

Editorial

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA A THEOLOGIAN WITH AN EYE OF HEART

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Eastern theology tends to prioritize harmony, balance, and the integration of the spiritual and material realms. The central themes often include the interconnectedness of everything in the universe fostering the unity of all creation, the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment or union with the divine, and an emphasis on mystical experience and practices such as meditation and contemplation. Eastern theological vision gives priority to spiritual experiences through meditation, prayer, and often reveres nature as sacred and fosters a deep respect for the environment and all living beings. According to Saint Ephrem, the right attitude and response to the nature are of wonder, gratitude, admiration, love and respect; and he delineates the sacramental character of the created world and the potential of everything in it to be the indicators of the creator. To see these hidden links an eye of faith illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit is a necessary requirement. Thus, guided by faith, the early Syriac writers reflect the Semitic roots of Christianity in a special way and their mode of discourse is essentially in the tradition of the Bible, and it lacks the rhetorical overlay.¹ In the Syriac tradition, salvation is re-entry into the lost paradise, a 'homecoming and a return to the Father's house' (*Hymns on Paradise* 14.7).

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a prominent figure in the Syriac Christian tradition, particularly within the Syro-Malabar Church was instrumental in spearheading renewal in the Church. He addressed both internal and external challenges, promoted unity and cohesion in the Church, and urged its members to deepen their faith through his loyalty

¹ S.P. Brock, "The Syriac Orient: A Third 'Lung' for the Church?," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005), 57.

to the Church and its liturgical life, theological heritage and spirituality. He embraced a life of asceticism, holiness and personal sanctification, for asceticism was a dominant feature of Christian life in the Syriac tradition and a motivational force of the ecclesial life. He regarded the purity of heart as the basic virtue, and the abiding compunction of heart prompted him to compare himself to the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-24) and lament his sins and plead for God's mercy. Nevertheless, Chavara, a brilliant paradigm of virtues and holiness of life, believed that each Christian at baptism is betrothed to Christ the bridegroom; and he could maintain the purity of the robe of glory put on at his baptism. He stated at his deathbed: "By the grace of God, I dare say that with their [Holy Family] help never had I experienced an occasion where I was deprived of the grace received in baptism."² At the passing of Chavara, the sisters wrote about his holy and inspiring life in their chronicle: "This Father of ours was a model and guiding light to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a pillar that supported the Catholic Church because of the zeal he evinced in its expansion and in the protection of faith."³ He mirrored Christ and established the convents and the monasteries to remain as "the mirror of virtues and the "abode of saints."

The biblical simplicity is perfectly echoed in Chavara's writings, and they are steeped in the tradition of the Scripture, Fathers of the Church and the symbolic-poetic style of thought with a lot of symbolism, imagery and types. The symbolic-poetic approach of Chavara with the *heart's eye* (Eph 1:18) attempts to wonder at and be grateful to the mystery of Christ in the history of salvation. He advises: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty you must look at Him with *the eye of your heart* and worship Him."⁴ Chavara had *the eye of his heart*, and he could see God's providence in everything, and experience and enjoy the uninterrupted vision of God, for the *eye of the heart* suggests profound comprehension of the mystery of God beyond mere intellectual understanding of the depths of inner being. As a man of prayer, Chavara prayed truly, for according to the famous aphorism of Evagrius, "If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you will be a theologian" (PG 79, col. 1180B).

² Moolayil, *Positio*, 548. Quoted in A.M. Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, revised edition, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 392-393.

³ *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, vol. 2, 2002, 23.

⁴ *Dyanasallapankal* in Chavara Achante Sampurna Kritikal, vol. 3, Mannanam, 1981, 25.

A careful study of his spiritual experience and the general picture of his writings, be it historical (*The Chronicles*), literary (*Compunction of the Soul*, *Dirge*, *Anastasia's Martyrdom*), spiritual (*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*) and the *Letters*, reflect and reveal the nature of his theology and spirituality. He was an apostle of the Eucharist who urged his confreres to love Jesus present in the most Holy Eucharist with all their hearts.⁵ With ardent love and deep faith, he longed to see the Lord and to have an enlightened understanding of the history of salvation and truth explained through his poetic logic and vision, committed to the service of the Church and its pastoral concerns, had tender devotion to Mother Mary and proudly described himself as a servant of Mary, and sought God's will always and everywhere. A re-visiting of the life and works of Chavara through the lens of Eastern/Syriac mind would help us to unveil the Eastern/Syriac theological vision enshrined in them.

The present issue of the *Herald of the East* examines the Eastern theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The volume has seven articles and four of them are directly related to the theme. The authors, whose papers are presented in this issue, have differing perspectives. Nevertheless, each one shares the conviction that Chavara was imbued with the Eastern theological vision and equals the great Fathers and doctors of the Church who contributed immensely to the growth of the Church through their excellent biblical, liturgical, catechetical, homiletic, and apologetic works.

Siby Kavattu in his article investigates the theological foundations and spiritual dispositions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara within the framework of Syriac Christian tradition. According to Kavattu, the theological vision of Chavara was rooted in the Syriac tradition of sacramental understanding of God, humans, and the world. His writings reflect the unique characteristics of Syriac Christian tradition, i.e., the integration of revelation and faith as mystery, the experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing. Chavara's profound love for the Church, and his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are key aspects of his spiritual legacy, which are also the characteristic traits of Syriac Christianity.

Annie Noel in her article delves into Chavara's spirituality through the lens of Eastern Christian mysticism and draws parallels with the wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Chavara's spirituality reflects Eastern

⁵ *Positio*, 548.

Christianity's concept of God's unconditional love. Noel explores asceticism, virtuous life, prayer, and contemplation as means of experiencing the divine love. Chavara's life illustrates detachment from worldly distractions and continuous dialogue with the divine as integral to experiencing God's love. Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes prayer, contemplation, and embracing divine love amidst trials and suffering. Chavara dedicated himself to prayer and trust in divine providence; and his compassionate concern for others, especially the marginalized, reflects divine love in action. His life inspires everyone to embrace spirituality through asceticism, virtuous living, prayer, contemplation, and compassionate service.

Geo Pallikunnel expounds the compunction of the heart as an ascetic ideal practiced both in the East and the West to reach the monastic way of perfection, and he highlights this Eastern ascetic ideal in the life and works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. In the Syriac tradition, anchorites were called 'mourners' (*'abīlē*). Many spiritual authors witness to this ascetic ideal of compunction of the heart both in the desert and in the Syriac traditions. Focusing the research on *Atmanuthapam*, Pallikunnel establishes that Chavara follows the tradition of compunction of the soul.

Rincy Maria delineates the Eastern mystical paradigms in Chavara, and she affirms that his profound faith in Christ and deep love for the Lord had a transformative effect, shaping him into a vessel of divine grace. Inspired and strengthened by the Word of God, Chavara undertook extraordinary measures for his community. Constant communion with the Almighty not only cultivated a rich inner life within him but also impelled him to dedicate his life to the service of God. Through meditation, he established unity with God, and in and through his actions, he embodied solidarity with the marginalized and impoverished. Chavara emulated the fervour of Elijah, driven by an unwavering zeal for the living God. His teachings emanated from his own lived experiences. In the tradition of Carmelite mystics, Chavara embraced spousal mysticism, wherein the relationship between humanity and God mirrors a spiritual marriage—an intimate and reciprocal bond of love and commitment. Rincy Maria underscores the Abba (*appa*) experience as the core of Chavara's mysticism.

Sebastian Elavathingal, in his article, presents Kuriakose Elias Chavara as God's work of art. Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art". The human person becomes ultimately an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials into a spiritual or a transfigured body. It is against the background of this Biblical view of creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer that Chavara has laid out in his works. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person which can be compared to the formation of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. Chavara is an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection. He bears witness to the transfigured glory of Jesus who entered his glory through his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Joel Chiramal and Joy Philip Kakkanatt read through the Parable of the Prodigal Son in *Dhyānasallāpannaḷ*, where Chavara makes a synthesis of the Sacred Scripture and his personal reflection. They analyze some passages from it to understand the inner dynamics involved in the way he quotes the Scripture. Chavara's presentation of this parable in a 'Three-Scene Perspective' shows his radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture as well as a three-fold identification, namely, with the character in the parable, society of the nineteenth century and the culture of the time. Chavara presents himself before God and the community as a corporate personality; and the Sacred Scripture was the focus and foundation in his reformation pedagogy. Chiramal and Kakkant propose it as a paradigm for modern-day pastors. This method of radical interiorization and contextual interpretation is a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

Jipson Joseph Edappulavan examines the theology of marriage presented in the *Chavarul*, one of the most inspiring literary contributions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. It is his last testament particularly addressed to the people of Kainakari symbolising the entire Thomas Christians of Kerala. Against the context of most of the researchers identifying it in connection with the family life in general, Edappulavan proposes it to be a practical manual for married persons than addressing family in general. This nineteenth century work is still relevant due to its in-depth scriptural foundation, theological

articulation, and practical framework. It invites the spouses to focus on mutuality for a meaningful marital life.

These pages on various dimensions of the Eastern/Syriac theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara offer an inspiration to pursue the theological and spiritual dispositions of Chavara within the framework of Eastern Christian tradition in general and Syriac Christian tradition in particular; and invite the readers to opt for developing the vision further.