were waves of immigrants from Mesopotamia into Kerala.
From as early as the 4th century up until the 17th century St. Thomas Christians in India received their bishops and their church liturgy, the East Syrian liturgy, from Mesopotamia. Because the language used in the East Syrian liturgy was Syriac (the branch of Aramaic assumed to have been spoken by Jesus and the apostles), the St. Thomas Christians of India eventually became known as the Syrian Christians. In addition to following the East Syrian liturgy, the St. Thomas Christians lived by what they called “The Law of Thomas.” This law was the sum total of their Christian discipline. Through oral traditions they had also preserved the Margam Kali Pattu (the Song of the Way) which described how St. Thomas introduced the Margam or the Christian way of worship into Malabar. Until the advent of Portuguese colonization in the 16th century all St. Thomas Christians in India practiced the same faith, forming one Christian church, with the same liturgy, religious traditions and customs.

The advent of the Portuguese and the brand of Christianity that they brought with them ultimately meant division for the St. Thomas Christians of India. For the first time in its history, the St. Thomas Christian community became divided between those who accepted Portuguese Christian colonization and those who did not. The majority of St. Thomas Christians accepted the changes to liturgy and practice imposed by the Portuguese missions and came to practice a rite which some historians have referred to as a hybrid of Latin and East Syrian liturgies.

The small but ardent dissident group of St. Thomas Christians, who rejected the changes to liturgy and practice imposed by the Portuguese, brought their defiance to completion by accepting the olive branch extended to them by the Syrian Orthodox church, which sent a bishop (Mar Gregorios) from Jerusalem to Kerala in 1665. With the arrival of this bishop two distinct communities of St. Thomas Christians came to exist, one in communion with Rome and eventually designated as the Syro-Malabar church, the other becoming subsumed within the Syrian Orthodox church and hence outside of Roman communion.

From the 17th century onwards the unity of the Christian community in India was lost. It is worth noting, of course, that things did not improve in the wake of the Dutch and the British conquests of India that followed upon the Portuguese, each of which brought further religious divisions to the St. Thomas Christian communities. For the purposes of this survey, however, an event that took place in 1926 is of most interest. In that year a Syrian Orthodox Archbishop named Mar Ivanios entered into negotiations with Rome to effect a reunion with the Roman Catholic church under the expressed condition that the ancient and venerable traditions of his church (which included use of the Antiochian rite adopted by those St. Thomas Christians who had joined the Syrian Orthodox church in 1665) should be retained and kept intact. It is with the identity and unique role of the Syro-Malankara (an alternative name for the Malabar coast of India) church, which came into being in 1930, that Father Abraham Mulamoottil’s paper, entitled “The Ecclesiological Significance of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church” is concerned.

PART II: The Syro-Malankara Church as a Bridge Between East and West

The Syro-Malankara church makes for a very interesting case study within Christianity, highlighting themes as broad as reclaiming ancient apostolic traditions, to the inculcation of the gospel and the constant struggle faced by individual churches with regard to communion within the universal Church and individuality. Dr. Mulamoottil suggests that the Syro-Malankara church is a pertinent example of the value to be gained by diversity within unity in the Catholic communion in particular. In addition, the Syro-Malankara church may also prove a useful tool for exploring ways in which Indian Christianity can inform, at times challenge, but also enrich Western Christianity.

First Dr. Mulamoottil, an ordained priest of the Syro-Malankara church, points out that for Syro-Malankara Christians the reunion that took place in 1930 signified not so much the creation of a new Catholic church in India, but rather the restoration of an Apostolic church. Thus, quoting C. Mar Baselios, he notes that the reunion of 1930 was “an historical encounter between two apostolic churches in which both were reconciled, healed and perfected in terms of fullness of communion and Catholicity.”

This statement serves as a reminder that historically, and to this day, there are six separate rites within Catholicism as well as twenty-two independent Catholic churches, twenty-one of which are Eastern in origin. Historically the Catholic communion was precisely that, a communion of churches. Over time, however, that image seems to have been replaced by that of an immense organization with a powerful center upon which all the particular churches converge or depend for their life or survival. Though the Latin Catholic church holds a position of priority within the Catholic communion, it is only one of the twenty-two Catholic churches worldwide. Given that for the rest of the religious and even secular world the Latin Catholic church it is often mistaken as the only face of Catholicism, other Catholic churches, including the Syro-Malankara church, sometimes feel marginalized. This perception is only exacerbated by a sense of loss of equality among some of the Eastern Catholic churches. Until very recently, for instance, the Syro-Malankara church received its bishops from seminaries trained according to the Latin rite. This, added to a prohibition against Syro-Malankara missions outside of Kerala, has left some within Malankara tradition concerned about its status vis-a-vis Latin Catholicism.

Recognition of the Syro-Malankara church as an ancient apostolic church in 1930 reflected an appreciation and respect within the universal church for individual churches, due to their fidelity to apostolic traditions. In Dr. Mulamoottil’s opinion, it is diversity within unity that best manifests the beauty of the Catholic church. The autonomy of, and appreciation for, Eastern Catholic churches vis-a-vis the Latin Catholic church needs to be preserved and respected if the Catholic communion is to be true to its ancient origins.

Secondly, Dr. Mulamoottil offers the liturgy of Syro-Malankara tradition as a particularly pertinent example of the
way in which culture is inseparable from the practice of Christianity, and as one of the reasons why imposing alien forms of liturgy and practice upon an individual church can lead not only to the loss of ancient traditions, but with it to a loss of the rich diversity of Christian expression. For Mar Ivanios, the Archbiarch who initiated the reunion of 1930, it was crucial that the Syro-Malankarans be permitted to retain their own liturgy, discipline and hierarchy, conditions agreed to by the Holy See in acknowledgement of the legitimate ancient and apostolic traditions of the St. Thomas Christians.

The Syro-Malankara church follows the rite of Antioch, which is known as the liturgy of St. James. This liturgy consists of long prayers, songs and chants of great beauty and solemnity and was celebrated in the vernacular even prior to Vatican II. The gestures, symbols and symbolic action in the liturgy are fundamentally Oriental. There is, for instance, no use of the crucifix in this liturgical tradition, due to its emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus rather than on his suffering and death. The congregation does not kneel, but stands during most of the celebration. Colorful vestments, incense and bells are certain other peculiarities. The Eucharist liturgy, which commemorates the entire life of Jesus, ends with a prayer that at Christ's Second Coming all may receive mercy.

In Dr. Abraham's opinion, the Antiochian liturgy is comparatively better adapted to the Indian religious sentiments. He notes that when Francis Malheu, a Cistercian from Belgium and Bede Griffiths, the well-renowned Benedictine from England, together decided to start an ashram in India, they selected the Malankara liturgy which they considered to be "more incultured."

Unfortunately, there have been occasions upon which respect for individual rites has been neglected. The Syro-Malankara church has, since its reunion with Roman Catholicism, occasionally been subject to subtle pressures with regard to its rite and liturgy under the proviso of making it more truly "Catholic." Such pressures seem to work on the assumption that there is one correct form of Catholic liturgy to which individual churches gravitate in varying degrees. Such a notion is dangerously close to that of promoting homogeneity rather than the richness of diversity that lay at the heart of Christianity historically. There would be great loss if forms of worship and tradition in Eastern Catholicism were to become imitations of Western forms of worship and tradition. Attempts to "correct" non-Latin liturgical forms also fail to recognize the extent to which liturgy can often be more fundamental to an individual church's identity than theology.

Dr. Mulamoottil’s third and perhaps most noteworthy claim concerning the Syro-Malankara church regards its potential as a bridge between not only Eastern and Western Catholicism, but also between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. For Orthodox churches in India the Syro-Malankara church is a great example of the fact that it is possible to be united to what Dr. Abraham calls the great Church of the West, while preserving their own authority and individual identity and without renouncing their familiar rites and customs. Given its unique position as a Catholic church which has retained what most would identify as an Orthodox liturgy, the Syro-Malankara church has an essential ecumenical role to play within the Christian communion, in particular functioning as a bridge between both Eastern and Western Catholicism and between Catholic and Orthodox churches. Such a role will only prove successful, however, if the Latin Catholic church demonstrates a clear appreciation for Eastern expressions of the Christian faith rather than a more narrowly circumscribed Latin homogeneity in Catholicism.

Dr. Mulamoottil’s lucid treatment of the Syro-Malankara church provides us with a welcome glimpse of issues significant to the study and practice of Christianity in India. Throughout Dr. Mulamoottil’s treatment of the Syro-Malankara church there was a constant refrain: the unity of the Catholic communion is to be realized in the midst of a rich plurality, a plurality that allows for Eastern as well as Western expressions of Catholicism. Dr. Job Thomas’s paper, to which we now turn, highlights the ways in which Hinduism can inform the expression of Christian themes in Indian art.

PART III: Life of Christ painted in “Temple Cloth” Style

There are major differences in content and style between Hindu artists trained in the traditional painting techniques of Tamil Nadu and Indian Christian artists trained in western styles. These differences are most apparent in paintings of Christian themes and appear to be a reflection of the debate that is going on among Christians in India as to what is authentic and which type of art correctly represent the Indian Christians.

Gourappa Chetty of Kala has this is a Hindu artist who painted the life of Jesus in the traditional style of painting in Tamil Nadu. To appreciate his style, background information on the history of painting in the Tamil Nadu region is relevant. The earliest reference to the art of painting in Tamil Nadu may be traced back to the period of Cankam Tamil literature during the early centuries of the Common Era. The various dynasties that ruled the region in succession, the Pallavas, Pandyars, Cholas and Sangamas of Vijayanagar patronized the art of painting. Popular themes were the deity performing miracles, subduing demons and bestowing gifts on his/her devotees. During the successive Nayak period, the format of the paintings changed in order to accommodate detailed renderings of events with labels, in Tamil or Telugu. The viswarupam (large depiction of the deity purported to extend to the size of the universe itself) portrayed the deity in grandeur with devotees and donors standing in adoration on either side of the viswarupam. When the images of the deity were taken out of the temples premises in procession, a painted temple cloth, simulating the sanctum ceiling, was held as a canopy over the deity. The temple cloth was always in the kalamkari technique using natural dyes and fibers. Throughout the centuries there was a remarkable degree of continuity both in the style and in the contents of the paintings. Although the Jesus kalamkari was completed in 1989, elements of the style can be traced back to pre-Christian times.

It is necessary to examine the background of the
Among artists practicing the contemporary style, particularly the Christians, events in the life of Christ are a popular subject. Their paintings are often discussed as to how well they represent the subject matter and whether their cubist, expressionist or surrealist styles of interpretation will appeal to a broad audience. The tendency of contemporary artists is to interpret their subject with Hindu overtones rather than simply portray their subjects. Contemporary Indian Christian artists portrayed Christ's message in representational terms such as mandala and the mystic Aum. Christ has been portrayed as a yogi, a sanyasi, a guru, as Krishna, or as the Buddha. The same symbolic representation is seen in church architecture. When Indianization was attempted various parts of the church were identified in Hindu Agamic terms.

The life of Christ painted by Gourappa Chetty, provides a contrast to the contemporary Christian artists’ work. Currently Gourappa Chetty is the acknowledged master of the kalamkari art and having been impressed with his kalamkari of the life of Rama, Krishna and the Buddha I commissioned him to make a kalamkari of the life of Jesus. The size, design and content of the kalamkari were to be chosen by the artist. Though not a Christian, Gourappa was familiar with the life of Jesus as there are schools run by Christian missions in his neighborhood.

The Jesus kalamkari measures 72” by 50”. Framed by an ornate border of floral motifs on the top and sides with a row of playful elephants at the bottom, the artist followed the format of traditional temple cloths. The viswarupam of Christ (the risen Christ adored by celestials and devotees) is in the center of the cloth. The interior is arranged in narrow panels depicting events that Gourappa considered significant in the life of Christ.

At the far left in the top panel of the Jesus kalamkari, the artist, Gourappa seeks the blessing of Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, for success in painting a Jesus kalamkari. In the boustrophedon manner the following are illustrated: annunciation, birth, Christ with the priests at the temple, flight to Egypt, the adoration by the Magi, Christ baptized by John, John’s imprisonment, temptation by Satan, Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman, miracle at the wedding at Cana, miracle of the loaves and fishes, miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, trial of Jesus, the road to Calvary, and the crucifixion. In the center is the risen Christ on a throne worshipped by his devotees and adored by divinities with a celestial parade.

Gourappa has rendered all the characters, including Christ, purely in Indian context, in their settings, garments and gestures. This seeming contrast does not show an ideological tension in his work as he seems to be quite comfortable with the subject and the manner in which he has rendered it.

One group of Indian Christians, the dalit Christians, complain that the Christianity practiced in India is caste-oriented and that the leaders of the Indian Christian church are elitists whose theology does not represent the majority of the Christians who are dalits. Dalits argue that expressions in art and rituals need to emerge along a theol-
ogy that closely represents the Indian church. Demanding a new theology, dalits have noted that the Indian theology is along the Orthodox Hindu Brahmanical ways of salvation which excluded the dalits. They have interpreted Christian theology in terms of Shankara’s *advaita vedanta* and Shri Aurobindo’s integral yoga.

The manner in which Gourappa Chetty has represented Christ, those around Him and the manner in which the various events are portrayed seems to have a genuine, direct and emotional appeal. There is nothing hidden or symbolic. There are no philosophical overtones or symbolic messages. In all the scenes there is an emphasis on people and Christ’s relationship with those around Him that is direct, intimate and compassionate. Gourappa’s artistic vocabulary is distinctly rural Indian. Satan tempts Christ with wealth represented as a cow, horse, elephant and baskets of coins. Satan’s demonic appearance shows him wearing a garland of human skulls around his waist. John the Baptist is painted wearing bead necklaces, holding a staff and wearing a leaf cap. In the wedding scene at Cana the bride and groom are standing near the sacred fire as a woman fills pots with water. In the center of the *kalamkari* the risen Christ is shown in majesty, attended by celestials and mortals all wearing saris or dhotis, holding flywhisks, lamps, umbrellas and garlands. All the events are shown in one dimension. There can be no correct answer to the questions concerning which is the proper representation of Christ. The debate over which expression is elitist and which expression represents the broadest spectrum will have no end. For now Gourappa has offered an alternate expression.

**NOTES**


5. I. Alexandrian, II. Antiochian, III. Armenian, IV. Byzantine, V. Chaldean, VI. Latin

6. Albanian, Armenian, Belorussian, Bulgarian, Chaldean, Coptic, Ethiopian, Greek, Hungarian, Italo-Albanian, Krizevci, Latin, Maronite, Melkite, Romanian, Russian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Syrian, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Ukrainian

7. The liturgy of St. James may have been the original rite of Jerusalem, celebrated by James, ‘the brother of the Lord’, according to Dr. Gheevarghese Panicker in “The Syro-Malankara Eucharistic Liturgy”.

8. In 1930 when the reunion took place between the Malankara Church and Rome, the Malankara Church was permitted to use the vernacular language, Malayalam, in it's liturgy, a practice already firmly established within Jacobite churches in South West India. It is quite possible that this practice had some impact upon debates regarding the vernacularization of the language of liturgy at the Second Detail of a portion of the Jesus *kalamakari* by Gourappa Chetty
Vatican Council.


Detail of portions of the Jesus *kalamkari* by Gourappa Chetty