

Book Reviews

George Nedungatt , S.J., *Quest for the Historical Thomas Apostle of India, Bangalore*, Theological Publications in India, 2008, pp.xxxiv+428, price Rs.200.

The scholars working on the history of the Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas are greatly divided among themselves to make the statement of Rudyard Kipling, "East is East and West is West, the twain shall never meet", a reality. The majority of western scholars motivated by various factors refuse to accept the proposition that St.Thomas, the apostle preached the Gospel in India while large number of researchers of the Subcontinent hold fast to the view that the tradition of St. Thomas' apostolate is a matter of historical truth. Of course establishment of historical facts is to be done not on the majority of opinions or votes as in democracy. Presumably till the first quarter of the sixteenth century this was considered to be of general consensus among the writers. The communication sent by the Portuguese king to the Zamorin of Calicut in 1500 makes mention of the fact that St.Thomas preached the Gospel to the people of Malabar.

The Portuguese merchants and marines proceeding to the Malacca from Cochin in search of spices came across the people from the Coromandel region who informed them of the existence of the tomb of St.Thomas in Mylapore, near Chennapattanam. Inquiries were made in detail regarding the tomb. The sixteenth century Portuguese chroniclers like Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, João de Barros, Gaspar Correa and Diogo do Couto after the perusal of the details of excavations conducted by the Portuguese at Mylapore subscribed to the view that St. Thomas, the Apostle worked in India, especially South India. Convinced as the Portuguese were of the Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas, they issued gold coins in the name of *Santhomé*, established chapels under his patronage and even christened an ocean-going vessel with the name *Santhomé* in honour of St.Thomas.

But with the arrival of large number of missionaries who were on the look out for financial assistance from the avid readers of the newsletter sent to Europe no mention was being made about the St. Thomas Christians in Malabar. This must be ploy to affirm that Christianity was introduced to this region only by the missionaries coming under the Portuguese banner and more help should be extended in terms of human and financial resources. The reports and letters sent from India to Europe were carefully worded by the missionaries presumably to emphasis the fact that there were no Catholics in Malabar before their arrival. This could have been the background of the uncompromising attitude of some of the Western scholars denying the truth

about the apostolate of St. Thomas in India. To buttress this view, "...it is possible that the authors, who in the libraries in Europe compile ...theories, do not give sufficient weight to the tradition so warmly held by the Syrian Christians". as remarked by G.T. Mackenzie (1956) .

On the other hand large number of scholars adduces arguments to substantiate the view that the Catholic faith in India was implanted by the apostolic activity of St Thomas the Apostle. Some genuine researchers of truth like Louis-Sébastien Lenain de Tillemont are frank enough to state :“What concerns the examination of the apostolate of St. Thomas in what we call India today, we leave it to those who truly know what has been found there and who can draw from it reasonable and solid consequences”. A galaxy of scholars like Joseph Simon Assemani, Claudius Buchanan, Alphonse Medlycott, Georg Schurhammer, P.J. Thomas, Henry Hasten, K.N. Daniel, A.C. Perumalil, Mark G.Moraes, Placid Podipara, V.C.George, Guiseppa Sorge, A. Mathias Mundadan, Martin Gielen, Xavier Koodappuzha, James J.Kurikilamkatt and others consider the St. Thomas Apostolate in India historical and certain. Of late Benedict Vadakkekara in his *Origin of Christianity in India* (2007)takes tradition in vogue among the Christians in India as the bedrock of his argumentation. He says that it is concrete, constant and consistent lending to the quality of historical truth. He writes.

This communal belief handed down from generation to generation has been inalienably bound to actually existing localities and families and there is total unanimity and consensus in the community on the identity and significance of these physical realities. The tradition itself is, therefore, a concrete actuality and it betrays no sign of equivocation or vagueness. The contents of the tradition have remained constant and consistent at least since their history began to be chronicled. (Benedict . p.26.)

It may be further noted that he maintains the tradition independent of the apocryphal work, *Acts of Thomas*. His work does not open a dialogue with the scholars in the other camp like Siniscalco and Tubach who are not fully convinced of the argumentation. Against this backdrop, Nedungatt proposes to work for a dialogue with the scholars of the western world and their supporters to try the possibility of making the twain meet in the case of the historical Thomas, the *Twin* in his work *Quest for the Historical Thomas Apostle of India- A Re-reading of the Evidence*. He questions the assumption of Vadakkekara and tries to make *Traditionskritik* and to base his arguments on other much more solid grounds with a view to opening a dialogue.

The author divides the work into five different parts. In the first part he makes a survey of recent works related to the Apostolate of St. Thomas to acquaint the readers with the present status of the problem. Nedungatt, in the second part, explains the methodology besides defining some of the terms used in the work. Following the method of St.Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, he starts with the stating of the problem

The different negative opinions or objections held by the scholars regarding the Indian apostolate are presented in Part III. He identifies nine theories or assumptions which underlie the negative stance of western scholars on Thomasology. All these assumptions are explained to give a clear picture of the strand followed by the Western writers. The prejudice or bias behind these is also brought out. Some of the writers assume that the term India is confused with other countries like Ethiopia. India proper was not known to the people of the first century, according to them. The *Acts of Thomas* being apocryphal has no historical value and consequently any discussion on the Apostolate of St. Thomas based on this work has no meaning to historians. Another point brought out by some of the scholars is that the Saint Thomas tradition in India was a creation of the church of Edessa to assert their superiority on the church in India. *Acts of Thomas* was a tool fabricated by them for this purpose. One reading of the work of Origen brings to light that the Gospel was not preached in India by the end of the second century A.D. They further add that the patristic witnesses about the field of the activity of St. Thomas is divided between Parthia and India and so they are devoid of any historical value. Similarly, they hold the view that it was St. Bartholomew, not St. Thomas, who preached the Gospel in India. According another group of writers, Thomas of Cana is confused with St. Thomas the Apostle and so the St. Thomas tradition in vogue in India is associated with Thomas of Cana. There is another assumption that it was the Nestorians who brought Christian faith to India and so it must be of the fourth century through the Persian church. There is confusion among the writers about the tomb of St. Thomas. After having a close look at the various 'theories hatched in the Libraries in Europe' Nedungatt states categorically that they do not stand the test of critical analysis. He suggests that *Calamina* could be a variant of *Cholamannu*, a Tamil-Malayalam word indicating the land of the Cholas where the tomb of the Apostle was known to be located (p.172).

Just as St. Thomas Aquinas quotes various authorities supporting the theme discussed in the work, Nedungatt examines the patristic texts bearing on the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas in Part IV of his work. The author concedes the fact that there is divergence in the patristic texts on St. Thomas. He examines the visit of Pantaenus, a stoic philosopher to India in 189-190. Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome report about his visit to India though he himself had not left anything in writing. The important patristic texts examined by the author are of Origen (186-255), *Acts of Thomas* (3rd century), Clement of Rome (3rd century), *Doctrine of the Apostles* (3rd century), Gregory Nazianzen (329-390), Cyrillona (d 396), Ambrose (333-397), John Chrysostom (347-407), Jerome (345-419), Gregory of Tours (538-594), Gregory the Great (590-604), Isidore of Seville (560-636), Codex of Fulda (8th century) and so on. After examining the texts and other relevant sources, the author states, "Whatever be the precise date of the transfer of the relics of the Apostle Thomas all the patristic texts concur with Ephrem on the source of their transfer, namely India. This massive evidence is not weakened by some other texts that mention some other country than India in the midst of the terminological confusion If this transfer is historical, it presupposes that the Apostle Thomas

worked, died and was buried in India. This conclusion, then is no legend or fable or unfounded "tradition" but solid historical fact as certain as transfer itself" (p.231).

The author brings out a plausible suggestion of two missionary journeys of St. Thomas as in the case of St. Paul. The first was through the land route along the Silk route to Taxila, the capital of Indo-Parthian kingdom of Gondapherus and the second after his return to Jerusalem by sea voyage to India landing at Muziris or Kodungalloor. Barugacha or Barygaza was considered to be an important haven of the Roman traders as mentioned in the *Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea. St. Thomas must have reached Andhrapura or Andhrapolis namely either Kalyana or Barygaza and from there to the mouth of river Indus by sea and then proceeded through Indus to Taxila, the headquarters of the Indo-Parthian king Gundaphar. Alternatively he could have used the route via Red Sea to Barugacha. He left Taxila when it was under attack and was destroyed by the enemies. It was the dynasty of Satvahanas or Satkarni that was powerful around 50 A.D. in the region Andhara extending from Barukacha to Krishna river after vanquishing Scythians, Indo-Greeks and Parthians. Kalyana on the western coast and the port city Barygaza on the Narmada River were under the control of this dynasty. The first journey was after the Pentecost and the second was after the meeting of all the Apostles in Jerusalem in 50 A.D. He is believed to have landed at Muziris (Kodungalloor) in 52 A.D (ref. pages 247-251).

The wide ranging patristic texts, far from being discordant, are best understood if the Apostle Thomas is seen to have first evangelized Parthia (Indo-Parthia or India) and then moved to evangelize other peoples ending with South India where he preached the gospel and died as a martyr. The patristic witness about India's evangelization by the Apostle Thomas is not dependent on the Acts of Thomas but is derived from the common tradition reaching back to the Apostolic times (p. 253). Part V contains details of Indian traditions about the apostolate of St. Thomas. The section dealing with the general conclusions summarizes various points discussed in the work.

The relics of the Apostle Thomas were venerated at Edessa in the fourth century. This is historically certain. And Edessa itself proclaimed through its mouthpiece, Ephrem, the Harp of the Spirit "that those relics were brought there from India. If so, the quest for the historical Thomas, the Apostle of India, can be terminated here, giving the true value to the Indian tradition that the Apostle died a martyr's death at Mylapore and was buried there in a tomb that has not ceased to attract pilgrims from antiquity down the centuries. In addition, when the Alexandrian philosopher and theologian Pantenus visited South India in 189-190 (as has been historically demonstrated by Albrecht Dihle), he met with Christians there who presented him with an Aramaic copy of the Gospel of Mathew, saying that it was given to them by an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Whether that Apostle was Bartholomew or Thomas, the apostolic origin of Christianity in India emerges as a historical fact. This conclusion is reinforced by Origen according to whom non-Aryan India was already evangelized. Lastly when due value is

given to the four-focus Indian tradition regarding the Apostle Thomas, in some cases shared by Christians and Hindus alike, there can be no reasonable doubt that he evangelized India. And the quest for the historical Thomas can come finally to a close here with the historical certainty about his being truly the Apostle of India (p. 410).

In fine one may say that the Palayur and the Mylapore traditions are taken up by the author as the most convincing evidences for the Apostolate of St. Thomas in South India. He underlines the fact that though *Acts of Thomas* is apocryphal and forms part of fiction, it has reference to some historical facts like the riding of Elephant in India in the work *David Copperfield* of Charles Dickens. He is of the opinion that the arguments brought out by him in his work would definitely open up a dialogue with the scholars in the west and finally the twain may meet in Thomas, the twin. It is possible that the readers may find the Thomistic methodology which the author follows is rather outdated and unpleasant.

On the whole the work of Nedungatt following the Thomistic methodology opens up a new avenue for further research especially the suggestion of two missionary journeys, one to Taxila, the headquarters of Indo-Parthian kingdom and the other to Muziris. The plausible dates suggested are worth investigating. The details of Roman trade with the western and Eastern coast of India which flourished from the first Century B.C. to the third century A.D. will help situate the apostolate of St. Thomas in a better light. Similarly, the recent findings of the excavations conducted in Pattinam, near Cranganore on the Malabar coast will add further evidences to the study. It will be definitely possible to assert the fact that the fact of the apostolate of St. Thomas is not a legend full of lies, and not one concocted by the Portuguese. The prejudices of some sections of Indians are now getting vanished since they would like to underline the fact that Catholicism in India was not the product of Colonialism. They would now try to find evidence to prove that Catholicism was in India even before the arrival of the Portuguese with a view to escape the attacks of anti-colonial activists.