

Syro-Malabar Faith-Experience in the Cultural Context

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Introduction

This paper is divided into the following parts:

1. The biblical picture of St Thomas and his personal experience with Jesus.
2. Reality and relevance of the cultural context in faith formation.
3. The cultural context of India at the time of St Thomas and the beginning of Syro-Malabar Church.
4. Call to a deeper assimilation of the cultural elements of the country encountered.
5. Celebration, contemplation and realization.

1. The Biblical Picture of St Thomas and His Personal Experience with Jesus

When we go through the biblical passages relating to St Thomas we see the following characteristic notes of a person:

1.1 Spontaneity and Readiness for Sacrifice

This is a very good character. Courage and readiness to do what is difficult was always with him. St Thomas, when he was just a disciple of Jesus, offered himself to go and die with him. When the disciples knew what was going on in the society and people's evil plan to kill Jesus, they lovingly warned Jesus not to go to the city. It is in this context Thomas said: "Let us all go with the master so we may die with him" (Jn

11:16). This is a sign that Thomas accepted the master and also manifested his readiness to surrender himself to him. From the other passages of the Gospel we can understand that the inner eyes of the disciples were not yet open. This is said about the chosen disciples Peter, James and John, whom Jesus took to Mount Tabor and to Gethsemane. The idea was that those who had the Tabor experience also should have the Gethsemane experience. But in spite of all that, it is said: "They still did not understand the Sacred Scripture which said that he must rise from death." (Jn 20:9). In the light of this, the readiness of Thomas to go and die with Jesus could be seen as a natural enthusiasm arising from his then consciousness of Jesus. My argument at this moment is not about his faith in Jesus, but his commitment and readiness to give himself to what he knows.

1.2. An Inquisitive Mind, Seeking Satisfactory Evidence for Reason

After the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas refused to accept it, even after the witnessing by other disciples. This was because Thomas insisted on evidence which natural reason demands. Reason is a faculty of truth. Evidence is what reason naturally asks for its decision making. The problem here is that the resurrection of Jesus is not to be accepted primarily by human evidences, but by faith, which is a light enlightening the mind and heart of the believer at the same time, leading him to understand and accept the self-revealing God. The reluctance of Thomas to accept the fact of resurrection shows that reason was powerful in his personality and a natural demand for proof and evidence was put forward. Jesus uses this occasion for another apparition to the disciples in which the primacy of faith over reason is established.

1.3. Readiness to Move from Reason to Faith

In the second apparition Jesus calls Thomas personally and reveals himself to him. When Jesus said to him: "Put your finger here and look at my hands; stretch out your hands and put into my side. Resist no

longer and be a believer" (Jn 20:27). His spontaneous response was "My Lord and my God." Once again we see the readiness to accept what is placed before him as evidence. But Jesus said, "You believed because you have seen, blessed are those who believe without seeing." This is an instruction given to all disciples, especially to Thomas, that ultimate salvation is sought basically through faith rather than seeing by physical or mental eyes. The spontaneity with which Thomas accepted this faith is very clear by his sudden expression: "My Lord and my God." The expression was a complete surrender of himself to the master as a faithful disciple. Once again, the same spontaneity and readiness to accept and surrender to that which is clearly manifested before him is seen. Here the manifestation is taking place not in the sense or mind level, but in the Spirit level, which we call the opening of the third eye.

St Ephrem, a great poet of the Syrian tradition has written *Hymns on Faith*, which in fact is a treatise on faith. This poem shows how important is faith for the disciples of Jesus and could be understood as a natural flow of faith consciousness of the original Syrian tradition. St Ephrem calls faith as 'the luminous eye'. In the Indian tradition faith is known as the third eye and is understood as a person's entry into the divine way of thinking and seeing in contrast to the human ways of sensation and reason. When Jesus presented blessedness to those who believe without seeing, Jesus insisted the need of transcending the two ways of human seeing, that is of sensation and reason. Though faith is not against reason, faith definitely asks us to transcend the parameters of reason and opt that which is beyond reason, of course, by the very light of faith which is a gift given to us. My conclusion is that the St Thomas Christians, irrespective of place or country they live, should be persons of deep faith, though it is in principle applicable to all. All Christians must live in faith. Here is an incident which brings faith to the forefront of our Jesus experience and let this be the corner stone of our spiritual heritage.

As we advance in our seeing dynamics, proceeding from the lower level of sense and mind, moving to the higher level of faith, our value system slowly changes, because it is the eye, that sees, decides the value that is opted. The refusal to accept the fact of resurrection was because it was not corresponding to the demands of reason. When Jesus appeared and condescendingly offered himself to be touched, Thomas understood that Jesus is to be experienced not by senses or by reason but by faith. The exclamation of faith preceded the remark of Jesus saying that the vision of faith is nobler than that of reason.

1.4. Call to a Mystical Theology of Touch

Jesus asked Thomas to touch and experience him. This was a demand to move from the level of reason looking for proofs and evidences and come to the realm of direct experience. Faith is knowing God directly in the deepest level of the soul, rather than in the levels of physical and mental visions. In his work, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John of the Cross very clearly says: "Faith is the proximate and the proportionate means to unite us with God".¹ This is also treated elaborately in the *Dark Night of the Soul*, though, according to him, faith is a dark and confused light. Faith is thus knowing by touching, not physically nor mentally, but spiritually. The St Thomas Christians are called to live by this light of faith. It is experiencing and surrendering at the same time. Jesus never asked the people who came to him for healing, "Do you understand me" but he asked, "Do you believe that I can do this?" This would mean that the special knowledge of faith is given to the person concerned, and even the desired gift is given, as a reward to his/her faith. Faith is a way of touching God. The woman suffering from hemorrhage thought that "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed" (Mt 9:21). Thus, she touched and was immediately healed. Jesus understood that power went out of him and asked, "Who touched me?" In reality nobody touched him, except the crowd that was pressing in upon him. The woman touched only on the hem of his cloth. But this was a touch by faith and thus touched the inner core of Jesus and

power went out of Jesus and healed her. Faith is actually this kind of a touch, which also took place in Thomas, our father and the disciple of Jesus. The power went out of Jesus, opened the inner eye of Thomas and he moved from the level of reason to faith. As a characteristic of Thomas, his natural spontaneity and readiness to surrender came out beautifully by his short but perfect expression "My Lord and my God."

Let the St Thomas Christians take this aspect of touch as their special patrimony. They are called to know Jesus not by just studying theology, Eastern or Western, but by touching him, experiencing him and giving themselves totally to this divine experience. This experience must be the inner core of the paternal tradition we have to build up, naturally in a perfectly oriental genius which is handed over to us. We, in India, have to live this experience, taking into consideration the real context in which our faith is lived. This is exactly the title of my paper: Syro-Malabar Church and its cultural context.

2. Reality and Relevance of the Cultural Context in Faith Formation

2.1. What is Culture?

Christopher Dawson defines culture as "An organized way of life which is based on common tradition and condition by a common environment."² C.Geertz describes culture as follows:

Culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.³

From this perspective we have to look at the cultural context and its possible influence and integration into the spirituality of the St Thomas Christians in India. A kind of inculturation should pervade all these above mentioned aspects of our life.

2.2. Dynamics of Revelation and Need for Inculturation

The ineffable and infinite God revealed himself in time and history. The break-through of the eternal in time made history divine and heaven bound, but made God "earth-bound" and the divine expressions subject to limitations of time and space. The formless and the nameless assumed a form and a name. This limitation structure surrounding all process of revelation is an inevitable reality we have to face in understanding God and his unfathomable greatness. When the invisible becomes visible, time and space dimension determine and delimit the ineffable. All revelation is therefore at the same time a concealment. The great philosopher Sankara calls this *avarana-viksepa*, the revealing-concealing dynamics, in God. Thus, the magnificent universe with its charm and beauty is a means by which God reveals himself as the psalmist rightly proclaims: "The heavens proclaim the glory of God." However, the divine riches in God remain inexhausted and one has to transcend the already revealed in order to reach and relish the whole. This becomes necessary because of the time-space character of revelation which gives way to history and later to particularities of culture.

Culture, however excellent and expressive, is in fact a limitation of particularity inevitably associated with the infinity and the universality of the self-revealing God. The only way to transcend this limitation is to hold ourselves open to successive and simultaneous modes of receiving and living the revelation, differing from the one that we are trying to live. It is here we see the role of different cultures in the Church. The limitations of the European culture in the Church is to be overcome by the contributions of other non-western cultures, say Asian, African or South American and so on and vice-versa. Each culture has to contribute to the Church what the other culture misses. Another culture perhaps unveils an aspect of the divine which a particular culture has failed or forgotten to bring to light. Now a days, we see a large number of people from the West, especially the young, turning to the East in search of *ashrams*

and *gurus*, yoga and meditation etc. It is sad that today many seek it outside the Church. If yoga and meditation methods had already been integrated into the life-stream of the Asian Churches, these young seekers could have found within the Church what they now seek outside. This does not however mean an unacceptable compromise with any form of prayer as truly Christian prayer. A true faithful may see the reflection of the divine in a neighbouring culture and draw inspiration from it, and thus transcend the inherent limitation of his own God-experience, however genuine and reliable it be.

2.3. Incarnation and Inculturation

Seen from the perspective of Christian faith, the most important self-revelation of God has taken place in Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh. This incarnational event itself is the best model of the inculturation process. The infinite and ineffable word, born of the bosom of the Father from all eternity, became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus was a Jew just like any other Jew in Palestine: He dressed like them, ate with them and lived the life of a Palestinian Jew. But at the same time he carried within himself the eternal consciousness of the Father and communicated it to his people. For this purpose he used the signs and symbols which were still valid for them. He also showed his power of transcendence over the limitations of his own culture, and religious practices of his time, and refused to identify himself with them, and severely criticized them. Yet, he did not relinquish all of them and bring some other practices instead, as we see quite often in the Asian and African Churches, where the Western or European practices are introduced as truly and authentically Christian. As the Word was incarnated in the flesh of Bl. Mary, a Jewish woman, so he wanted that his spirit be incarnated in the Jewish culture and give birth to a renewed Jewish culture which is divine and Jewish at the same time. The heavenly and the universal character of the Word was now brought down to the limitations of time and space and thus to the particularity of a culture.

Though appeared in time and space in the cultural limitations of a particular nation, the Word Incarnate was to bring about the salvation of all humanity. The particularity, though it is a matter of divine election, was therefore ultimately to be transcended. This happens in resurrection. Resurrection is a trans-historical event. Resurrection proclaims to the whole world that the Word who became flesh has now overcome death, that dense and destructive nature of the human body, which makes it earthbound and keeps it in the confinement of cultural limitations. The resurrected Lord is the Lord of all humanity. By a process of death and resurrection, Jesus became the universal Lord of all humanity. Resurrection does not mean the creation of totally new entity. It is the transcendence of limitation inherent in the previous one. Essentially the same process should continue in all our attempts of inculturation and evangelization. When the message of the Gospel is brought to Asia or any other continents, it should be incarnated in the soil of that country. The message of the Gospel should remain one with the cultures of these lands and at the same time transcend the limitations thereof in its orientations to God and to other cultures.

2.4. Incarnational Nature of the Church and Dynamics of Integrating Faith and Culture

The missionary Church proceeds from one place to another as the carrier of the Word of God. The Church is the Word of God planted in the womb of human culture. Hence, the Church grows integrating these two factors: the Word, the Spirit from above and the world, the material dimensions of its being from below. The true Church is a genuine synthesis of these two and naturally gives birth to a new culture, which is not entirely new in the sense of an altogether new creation, but new so far as it is being formed by a new, inspiring spirit of Christ. The decree of Vatican II on Mission clearly spells out the details of this wonderful growth of the missionary Church.

The seed which is the Word of God sprouts from the good ground watered by divine dew. From this ground the seed draws

nourishing elements which it transforms and assimilates into itself. Finally it bears much fruit.

Thus in imitation of the plan of incarnation the young Churches, rooted in Christ and built upon the foundation of the apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange of all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance. From the customs and traditions of their peoples, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Savior's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life.⁴

That this may really take place, the missionary Church should undergo a process of death and resurrection, analogous to what happened in the life of the Lord. Every particular Church, when it is transplanted to another land, is called for a death and resurrection in the Lord. Thus for example when the Western Church brings the Good News to Asia, the Europeanness of this Christianity should die that it may give rise to Asian Christianity. But quite often it is exactly the opposite that takes place. The same principle is valid when the Asian or African Church brings the Word of God to another country or to an area of a different culture in the same continent. Man's inherent tendency is to impose his own culture on others. The new tendency in the West to acknowledge and appreciate the cultural values of the Eastern religions is the result of great learning and the evolution of human consciousness and, I believe, also of the work of the Holy Spirit. And this new mentality is highly appreciated by the people of these countries.

On the other hand, no Church can experience the Word of God in the abstract but only in the concreteness of her own culture. She gives also something concrete, namely the Word encapsulated in a particular culture, customs and language. But it should not deny the right of the newly born Church to evolve their own way of experiencing their faith, protecting their patrimony, drawing also inspiration from the culture of their own people. This is the way several Rites or Individual

Churches have evolved in the great Catholic Church and the Church remains Catholic precisely because she embraces all particularities and transcends them all at the same time. In spite of all cultural varieties the seed remains the same, a genuine seed of the Kingdoms of God on earth.

Though the principle of inculturation is accepted, at any stage of this evolutionary process the spirit of stagnancy can stifle the growth of the budding Church. This happens because of a static vision of the Church. The incarnation and consequently the Christ-event is looked upon as finished event or as an accomplished fact. We are asked to repeat it ritually in order that we may participate in that. Very little freedom is allowed with regard to the modalities of this ritual repetition. These modalities are already 'formed' and therefore they are to be kept as they are. In fact, many of these already formed modalities are taken from the cultural forms of one or other nation, which happen to receive Christian faith in ancient days. This static conception of the Church makes people live in the past than in the present and much less in the future. On the contrary the Church is an incarnational reality and the basic dynamism of incarnation ever continues as she gets incarnated into new nations and cultures.

3. Cultural Context of India at the Time of St Thomas and the Beginning of Syro-Malabar Church

St Thomas landed in a country of deep spiritual search and realization, a land of profound search into the abiding Spirit, a land of 'guru-disciple' relationship, a land of abounding devotional literature, a land which said: "Knowing is becoming" and a land of numerous wandering monks and a land of religious tolerance.

3.1. A Land of 'Guru-Disciple' Relationship and the Upanishads

The very word 'Upanishads' means 'upa-ni-shad', sitting on the ground near the master. One of the most ancient literatures of India and of the world is the Upanishads. They are one of the world's profoundest

search into the abiding presence of God within us. India called this spirit of God abiding in us '*Atman*', the Self. Here the Self means, the innermost Subject who acts in and through us. The Christian concept of Holy Spirit is not alien from this at least in this aspect of the inner agent of our enlightenment, sanctification, purification, etc. All these are done by the Holy Spirit abiding and acting in us. Jesus clearly says: "You can do nothing without me" (Jn 15:5) and "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13). What I admire in the Upanishads is the relentless search to understand and experience this abiding divine Spirit within us.

In truth, this is the great, unborn *Atman* who is the spiritual element among the life powers. He dwells in that space within the heart, the Ordainer of all, the Lord of all, the ruler of all. He does not become greater by good works or less great by bad works. He is the Lord of all, the ruler of all beings, the protector of all beings. He is the bridge that holds these worlds apart. It is he whom Brahmins desire to know through the study of the Veda, through sacrifice and alms-giving, through ascetic fervour and fasting (Brh.Up. IV.4.22).

The great insight of our Indian seers is that there is a Self within our self, within our bodily self, and still deeper within our mental self and still deep down within our spiritual self or soul. And this Self or *atman* is our divine Self whom we should know, neither by senses, nor by mind, nor even by our finer consciousness,⁵ but by faith, that is, through the very eye of God hidden within us. A journey through interiority is made to discover this *atman*, the ultimate Self within the different layers of our self-hood. In our journey to this *atman* we can really get stuck at any stage, depending on the fervour we are led by in the layers of sense, mind or deeper consciousness. Everything, every finite dimension of our knowledge is accepted and yet is to be transcended, if we really want to come in touch with the divine Self within us. "In truth, this is the great unborn *atman* who is the spiritual element among the life powers." The Oriental Fathers of the Church

went in search of the “uncreated energy” that moves our life and thought from within. A striking parallelism is seen here in this Indian text, obviously a tradition much more ancient than that of the Christian Orient, namely, a search into the ‘unborn *atman*’ of every human being. This unborn *atman* is the real Spirit. Here the search into the unborn is in fact the search into the uncreated. “He is the ordainer of all, the Lord of all, the ruler of all.” The teaching of the Upanishads continues.

This *atman* is not attained by instruction or by intelligence or by learning. By him whom he chooses is the *atman* attained. To him the *atman* reveals his own being. The one who has not turned away from the wickedness, has no peace, who is not concentrated, whose mind is restless – he cannot realize the *Atman*, who is known by wisdom (*Katha Upanishad* II. 2.23-24).

As oil in sesame seed, as butter in cream, as water in hidden springs, as fire in fire sticks, so is the *Atman* grasped in one’s own self, when one searches for him in truth and with fervour (*Surya Up.* I.15).

Ascetic fervour, *tapas*, starts with the initial rays of awakening which the disciples, who went to Emmaus, felt as they were listening to the words of Jesus: “Were not our hearts burning when he was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32) *Tapas*, then, proceeds to deeper enlightenment and guides us to commitment and determination to pursue the path shown, renounce everything else, because the true treasure has been found, and ends up in complete surrender and transformation.

3.2. A Land of Abounding Devotional Literature

Before St Thomas came to India, India had already produced some classics of *bhakti* literature. There are two *Bhaktisutras* attributed to Narada and Shandilya. These *sutras* are treatises on pure love of God which say that *bhakti* is of the nature of absolute love (*parama-prema-rupam*), devoid of material interests (*kamana-rahitam*), an unbroken flow of personal love (*aviccihinna-anuraga-rupam*), to which is surrendered the entire life-style (*tat-arpitam-akhila-acarata*) of the devotee.

Another classic of the period is the famous book the *Bagavad Gita*, a master piece on *bhakti* in the form of a dialogue between God and soul, in this case the mythical figures Krishna and Arjuna. In addition to these Sanskrit literatures from the North, we also have a very longstanding tradition of *bhakti* in the South, as Vaishnavism and Shaivism and a vast sea of devotional literature in Tamil. The St Thomas Christians had a very deep relation with the Tamil literature at least in the first centuries of Christianity in India. Our *bhakti* is very much influenced by these literary works of India from which we were not totally alienated. We see them lived in front of us, as well as in the books we study where they are sometimes lessons according to the curriculum.

From the *bhakti* literature of India I am especially attracted by the characteristic notes of a *bhakta* which the epic *Mahabharatha* presents. These are listening (*sravanam*), pondering (*mananam*), praising (*vandanam*), remembering (*smaranam*), service (*sevanam*), offering (*arpanam*), self-surrender (*atma-nivedanam*). It is surprisingly pleasing to me, and hopefully to all of us, that these characteristics notes are seen in Bl. Mary our Mother, as a shining example for all of us. Very little is written on Bl. Mary in the Gospels. But what is written, if we read them together, we will find that these characteristics of *bhakti*, were very singularly realized in her. I present this in the following table.

Mary as a *Bhakta*

<i>Sravanam</i>	...Lk.1:28-33
<i>Mananam</i>	...Lk 1:34
<i>Vandanam</i>	...Lk 1:46-55
<i>Smaranam</i>	...Lk 2:16-19, 48-51
<i>Sevanam</i>	...Lk. 1:39, 56
<i>Arpanam</i>	...Lk 2:22
<i>Atma-nivedanam</i>	...Lk 1:38

Devotion to Bl. Mary is a very good tradition which the St Thomas Christians have maintained throughout their history. This was easily possible for the native Christians of India, because there was already a living tradition of *bhakti* in the religious culture of the people, which was very similar to the *bhakti* that characterized the mind of Mary. This also shows that there was deeper cultural affinity between these two countries, Palestine and India.

3.3. A Land of Numerous Wandering Monks

The tradition of wandering monks in India goes back to the *Upanishadic* period and most probably earlier to that. This is a very noble tradition, which silently, but very eloquently, speaks of our otherworldly existence. The wandering monks abandoned all what they had and opted a life-style of a *sannyasin*, one whose treasure is deposited in the Lord. The word *sannyasin* means a person who has deposited (*sam+nyas*) everything in the Lord. Our Lord says that you keep your treasure where neither moths nor rust will destroy them (Mt 6:19-21). This is what exactly the wandering monks have done. This may be only a very small percentage of Brahmins who opted for this type of life. But those who opted really and literally gave up everything. The *Sannyasoupanishad* says: “*Sannyas* is a slow maturing of a person who comes to a state to say that: ‘God alone suffices, everything else matters little’” (*SU.I*). In the ancient East we had the tradition of desert fathers in the Church who too had abandoned everything and followed a path similar to that of the wandering monks.

3.4. A Land of Commendable Religious Tolerance and Inter-religious Harmony

India is very much praised by other countries in the world as a land known for its religious tolerance. India welcomed all religions and allowed them to co-exist. This does not exclude occasional quarrels and infighting between the different sects. But a longstanding fight between religions and a tendency to exterminate those who follow other

religious traditions is not seen in the Indian history. It is this sense of religious tolerance that welcomed St Thomas to India, allowing him and his followers to bring and live a religious tradition that is alien to this country. We should be very grateful to the then Hindu India on account of this, though we also should accept that there was religious persecution at times in India too. But in general, varieties of religious experiences were welcomed in India, and normally freedom of religion was granted. This freedom helped the St Thomas Christians to live and develop their own spiritual traditions including that of a divine liturgy, even in a foreign language, as it was for many centuries of Christianity in India. To the question whether this liturgical tradition is inculturated or not, we may see an answer from two perspectives. One is a positive answer saying 'yes', in the sense that this was allowed to exist without any interference from the part of the Hindu majority. Therefore, the tradition does enjoy the existence of 2000 years and thus could be seen as an inculturated tradition. The answer from the second perspective will be still 'yes' with an additional note, which says that more inculturation is possible. In the field of art and architecture including of the Churches, and some of the sacramentals and social customs, the inculturation process has been successful. For a deeper inculturation, a deeper study and thorough understanding of the Indian philosophy and pattern of thinking is necessary. We do not see any existing literature as evidence for such a mastery over Indian theological vision, though we have a lived tradition, excellent in itself, in accepting and living a life of inter-religious harmony. Fr. Mathias Mundadan, a renowned Church historian, speaks about this as follows:

Another important point to be mentioned in this connection is the attitude of the Christians toward the Hindu community in Kerala and their relations with it. The Synod of Diamper of 1599 forbade a number of customs and practices which the Portuguese considered 'pagan' (Hindu). These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relation that existed between Christians and the

Hindus. This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision.⁶

3.5. Negative Factors

The cultural context of the St Thomas Christians also includes certain negative factors:

(i). St Thomas came to a land of strong Buddhist influence, especially in the North, which had a penetration also into the South after the reign of Ashoka, the great Buddhist emperor. Buddhism kept silence about God and thus the Buddhist devotees found themselves in a dilemma to express their devotion to gods or god. An absolute aphophatism which is not balanced by the positive revelation of God in Jesus Christ, is not acceptable in Christianity.

(ii). A Land of Caste-mentality. One of the weakest points of Hinduism is its caste-consciousness. Caste is fundamentally based on blood. This is something which the Jewish people also had in their upbringing. Here the case is the blood of Abraham. This theory of superiority, based on material blood relationship, was rejected by Jesus who said: "If you are Abraham's children, you have to produce Abraham's work." All boasting, based on blood, was completely thrown out by Jesus Christ and is clearly shown in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman. The Samaritans were considered lower to the status of Palestinian Jews, because after the conquest of Samaria by Assyria, the assumption was that the Assyrian blood had entered into the blood of the Samaritan Jews. But this woman, perhaps of loose morals, was acceptable to Jesus, because Jesus saw in her a possible candidate for his discipleship. Jesus chooses her as his first missionary in Samaria, questioning the tradition of untouchables and gradation of people based on blood by the then existing Jewish society. Sometimes charges are raised against the St Thomas Christians that they have failed to transcend this caste-based mentality of a living Hindu tradition.

(iii). Because of the historical suppression for 300 years within the Church, the St Thomas Christians developed a rather narrow vision of “preserving the heritage”, rather than expanding, growing and progressively adapting to the new situations, against the background of vast expansion of the Latin Church in India.

(iv). The Orientals are denied freedom to expand in their own country, effectively keeping them as an “ethnic group”, restricted to their own little piece of land ear-marked to them. Instead of granting genuine freedom and equal right within the Church, praises are showered on the excellence of their ancient liturgy and heritage (which is of course true), at the same time denying even a parish where there is large numbers of Oriental Catholics, and freely allowing many of her members continuously to be latinized, not insisting for the formation of the Oriental provinces in the international congregations as strongly suggested by Vatican II, in the Decree on the Oriental Churches (*Orientalium Ecclessiarum*, 4 & 6).

4. Call to a Deeper Assimilation of the Cultural Elements of the Country Encountered

The Syro-Malabar Church has successfully taken into consideration the cultural contexts of its origin as well as its growth in India. It has as its patrimony a very ancient and highly valued Syriac tradition from the country of its origin. It has also another ancient spiritual culture to be integrated into its spirituality from the land of its re-birth in India. In the previous sections of this article I was trying to present different aspects of this ancient Indian culture, some of which are earlier than the dawn of Christianity on this earth. When the Word of God is brought into another country, or a living Church starts its mission in another country, it has to assimilate the spiritual and moral goods that are placed before them by way of religion and culture of that country, purifying, ennobling and integrating them into her own living faith and tradition. The Catholic Church is very clear about this as it is well mentioned in the decree on non-Christian religions.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. ... The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons, prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, **acknowledge, preserve, and promote** the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.⁷

In this context it is worth looking into the final statement of the plenary assembly of the Asian Bishops' Conference in 1974 on the local Church.

The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to adhere in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its lives, its inspirations, its thought and its language, its songs and its artistry.⁸

Here the expression 'local Church' can be applied to any Church irrespective of the differentiation of the Rites. The nascent Church has the right and freedom to check, examine and accept the salient features of a cultural tradition of the country into which it is born as well as to reject any idea or practice that is contrary to the Gospel values.

It is something to the credit of the Syro-Malabar Church that, though extensively remote from Rome and the heartlands of Christianity, this Church kept up its Catholic faith all throughout the centuries, in spite of different vicissitudes of life which confronted it and even posed threat against its growth. But inculturation is an ongoing process and should be continued according to the growth of its consciousness of the culture and cultural values which is deeply buried in the philosophy, spirituality and other mystical traditions of the country encountered. From this perspective some aspects of theological and mystical inculturations could also be worked out as the members of this Syro-

Malabar Church are now deeply entering into the spiritual, philosophical and mystical tradition of this country. Our Holy Father, John Paul II gives us a clarion call for this purpose in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*:

I wish to repeat clearly that the study of philosophy is fundamental and indispensable to the structure of theological studies and to the formation of candidates for the priesthood. It is not by chance that the curriculum of theological studies is preceded by a time of special study of philosophy. This decision, confirmed by the Fifth Lateran Council, is rooted in the experience which matured through the Middle Ages, when the importance of a constructive harmony of philosophical and theological learning emerged.⁹

Pope continues:

For its part, *dogmatic theology* must be able to articulate the universal meaning of the mystery of the One and Triune God and of the economy of salvation, both as a narrative and, above all, in the form of argument. It must do so, in other words, through concepts formulated in a critical and universally communicable way. Without philosophy's contribution, it would in fact be impossible to discuss theological issues such as, for example, the use of language to speak about God, the personal relations within the Trinity, God's creative activity in the world, the relationship between God and man, or Christ's identity as true God and true man.¹⁰

He continues: "Cultural context permits the living of Christian faith, which contributes in turn little by little to shaping that context. To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth of God which he reveals in the history and culture of a people."¹¹

The symbiosis between faith and culture is something to take shape in each one of us and in the Christian community as a whole. Philosophy as the eye of a culture plays a great role in this inculturation of our faith and penetration of the culture by our faith. In the same encyclical, Pope draws his attention in a special way to India:

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among

these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek and experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind.¹²

Then Pope gives three criteria which can be summarized as follows:

1. Universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures.
2. In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what She has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought.
3. Care need to be taken, lest contrary to the very nature of the human spirit, the legitimate defense of the uniqueness and originality of Indian thought be confused with the idea that a particular cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions.¹³

These norms are given as a call and help for developing proper Indian Christian theology. It is a need of our time and also a need of the universal Church. The norms also reflect the principle of basic openness, which every Church should have in its relation to the culture of the country and to other individual Churches.

A theological inculturation combining the vision of the Oriental Church with the Indian genius is yet to be perfected with deeper and more integrating studies of both of them. We have to draw light for this from the Oriental Fathers who have developed a theology which is perhaps more congenial to the patterns of Indian thinking. As St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas show us examples for drawing

inspirations from the pre-Christian writings available to them, notably from Aristotle and Plato, the theologians like St Ephrem, St Basil and other Oriental Fathers could be shining examples for us, the St Thomas Christians in India, because of the Indian affinity between these Oriental cultures.

5. Celebration, Contemplation and Realization

The St Thomas Christians have well developed a theology of celebration. This is, in short, the celebration of the mystery of our salvation (*Raza*), which in itself has several factors of our cultural ethos integrated into them. Some of these are 1) a contemplative look into the mystery of salvation, 2) which is expressed in words and actions, in melody and music of the place, 3) search for interior depth, especially for the abiding Holy Spirit and 4) the joy of a liberated community consciousness. Celebration is always a communitarian experience and a joyous remembrance of the liberation that was achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord. This is celebrated because we participate in that life. The goal is realization. Every individual has to participate and realize the mystery celebrated in one's self. St Paul says, "And now I rejoice about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the Church" (Col 1: 24). Suffering and resurrection are to be realized in our life. This is what we are celebrating. A celebrating community should be also a contemplating community. Interiorizing and contemplating are the way for realization.

5.1. Contemplative Experience of Celebration

When I go through certain books on our liturgical and spiritual traditions, I do not find the word 'contemplation' or 'contemplative experience'. But I do think that the East Syrian Liturgy has a very rich contemplative tradition. India being a country, famous for its yoga, meditation and contemplative experience, which is praised by many, the members of the Syro-Malabar Church should also imbibe this

tradition and integrate it into the spiritual life of the Church in India. The prime model for this contemplative aspect of our life is Jesus who retired to the mountains and prayed to his Father in silence (Lk 5:15-16) and Bl. Mary our Mother who kept all these things in her heart and pondered over it in silence.

Jesus and Mary Models for Contemplative Prayer

Jesus

Mt. 14:20-23

Mk. 1:35-38

Lk. 5:15-16

Lk. 6:12-13

Mary

Lk. 2:16-19

Lk. 2: 48-51

Drawing inspiration from this, the Oriental Fathers of the Church went to the deserts and developed contemplative prayer from the very beginning of Christianity in the East. This tradition should be accepted, acknowledged and also emulated as far as it is applicable in the Indian and ecclesial context of ours. For this purpose, as Archbishop Mar Powathil rightly says, "Liturgy based meditation books, retreat for priests"¹⁴ should be developed. The famous book *Philokhalia* can be used as a classical text for this meditation.

5.2. Revival of the Jesus' Prayer of the Early Oriental Church

Today we see all over the world a renewed interest in the *pranayama* meditation, which is a method of meditation integrated into the breathing rhythm and supported by an appropriate *mantra*. The Oriental Catholics had developed such a meditation from the first centuries of Christian era, especially on the Mount Athos. The sum and substance of this method has been published by a Russian monk under the title '*The Way of the Pilgrim*'. The *mantra* they used is, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us" (Mt 20:30). This is also known as the prayer of the heart, because the *mantra* was also related to the heartbeat of the one who practices this meditation. The choice was given to

synchronize the *mantra* either with heartbeat or with breathing rhythm. India has a preference for the breathing rhythm rather than to that of the heartbeat. A Ramakrishna monk has translated this book into Malayalam. He writes on the back cover of this book: "I have translated this Christian book into Malayalam, because it is totally Indian." The prayer or method of meditation, though it is using a Jesus *mantra* is well inculturated in India according to this Hindu monk. But the unhappy problem is that how many of us practice this method of meditation. So many religious congregations are in our Church and I would like very much that the novices of these congregations practice this oriental method of Christian meditation and make it part of their Christian and Indian spirituality. In Vidyavanam Ashram we are giving training for the practice of this meditation.

5.3. Meditation on the Liturgical Seasons

Another point, in favour of the contemplative culture, I would draw your attention to, is the spirituality of our liturgical seasons. I personally find these seasons, well arranged in a way of summarizing the entire salvation work of Jesus from its beginning on earth till its consummation in heaven, as a call for contemplative life, focusing our attention on one or other aspect of the life of Jesus and consequently of the Church on earth. Each season gives us an *istadevata*, a favourite form of God or Jesus for us to contemplate, to which is integrated the variables of Holy Mass and the main hymns of the breviary, the prayer of the hours. The whole life of the season, extending more or less to seven weeks, is a perduring contemplative look of the specific aspects of the mystery of Christ. The Ashram Chapel of Vidyavanam, designed as a cave, has stained glass windows depicting all the liturgical seasons. I find it very good to have a contemplative look into the mystery that is celebrated during each season.

In order to maintain the contemplative aspect of celebration, there must be an overall atmosphere of silence along with the celebration of

the mystery of Christ, prayers of the hours etc. Meditation or contemplation apart from the Holy Mass and prayer of the hours also is very important to delve deep into the mystery celebrated and prayed during the hours. For this no other example is necessary than that of Jesus and Mary.

The spirit of contemplation must be fostered. I think that the Indian Church is very poor in mysticism and contemplative prayer. Silence is fast disappearing from religious and formation houses. More and more priests are being ordained with very little interest in silence and contemplative prayer, and consequently a worthy celebration of our contemplative liturgy. Our traditional word *Raza* is very meaningful to the context. A mystery is something to be contemplated, relished and realized. Of course, it is also to be solemnly celebrated. But one should remember that celebration is meaningful when it is being realized in each one of us. The style of celebration should also conform and suit to the taste and state of consciousness we are now living. The divine mystery, which is to be celebrated, should be presented to the people, gently and meaningfully with the help of contemplative, symbolic actions, with decorum, grace and melody.

Conclusion

The Syro-Malabar Church is an individual Church with a Major Archbishop. It should have its own individuality which should be handed over to its posterity. As a faith experience in its cultural context, it should include, among others the following:

1. Following our Father St Thomas, it should have a profound experience of touching Jesus by faith which should be the cornerstone of this heritage.
2. It should develop a mystical theology of knowing God through the eye of faith, rather than by the analytical theology dominated by reason.

3. In developing this theology, the St Thomas Christians are invited to draw inspiration from their two-fold cultural context, namely, from the Syrian and other Oriental Fathers and the Indian Scriptures and deep philosophical insights emerging from them.
4. Holy Father John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, calls the Indian Church to develop an Indian theology against the background of its spirituality and philosophy. The St Thomas Christians of the Syro-Malabar Church has well educated theologians to take up this task in an Indian and Oriental way.
5. The context of India, especially of the relentless search for the abiding Divine Self of the *Upanishads* and other devotional literature, strongly suggests a deep search into the Spirit of Jesus which he has breathed into us and which would lead us into 'all the truths' (Jn. 16:13). This Spirit should be understood as 'subject' from whom our actions proceed and not as an object of our mind. This is done realizing the Spirit of Jesus in us by meditation/contemplation and celebration than discussing about him. The Supreme Knowing is becoming.
6. This process of realization and proclamation elegantly takes place in the Eucharistic celebration, in which we place ourselves on the altar of sacrifice for self-transformation, along with the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our Divine Master and Saviour.

Notes

¹ *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*, Book II, Ch. 9.1.

² C. Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London, 1949) 47.

³ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (London, 1976) 89.

⁴ A.G 22.

⁵ The distinction between mind and finer consciousness is to be understood in the light of the distinction between the mind and soul (as purer consciousness); a similarity may be drawn from the distinction between *manas* and *buddhi* (consciousness before individualization) in the Indian Philosophy.

⁶ A. M. Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore, 2003) 27-28.

⁷ N.A. 2.

⁸ FABC: "His Gospel to Our Peoples", Book 2.

⁹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Vatican, 1998) 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ T. Vellilanthadam *et al.* ed., *Ecclesial Identity of the Thomas Christians* (Kottayam, 1985) 29-31.

