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MEETING OF TWO THEOLOGIES IN INDIA IN THE 16th AND 17th CENTURIES

1. Ancient Indian Christians and Their Self-Understanding Before the 16th Century

Most ancient Christian churches, whether they were of direct or indirect apostolic origin, had developed an individuality of their own. This individuality is seen in the worship form, church structure and discipline peculiar to them and, above all, in the theological and spiritual vision that emerged in each of these churches in course of time. We need not go in search the reasons for the growth of the individuality of each Church; the individuality is a fact though individual characteristics – liturgical, theological, spiritual, structural or disciplinary – and their expressions in each Church may vary in degree.

The Church in India which claims apostolic origin is certainly one of the oldest Churches. It did develop an individuality of its own, with its long tradition and life in India. Naturally one would ask whether it has evolved a distinct theology which serves as a guide and inspiration for theologizing in India today. There is no simple answer to this question. It is often stated that the long dependence of the ancient Christians of India – the St. Thomas Christians – on the Persian or East-Syrian Church followed by the domination of the Portuguese and other Western missionaries was least conducive to the emergence of an indigenous theology proper to the Christians of St. Thomas.¹

Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese the Christians of India had been living in two worlds – the geographical, political and social environment of India (Kerala) and the Christian environment resulting from a long

1. R. H. S. Boyd, *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Madras, 1975), p. 88 gives a few other reasons.

association with the East-Syrian Church.² It is this life in two worlds which gave the Christians of St. Thomas a distinctive identity of their own. It is this identity which some writers have characterized as, "Hindu in culture, Christian in faith and Syro-Oriental in worship."³

While the socio-cultural environment was fully reflected in the purely social life of the Christians, it does not seem to have touched, except peripherally the Church-life or the faith-life, especially the worship pattern and the theological and spiritual outlook of the community. From the various reports and letters of the Portuguese in the 16th century, the picture that emerges is that of a Church which not only was ruled by East-Syrian prelates but a Church which had almost completely taken over the theology, worship form and Church institutions of the East-Syrian Christians of Persia.

As noted above we possess a number of Portuguese evaluations of the doctrinal/theological position of the St. Thomas Christians in the 16th century. Some of these evaluations are derived from general observations which the Portuguese made about the beliefs and practices of the community, and do not go beyond a blanket statement that the Christians professed the orthodox faith. Others, like the study of Bishop Ros are the result of deeper study, especially of the Syriac books in their possession and provide evidence that the Christians of St. Thomas adhered to the official theological position of the East-Syrian Church.⁴

Taking all this into consideration, the conclusion arrived at by many writers today is similar to the one stated by Robin Boyd. He says:

It might be expected that the Syrian Church, with its long Indian tradition behind it, would have evolved a distinct type of theology which could be a guide and inspiration to Indian theologians of other, more recent, traditions. It must be admitted, however, that this has not been the case, and that it is only comparatively recently, and under the influence of western theology, that theological writers of note have begun to emerge.⁵

2. Cf. A. M. Mundadan, C.M.I., *The Arrival of the Portuguese in India and the Thomas Christians under Mar Jacob, 1498-1552*, (Bangalore, 1967), p. 1-34, (Hereafter referred to as Mundadan, *The Arrival*).

3. Cf. Placid Podipara, *The Malabar Christians*, (Alleppey, 1972), pp. 27ff.

4. Cf. Joras Thaliath, T.O.C.D., *The Synod of Diamper*, (Rome, 1958), pp. 12f., 15f.

5. R.H.S. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

But a few have taken slightly different view. For example. Antony Mookenthottam feels that "it is possible that the ancient Church of India had developed some theology of its own and this theology is not written down in books but is implicit in "the life, experience and traditions" of the community.⁶

Today there is no written pre-16th century record of the doctrinal/theological position of the St. Thomas Christians prior to their contact with the West in the 16th century. Even those books which the Portuguese writers of the 16th century examined and used for drawing their conclusions, are not available today. Since the Portuguese suspected the presence of errors in the books, they all became casualties in the *auto-da-fé* programme launched by the Portuguese Padroado authorities at the close of the 16th century and later.⁷ This leaves us without sufficient data to verify whether the Indian Christians had evolved a theology of their own. Recourse then has to be made to other sources of information, namely, "the life, experience and tradition," to derive some idea of the pre 16th century views of the Christians of India. In other words, we have to see what theology is reflected in the general outlook and religious mentality of the community, in their life, customs and traditions.

If you examine the social and certain aspects of the socio-ecclesiastical life the Christians of St. Thomas had been leading,⁸ you may come to the same conclusion as Antony Mookenthottam: "their identification with their socio-cultural milieu was so thorough... This oneness with their socio-cultural milieu implies an implicit incarnational theology lived, an awareness that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values."⁹

6. A. Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies*, (Berne, 1978), pp. 23f.

7. In accordance with a resolution of the third provincial synod of Goa (1585), Father (later Bishop) Ros had started scrutinizing the books and marking the "errors" before the synod of Diamper (1599). The synod itself decreed not only the correction but the burning of the books which the Portuguese authorities thought contained "errors." See Act III, decrees 14, 15 and 16. The original Portuguese Acts of the synod were published in 1606 together with the *Jornada* (diary of the visit of Archbishop Alexis de Meneses to Kerala in 1599) written by A. de Gouvea, *Jornada do Arcebispo de Goa Dom Frey Alexio de Meneses...* (Coimbra, 1606). See also Jonas Thaliath. *op. cit.*, p. 31.

8. A.M. Mundadan, C. M. I. *Sixteenth Century Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, (Bangalore, 1970), pp. 118-55, (Hereafter referred to as A.M. Mundadan, *Traditions*).

9. A. Mookenthottam, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Another important factor worth considering is their attitude towards 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).¹⁰ These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations 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.

In Act III, Decree 4 of the synod we read :

Each one can be saved in his own law, all laws are right: This is fully erroneous and a most shameful heresy: There is no law in which we may be saved except the law of Christ our Saviour....” (and the footnote says:) “This is a perverse dogma of politicians and those tolerant. . . Consequently being indifferent they wander very far away from the truth.”

It is to be noted that the synod attributes this ‘error’ to contact with pagans. What is really involved here is the understanding of the doctrine; ‘*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’ (‘outside the Church there is no salvation’), by the Portuguese and the St. Thomas Christians, respectively. The Portuguese came from the West where a rigid interpretation of the dictum had prevailed for a long time and had become acute in the 16th century in the

10. The synod of Diamper which was dominated by the Western “exclusive” theological outlook of the Middle Ages thought it necessary to prohibit certain customs and practices of the community in order to distinguish Christians from the Hindus. It noted with regret that in social life there were no external signs to distinguish Christians from the *nayaras* (the chivalry class of Kerala; in dress, hair style, in everything they followed the same pattern. Hence the assembly decreed that Christians desist from boring ear-lobes (IX, 17); at least that would be a distinguishing sign! It prohibited a number of other items: observance of legal impurity by women after child-birth (IX, 7); use of “non-Christian names” (IV, I, 16 & 17); practice of ordeals and omens (IX, 4 & 6); Hindu musicians singing in Christian churches (V, II, 14); certain ceremonies connected with marriages, child-birth, death; selection of auspicious days for certain functions (VII, II, 15; sending children to schools run by Hindu *panicars* (teachers) and Christian *panicars* keeping Hindu idols in their schools for the sake of the Hindu children attending lessons (VIII, 36; III, 13); the clergy eating with the Hindus (VII, I, II). The synod recommended strongly that the Christians live together remote from the “danger” of communication with non-Christians (IX, 23). It encouraged conversion of low castes to Christianity though separate churches might be built for the low cast converts (VIII, 36).

context of the anti-Protestant Counter-Reformation spirit. They sensed danger in the more liberal attitude of the Indian Christians towards Hindus and Hindu religion. Archbishop Meneses and his Portuguese advisers drew up a decree condemning an error which they thought was implied in the liberal attitude of the Christians.

The synod is right in attributing the 'error' to the contacts the St. Thomas Christians maintained with pagans. It would take centuries before the Europeans would acquire a life-experience of non-Christian religions, before a theology of the religions of the world would emerge which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had been already living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal. Today in the light of modern theological approaches to non-Christian religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries.

Their theological vision was broader and more liberal. But their position was not that radical and extreme as expressed by the synodal decree. No Portuguese writers of the 16th century like Ros, for instance, who had made a rather deep study of the faith and doctrine of the St. Thomas Christians, attribute to them such an error. The wording of the decree must have been dictated by the over-sensitivity of Meneses and his advisers to a liberal but orthodox approach to non-Christian religions.

The attitude of the St. Thomas Christians towards non-Christians and their religions was an enlightened one and approximates that of modern theology. Their ideas on a local/individual Church agree even more with the modern ecclesiology. Act III, Decree 7 of the same synod denounces another 'error' of the Christians of St. Thomas.

The synod is painfully aware of the heresy and perverse error which is being disseminated in this diocese by the schismatics to the great detriment of souls: There is one law of St. Thomas and another of St. Peter, the Church founded by the one is distinct and different from the Church founded by the other; each is immediately from Christ; one has nothing to do with other; neither the prelate of one owes obedience to the prelate of the

other; those who belong to the law of Peter endeavoured to destroy the law of St. Thomas; for this they had been punished by him . . .

The words used by the synodal decree are too sharp to be taken at their face value. Those who drafted the decree gave a rather radical and extreme interpretation of the views of the Indian Christians regarding the identity and autonomy of individual / particular Churches. The whole question must be analysed in the particular context in which it was discussed. On the one hand Archbishop Meneses and his Portuguese associates were out to detect 'errors' where perhaps none existed. On the other hand in the tension-filled atmosphere that preceded the synod, some leaders of the community including the archdeacon, anxious as they were about the autonomy and identity of their Church, might have criticised in scathing terms the Portuguese action in general and the interference of Archbishop Meneses in particular.

Only twenty years before the celebration of the synod a Jesuit priest, Francisco Dionysio, who had known the Christians rather intimately, had written:

They regard the Pope as the Vicar of Christ our Redeemer, on earth, and their Patriarch as subject to the Pope from whom his powers are communicated to him.¹¹

Even though we do not accept this statement as representing a conscious acceptance of the primacy of the Roman bishop as it is understood in the Catholic Church today, there is no doubt that they showed positive regard to the Petrine office and the Pope's position, and believed in the universal communion of all Christians. Besides, the Indian Christians, as far as history can trace had all along been welcoming Christian visitors whether from the East or West as brothers in Christ and treating them such.¹² It was in this spirit of Christian solidarity and cordiality that they welcomed the Portuguese in the beginning. Tension started developing when they felt that the Portuguese unduly

11. Antonio da Silva Rego, *Documentação para a História das Missões do Pedrado Português do Oriente, Índia*, Vol, 12, (Lisbon, 1958), p. 399.

12. Just to give an example: John de Marignoli, O.F.M., came to Quilon in the 14th century. He was received by the Christian community of Kerala with all respect and consideration. See Mundadan, *The Arrival*, p. 151 f.

interfered in their autonomy and were critical of their customs, practices and beliefs which were indeed marks of their distinctive identity.¹³

The attitude and mentality of the Christians, as they emerge from various Portuguese reports and letters, deserve mention here. It is clear that the Indian Christians looked upon the customs, practices and life of the Latin Christians from the West with respect, and expected from the Western Christians a reciprocal regard for their own way of life which had developed with the Indian Church ever since St Thomas sowed the seeds of the faith in India. The Churches, each one supposed to be founded by one of the apostles, were to be left free to develop their own particular tradition, so that one did not interfere in the affairs of the other while holding on to the same faith in Jesus Christ and being in communion with one another. This did not therefore mean the exclusion of mutual co-operation and deriving profit from one another by remaining in contact. The Christians of India were not averse to learn from the Western Christians in matters relating to clearer doctrinal definition and Church discipline.

But the Indian Christians could never accept the idea that only the Latin form of Christianity was the true form of Christianity. They could, to some extent, appreciate the Latin usages and liturgical and canonical disciplines but they would not wholly accept them, just as they did not expect the Portuguese to accept their own particular customs and practices in these matters. Their thinking could be described thus: both the Portuguese and they were Christians and both belonged to the universal Church. But each local community had its own customs and usages including Church-discipline, their native customs etc., probably going back to the times of the Apostles themselves ('Law of Thomas,' 'Law of Peter,' and so on). They could never reconcile themselves to the idea of giving up their customs and practices, both social and

13. A Portuguese priest, Alvaro Penteadó wrote from Kerala to the Portuguese king c. 1518: "The Christians of St Thomas do not care for communication with the Portuguese, not because they are not happy that they are Christians as we are, but because we are among them as the English and the Germans are among us. As regards their natural customs, their will is corrupted by their priests who say that just as there were twelve Apostles, even so, they founded twelve customs, each different from the others." A. M. Mundadan, *ibid.*, p. 83. Though the Portuguese clergy understood this mentality of the Indian Christians, they were not prepared to tolerate it because it was "wrong and unchristian mentality." They would bluntly ask the Christians to conform to the Portuguese way of life. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 93.

ecclesiastical, which had been sacred to them for many centuries. They were prepared to accept from the Latin missionaries what they lacked: Instruction, a better discipline; but they would not like the missionaries to occupy the position of their own priests and prelates.¹⁴

This was of course a legitimate theological concept of the individual/particular Church, a concept which is a significant contribution of modern ecclesiology and approved by many official Church documents. To this was added a typically Indian community or even caste attitude, The Indian Christians regarded the Portuguese as their own people in friendly recognition of them as Christians and brethren, but this recognition did not mean that the Christians were prepared to admit the Portuguese into the set-up of their own communal life, which was a closed one to which strangers, whether Christian or not (in this sense the high caste Hindus of Kerala were less strangers to them than the Portuguese), were prohibited entry and assimilation. They looked upon the Portuguese in this exclusive spirit and thus thought of them as strangers and outsiders.¹⁵

The Church in India, though patterned after the structure of the East-Syrian Church of Persia, was marked by certain peculiarities of its own. It is not certain whether the Indian Christians, since they came into intimate contact with the East-Syrian Church, ever had any prelate of theirs chosen from among themselves.¹⁶ From the existing historical records we know only that bishops came from Persia regularly and administered the Indian Church. The bishops whether they were Indians or foreigners, were known by such titles as 'Metropolitan and Gate of All-India,' 'Gate of India,' 'gate' in Syriac parlance signifying 'sublime authority' or 'sublime and great power.' This appears to be a unique position.

The institution of the 'Archdeacon of India' was even more unique. His usual title was 'Archdeacon of All India.' He was not only the '*alter ego*' of the bishop but was the national head of the Indian

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 82 f., 151-54.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

16. There is reference in a letter of Patriarch Timothy I (A. D. 780-823) to bishops in India choosing and ordaining their metropolitan. But no clear evidence is available for deciding whether the bishops and the metropolitan were chosen from among Indian Christians. Cf. Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, (Kottayam, 1972), p. 80.

Christian community (*Jatikku Kurthavian* as he was known in Malayalam), 'the prince and the head of the Christians of St. Thomas' as some missionaries have described his position in Kerala.¹⁷

The Church of India as a whole was governed by the metropolitan and archdeacon together with a general assembly (known in Malayalam as *pothuyogam* meaning 'general assembly') consisting of laymen and priests. Each local community had its local assembly (simply '*yogam*') with lay leaders and the local college of clergy as their members and administered the church and directed the local community.

Even in the worship of the community, which, as stated above, in general followed the East-Syrian pattern, seems to have had certain local accommodations. It is possible that rice cakes and palm wine were used in the eucharist.¹⁸ In connection with the sacred rites of baptism, matrimony etc., there were a number of ceremonies which were derived from Indian local social practices common both to Hindus and Christians.¹⁹

All this points to an identity and an autonomous status of the Church of India marked by a theological vision of its own regarding the particular/individual Churches. If this vision is not written down in elaborate theological works, it is clearly reflected in the life and tradition of the Indian Christians prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. When Roberto de Nobili and his collaborators introduced a way of Christian life well adapted to Indian socio-religious sentiments they pointed to the life of the Syrian (St. Thomas) Christians as a model and as justification for their own novel method of evangelization.²⁰

2. The 'Conquista' Theology of Early Missionaries

The earliest missionaries of the Latin West to work in India for any length of time were a few Franciscans and Dominicans like John Monte Corvino, Jordan Catalani de Severac. Their attitude towards Christians belonging to non-Latin Churches and towards non-Christians could not but be the typical medieval, exclusive and negative one. When the Portuguese came to India at the close of the 15th century, this attitude

17. J. Kollaparambil, *ibid.*, A. M. Mundadan, *Traditions*, pp. 123-25.

18. A. M. Mundadan *ibid.*, pp. 165 f.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 174.

20. A. Mookenthottam, *op. cit.*, p. 189, footnote 28.

and the consequent theological vision had not changed. First I will briefly examine their approach to the Indian Christians who followed a Church-life different from that of the Latin West and then analyse their approach to non-Christian religions.

In the West the Eastern Churches were looked upon for a long time as 'heretical' and 'schismatic'. In spite of this, as soon as the Portuguese came into contact with the Christians of India they showed great enthusiasm and willingness to enter into communion with the latter; yet the Portuguese elite, entertained particularly the priests, unhelpful ideas about their form of faith and practices. They considered that the form of Christianity existing in the East including that of the Indian Christians was an imperfect form for, according to them, the Western Latin form was the only perfect form. The relations of the Portuguese with the ancient Christians of India were governed by their ideas of Christian solidarity and also by a feeling of superiority as they regarded their culture and Christianity far superior to those of the Indian Christians. The western form of Christianity, which was the Roman form of Christianity, was for them the perfect one not only in matters of faith and morals but in everything else that distinguished a Christian from a non-Christian. Hence every Christian was expected to accept that form. The surest way to achieve this was to bring the Christians under the Portuguese jurisdiction and the Latin Rite. The Portuguese apparently had no clear idea of Eastern Christianity. The only thing they probably cared to know about Eastern Christianity was the imperfection of that Christianity and they probably attributed this imperfection to its divergence from Roman custom.²¹ This view of a particular/individual Church was quite contrary to the view which the Indian Christians had entertained, as explained earlier.

The Portuguese as a true Iberian of this time, was a typical medieval European and Christian whose faith was strong though sometimes even verging on fanaticism and whose Christianity was a militant kind of Christianity. If this medieval spirit had been modified elsewhere in Europe through the influence of more liberal ideas and especially the Renaissance Movement, the Iberian was practically untouched by any such liberal ideas. On the contrary, his age-long war with the forces of Islam – considered both a religious and a patriotic duty – only increased the fervour of his militant faith. As regards the pagan world, the Portuguese had fully

21. Mundadan, *Traditions*, p. 157.

inherited the gloomy attitude of the Middle Ages towards it: It was a world wholly under the sway of the spirit of darkness and was to be conquered and converted.²²

In India, however, where the Portuguese had to operate in territories under Hindu rulers practical prudence called for the use of moderation. In Goa, which was the only Portuguese territory by conquest, the application of medieval ideas prevailed to some extent. Force was used for conversion indirectly, if not directly. But this means was adopted only after a long time and under pressure from missionaries. Outside Goa the Portuguese showed greater consideration for the religious sentiments of the people, particularly the rulers. There were even instances of the Portuguese adjusting themselves to the local usage. But all this they did not out of any respect for other religions but being motivated by practical diplomacy and to safeguard Portuguese economic interests. Their real theological views on other religions found expression in the many reports and books of the Portuguese, especially of the missionaries.

The conquering conception of the mission of the Church was uppermost in the minds of the Portuguese in general and the missionaries in particular, when they approached the non-Christian religions. They saw the work of the mission and "evangelism in terms of military operations, lines of defence, plans for attack, as if we were waging war against other believers."²³ In many of the missionary reports of the 16th and 17th centuries this attitude is quite evident. The works of Sebastian Gonçalves, Diogo Gonçalves, Paulo da Trindade, Francis de Sousa are good examples. The many letters of St. Francis Xavier and even some of the polemic treatises of Robert de Nobili are no exception to this. Two mission histories are of special relevance here: one written by a Franciscan in the first half of the 17th century, and the other by a Jesuit in the beginning of the 18th century. The titles of these books themselves are highly suggestive of their contents, and the spirit in which they were written. The Franciscan, Paulo da Trindade, described his account of the Franciscan missions in the East under the name, *Conquista Espiritual do Oriente*, "The Spritual Conquest of the East." The Jesuit writer, Francisco de Souza was most probably inspired by Trindade's title (perhaps such an inspiration was not needed, the times could suggest the title) when he called his history of the

22. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

23. Murray Rogers, "Hindu and Christian — A Moment Breaks," *Religion and Society*, 12 (1965), p. 37.

Jesuit missions in the East, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo*, "The East won over to Christ by the Fathers of the Society of Jesus."²⁴ Though the spirit which moved both the chronicles and the mentality manifest in both of them are more or less same, it is the Franciscan who employs the *conquista* vocabulary more frequently and more forcefully.

The scope of Trindade's history is to describe the splendid work carried out by the Franciscan Friars Minor of the Province of St. Thomas in India in the proclamation of the Christian faith and in the conversion of 'infidels' in more than thirty countries, from the Cape of Good Hope to the farthest Islands of Japan.²⁵ The book is dedicated to St. Thomas, the Apostle and patron of India whom the author describes as 'the first captain of the conquest' of the East ("*o primeiro capitão desta conquista*"). The Apostle starting from Socotora moved on as far as China, preaching the Gospel, unfolding the banner of the Cross wherever he went, and working miracles all along. The Gentiles abandoned their false and superstitious practices and adhered to the true law of Christ. The Friars Minor were the first to follow in the footsteps of the Apostle, to India and convert many to the faith. Baptizing many kings, razing many temples of the idols, building many churches, erecting many crosses, and in that way conquering many thousands of souls for God. Trindade prays to glorious Apostle to lead them as the captain and beacon light in this ongoing spiritual conquest.²⁶

The '*conquista*' was in reality a victory, a triumph over idolatry which reigned in the whole of the East in all glory and splendour with magnificent temples and richly endowed shrines. The religious, armed as they were with spiritual weapons and fortified with divine grace, entered the arena and as true soldiers of Christ engaged the idols in a fierce battle, stripped them of their rich vestments, fleeced them of their jewels, razed to the ground many of their rich and beautiful temples, prohibited their feasts, obstructed their ceremonies and rites, banished their priests, depriving them of their revenues, and wresting from their possession thousands of souls. Always holding aloft the standard of the Cross the Franciscans scored many a victory over the idols, the story of which forms the contents of the book.²⁷

24. Paulo da Trindade, O.F.M., *Conquista Espiritual do Oriente*, ed, by Felix Lopes, O.F.M., 3. vols., (Lisbon, 1962-67).

25. See the full title of the book.

26. P. da Trindade, *op. cit.*, p. 3 (dedication of the book).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 82 ff.

This highly rhetorical presentation of the mission work of the Portuguese is not far removed from what actually happened in the Portuguese colonies, especially in Goa. In 1522 a visiting Dominican Bishop, Duarte Nunes, wrote from Goa to the Portuguese king :

Regarding the people of Goa, they have in the island temples decked out with figures of the enemy of the Cross and statues, and they celebrate their feasts every year. These feasts are attended by many Christians, our own people as well as recent native Christians. It is a big mistake to continue to show favour to their idolatry. It would be to the service of God to destroy in this island alone these temples, and to raise in their stead churches with Saints. And let him who wants to live in the island become a Christian, and he shall possess his lands and houses, as he has till now done; if not, let him leave the island.

Bishop Duarte's suggestion did not take effect till 1540; then it was carried out so thoroughly that by 1545 there were no more temples to be seen in the islands. Decrees were published transferring the properties of many temples to Christian institutions; laws enacted by the Church prohibiting the making and retaining of Hindu religious objects, public celebration of Hindu feasts, denying public offices to certain Hindu classes, were carried out by secular authorities. Even banishment of brahmins was effected for the Christian cause. Whatever the motivation behind these moves and the excuses for them, and however well-known were their concern for the poor and humanitarian works of individuals like Miguel Vas and Diego de Borba who were connected with these happenings, such things really happened in Goa. They were done in the name of 'Rigour of Mercy'.²⁸

Trindade claims that in the Eastern Conquest the Franciscans assumed the pride of place over other soldiers of Christ, religious or not. They had come to India as spiritual conquerors and followed in the footsteps of 'captain' St. Thomas 200 years before the Portuguese started on their east-

28. See Antony D'Costa, S.J., *The Christianisation of the Goa Islands, 1510-567*, (Bombay, 1965), pp. 29-35. While documenting the various ways the policy of "Rigour of Mercy" was carried out by the Portuguese authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, the author makes it a point to indicate always the mitigating circumstance as excuses for the actions.

ward march.²⁹ Again it was the Franciscans who accompanied the Portuguese captains in their first fleets and started anew the spiritual conquest, which therefore doubly belonged to them by right of prior possession. Some members of a new religious order (the Society of Jesus) failed not only to recognize this fact, but even dared to cast doubts on the competency of the Franciscan soldiers for waging the war. This was too much for a true soldier of Christ and a champion of the past heroes of the Franciscan missions to bear and so he took up his pen to vindicate the prior rights of his confreres in the spiritual conquest of the East and wrote the *Conquista Espiritual* by the Franciscans in the East.³⁰

Not only are the preaching of the Word of God and the conversion of pagans a conquest for Christ, but the very colonial expansion of a Christian nation like Portugal and all the military operations of the Portuguese in Africa and in the East are conquest for Christ. Every true Christian who fought against the enemies of his motherland, who fought for the aggrandizement of his country's territorial possessions, wealth and prestige was a soldier of Christ. In the same way as the missionaries who worked in the colonies were regarded as rendering a service to God and their sovereign, the Portuguese secular personnel in the colonies promoting national interests were to be reckoned as serving not only the king but also God. The very idea of 'Padroado' signified a mutual inclusiveness of the secular and the sacred. The whole mentality is to be understood against the background of medieval Europe in general, and of Spain and Portugal in particular. The European was quite familiar for the last five or six centuries with the idea of Crusade which was territorial conquest or reconquest as well as a religious undertaking. This task was doubly sacred for an Iberian, Spaniard or Portuguese. Fighting against Islam had been a religious duty and a patriotic necessity for him for more than seven centuries.

Trindade sees in the discovery of India, for which the Portuguese nation was specially chosen by God, the hand of Providence in more senses than one. The discovery brought to Portugal immense profit, for it established naval hegemony over the followers of Mohammed and wrested from their monopoly the east-west trade in spices and other

29. The allusion obviously is to the medieval Franciscan missionaries, John de Monte Corvino and others who worked in India for short periods on their way to or from the Mongol missions in China in the 13th and 14th centuries.

30. P. da Trindade *op. cit.*, Prologue.

oriental commodities. Great as these gains were, there were even greater and more valuable advantages to be gained; it facilitated the preaching of the Gospel by the religious so that the true God came to be acknowledged by the 'barbarous nations' which were till then adoring the devil. There can be no doubt that God in his Providence employed the Portuguese nation to realize such great things and in doing this fulfilled a promise made by God to the king of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques. The arrival of the Portuguese in the East saw also the fulfilment of a prophecy made by St. Thomas the Apostle himself.

Many Portuguese soldiers like Christão da Gama, the illustrious son of the great Vasco da Gama, and many other heroic soldiers who died on the battle field at the hands of their enemies were really soldiers of Christ. By their glorious death not only did they honour their motherland, Portugal, but showed that it was by divine Providence that the Portuguese came to India, because their arrival was blessed and continues to be blessed with so many such sublime fruits, reaped for the glory of God.³¹

3. Roberto de Nobili: A Positive Approach

In all the missionary writings the general outlook was more or less the same as described above, though one may find here and there a few positive notes on certain customs and practices of the Hindus. But these are few and far between. With Roberto de Nobili there was a marked change.³² It is well-known that the Italian Jesuit adopted an Indian *sanyasi* way of life and studied not only Tamil but the sacred language of India, Sanskrit, and mastered the *Vedas* and *Vedanta*. He used Indian philosophy and philosophical language as a vehicle for conveying Christian theological truth. He made an attempt to present Christian theology in a form intelligible to the brahmins of Madurai. In order to win over India to Christianity he thought it quite necessary to raise a generation of Indian clergy, educated as far as possible according to Indian traditions for which he planned a seminary with a five-year course in Christian philosophy.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 29 ff.

32. Before de Nobili the English Jesuit, Thomas Stephens, realized the hold that the popular vernacular *Puranas* had on the minds of the people and composed a Christian *Purana* in colloquial Marathi with an admixture of Konkani, cf. R.H.S. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

He wanted his future priests to present Christianity to the Indian people in their own language, not in a jargon in which all religious terms were Portuguese; to be well-trained in Christian theology but also experts in the religion of the Hindus around him; to depend for support and protection on their own countrymen, not on foreigners.³³

It is agreed by almost all writers concerned that de Nobili's methods of work were indigenous and highly original and commendable. Opinions differ on the question, whether all this constitutes an experiment in theologizing in the Indian context. Boyd remarks:

We should not imagine, however, that his writings really represent an experiment in 'indigenous theology,' using Hindu terminology for the exposition of Christian doctrine, for indeed his attitude to religious Hinduism is entirely negative, and he writes to refute.

The author goes on to illustrate his point and concludes:

His achievement – and it was a great achievement – is to be seen in his understanding and adaptation of Hindu customs and ceremonies, in his pioneering study of Sanskrit and Tamil and in his initiation of the essential task of evolving a Christian theological vocabulary for Indian languages. For this contribution Indian Christian theology will always be indebted to him.³⁴

Others have evaluated de Nobili's theological contribution a little differently. Mookenthottam says:

He was first and foremost a missionary. His principal aim was not to write a theology but to find ways and means to announce the Gospel in a manner intelligible and appealing to Indians and to instruct his converts. He wrote partly to defend his method of evangelization against some of his own confreres and some ecclesiastical authorities who were more intolerant and hostile than the Hindus among whom he worked. In spite of such adverse circumstances, de Nobili did contribute to the cause of an Indian theology.³⁵

33. Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The Life of Roberto de Nobili*, (New York, 1959). p. 168.

34. R.H.S. Boyd, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 14.

35. A. Mookenthottam, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

De Nobili's able defence of his method earned for him the approval not only of his superiors but of Pope Gregory himself for the Indian religious practices he borrowed from the Hindus. The bull of the Pope *Romanae Sedis Antistes* accepts in principle de Nobili's indigenous method of evangelization.

De Nobili, of course, as a missionary followed an apologetic method. But his apology was not merely negative. He wrote to refute, but at the same time he never rejected what he thought was valuable in Hinduism.

He uses Hindu scriptures to prove his points; He argues against the outright condemnation of the sciences of the Brahmins as superstitious; he contends that what is also compatible with true religion is found in the *Vedas*. Hence his approach to religious Hinduism does not seem to be entirely negative.

His concept of Christ as *Guru* might be considered as a special contribution to an Indian theology.³⁶ He showed the way towards the development of an Indian theology. Only two or three centuries later some sensitive spirits like Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya would be inspired to follow the path let open by de Nobili and advance it further.

4. Conclusion

The ancient Christians of India, the St. Thomas Christians, had not perhaps, developed an elaborate theology of their own. But a theological vision of their church in India was implicit in their life and tradition; the autonomy and identity of an individual/particular church, the relationship of the Christian faith with culture and other faiths and religions were some marked aspects of that vision. This rather liberal and broad vision came into conflict with the more narrow, rigid and aggressive-polemic ecclesiology of the Western Christians. It caused many stresses and strains in the community which eventually led to division.

The de Nobili experiment and the Brahmabandhab story are for me typical symbols of the Indian church, of its situation in the past as well as in the present. On the one hand some daring individuals who see far into the future take bold steps to make the church of India an Indian Church of the Indian people, a church rooted in Christ and rooted

36. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

in the rich culture of the country. On the other hand the majority of Christians who do not grasp the real significance of the daring attempts remain indifferent, if not hostile; the church authorities often, in the name of orthodox doctrine and orthodox praxis, stifle the attempts. Both the movements, of Brahmabandhab and of de Nobili, ended tragically. That of former was simply nipped in the bud at the intervention of the Papal delegate in India. De Nobili's movement survived for some time, because the powerful Society of Jesus backed it. But finally it also met with a tragic end; the highest ecclesiastical authority formally suppressed it.

If we glance at the happenings in the Indian church in our own days, it would appear that the story is being repeated in one way or another. Vatican II adopted very dynamic principles and created an atmosphere conducive to creative thinking and creative action in each cultural context. The pronouncement of the Popes gave further encouragement. The Indian Church showed eagerness to snatch the opportunity to give shape to a real Indian Church.

Everything changed soon. Fear and anxiety began to be expressed in the highest circles of the church; perhaps the Vatican spirit has gone too far; some restraint is quite necessary. At this critical juncture the more conservative elements in the church which had been lying low after the Council began to raise their head. There are symptoms everywhere to proclaim that the church today is led by a conservative group which is determined to wipe out whatever has been undertaken so far.

This may be a passing phase. The quest for an Indian church, which so many great souls have been looking forward to and for which so many have worked hard, may soon regain its vigour and momentum. Indian Christian thinkers continue their efforts with a sense of urgency; various avenues are being explored to develop a Christian way of life in general, and a form of worship in particular, which are relevant to today's India.

The tension within the community, also needs a brief explanation. The church of the Catholic St. Thomas Christians enjoys a measure of autonomy within the Roman Communion. This means the Church is independent not only of any intermediary Latin jurisdiction (Padroado/ Propaganda) but also of any intermediary Oriental jurisdiction. Now

arises the question; how far is the Indian church bound to retain or restore the East-Syrian character? In the wake of the recent Indianization movement this question became all the more acute.

Two strong views began crystallizing within the community and tended to create a tension: 1) Only the Latin elements are foreign and as such they alone need be eliminated and after the process of de-latinization is complete, the question of adaptation or Indianization may be taken up; 2) Both the Latin and the Chaldean elements are foreign and both must be eliminated or retained as far as it is necessary for the emergence of a truly Indian church. At present the first group appears to be impeding the growth of an Indian Church of the Indian people, with an Indian theology, an Indian Christian form of worship and an Indian Christian way of life. It is a well-known fact that in the past too much dependence on the East-Syrian Church was detrimental to the development of the Indian Church.

Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Kerala in February 1986, clearly saw and testified the great challenges this dynamic church is called upon to face. While India's highly developed cultures posed the supreme challenge of inculturation, the deep spiritual tradition of her religious presented the challenge of dialogue. The Church of St. Thomas Christians, though ancient, is fully alive, and dynamic enough to meet these challenges and adapt itself to the ethos and needs of the present.