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THE SYRIAC HERITAGE OF THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF THE CULTURAL FABRIC OF INDIA

Joseph J. Palackal

Abstract: The Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church is an integral part of the cultural treasures of India and the world. The Syro Malabar Church (about 4 million members) is the largest among the eight churches of the St. Thomas Christians, who were evangelized by the missionary endeavors of the Aramaic-speaking Apostle Thomas. From early on, the Aramaic (Syriac) language and music played a significant role in the experience of the Christian faith in India. In spite of the challenges from Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, the Syro Malabar Christians zealously cherished and preserved the Syriac tradition. In the following centuries, they also adapted many liturgical practices from the Roman rite by translating the respective Latin texts into Syriac, and composing them anew in Kerala, thereby adding another layer to the already vast Syriac chant repertory. With the vernacularization of the liturgy in the 1960s, however, intimacy with the Syriac tradition declined gradually. Luckily, the generation that was born during the transitional period continues to hold, albeit advancing in years, a prolific memory base of melodies and experiences associated with the Syriac tradition. With a focus on the musical and liturgical elements, this article provides an overview of the various aspects of the Syriac heritage, practical suggestions to preserve it for posterity, and recommendations to include it in our conversations on the cultural legacy of India.

Introduction

On Wednesday, June 16, 2014, The New York Times carried the following news item by its staff reporter, Ellen Barry, on the first page of the International section: "New Leaders Stir Hopes for Sanskrit in India." The team of administrators, under the leadership of the new Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were making plans to promote the study of the Sanskrit language. "In late May," the article said, "there had been rumors that he [the Prime Minister] would go a step further and take his oath of office in Sanskrit." Amid a hectic election campaign, Mr. Narendra Modi's team spent time deliberating on how to draw attention to the Sanskrit language as a means to reclaim a particular aspect of the history of India and its cultural legacy. Even though the new Prime Minister changed his mind at the last minute and took his oath in Hindi, the very idea of doing it in Sanskrit was a bold and calculated move. Today, we may engage in a similar pursuit. We may deliberate on the unique religious and cultural heritage of the Syro Malabar Christians. One of the determining factors of Kerala Christian heritage belongs with the Aramaic language in which Jesus and his disciples preached the gospel. In other words, the St. Thomas Christians in India claim to have received the good news well before the original teachings of Jesus were translated into the medium of the Greek language, and were bequeathed to the world by the four Gospel writers. We can also be uniquely proud of the fact that the Christian faith came to India, where

the Aramaic language was already in use for several centuries; Aramaic was one of the languages in which Emperor Ashoka (ca. 269-232 BC) promulgated his edicts (see Mukherjee, 1984). Therefore, it is worthwhile to reset the discourse on India from a Syriac perspective.

Syriac Christianity in Kerala

The spice trade between Kerala and the Middle East, established much before the Christian era, paved the way for the import of the Eastern form of Christianity to South India. According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus preached the Christian faith in South India. In the fourth century, a group of Christians from Persia migrated to Kerala; they brought the liturgy in Syriac, a form of Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. Continued commercial and religious interactions between the two regions helped the preservation of the linguistic and musical traditions associated with the Chaldean/Syriac Christianity from the Middle East, as if in a time capsule, in Kerala.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Vasco de Gama brought Portuguese missionaries to Kerala; they introduced the Roman Catholic form of Christianity along with liturgy in Latin. The missionaries converted many local people into the Roman Catholic faith. The Latin Church flourished in Kerala through the zealous activities of the Franciscans, Jesuits, and Carmelites. In their zeal for uniformity, the Portuguese missionaries made an attempt to change the Syriac language and music of the St. Thomas Christians to Latin language and Western chant. However, the St. Thomas Christians considered the Syriac language and music to be crucial to their unique religious identity and, therefore, resisted the move. In 1653, a group of St. Thomas Christians revolted against the Portuguese missionaries who wanted to take complete control over the religious and social lives of the local Christians. These Christians gathered at the church in Mattanchery, near Kochi, and took an oath that they would never subject themselves to the Jesuit Archbishop Garcia. Later, they contacted the Patriarch of Antioch to send them bishops. The bishops who came to Kerala gradually introduced the Antiochene liturgy in West Syriac (different from the East Syriac of the Chaldean rite).

All these encounters led to several divisions among the St. Thomas Christians. Today, the term "St. Thomas Christians" or "Syriac Christians" refer to a conglomeration of eight different churches: Syro Malabar Church, Church of the East, Malankara Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Syro Malankara Church, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, and St. Thomas Evangelical Church. Among these, the Syro Malabar Church and the Church of the East followed the Chaldean liturgical tradition in the East-Syriac form of the Aramaic language, and the other churches followed the Antiochene tradition in West Syriac. At present, these churches celebrate their respective liturgies mostly in the vernacular languages.

The outstanding Oxford scholar Sebastian Brock has underscored the importance of the Syriac heritage as a "third lung," along with the "two lungs" (the Latin West and the Greek East) of the Church made famous by Pope John Paul II (Brock 2005 & 2008). Our focus here is on the Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church. We shall use the term "Syriac heritage" to mean a broad spectrum of items that include the different aspects of the Syriac language, liturgy, theology,

diocese. The argument that every liturgical celebration, according to the Chaldean rite, requires the service of a deacon does not seem to have impressed the code writers. In view of the particular history and situation of the Syro Malabar Church, the restoration of married priesthood may or may not happen in the near future, but the restoration of permanent deacons, married or otherwise, should normally go with the restoration of the liturgy.

What more can we do to reclaim parts of the Syriac heritage?

Here are a few practical suggestions.

1. *Own it and pass it on*.

As long as the name of the **Syro** Malabar Church retains the reference to the Syriac language and liturgy, the Syriac heritage cannot be dispensed with. A separation from the past may not be in favor of the next generation; we will be creating a generation without an umbilical cord. Therefore, the first thing that the present generation can do is to own the Syriac heritage with pride, and then pass it on to the next generation with pleasure.

2. *Reinstate the Lord's Prayer in Syriac in personal and family prayer*

Language is not only a means of communication, but also a means to express intimacy. For example, my parents called their respective fathers "Appan." We, the children, called our father "Ichāchan." Not every family in the village followed that practice. In any case, whenever my siblings and I talk about our father, we refer to him as Ichāchan. For us, no other word (Chāchan, Achāchan, Appachan, Pappa, Daddy, etc.) would emote the intimacy. The St. Thomas Christians in India have a unique privilege to pray the Lord's Prayer using almost the exact words that Jesus taught His disciples. The phonetics might have been different, but the phonemes must have been the same. Even in the matter of phonetics, the Syro Malabar version (i. e., East-Syriac) is closer to the original articulation of the vowel sounds in comparison with the West Syriac version that is prevalent among the Orthodox and Jacobite Christians. This is the closest you can get to Jesus, his time, and his voice. There is absolutely no reason why the Syro Malabar Christians should not reclaim that privilege, relearn the text, relish the sound, and reconnect with the author of the prayer in an intimate way. They do not need anybody's permission to do this in their personal or family prayer, as well as non-liturgical prayer gatherings.

3. *Reinstate the tradition of giving biblical names to children*

The Syro Malabar Christians can, if they wish, bring back the tradition of giving biblical names (Hebrew/Aramaic) to their children. The name itself can be an act of witnessing. Such names as Maṛiam, Mathāi, Yohannān, Yācob, Thōmma, and Anna were quite popular until the middle of the twentieth century. These names were sometimes adapted to the Kerala setting, as for example, Maṛiāmma, Maṛiakutty, Annamma, Māthachan, etc.. Interestingly, the transitional period in liturgy also happened to be a time of secularization of the names of children among the

What we are calling for is a reversal of the process that brought us to this juncture. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Syro Malabar Church wanted to explore a new identity, and tried to redefine itself by distancing from the Syriac language. Ironically, the Church continues to make use of the reference to the Syriac language in the first part of its name.

Finally, the self-awareness of the Syro Malabar Christians, who belong to the largest Church among the St. Thomas Christians, may have much more political implications than they might think. It is time for the Syro Malabar Christians to take hold of the narrative of Christian history in India. The discourses that they engage in everyday life are part of history in the making. If they do not proclaim the good news to the world that Christianity and India are complementary concepts, nobody else will. By doing so, they will be serving the country by highlighting yet another dimension of its religious, cultural, linguistic, and musical diversity. India is more than the sum of its parts.

Jai Hind!

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