

## The Mar Thoma Syrian Church: Ecumenical and Oriental

By Abel Joshua Abey

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Christianity in its earliest forms never existed as a homogenous expression, but rather as collections of groups which affirmed some aspects about the person of Jesus Christ. The earliest extant documents of Christianity document the establishment of communities within the New Testament Church, which, within a few years of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, associated themselves with the prominent figures of that era (1 Corinthians 1), or were involved in disputes concerning circumcision and dietary laws between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians (Acts 15). One can argue that important theological differences exist between the Synoptic gospel writers who portrayed a more humane, more bridge-like Christ to that of the all-powerful *logos* appearing in the Johannine Tradition.<sup>1</sup> From the Jewish, Gentile, and Apocalyptic groups of the New Testament Church to the “othered” forms of Christianity or heresies, such as Marcionism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Donatism, and the like, all have existed together as part of the Jesus movement, providing different interpretations of the message of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karen L. King, “Which Early Christianity?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69.

<sup>2</sup> King, “Which Early Christianity?”, 71.

What defines a church as Catholic or Orthodox? The ideal ecclesiological framework and boundaries expected of a particular individual church today never existed until the beginning of the late antique period.<sup>3</sup> Christianity was indeed catholic, but in the sense that it welcomed all people from all cultures.<sup>4</sup> Defining the orthodox nature of the Church is somewhat complex. In the early church, local debates and discussions through physical meetings or literature exchange were means of determining the correct faith. However, it was only at the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century CE that the orthodoxy of the Christian Church was established and universally recognized.<sup>5</sup> It is within this context that the paper proposes to understand the historical development of the ancient Mar Thoma Syrian Church and its current standing as an ecclesial division in the early Church.

### **Complex History of the Mar Thoma Church**

The Church of Malabar<sup>6</sup> was established by Thomas the Apostle on the southern coast of India and has existed well before modern colonial associations of Christianity with Western hegemony. Christian tradition often affirms that Thomas established the ancient Church in India despite having no direct physical evidence. Secondary evidence from early patristic sources and other circumstantial evidence affirms the probability of the existence of Thomasine Christians and the

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<sup>3</sup> Late antiquity is a historical period spanning roughly from the end of the 3rd century to the sixth or eighth century CE.

<sup>4</sup> Volker Menze, "The Establishment of the Syriac Churches," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Menze, "The Establishment of the Syriac Churches," 106.

<sup>6</sup> The Church of Malabar, Malankara Church, and Mar Thoma Church are all names that refer to the ancient ecclesiastical community in India. Members of this group are often called Nazranis (followers of the Nazarene) or Mar Thoma Christians, among other designations.

Mar Thoma Church.<sup>7</sup> The earliest text available of Thomas' association with India is from the Acts of Thomas, written in the late second century CE, which references his missionary work in the North of India, during the reign of King Gondophares<sup>8</sup> of the Indo-Parthian Empire.<sup>9</sup>

Eusebius in his ecclesiastical history refers to the Alexandrian philosopher Pantaeus who travels to India in 180 CE and finds a Christian community in India which has the Gospel of Matthew in the Hebrew language.<sup>10</sup> Patristic fathers mention Thomas's work in India in their writings.

Gregory of Nazianzus, in his work *Against the Arians and Concerning Himself*, writes about Thomas' work in India<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the Syriac father, Ephrem the Syrian, refers to Thomas in India in Hymn 42 of his collection called the Nisibian Hymns<sup>12</sup>.

Circumstantial evidence particularly focuses on the importance of trade routes in classical antiquity. The Southern Coast of India was known for its trade connections with other

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<sup>7</sup> Zacharia John, *The Liturgy of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar in the Light of Its History* (PhD diss., University of Durham, 1994), 3, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/5839/>. See also Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Excavations conducted at the end of the 19th century have revealed that a king named Gondophares ruled one of the prominent provinces of India, specifically the Punjab and the Indus Valley, during the middle of the first century CE.

<sup>9</sup> L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 248.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Nazianzus writes, "You have heard the words of Paul, "that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the Circumcision. Be it that Judæa is Peter's home; what has Paul in common with the Gentiles, Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, Thomas with India, Marc with Italy, or the rest, not to go into particulars, with those to whom they went?" Gregory of Nazianzus, *Against the Arians, and Concerning Himself*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, repr. of 1894 ed.), 665

<sup>12</sup> The Evil One wailed "Where now, is there a place for me to flee to from the righteous? I stirred up Death to slay the Apostles, that I might be safe from their blows. By their deaths now more exceedingly am I cruelly beaten. The Apostle whom I slew in India is before me in Edessa: he is here wholly and also there...O that one would show me that bag of Iscariot, for by it I acquired strength! The bag of Thomas has slain me, for the secret strength that dwells in it tortures me. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymn 42*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, repr. of 1898 ed.), 386

civilizations. Before the birth of Christ, the coast became important to the Greek and Roman civilizations for its spices, especially Malabar pepper. The Chera Kingdom (second century BCE–third century CE) had trading links with China, West Asia, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire.<sup>13</sup> The Greek geographer Strabo (63 BCE–24 CE) talks about direct sea routes from Arabia to Malabar. Pliny (23–79 CE), Ptolemy (100–160 CE) and the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea provide detailed information on the trading centers of the Malabar Coast.<sup>14</sup> Also salient is the presence of Jewish settlements along the Malabar coast. Scholars of Indian Christian history often suggest that these settlements were established by Jews who migrated after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE, as well as by later Jewish exiles fleeing from Greek and Roman persecution.<sup>15</sup> There is possibility within this context that the Christianity that existed in the first two hundred years in India could have been a form of “Jewish Christianity” without any set form of liturgies but continued with the Jewish way life with the addition of the Matthean Gospel.<sup>16</sup>

Mar Thoma Christianity entered its second phase with the arrival Thomas of Cana by the middle of the fourth century CE. Tradition states that Thomas of Cana, along with Joseph, Bishop of Edessa, was sent by the Catholicos of Tigris of the Persian Church in Babylon to provide spiritual authority to the Mar Thoma Christians.<sup>17</sup> But it is more probable that this group

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Balfour, *The Cyclopædia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia, Commercial, Industrial, and Scientific: Products of the Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal Kingdoms, Useful Arts and Manufactures* (Madras: Scottish and Adelphi Press, 1885), 584.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> Edna Fernandes, *The Last Jews of Kerala* (London: Granta Books, 2011), 79.

<sup>16</sup> See King, “Which Early Christianity?”, 75, for features that characterize Jewish Christianity. The Jews of Malabar, as ethnic Jews who accepted Christ as the Messiah, retained a significant influence from Jewish texts and traditions in their worship and practices. Their exclusive use of the Gospel of Matthew further underscores this distinct characteristic.

<sup>17</sup> Juhanon Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Kottayam: Literature Press, 1951), 7.

of merchants and ecclesiastical authorities were escaping the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire under the reign of Shapur II.<sup>18</sup> It is within the next hundred years that the first direct evidence of Christian existence in Malabar is recorded. In the book, *Christian Topography* by Cosmas Indicopleustes, who appears to be a Christian merchant, there is mention of the Christians in Malabar and the Persian bishop who is appointed over them.<sup>19</sup> There is a significant lack of evidence regarding the Christian community in Malabar until the fifteenth century, apart from the bestowal of five copper plates that document privileges granted by local Malabar kings to what was by then known as the Syrian Christian community.<sup>20</sup>

The colonial period, which began in the fifteenth century, was characterized by significant persecution, division, and marginalization of various cultures and communities. The ancient Church of India also faced consequences due to colonial movements, especially with the arrival of the Portuguese and the spread of Roman Catholicism along the Malabar coast. Before the colonial wave began, the first European explorations of the Mar Thoma Christians were undertaken by the *Societas Peregrinantium pro Christo*, a missionary organization established by Pope Innocent III. John of Monte Corvino was the first to arrive in Malabar in 1291.<sup>21</sup> In 1328, Jordanus, another member of this group, was sent to India as a bishop with the mission of converting the Christians of Malabar to Roman Catholicism.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Odoric of Udine, who arrived in 1321, and John De Marignolli, who visited in 1348, were both tasked with

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<sup>18</sup> Touraj Daryaei, "The Sasanian Empire," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 36.

<sup>19</sup> Baby Varghese, *Syriac Liturgy in India: Syro-Malabar, Malankara Orthodox and Mar Thoma Liturgies*, vol. 66 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2023), Introduction.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> K. V. Koshy, *St. Thomas and the Syrian Churches of India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 41.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, 83.

mapping the presence of Thomasine Christians. The arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498 marked a turning point in the political landscape of Malabar, particularly as the region came under the protection of the King of Portugal.<sup>23</sup> This shift also led to the establishment of the Padroado by Pope Leo X, granting the Portuguese ecclesiastical authority over churches in the East.<sup>24</sup> The ancient Church of Malabar was completely brought under Rome in 1599 through the Synod of Diamper led by Archbishop Menezes of Goa.<sup>25</sup> Through the Synod of Diamper, the Latinization of the Syrian Christian took place along with a liturgical and theological transformation to Roman Catholic orthodoxy from the East Syriac orthodoxy.<sup>26</sup>

After five decades under Roman influence, the Mar Thoma Christians reacted against the Latinization of their faith and traditions. On January 3, 1653, under the leadership of Archdeacon Thomas, the majority of Thomasine Christians took an oath at Mattancherry, holding onto a rope tied to a stone cross and declaring their severance from the Roman Church.<sup>27</sup> This event can be regarded as the first freedom movement against colonial rule in India.<sup>28</sup> During this event, twelve

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<sup>23</sup> Clara A. B. Joseph, *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2019), 61

<sup>24</sup> Koshy, *St. Thomas and the Syrian Churches of India*, 42

<sup>25</sup> C. P. Mathew and M. M. Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1967), 31

<sup>26</sup> Scaria Zacharia, ed., *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599* (Bangalore: Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994), 19–23.

The Synod of Diamper is often regarded as a black mark in the history of the ancient Indian Christian Church. While acknowledging the harm inflicted by the colonial mindset of the Roman Church, the author of this article also recognizes the reforms introduced by the Synod that contributed to greater theological and liturgical clarity among the Nazranis. Notably, the Synod of Diamper also brought about significant social changes, particularly in matters concerning women and children, that were centuries ahead of their time.

<sup>27</sup> The title of Archdeacon has its origins in the East Syriac or Persian tradition, and the individual bearing this title served as the head of the clergy. However, there remains a lack of clarity among scholars regarding the exact period when this designation was first adopted within the Malankara Church.

<sup>28</sup> George Mathew, *Faith and Sacraments of the Mar Thoma Church* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy, 2004), 12.

priests elevated Archdeacon Thomas to the episcopate of the Mar Thoma Church, bestowing on him the title *Mar Thoma* (translated from Syriac as "Lord Thomas").<sup>29</sup> However, the Mar Thoma Christians recognized that this consecration was irregular and thus sought the assistance of various ancient patriarchs of the East. Their appeals were ultimately answered by the Patriarch of Antioch, who sent Mar Gregorius of Jerusalem to India to regularize the episcopate through a valid consecration of Mar Thoma. This development marked a significant turning point in the history of the Mar Thoma Nazranis, leading them into a new ecclesiastical identity that would later be recognized as part of oriental Orthodoxy.<sup>30</sup>

The political and ecclesiastical landscape in and around the Mar Thoma Church kept changing. Political and economic powers were transferred from the Portuguese to the Dutch, later to the French and finally to the British.<sup>31</sup> Within the Church, what initially began as the adoption of West Syriac liturgical and theological rites eventually resulted in the ceding of autonomy and ecclesiastical authority to the Patriarch of Antioch.<sup>32</sup>

The final historical chapter in the evolution of the Mar Thoma Church began with the arrival of CMS missionaries sent by the Church of England.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1800s, Western Europe was experiencing significant tensions between the Anglicans, various Protestant groups, and the

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<sup>29</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Mathew, *Faith and Sacraments of the Mar Thoma Church*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> The French started colonizing the southern part of India since 1721 and fought wars against the British until 1816. British rule in India lasted from 1757 to 1947 till India gained independence.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 38.

<sup>33</sup> The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was founded in London in 1799 within the Church of England as the Society for Missions to Africa and the East. It arose out of the Evangelical revival, with the purpose of spreading the Christian faith overseas, particularly in Africa and Asia. See, Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas*, 44.

Roman Catholic Church. These conflicts found their way into the Church of Malabar—British missionaries not only provided spiritual guidance but also, at times, intervened in the internal affairs of the Church.<sup>34</sup> This interference later led to considerable challenges and divisions within the community.<sup>35</sup> The missionaries, though zealous, failed to grasp the heritage of the Syrian Church, overlooking its Orthodox and Oriental roots. Memories of Portuguese coercion made the community wary of foreign-imposed reforms, even under British patronage. Mistaking ancient traditions for Roman remnants, they sought to erase symbols and practices central to communal faith. Their individualistic Protestant ethos of missionaries clashed with the Church's corporate communion, making conflict inevitable.<sup>36</sup> After the reforms adopted in Diamper, the next set of reforms happened with the arrival of missionaries. Reforms such as the translation of the Scriptures into Malayalam, the local language of Kerala, were positively received. Other reforms included the conduct of church life; the requirement that those selected for the priesthood have a college-level education; financial transparency within the church; the expectation that clergy speak from the gospel every Sunday, which was not a common practice among the Syrian community; and the establishment of schools in each parish for the education of the entire community.<sup>37</sup> However, the increasing interference of the missionaries eventually led to opposition against the decisions of the Church leadership. Moreover, the missionaries often conflated the theological framework of the Syriac Church—such as the intercession of saints and

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<sup>34</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas*, 46

<sup>35</sup> Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas*, 48

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, 125

prayers for the departed—with Roman Catholic dogmatic concepts. This misunderstanding led to their expulsion from all affairs of the Malankara Church at the Synod held in Mavelikkara.<sup>38</sup>

### **An Oriental Indian Church with a ‘reformed’<sup>39</sup> Character**

A group of priests appointed by Mar Thoma XI sought to purify the Church of Malabar by eliminating redundant elements, either those absorbed from non-Christian cultural influences or lingering Roman Catholic practices.<sup>40</sup> However, following the death of Mar Thoma XI, they faced opposition. Mar Thoma XII also refrained from addressing the irregularities the priests had identified within the Church of Malabar, as measured against scripture and the Syriac canon.<sup>41</sup>

The confrontation between the two groups grew strong, and the purifiers sought out the help of the Patriarch of Antioch to consecrate a Deacon Mathen with valid orders, as the consecration of the Mar Thoma VIII to Mar Thoma XII were considered partially invalid for various reasons<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 34. The Mavelikkara Synod of the Malankara Syrian Church convened before the expulsion of the British missionaries, stated the following, "We, as Jacobite Syrians, acknowledge the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch and adhere to the liturgies and traditions established by the bishops appointed under his command. We cannot deviate from these practices or accept teachings that contradict them. Likewise, no one from a different tradition may preach or teach in our Church without permission from the respective Patriarch. Therefore, we cannot allow such actions against us. Our churches, built with the guidance of the Patriarch's bishops and supported financially by our people, follow established regulations regarding contributions and offerings. Just as this is the norm in the churches of Antioch and other regions, we, too, lack the authority to follow or promote a different approach."

<sup>39</sup> The term ‘reformed’ is deliberately lowercased in this context to prevent confusion with the Protestant Reformation of the West. While the Mar Thoma Church drew some inspiration from Anglican influences, it upholds that its reformation was both necessary and indigenous.

<sup>40</sup> Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> Koshy, *St. Thomas and the Syrian Churches of India*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> The predecessor of Mar Thoma VIII, Mar Thoma VII, fell ill and was unable to convene a meeting of church leaders to select his successor. In his absence, he invited a relative, Thoma Kathanar, to his bedside. There, he laid his hands on him, prayed, and consecrated him as Mar Thoma VIII on July 2, 1809. Any consecration that had not been pre-approved by the representative body of clergy and laity was considered invalid. Similarly, the consecration of Mar Thoma IX was deemed invalid, and he was not granted permission to govern the Church by the British Resident. He was instructed to relinquish his power to Mar Thoma X, whose consecration was also considered invalid because it was performed by bishops from the Malabar Independent Syrian Church, which had separated from the mother Malankara Church. C. V. Cheriyan, *Orthodox Christianity in India: A History of the Malankara Orthodox Church, AD 52–2002* (Kottayam: Academic Publishers, 2003), 227. For information on the Malabar

The Patriarch consecrated Deacon Mathen as Mathews Mar Athanasius (Mar Thoma XIII) who was the nephew of one of the purifiers, Abraham Malpan,<sup>43</sup> and for first time in the Malankara Church, there remained two concurrent “Mar Thoma Metropolitans”<sup>44</sup> for a brief period.<sup>45</sup> Mar Thoma XIII consecrated his cousin, Mar Thoma XIV; however, the opposing faction, which resisted the reforms, rejected this consecration and instead sent another priest to the Patriarch of Antioch, who was consecrated as Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius.<sup>46</sup> The official division of the Malankara Church into what is now the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Syrian Church was finalized through the verdict of the Royal Court Case in 1889.<sup>47</sup> This separation was not based on theological differences but rather on ecclesiastical authority. The faction led by Thomas Mar Athanasius (Mar Thoma XIV) asserted that the Malankara Church had always been independent, despite having sought assistance from various foreign ecclesiastical bodies. They maintained that the Throne of Malabar was as ancient as the Throne of Antioch. In contrast, the opposing groups argued that the Patriarch of Antioch was the supreme authority over the Malankara Church. The Royal Court verdict ruled in favor of the latter, resulting in the loss of all assets for the reformist faction. Consequently, the

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Independent Syrian Church please refer to, John Fenwick, *The Forgotten Bishops: The Malabar Independent Syrian Church and Its Place in the Story of the St Thomas Christians of South India* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> *Malpan* is the Syriac term used for a teacher of Syriac language or theology.

<sup>44</sup> The title “Mar Thoma Metropolitan” is the indigenous designation for the head of the ancient Indian Church, regarded as the successor to Saint Thomas the Apostle. The term Mar Thoma translates as “Lord Thomas.” The present Mar Thoma Metropolitan, seated on the Apostolic Throne of Saint Thomas, is His Beatitude Dr. Theodosius Mar Thoma.

<sup>45</sup> Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 42-43.

<sup>46</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Church of Saint Thomas*, 77-80.

<sup>47</sup> Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 44-45.

reformist/purified party, which officially adopted the name Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, had to struggle to sustain its existence.<sup>48</sup>

The Mar Thoma Church today remains an oriental Indian Church, following the Syriac liturgies of the Church of Antioch and affirming its Miaphysite Christological position. This position is not merely inherited but has been reaffirmed in present day ecumenical dialogues, recording the church's strong affirmation of the unity of Christ's divinity and humanity in the one incarnate nature, consistent with the faith of the first three Ecumenical Councils – in the language of Cyril of Alexandria.<sup>49</sup> However, the Mar Thoma Church does not polemically reject the formulation of Chalcedon, upheld by the majority of Christians in the world, but rather recognizes that much of the division that has occurred was due to linguistic, political and philosophical differences rather than a substantive divergence of faith. The dialogue statement between the Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Churches states: “both churches receive their respective traditions, and histories, the same faith of the early church”, reflecting the commitment to ancient orthodoxy in its different perspectives.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, in terms of the shared faith, the Mar Thoma position holds the same deep reverence for the Miaphysite formulations as the Oriental Orthodox, with an openness to the Chalcedonian understandings. It upholds the Eastern Canon of Scripture as its foundation, along with maintaining the orthodoxy that was established by the first three councils.<sup>51</sup> Regarding its separated orthodox brethren, it affirms

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<sup>48</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Five Tomes Against Nestorius*, trans. P. E. Pusey (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1881), 39.

<sup>50</sup> These different perspectives include Chalcedonian versus non-Chalcedonian orthodoxies. Zacharias Mar Theophilus, Isaac Mar Philoxenos, K. G. Pothan, Sam T. Koshy, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, John Okoro, Harald Rein, Adrian Suter, Peter-Ben Smit, and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, “The Munnar Statement” (2014).

<sup>51</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 93.

similarities in its commitment to ancient doctrine evident through the Church's sacramental theology. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church celebrates seven sacraments—Holy Communion, Baptism, Confirmation, Confession, Matrimony, Unction, and Ordination—much like its oriental and Catholic counterparts.<sup>52</sup> The idea of reform in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church was more in relation to its practical aspects rather than theological. Liturgically, the church has removed or reframed direct prayers for the departed and intercession from public worship, but does not consider it to be wrong, and allows individual agency for public worship in their personal prayers and daily offices.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, while the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist is affirmed, the Church does not adopt the metaphysical categories of transubstantiation or consubstantiation; instead, it prefers the language of mystery and real presence, rooted in patristic and Eastern theological idioms.<sup>54</sup> This balanced position that is common to all Eastern Churches avoids the rationalism of Reformed memorialism or the juridical specificity of Latin scholasticism, instead locating the Eucharistic transformation into the dimension of doxological mystery. The liturgies call forth the entire community of believers, both the royal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, to participate in the heavenly reality through signs and symbols. This view is rooted in the Syriac sacramental imagination where the created and the uncreated realms meet in true worship. In relation to baptism and confirmation, the Church practices infant baptism with chrismation, preserving initiation as a holistic sacramental entrance into the Church. Confession, which is often public, is understood not only as mediatorial absolution by the priest but also as a pastoral and communal act of healing and restoration. Marriage and

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Verghese and M. Thommen, eds., *Orthodox–Mar Thoma Conversations: Some Papers and Statements from the Period 1968–1970* (Kottayam: n.p., 1970), 5–7.

<sup>53</sup> John Fenwick, *High Priests of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2015), 149–151.

<sup>54</sup> John, “The Liturgy of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar in the Light of Its History.”

ordination are celebrated within a deeply symbolic liturgical structure, invoking the Trinitarian presence and the covenantal nature of Christian community. Unction, though less frequently practiced, remains part of church life, particularly in the perspective of pastoral care.<sup>55</sup>

The liturgical calendar of the Mar Thoma Church reflects its continuity with the Syriac tradition while both emphasizing its reformist principles of upholding the spiritual transformation of the faith community and partaking in ritualistic elements. Major feasts are divided into four: Maranaya—relating to Christ; Roohanaya—relating to the Holy Spirit; Ethanaya—relating to the Church; and Dukranas—relating to saints and martyrs. Five major fasting seasons are observed in the Church which includes the Great Lent (fifty days before Easter), the Nativity Fast (twenty-five days before Christmas), fast in remembrance of the Virgin Mary (August 1-15), the Apostles Fast (June 16-29), and the three-day Nineveh Fast.<sup>56</sup> In practice, while historically, certain Marian feasts and saints' commemorations were not emphasized liturgically as in the Orthodox tradition, there is growing interest in such celebrations among younger generations in the Church.

Its ecumenical vision remaining broad and inclusive, the Mar Thoma Church is in full communion with the Anglican Communion, the Old Catholic churches, the Protestant Churches of South India and North India (CSI and CNI), the Independent Oriental Orthodox Malabar Independent Syrian Church and is also in active dialogue with the Syriac Orthodox Church of

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<sup>55</sup> George Mathew Kuttiyil, *The Faith and Sacraments of the Mar Thoma Church* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy, 2004), 40–87.

<sup>56</sup> Mar Thoma Lectionary for the Christian Year 2015-2025. [https://web.archive.org/web/20160323134433/http://marthomascotland.org/documents/Mar\\_Thoma\\_Lectionary\\_2015.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20160323134433/http://marthomascotland.org/documents/Mar_Thoma_Lectionary_2015.pdf).

Antioch, and the Catholic Church.<sup>57</sup> The Church takes an active role within ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia, and various national church councils.<sup>58</sup> For the Mar Thoma Church, its ecumenical vision flows from the Church's theological vision—Christ being the reconciler of things. The Church is called to be the sign and instrument of this reconciliation. In its dialogue with the Old Catholic Churches, the Mar Thoma Church affirms that ecclesial differences in expression, such as the number of accepted ecumenical councils, use of icons or imageries, and the theological rationalization of the Eucharist, do not constitute a break in communion so long as the underlying faith is held in common.<sup>59</sup>

The Mar Thoma Church's internal ecclesiology also reflects its unique theological vision. The decision-making bodies of the Church—the Episcopal Synod, the Sabha Council, and the Prathinidhi Mandalam—include a substantial role for laity which demonstrates the church's commitment to synodality and participation. Such inclusion resonates not only with the early church model (which was participatory) but also with the ecclesial vision of other conciliar churches like the Old Catholics and Anglicans.<sup>60</sup> The episcopate retains apostolic succession and sacramental authority, but functions in tandem with lay and clergy participation in governance, thus preserving the balance of authority and accountability.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Prakash K. George, ed., *The Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Its Ecumenical Relations: Through the Centuries* (Tiruvalla: Mar Thoma Press, 2024), introduction.

<sup>58</sup> George, *The Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Its Ecumenical Relations*, 110-112.

<sup>59</sup> Mar Theophilus et al., "The Munnar Statement."

<sup>60</sup> For Anglicanism, please refer to *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions*, ed. Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, 29-31. For the Old Catholic perspective, refer to *Listening to the West*, 246-247.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 195-197.

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church's vision of salvation and Christian discipleship cannot be abstracted from its engagement with the world and within the Indian social framework. One of the key elements of its reformation was to uphold the theoretical concept of the "liturgy after the liturgy" that in praxis maintains that the worship of God is incomplete without the service to the neighbor. This understanding is not framed in terms of a social gospel detached from theology but rather is embedded in its liturgical and ecclesiological convictions. The Holy Qurbana,<sup>62</sup> the Church's central act of worship, repeatedly invokes prayers that portray the idea of the coming of God's Kingdom on earth.<sup>63</sup> The sacramental life of the Mar Thoma Church goes beyond the sanctuary—to public life through its works in education, health care, rural development, environmental stewardship and through protecting the dignity of the marginalized. This theology of public discipleship finds historical expression in the Church's extensive work in North India and rural South India, where it has established schools, hospitals, and agricultural programs not for proselytism, but for service. The Church founded mission fields across India, including in the tribal regions of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Assam, often at the cost of great financial and human investment.<sup>64</sup> In these contexts, mission was not framed as conversion but as accompaniment—offering literacy, sanitation, women's empowerment, and ecological renewal. These efforts were rooted in the theology of incarnation, which holds that the Word became flesh

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<sup>62</sup> The term *Holy Qurbana* comes from the Syriac word *qurbānā*, meaning "offering" or "sacrifice," and designates the Eucharistic celebration in the Syriac Christian tradition. It highlights both the sacrificial character of the rite and the communal act of offering worship to God.

<sup>63</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 241-242

<sup>64</sup> The missionary wing of the Church, known as the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association, covers almost three thousand villages and has established 450 new congregations, three hospitals, and twelve higher secondary schools. For more information, please refer to the official website: <https://marthomaevangelisticassociation.com/activities.html>

in each culture. The Mar Thoma Church's mission, therefore, became the witnessing of the message of incarnation—identification of God with the people and harsh world realities.<sup>65</sup>

The political theology of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in the twentieth century was decisively shaped by its encounter with the World Council of Churches and the global ecumenical movement. The WCC's vision of the "responsible society" provided a framework that connected Christian faith to social ethics, demanding justice, participation, and accountability in political life. The Mar Thoma Church received this vision not as an abstract theory but as an urgent mandate for its own context in Kerala, where autocracy and caste divisions stifled democratic aspirations.<sup>66</sup> In that context, Abraham Mar Thoma articulated a theologically grounded civic solidarity: in 1938, he urged unity across castes and religions—"Nairs, Ezhavas, Brahmins, Muslims and Christians belong to a common brotherhood of man"—repudiating divide-and-rule politics, and he spoke again in 1943 in favor of the agitators for responsible government.<sup>67</sup> His successor, Juhanon Mar Thoma (1949–1976), carried this legacy forward into the post-independence period. Juhanon Mar Thoma argued that the Church's calling in a secular democratic India was to form citizens shaped by the Gospel who could contribute to national life. He consistently linked ecclesiology with democracy, insisting that "the conciliar and synodical character of the Mar Thoma Church" reflected not only theological commitments but also a model for how Christian communities could sustain democratic participation in a plural society. His writings and leadership during the formative years of Indian democracy reveal a conviction

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<sup>65</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 107-110.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 149-150.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 152.

that the Church had to model justice, dialogue, and participation in its own polity in order to bear credible witness in the nation.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, the Church's political theology acquired a practical edge in its social mission. In 1977, the Mar Thoma Development Department was launched to translate its kingdom-centered theology into action. Its programs addressed caste oppression, land redistribution, literacy, healthcare, and women's empowerment, reflecting a theology of the Kingdom that intertwined salvation with social transformation.<sup>69</sup> The Mar Thoma Church developed a theology that integrated faith with justice, democracy, and public responsibility. This vision continues to animate its self-understanding as a community called not only to worship but to active participation in the shaping of society.

## **Conclusion**

The Mar Thoma Church is rightly termed a “bridge church,”<sup>70</sup> which, through its reformed character, has ecumenically bridged the East and West.<sup>71</sup> Over centuries of division, the sister churches in Malabar, in their pursuit of orthodoxy and political influence, have often aligned themselves with more powerful Christian communions across the world. Within this complex historical and ecclesiastical landscape, the Mar Thoma Church has embraced the depth and richness of the ancient Thomasine Syriac Christian tradition, carrying forward its theological and

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<sup>68</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 251-257.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 270-276.

<sup>70</sup> The expression “bridge church” in reference to the Mar Thoma Church is a designation frequently employed in ecumenical circles rather than one attributed to a single individual. It has come to serve as a recognition of the Church's distinctive ecumenical character.

<sup>71</sup> “To the Holy Synod of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (11 November 2024) | Francis,” 11 November 2024. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/november/documents/20241111-chiesa-siro-malankarese.html>.

liturgical heritage. At the same time, it has cultivated a distinctive expression of orthodoxy—one that is both rooted in tradition and open to fraternal communion with diverse Christian bodies. Through its ecumenical engagements, socio-political commitment and theological integrity, the Mar Thoma Church continues to embody a dynamic and inclusive vision of Christianity, reflecting both its historical evolution and its mission for the future. This integrated vision—of worship, faith, justice, and healing, underlines the Mar Thoma Syrian Church as a community that embodies its theology in the real world. It stands not only as an oriental Church but as a reforming and incarnating body, where every theological claim finds expression in social action. It does not separate doxology from ethics nor ecclesiology from society, but sees in every human encounter the possibility of divine communion.

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