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ENCOUNTER OF HINDUS WITH THE ANCIENT THOMAS CHRISTIANS IN KERALA

Though the St. Thomas Christians are spread throughout India and abroad today, I find it difficult to analyse the whole situation. Hence I have restricted the study to Kerala only. One cannot make an amorphous entity like Hinduism encounter the concrete reality of St. Thomas Christians as a group of living human beings. Therefore I have put 'Hindus' instead of 'Hinduism' in the title.

I was born in Trivandrum, Capital of Kerala state and I have been living in the state ever since. I have interacted with St. Thomas Christians at different levels. Perhaps this is the only credential for my writing the present article.

The present state of Kerala was formed on November 1st 1956 by adding what used to be the British Malabar, part of the old Madras Presidency, to the united State of Travancore and Cochin, minus the district of Kanyakumari which with its predominantly Tamil speaking population was merged into Tamil Nadu. Malayalam is the common language of the people of Kerala. Hence the people are generally known as Malayalees.

"The state of Kerala provides a unique history of triological relationships, a kind of laboratory even within multi-religious India. Kerala is the only place in the world where Hindus, Muslims and Christians live together in such numerical equilibrium. According to 1981 Census Hindus comprise 58 percent, Christians 21 percent and Muslims 21 percent of the population."¹

This paper studies only the on-going dialogue between Hindus and St. Thomas Christians. An attempt is made here to trace the history of this encounter and posit a few future trends as far as one can discern them.

1. R.E. Miller, "Triologue: The Context of Hindu-Christian Dialogue in Kerala," in H. COWARD, ed., *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1993), p. 48

St. Thomas Christians

Christianity came to India very early. This penetration appears to have been by sea through the west and the north west. Christians on the shores of India commonly known as St. Thomas Christians have survived till today.

The very name "St. Thomas Christians" refers to a tradition lived by these Christians who claim to be descendants of the converts made by St. Thomas, the Apostle, who is believed to have landed at Cranganore in Kerala about the year 52 A.D. Scores of historians Indian and foreign, like Mundadan,² Paul Thenayan, Placid Podipara, Leslie Brown, Paul Varghese have tried to reconstruct the early history of St. Thomas Christians. But as John Ochanthuruth of the department of history University of Calicut says, "as far as I could see from all the shreds of quotation presented by Prof. Kolangadan, the antiquity of St. Thomas tradition in South India cannot go beyond the 13th century. So far as direct and explicit support in favour of the St. Thomas tradition in South India is concerned I have no doubt that the answer must be No. Neither the Church fathers nor the Apocryphal Acts say anything explicitly about Malabar"³

Against this opinion, one can cite the words of Cardinal Parecattil, "this tradition is not written in Papyrus, nor carved on stone, but buried in the hearts of his (St. Thomas) spiritual children from whom it can never be removed."⁴ Metropolitan Alexander Mar Thomas in his preface to a book by Varghese on the subject has also stated, "He has avoided making assertions where documentary evidence is not adequate but he has given traditions as heritages worthy to be

2. a. A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. 1 (Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, TPI, 1984).

b. Paul Thenayan, *The Missionary Consciousness of the St. Thomas Christians* (Cochin: Viani Publication, 1982).

c. Placid Podipara, *The Malabar Christians* (Alleppy, 1972)

d. Lesli Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* - (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

e. Paul Varghese, ed. *The syrian Churches in India* (Stuttgart: Evangelical Publication, 1974).

3. *The History of Apostle Thomas*, Joseph Kolangaden, 1993, p. 79.

4. P. Thenayan, *op. cit.*, p. 3

treasured"⁵ The Travancore State Manual, originally written by Nagam Aiyar a Hindu, and later revised by Velu Pillai another Hindu in 1938, has come to this conclusion: "The St. Thomas tradition is not a creation of fancy. It is not a legend not founded on fact. On the other hand, the co-existence of co-ordinate facts points to the definite conclusion that the Apostle did come to Malabar to make the earliest beginnings for the propagation of Christianity"⁶ One can also agree with the Hindu writer, K.N. Subramanian when he says, "One cannot dismiss the legend of St. Thomas the Apostle as nothing more than a legend, for in a land like India, persistent traditions are much more valid than history and often enough take its place."⁷

Early Hindu Christian Coexistence

Leaving aside the historicity of St. Thomas Christians for the present, it is more interesting to study who were the Hindus who inter-acted with these Christians, and what their responses were. There is no documentary evidence that might answer these questions definitely. It is difficult to describe fully the Hinduism prevalent in Kerala in the early centuries of the Christian era. We can only make some intelligent surmises in this regard. As the Kerala historian Sreedhara Menon says: "The story of the confluence of religions in Kerala is an exhilarating subject for study. Even in the ancient period Kerala became a meeting ground of all Indian religions and philosophical systems as well as the most important world religions"⁸

R.E. Miller States, "Seldom in world history has there been such a 'successful' era or positive inter-religious living as that which existed in this region from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. That conclusion is not an unreasonable one, even though the evidence is

5. *Glimpses of the History of the Christian churches in India*, Titus Varghese and P. P. Phillip, (Madras: The Christian literature society 1983) - (Preface)

6. *Travancore State Manual*, T. K. Velu Pillai, 1938, p. 661.

7. Ka Na Subramanian, *The Catholic Community in India*, (Madras: Macmillan 1970), p. xi.

8. *A survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1967) p. 87, Sreedhara Menon.

somewhat circumstantial in nature and its interpretation is conditioned by nostalgia. Kerala Hindus, sharers of a faith noted for its spaciousness were at their most hospitable stage"⁹

However, we possess four documents or copper plates which enable us to pin-point the position of the Syrian groups within the structure of social interrelationships. These plates deal with the recognition of privileges granted by the Hindu chieftains to the leaders of the syrian groups in Cranganore and Quilon - The earliest document is a grant to Thomas Cana in 372 A.D. The second, dated 774 A.D. relates to Iravan Kortan, Chief of the Christians of Cranganore. The third and fourth both dated 849 A.D. are addressed to the local Church established by Maravan Sapir Iso at Quilon.

These plates have been analysed by Houtart and Lemercinier.¹⁰ The signatories in all the four instances were Hindu Chieftains. The privileges were economic, religious or social. In the Cranganore documents, the beneficiaries were recognised as a merchant guild. In the Quilon documents the mode of donation is identical with that used in favour of Hindu temples. The above authors therefore conclude, "So it is quite clear that it was by means of a dependent relationship between the leader of the Christian group and the king that the group was integrated into the social ensemble." The two Cranganore plates indicate the powerful position occupied by the syrian group in the key-sector of the Kerala economy - the foreign trade in spices, salt, sugar and oil.

All the four documents grant to the syrian St. Thomas Christian leaders a series of privileges in the symbolic order indicating their social status. A symbolic apparatus reserved for the royal family had been developed in order to support its authority. The Brahminical society also produced a rigid system of symbolic practices to express the difference between the social groups. Thomas Cana was assimilated into the dynasty of the dominant clan as a chieftain - The Christian church was recognised equivalent to a Brahmin temple - The St. Thomas Christians enjoyed the status equivalent to that of the groups holding the highest places in the hierarchy of the time.

9. R. E. Miller, *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

10. F. Houtart and G. Lemercinier, *Genesis and Institutionalisation of the Indian Catholicism*, (Louvain: CRSR Université Catholique de Louvain, 1981), (Chapter 1.)

It was the Hindu Kings who at this period formed the key element in a political structure necessitated by the double imperatives of the organisation of the economy and the defence of the country. The St. Thomas Christians enabled the whole system to function without any danger to the interests of the various dominant groups. They were excellent soldiers and had an army of their own. The characteristic note of their social life was that though Christian in faith, they remained strictly attached to the Hindu way of life. They continued to follow the social customs, diet, inter-dining, ritual purity etc. as were prescribed to the particular caste they belonged to.

The Syrian Churches were built after the fashion of the local pagodas. They built open air crosses on granite basement with the provision for wick and oil for illumination in the fashion of huge brass or granite lamps found outside the main gates of the Hindu temples in Kerala - In the celebration of various feasts there were even more similarities such as flag-hoisting, use of musical instruments, use of umbrellas and torches, during church processions, offering of food as a sort of 'Prasada' etc. These practices continue even today. In marriage ceremonies there was no wedding ring as prescribed in the East Syrian rite but 'thali' was used instead adapting Hindu practice.

They are often described as Hindu in culture, Christian in faith and Syrian in worship. They also adopted an attitude to outsiders as exclusive as that of any Hindu Caste. To quote Stephen Neill, 'at a very early date they separated themselves into a closed community, jealous of their privileges as a high caste, keeping slaves of the untouchable communities who were never admitted to their churches.'

We have reasons to believe that this process reached its climax by the 8th century when a big group of Brahmins reached Malabar. Under the leadership of these Brahmins the society underwent a strict stratification. This process later labelled as sanskritisation by M.N. Srinivas affected the St. Thomas Christians also and in the 9th and 10th centuries they became a distinct community.

The arrival of the Brahmins who established themselves in the inland villages did nothing to weaken the urban sector, of trade, commerce, and defence services. For the Brahmins were a group whose status depended on the manipulation of symbolic production and on

the rejection of all activities of a secular nature. Since the Christian group presented no danger to their status, there was no reason for the Brahmin group to oppose the St. Thomas Christians. The interests of the King were ensured by the merchant economy which helped him to be generous to the Hindu temples controlled by Brahmins. Moreover the St. Thomas Christians were not inclined to proselytize - Nearly all the authors writing on these Christians have labelled them as a non-missionary-spirited community till their coming into contact with the European missionaries in the 16th century. To quote Mundadan¹¹

"The monarchs who did so much for the revival and progress of Hindu religion were enlightened and benevolent enough to keep intact and even foster the age-long tradition of tolerance towards other religions and their followers. It is commercial interests which attracted people of various creeds, races and nations to the Kerala Coast; it is the same interests which induced the rulers and people of Kerala to show such hospitality to the 'alien' people professing alien creeds and practices, alien customs. It is again this kind of enlightened self-interest which must have been responsible for the harmony and the cultural symbiosis that came to prevail in Kerala from the very early times up to the advent of the Portuguese."

Prof. M.G.S. Narayanan,¹² Department of History, Calicut University, has endorsed the above view "This relationship was symbiotic and not parasitic since it was an agreement for mutual advantage. The outsiders were treated as paying guests in Kerala... The dominant elite of the country possessed the wisdom to guarantee security of trade and freedom of religion to the settlers who came in the wake of trade. The Brahmin - Kshatriya prejudice against trade and navigation also induced them to leave such vulgar affairs to the foreigners."

Thus the Hindus absorbed the earliest Christian groups as one element in an economic and political macro-structure of monarchical/ clan type character in accordance with the norms prevailing in that society in the case of local class. The St. Thomas Christians in their turn, organised themselves into clans which alone could and did ensure their survival to this day.

11. See reference 3 (a) *Supra* p. 153.

12. *Ibid*, p. 153.

The Christian groups were not ethnically homogenous since the earliest had arrived from Palestine and the later ones from Babylon or Tamil Nadu. Nor were their immigrations synchronous. Hence each group managed its integration on its own and organised itself according to the model emphasizing its exclusiveness. At the microlevel they organised into locality-based groups or Karas or lineage-based groups of Tarawads. At the macro-level they integrated as wider groups known as manigranamis, yogams etc. of Nazarenis or "converts of St. Thomas."

For the Hindus caste formed a natural group of both integration and identification. In the case of St. Thomas Christians it was religious belonging which constituted the identity of the group as a whole. The title of Christian therefore possesses a social rather than a religious significance. To be a Christian meant, socially, to belong to a group situated inside the social ensemble but on the margin of the social stratification imposed by Hinduism - the religious reference was only indirect. To quote Houtart and Lemercinier:¹³ "It is clear that it was because there was no question, economically speaking of any rivalry on either side between the Christian groups and the socially dominant Hindu groups of the period, and because the latter enjoyed in their own economic sphere, an equally unchallenged position that conflicts of interest between the groups were avoided. This relative autonomy also enabled each of them to justify its social position by an equally autonomous religious discourse."

The above authors have analysed the myths floated by St. Thomas Christians in the form of folk songs like Rambum Pattu, and they state the myths are built up on two axes, one in the social sphere and the other in the religious field. The myths show a strong emphasis on the identification of the group with the two dominant castes - the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. To quote the authors:¹⁴

The Christians were seeking by this means to situate themselves in relation to the group which had become the key element in the social structure. Now Aryanization had diminished the social status of the Syrian Christians in two ways - first since the Christians belonged to a religion other than

13. See reference (11) *Supra*, chapter 1.

14. *Ibid.*,

that on which the whole social structure was built and secondly because their economic activities as merchants were strongly devalued by the group which controlled the cultural capital - the Brahmins.

.... In addition, Christianity had to appear in it as 'superior' to Hinduism, so as to enhance as it were, the position of the Brahmin who had become a Christian. The second axis of the mythical construction is situated on this level, opposing the power of the Christian God to that of the Brahmin deities

The Syrian group adopted the rites of passage "practised by the Nambudiri Brahmin caste and integrated some Christian elements, to keep up their identity and superior status - Most of these practices reinforced through their symbolism the internal structure of the group, that of Kin-ship relations. Because of these, the Syrian Christians were not considered a source of pollution for the higher Hindu Castes, as the low caste pulayas etc.

It is possible that the phrase 'friendly and practical working accomodation' might effectively capture the mood of this unusual period. It was more than a form of co-existence. There was a kind of unabashed mutual acceptance that resulted in inter-marriage, and there was co-operation in affairs of common advantage underlying the mood was an apparent implicit assumption that inter-religious harmony is good. We do not, however, gain any sense that theoretical positions on the relationship among the religions were articulated, nor do we have the impression that formal methods for achieving such harmony were adopted. The latter appears to have been a by-product of other considerations.¹⁵

The great south Indian theologians like Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa never mention about Christianity. Sankara was keen to establish Hinduism on its own right, and he had combated Buddhism and Jainism as heterodox traditions. But he has nothing to say about Christianity. So also Ramanuja. Only in the case of Madhwa, some Christian scholars, attribute Christian influence. But this is not

15. See reference (2) *Supra* p. 50.

acknowledged by learned Hindu Scholars. One can only conjecture that the majority Hindu groups of the time were not bothered by the religious beliefs of the minority Christian groups, whose religion was 'alien', though their social praxis resembled those of Hinduism.

Hindu Christian Encounter After 15th C.

Hindu-Christian encounter takes a new turn after the fifteenth century - The age of harmony based on commerce, described above, moves to an age of rivalry based on economic and political domination. The period is also characterised by a militant religious flavour on the part of the Christians. The people who ushered in the new age were the Portuguese. The history of their period has been described by Fr. Joseph Thekkedath.¹⁶ The Portuguese disturbed matters "by making religion itself a part of the fabric of domination, uniting religion, politics and economics into one imperialistic whole." Within a century, the patterns of inter-religious living were radically altered, and up to the twentieth century we have a history of rivalry, and deteriorating relations."¹⁷

During this period, the Syrians who always depended on Persia Chaldea or Syria for their bishops often found themselves bereft of these spiritual leaders. They also lost the monopoly of the spice trade. The kingdom of the Perumal, their secular friend, also crumbled and in its ruins rose three new principalities, Kozhikode, Cochin and Travancore. The Zamorin of Kozhikode found it prudent to come to terms, so that Calicut superseded Cranganore as the main trade market. As a matter of policy he favoured the Muslim merchants rather than the Christian. Cochin however continued the Perumal policy of protecting and helping Christians so that when the Portuguese arrived they were welcomed by Cochin and not by the Zamorin of Kozhikode.

The Portuguese captain Vas Co De Gama landed in Calicut in 1498, an event of great significance in secular history. When the Hindu ruler of Calicut, the Zamorin hesitated to make a trading agreement with the Portuguese, they struck back with a series of sea attacks marked by frequent cruelty. On his second visit to Cochin in 1502

16. Joseph Thekkedath *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. 2, (Bangalore: TPI, 1982)

17. See reference (2) *Supra*, p. 51.

Gama came into contact with the local St. Thomas Christians. Bishop Mar Jacob on behalf of these Christians solicited his help against their rivals, especially the Arabs. Thus began a long connection between the Portuguese and the St. Thomas Christian community of Kerala which in turn led to serious consequence in course of time. The Portuguese, unlike the other European colonisers of India were interested in the evangelisation of the country. A temporal empire of any magnitude was beyond the means of the Portuguese - a small nation with a population of only one and a half million. The Portuguese enterprise was the king's own. The king of Portugal was the grand master of the order of Christ which counted the expansion of Christ's kingdom on earth as among its main duties. It was king John III of Portugal who sent St. Francis Xavier to India with full powers to convert Indians to Christianity.

Many of the missionaries who succeeded Xavier were as good as he. Conversions were numerous. St. Xavier must have come into contact with the ancient Christians of Malabar. According to the Travancore State Manuel, St. Xavier was able to found forty five churches in Travancore within a space of less than two years.

But the Catholic authorities at Goa did not follow the excellent Xavierian principle of live and let live in their dealings with the other branches of Indian Church. This led to a lot of bickerings which increased with the passing of the years. These quarrels have left their mark on the Christians themselves and the non-Christians. In the Portuguese territories in India conversion was attempted by some of the overzealous missionaries untempered by the saintliness of St. Xavier in a very undesirable manner. Public worship other than Christian was banned - Hindu temples were destroyed. This resulted in considerable migration of the Hindu population from this area. The Gowda - Saraswat Brahmins of Kerala are supposed to be such immigrants. "The story of the Portuguese Inquisition in India is not so well known, though its effects were felt and remembered long after it was liquidated giving Christian evangelisation a bad name from which it cannot yet be said to have recovered."¹⁸ "The Portuguese captains and officials were often corrupt and their greed during the limited years in office seemed to know no bounds nor any moral restraint.

18. See reference (8) *Supra*, p. 18.

The kind of life led by the Portuguese as well as the other Colonialists from the West were certainly no advertisement in favour of Christianity."¹⁹

Miller has summarised the effects of the Portuguese and subsequent foreign missions admirably.²⁰

Christians turned against Christians as the Syrian and Latin traditions struggled and divided Indigenous Christians, tending to align with the christian foreigners, became alienated from those who opposed them. Hindus became suspicious of Christians and the entente between Hindus and Muslims was shattered There was confusion and trauma; violence was not uncommon. It was only the vital, everyday relations of ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Christians in the towns and villages of Kerala that preserved society from permanent alienation. While not all of the weaknesses in community relations could be laid at the door of the Portuguese, there can be no doubt of the dramatic and deleterious effects of this period which continued to modern times Interreligious living in Kerala had become interreligious struggle and the golden age of harmony was now only a fading memory.

The spread of Christianity in Travancore was however facilitated by the generous attitude of the Hindu rulers. Fra. Bartolomew records that the Maharaja took such measures that all the grievances of the Malabar Christians were redressed in the kindest manner. "They were permitted to be governed by their own bishops in civil as well as in ecclesiastical matters. This attitude of the rulers of Travancore towards the Christians may be better appreciated when contrasted with the treatment meted out to them in Tamil Nadu. The Kilavan Setupati of Ramanad once ordered the destruction of all churches in his kingdom. John De Britto the missionary had to suffer martyrdom. The King of Tanjore persecuted the Christians in his own territory and induced his neighbours to do likewise. On one occasion all the missionaries were banished from Trichinopoly. But in Travancore it was all kindness, sympathy and encouragement."²¹

19. See reference (2) *Supra*, p. 4.

20. See reference (2) *Supra*, p. 54

21. See reference (7) *Supra*, p. 16-17.

One of the most important events during the period, which made Hindu encounter with St. Thomas Christians more tense and restricted was the Synod of Diamper held in June 20th 1599. The principal architect of the Synod was Archbishop of Goa, Alvis de Menezes. From his point of view "in order to bring the St. Thomas Christians into the fold of the Roman church it was necessary to rectify its beliefs, transform its religious and social practices and finally to integrate the whole into a juridical framework which would guarantee continuity and perseverance. The hidden function of this mechanism would lead the group, integrated into a foreign ecclesiastical structure in this way, to lose its social and cultural identity."²² The Synod condemned many Hindu beliefs like transmigration and destiny (Karma). A whole series of ceremonies were forbidden marriage symbolised by means of the thali, ritual ablution, the celebration of Onam (the harvest festival). It was also decreed that teachers should not keep images of the Hindu Gods in the schools, even for the sake of the Hindu children. Against such prohibition, Roman Catholic ritual practices were affirmed. Some of the practices that were restricted at that time are now being re-introduced (after Vatican II) in the name of inculturation. Dr. Mundadan concludes that "these prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between Christians and Hindus. Their communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision."²³ However at the end of this period, "the Syrian Christian community became something like a Caste (made up of two sub-castes viz, the Northists and the Southists) with all the exclusiveness and narrowness attached to Caste."²⁴

Kerala entered the modern period thus, the heir of both positive and negative experiences in inter-religious living. Individually the people of the area were living together in all sorts of ordinary, pragmatic and healthy day-to-day relationships. There was however no sustained intellectual and emotional effort to isolate and promote

22. See reference (11) *Supra*, chapter II

23. See reference 3 (a) p. 27.

24. See reference (17) *Supra*, p. 140.

a formal principle of action that could be applied to the area of inter-religious living.

By the end of the 19th century St. Thomas Christians got their own local bishops and by 1923 the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was erected by Pope Pious XI. Thus at last the St. Thomas Christians came under the rule of their own prelates after twelve centuries of Chaldean and three centuries of Western subjugation.

Now at last, the St. Thomas Christians peacefully settled at home, began to undertake missionary works in full vigour in an organised way. Medical, educational, and other philanthropic aids for the new converts were launched. Low-caste people began to be converted in great numbers. In many places new churches were built for them. Various congregations of priests and nuns were founded. This gave the church a great missionary force.

Contemporary Religio-Political Interactions

At the turn of the 20th century, Hindu, Christian and Muslim were the three major religious communities in Travancore. The Hindus were so sharply divided on caste lines that seldom had they social intercourse. Each caste and its sub-castes were endogamous. Among the Hindus, the Nairs and Ezhavas were the most numerous. At the end of 19th century, in the emerging new set up the educated middle class protested against the Brahmins ill-treating the Sudras. Technically, the Christians were outside this caste hierarchy, but in practice a system of inclusion and exclusion was developed vis-a-vis caste. Christians were a force to reckon within agriculture, business and trade. The central theme of the story of the Travancore society since the end of the 19th century is one of competing demands among the Nair, Ezhava and Christian communities for a larger share in the resources and power of the state. These major communities used the other marginal communities according to convenience for or against one another.

With the arrival of Western Christian missions a new system of ethics was being sown. To quote M.M. Thomas, "the missionaries" passion for liberal and cultural reform had roots not merely in their evangelical Christianity. It had roots also in the culture of the en-

lightenment and of capitalism which Europe then represented."²⁵ The work of the missionaries had its impact on Nair and Ezhava societies. This had the revolutionary potential of breaking open the social, political and economic exclusiveness of different communities after many years. Its immediate impact was an added incentive to the mercantile and commercial spirit of the Syrian Christians. By the closing decades of the 19th century, social conditions were ripe in Travancore for an awaking of the people to demand their rights from the state.

Two religious leaders came into power during this period. Their reactions to the Christians are worth studying in the context of inter-faith dialogue. Sri Chattampi Swamikal (1854-1924) represented the Nairs. He made a deep study of the religious literature of the Hindus and raised his voice against the existing social order, especially against the primacy of Brahmins. He wrote a book called *Veda-adhikara-nirupanam* (Proof for the competence to study the Vedas) establishing the right of Sudras and women to study the vedas. The 1941 Travancore census report has praised Sri Swamikal for the work he did to awaken the Hindus against the proselytising activities of the Christians. Swamiji wrote a book called *Christu-Mata-Chedanam* (cutting out the Christian faith) in Malayalam and asked his disciples to preach against Christian doctrines in Hindu temples, to protect the Hindus from being converted to Christianity. He had studied the Bible in depth and polemically established the superiority of Hinduism. He also wrote a book called *Christu-mata-Sāram* (Essence of Christianity) which was praised by even Christian Pandits. Commenting on Swamiji's work, Sreedhara Menon says "The activities of Chattampi Swamikal imparted a new life and vigour to the social reform movement among the Hindus and helped a great deal in stemming the rising tide of mass conversion to Christianity."

Sri Narayana Guru (1854-1928) was the leader of the Ezhava community. He openly rebelled against Brahminic domination by dedicating temples and conducting worship through Ezhavas to the same gods as those of high caste Hindus. His dedication of a Siva temple at Aruvipuram to Lord Siva in 1878, is considered to be a landmark in the liberation history of the down-trodden people of Kerala. An

25. George Mathew, *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala* Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1989, p. 41-42.

inscription in Malayalam at this temple reads: "This is the ideal house, where all live in full fraternity without distinction of caste or prejudice of creed." His message 'One caste, one religion, one God for mankind' captured the imagination of the deprived and marginalised in the Kerala society. He also organised an inter-religious meeting in Alwaye, Kerala in the year 1924. Thus his approach to Christianity was in the true spirit of inter-religious understanding. In one of his poems, 'Anu-Kampa-Dasakam' (The Verses on Mercy) he explicitly refers to Jesus Christ, as the embodiment of mercy, and says, "He is the pure begotten Son of the Lord Most High."

The three great Malayalam poets – Asan, Ulloor and Vallathol – have sung of Jesus with the same emotional and spiritual fervour as they have sung of Gods and heroes of the Indian tradition. Later poets like G. Sankara Kurup and Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon have sung of Christ with more intensity of feeling. The most comprehensive biography of Christ in Malayalam has been written by a Hindu, K.P. Kesava Menon, who opens his book with: "Jesus Christ is the perfect image of love. His name is the symbol of boundless compassion, endless patience and heavenly peace. Jesus will abide in the heart of humanity as their eternal perceptor." Even recently a fine work in Malayalam, on Jesus Christ entitled "Christu-darsanam" has been written by a Hindu philosophy professor, K.S. Radhakrishnan.

Religious Tolerance in the Secular India

The encounter between Hindus and Christians takes a new turn in the post independent era. This introduced the people of India to a new and conscious policy related to inter-religious living. Religious interaction is for national integration. Mahatma Gandhi in effect gave his life for these principles. Pandit Nehru on his part resisted any suggestions that India should revert to some form of a 'Hindu-raj'. With the help of his colleagues he succeeded in fashioning it as a secular state, marked by respect for religion in general and equality for all religious expressions. 'A secular state,' Pandit Nehru wrote on August 9, 1954, 'does not mean a state where religion as such is discouraged. It means freedom of religious conscience.' Rajiv Gandhi speaking in the Lok Sabha on 27th February 1986 reiterated, 'we are a secular country. But how do we define secularism? Do we define it as 'no religion'? We define it as the right of

every religion to co-exist with other religions. . . It is the basic strength of India that every religion has its own freedom of functioning within our framework and we do not try to suppress or change any religion”.

The right to freely propagate religion was passed by government of India, despite the opposition of several influential personages. Many prominent Hindus like T.T. Krishnanachari, Krishnaswami Bharati, K.M. Munshi, Lakshmikanth Maitra argued for retaining the words 'to propagate' in the Indian Constitution, as a recognition of a fundamental right of minority communities. Without the support of Hindu leaders the clause would never have been passed. Soli Sorabji, a distinguished jurist, remarks, "One cannot but be struck by the broad-mindedness and the spirit of tolerance and accommodation displayed by the founding fathers of the majority community towards their Christian brethren."²⁶

The trends at the national level have set the stage for the Hindus and Christians of Kerala. The democratic system of government has thrown together both Hindus and Christians in a give-and-take legislative process. The Government of Kerala treats Hindus and Christians alike, without particular regard for religious affiliation. Developmental programmes of various kinds make the Hindus and Christians come together.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the encounter of Hindus with Christians brought about certain fruitful changes for them. Dr. Mathew has analysed these as follows:²⁷

Nair and Ezhava communities realised that they would be thrown out of the race if some of the reasons for the enviable economic progress of Christians were not accepted by them also. These were identified as:

1. Organisational set-up, based on religious legitimacy, but the organisation had important social function, including that of effecting a redistributive balance of material resources on a communal basis.

26. S. J. Samartha, *One Christ - many religions*, Maryknoll, New, York Orbis books, 1991, p. 94.

27. See reference (26) *Supra*, p. 62-63.

2. Ownership of educational institutions as well as the access they offered to government employment. The capacity to make use of whatever came in the way for one's own advantage and self-interest.
3. Initiative and motivation in harnessing the slowly opening up resources and facilities, weakening of fundamentalism provided on ideal setting for prosperity in newer areas.
4. An ethic of hard work, the urge to be successful. This had something to do with thrift, a puritan way of the Protestant traditions, frugal ceremonies in families and inexpensive social celebration. All these summed up the ethics and culture of Syrian Christians and they yielded rewards in the newly unfolding situation.

The Nairs and Ezhavas naturally laid emphasis on these aspects. Sri Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan, all of them Ezhava leaders, first recognised these factors responsible for the success of the Syrian Christians. The Nairs, under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan and others, also began to emphasise these factors.

Today in Kerala one finds Nairs and Ezhavas, competing with Christians in the running of schools, colleges, hospitals etc. Prof. Wadia says,²⁸ "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the teachings of Christ have given a definite meaning and content to the concept of social work and have given rise to social workers in the truest sense of the term." The earliest of social welfare organisations in India were those organised by the Christians. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that sufficient action was taken by Hindus in this regard. Today in Kerala one can see many missions started in the name of charismatic Hindu saints and sages like Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Chinmaya, Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal etc. and their activities are similar to those of Christian missions.

The Kerala experience shows that such competition among Hindus, Nairs and Ezhavas to enhance their economic position status and power could ultimately lead to a situation where the process will blunt the edge of the communal aggregates and the primordial base of

28. See reference (8) *Supra*, p, 106.

communalism and broaden the scope for the secularisation process as a whole. The secular without the religious and the religious without the secular are not possible in Kerala. Tradition-modernity is not a bi-polarity but a continuum leading to a dialectical intertwining of both. Today, christianity has no alienating influence. It is hard indeed to tell a Malayali Christian from a Malayali Hindu, except perhaps when they mention their names, or when they go to their places of worship. Modern education, modern economy and reference group constituted by the international community adopting modern civilized practice, have brought the Christians and Hindus together.

As an instance of the continuing amity between Christians and Hindus, one can cite the Nilackal issue. To quote Dr. Mathew:²⁹

A cross said to be found (and soon disappeared) in Nilackal where according to Christian folklore St. Thomas had built a church in the first century sparked off a serious communal tension in March 1983. It lasted till November 23, 1983. The atmosphere was filled with war cries from a section of Hindu organisation to save Nilackal temple and church leaders to save Nilackal for Christians. It went to the extent of some predicting that the cross found and lost at Nilackal would become, the symbol of crucifixion of Kerala's communal harmony. But there was no violence on this issue, not a drop of blood was shed on this count. After eight months the social fabric of Kerala regained its original texture; the fundamentalists who wanted to fan communalism failed. They were ridiculed by the secular stream.

However, care should be taken not to exaggerate or over simplify the present situation on the basis of such incidents. For Indian Nationalism and Hindu Dharma are combined leading to aggressive reactions against Muslims and Christians. The Arya Samaj, Rastriya Svayam Sevak Sangh, and many Swamijis of established Hindu maths etc. feel that Christianity is a threat to the continuation of the Hindu dharma. Swami Chinmayananda, once said that the Hindus constitute 82% of the population of India and that when 82% of people are

29. See reference (26) *Supra*, p. 211.

seeking their religious and cultural revival it is not communal but national. According to the Swami, 'there are only two communities in India today, those who are Hindus and those who were Hindus.' Karan Singh, a former Cabinet Minister, declared at a public meeting, "While having goodwill for all religions as enjoyed by its scriptures, Hinduism would no longer remain a passive spectator to hostile incursions upon it."³⁰

Dwelling upon the organisational problems of Hindu Maha sabha, its erstwhile president Despande stated in 1960 that a band of life-workers should be formed for carrying out the party's social and cultural programme with special emphasis on combating the activities of Christian missionaries."³¹

Similar fundamental attitudes can be detected on the part of some Christian leaders also. For example Archbishop Pothacamury, writing in 1961, states, "Hinduism, is in fact a strong barrier to the wide diffusion of Christianity among Indians While Hinduism hinders the spread of the Christian faith, it should be emphasized that the majority of India's Hindus are neutral towards or perhaps even unaware of the christian minority in their midst."³² Such opinion can be detected even now, even after Vatican II, among some at least of the Christian leaders. One can only remind that such an approach is quite meaningless and invalid in the context of Kerala.

It is better to emphasize the positive attitudes rather than such negative approaches in the context of inter-religious dialogue. It is heartening to note that as early as 1955, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India, had struck this positive note on the occasion of St. Thomas Day Celebrations in New Delhi:

It was not an accident that a man like Mahatma Gandhi owed as much to Christianity as to Hinduism. Remember St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian and so these Indians who trace their christianity to him have a longer history and a higher

30. See reference (27) *Supra*, p. 25-30 for a study of Hindu-Models of Dialogue.

31. Archbishop Thomas Pothacamury, *The Church in Independent India*, [Bombay: Examiner Press, 1961.] p. 19.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

ancestry than that of Christians of many of the European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened If their true mission is the preaching of christianity, placing the life of Christ before our people, they are welcome. I am quite sure that everyone who is present here will go back satisfied and assured that we in this country have lived for nearly 2,000 years in peace and harmony and will continue to do so in the future too.³³

If this is to be taken as the official Hindu attitude to St. Thomas Christians, the future attitude to be adopted by the Christians to Hindus is clearly spelt out by Cardinal Parecattil:³⁴

In the present context of independent India, when the country is at pains to rediscover her cultural identity and reformulate her religious heritage in the face of challenges posed by Christianity and other creeds including atheistic communism, missionary work, as understood in earlier days becomes increasingly difficult and ineffective. There is the imperative need – this need was always there though we failed to recognise it – of entering into a meaningful dialogue with the non-christian religions with an open, sincere and humble heart. They too contain certain positive values in a greater or lesser measure. In no-wise should they be counted as enemies of Christianity but rather as its complements. It will be suicidal on the part of a missionary in India to look upon Hinduism as the hot-bed of error and superstition. If he does so, he should not be surprised if he is paid back in the same coin.

The above over-view of the Hindu – Christian encounter has raised many questions, as noted by Miller:³⁵

1. Is mutual commercial advantage a sufficiently enduring basis for inter-religious harmony?
2. Does violence in religious inter-relationships solve anything?

33. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

34. See reference 3 (b) *Supra*, (p. xi-xii)

35. See reference (2) above p. 47-60.

3. Can the active dominance of one religion lead to inter-religious understanding?
4. Can mere co-existence enforced by some external factor be a viable pattern for successful inter-religious living?
5. Can we base inter-religious harmony between two religions on common enmity towards a third alien religion?
6. Are common-sense humaneness and neighborliness adequate in the inter-religious context?
7. Are national integration and pragmatic governmental action sufficient for inter-religious living?
8. Are secularism, search for self-esteem, and growing mutual respect adequate to foster true inter-religious understanding?

Dialogue is now taking place in Kerala at different levels in discussions, symposia, colloquiums, conferences, seminars and workshops in which the above questions crop up again and again. Such activity is mostly confined to the elitist groups. When will the results of such fruitful programmes trickle down to the grass-root level?

To conclude, Hinduism and Christianity have met in Kerala, only as static and closed religions so far. To quote Henri Bergson:³⁶

Static religion, such as we find it when it stands alone attaches man to life and consequently the individual to society, by telling them tales on a par with those with which we lull children to sleep. Of course they are not like other stories. Being produced by the myth-making function in response to an actual need and not for mere pleasure, they counterfeit reality as actually perceived, to the point of making us act accordingly, other creations of the imagination have this same tendency, but they do not demand our compliance; they can remain just ideas, whereas the former are ideo-motory. They are none the less myths, which critical minds, as we have

36. Henri Bergson, *The two sources of Morality and Religion*, [New York: Doubleday and compass,] p. 211; 234-235.

seen, often accept in fact, but which they should, by rights, reject.

The proponents of static religion, have always thought, that with family, country, humanity appearing as wider and wider circles, man must naturally love humanity as he loves his country and his family. In reality however, the family group and the social group are the only ones ordained by nature, the only ones corresponding to instincts. And the social instinct would be far more likely to prompt societies to struggle against one another than to unite to make up humanity.

Thus, what is needed is a real mutation which can be brought about only by an open and dynamic religion, based on mysticism. For the mystic love of humanity is a very different thing. It is not the extension of an instinct, it does not originate in an idea. Coinciding with God's love for His handiwork, a love which has been the source of everything, it would yield up to anyone, who knew how to question it, the secret of creation. Both Hinduism and Christianity are nothing but open confession and charters for such an all-embracing love. Core scriptural texts belonging to both Christian and Hindu traditions speak only of this love (agape). This love has been well-exemplified in the lives of both Christian saints and Hindu sages. If such mysticism is to transform humanity it can do so only by passing on from one man to another slowly a part of itself. This is the future task of the inter-faith dialogue between Hindus and ancient Thomas Christians.