

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

A Christian Humanist in Dialogue with Society

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Abstract: The concepts of humanism, secular and particularly Christian humanism, were very active in the debates of academic circles and related areas for a long time. The application and understanding of Christian humanism in Indian context was felt necessary in the context of the life and contributions of many Christian humanists. St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a socio-religious reformer of nineteenth century Kerala. His life and that of others were made closer to God and it resulted in getting more meaningful life patterns in the society. His efforts at providing a platform for God experience, education for all, women empowerment, uplift of dalits and the poor and extending concern for the sick and the dying were the fruits of his dialogue with the society. It has got rare parallels in the history of nineteenth century Kerala.

Keywords: Christian Humanism, Education, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Literature and Humanism, Printing, Social Uplift, and Women Empowerment.

1. Introduction

The concept of Teilhard de Chardin about the evolution of humankind from a material being to social and spiritual being in terms of culture, society, mind, religion, spirituality and God by means of energy of love is interesting to note. This idea has its different levels of meaning to understand the lives of many of the religious reformers and their approaches in their experience of

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God and making avenues to extend that experience to other human beings. The energy of love got manifested in different settings and in different apostolates. The life and contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the story of a journey to an authentic social and spiritual being. He was basically a Christian humanist who practiced his religion for the welfare of his society. The humanism, which was inherent in him, made him to come out of the solitude and isolated life inside the monastic walls and got immersed in the uplifting of the common people and the downtrodden. The Mannanam¹ hill, where he lived in his monastery, was a comfortable zone for him as far as his solitary life was concerned. It would have been definitely catered to his spiritual hunger. But his spirituality of humanism urged him to come down from the hill and to live among the daily struggles of the people. For him his neighbours were God's children, his God experience compelled him to serve community, especially the poor and the needy.

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was understood as a social reformer and a social activist from a secular point of view. On the other hand from the point of view of Church he was a spiritual leader who worked for the renewal of liturgy and the life of the Church. In this paper an attempt is made to comprehend him from the point of view of a Christian humanist who made a blend of social commitments on the basis of his spirituality, a Christian humanist who practiced his religion for the welfare of his society. Here it is very significant that through his critical view of the then existing society, transformative leadership, concept of practical religion, empowering women and dissemination of knowledge to all irrespective caste and creed, he vividly expanded the vision of a Christian humanist. In fact his involvement and dialogue with the society as a humanist is very relevant from the context of nineteenth century.

¹*Mannanam*, in the district of Kottayam in the state of Kerala, India, is where the first monastery of the CMI congregation was founded in 1831 and the mortal remains of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is kept.

2. Secular Humanism

According to Corliss Lamont, humanism is “a philosophy of which man is the centre and sanction.”² Since sixteenth century, humanism had its greatest significance in this sense.³ In general secular humanism works in opposition to all the theories of universal determinism and fatalism. Human beings possess genuine freedom of creative choice and action, and they are the masters of their own destiny. They believe in an ethics or morality that grounds all human values in the earthly experiences and relationship alone. The worldly happiness and freedom are its highest goal irrespective of nation, race or religion.⁴

However these humanists in general have the view that human beings have lost their powers due to unnecessary transcendence in the field of religion bringing about alienation. Hence the destiny of humanity or everything that is related to the so called kingdom of God by believers should be confined to this world alone. Earthly well being of human being is the prime concern. Human anxieties, compulsion and repression are basic tragedies in human being. But one may observe that their perception of the reality would add oil to the fire when challenges are beyond human capacity and consequence would be utter desperation. Moreover, secular humanists do not give answer for human greed, selfishness and injustice which are the root causes of human misery in the world. Therefore we may observe that what secular humanists propose is that of symptoms of real humanity rather than reality itself.

3. Christian Humanism as Dialogue with Society

The basis of the arguments for Christian humanism needs to be taken up with the perspectives and understanding of the Christian principles and its meaning in today’s world. Modern Christian humanism tries to understand a human centred philosophy of ethics and social action within the framework of

²Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972, 11.

³Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 11.

⁴Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 13.

Christian principles. Human beings express their individuality in different contexts and most importantly as a being in a community or a group of individuals. Relatedness is the basic affirmation of human existence and humanity is originally and essentially co-humanity.⁵ It goes without saying that the meaning of one's existence and its relevance is in relation to one's connectivity to the other or one's responsibility of co-human existence. Some of the characteristics of Christian humanism are the question of love, communitarian aspect of relationship of God and human, role of Christian in building up a society, common fatherhood and brotherhood, triple relationship to God, human and nature. In nutshell Christian humanism emerged out of and nurtured by the dialogue with society.

The landmark shift as expressed in Second Vatican Council from individuality to community reflects this great emphasis.⁶ So human dignity is nurtured and raised by dealings with others, through reciprocal duties and through fraternal dialogue. There is always a constant mutual interaction between society and individual. It is in society that human beings act in the service of fellow beings in order to become truly human.⁷ The image of God within the individual directs the individuals towards other fellow beings, which refers to the communitarian aspect of the relationship between God and the human.⁸ This dialogical nature of the Church is very well reflected in *Gaudium et Spes*.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they

⁵R. S. Anderson, *On Being Human, Essays on Theological Anthropology*, Grant Rapids: Word Publishing, 1982, 168.

⁶A. Flannery, ed., "*Gaudium et Spes*," in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Bombay: St. Paul's Publication, 1992, 12, 24.

⁷Flannery, *Gaudium et Spes*, 25.

⁸Anderson, *On Being Human*, 168.

have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.⁹

It stems from the idea that all human beings are created in the image of God and as such all human beings find their common ground in God.¹⁰ The same idea is being expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “the first man was not only created by God but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ.”¹¹ The communitarian aspect of the relation between God and human beings calls for the role of a Christian in building up a society, and points to the responsibility of a human being to act on God’s behalf in relation to another and to the rest of the world.

According to Teilhard de Chardin co-existence is the pre-condition for the possibility of love.¹² Love is given the most prominent position of the faculty or the energy of a being for its evolution leading to God, the Omega point.¹³ Humanism gives the clarion call for this practical side of the religious belief and existence. The nature of Christian religion itself is a proclamation of this aspect. The teaching of Christ points to the love of the neighbour, a symbolic and most meaningful aspect of reaching to the other. The essential unity of the love of God and love of

⁹Flannery, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1

¹⁰Baby Rajesh Kavalackal, *Hominisation and the Kingdom of God: A Study on the Transformational Perspective of Edward Schillebeeckx, Together with the Reflections of Indian Social Theologian Madathilparampil M. Thomas on the Destiny of Man, and Their Relevance for Theological Anthropology*, Roma: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2015 (unpublished doctoral thesis), 54.

¹¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No 374 <<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=1843>> (9 March 2017).

¹²T. D. Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, New York: Harper and Row, 1937, 267.

¹³Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 265.

neighbour needs to be expressed by the Church through loving service and action for the needs of the human beings.¹⁴

In the Christian religion, according to Chardin, “a zone of thought has appeared and grown in which a genuine universal love has not only been conceived and preached but has also been shown to be psychologically possible and operative in practice.”¹⁵ The pages of history point to this aspect of Christianity wherein it was proved beyond doubt that it was a genuine symbol of universal love wherever it existed and grown. According to Karl Rahner, Church is a fundamental sign of the fact that God loves the world. Church remained as a symbol of God’s love expressed in this world through her being as a sacrament of salvation for the world. The Church presented and functioned itself over the continents as an institution that necessarily encountered social realities.¹⁶ Taking care of the welfare of human beings has a central place of concern for the Church.

4. St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: an Epitome of *Humanum*¹⁷

The life and contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a testimony of a person who found joy and satisfaction in contributing to human welfare and fulfilment. This Christian humanist was born in the state of Kerala, India on 10 February 1805 and died on 3 January 1871. He was canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church on 23 November 2014. His active ministry from 1831 to 1871 can be considered as the best example of the life time of a Christian humanist in Kerala. In the words of Paul Zacharia, “St Kuriakose Elias Chavara belonged to that category of saints who are, so to say, restlessly involved with people and causes with improving the lot of the deprived and making bold moves in their own way to create a Kingdom of God in the

¹⁴Sebastian Athappilly, “Church and Social Welfare according to Karl Rahner,” *Jeevadhara*, 107 (Sept. 1988): 373-381.

¹⁵Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 296.

¹⁶Athappilly, “Church and Social Welfare,” 373-381.

¹⁷The Latin *humanum* refers to humanisation or become fully human.

immediate world around him.”¹⁸ His life and contributions bear witness to this great reality of life dedicated to the uplift of people both in the temporal and spiritual realm.

St Chavara’s practice of his virtuous life and the development of the humanism in him were expressed in his engagement with society in all its complexities. He had regular conversation of the realities of that era of Kerala society. His dialogue with society compelled him to initiate certain new pathways to lead the society into a promising future. In the succeeding points like dissemination of knowledge, extending hands to empower the women of Kerala, being the instrument to feed the poor and assist the elderly are the best examples of his engagement with society.

At this juncture I would like to bring home yet another aspect of his dialogue with other religions in the society. He gave prime importance to peaceful life in the society by respecting other religions. During his attempt to find a land to establish the first monastery at *Pullarikunnu* (near Mannanam), there was objection from Hindu believers about selecting the particular place. Understanding their sentiments he did not want to establish the first monastery as it would hurt the faith of Hindu believers.

5. Practical Religion of St Chavara

Chavara’s style was that of actualization of Gospel in concrete situations. The Gospels’ being the sum total of the life and teachings of Jesus, he was translating the same through the different expressions of his life. His strength was the knowledge of the scriptures and personal possession of the Word of God by contemplation.¹⁹ It is this strength which got reflected through all his activities. In other words, the religion which was part and parcel of his life got reflected in all what he did and what he spoke. Christian principles and values were emanating and

¹⁸Paul Zacharia, “A Different Saint,” in *Light on the Burnt Horizon: Chavara, The Reformer Saint*, ed., John Mannarathara, New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2017, 68.

¹⁹Kuriakose Eliah Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation in the Light of the Spirit of St Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 114.

spreading like a fragrance throughout his life. His life of prayer with all its intensity was the real expression of his faith in God.²⁰ Whatever the future generation received from St Chavara was based on his ardent love for God founded in his ascetical life.²¹ His asceticism did not limit him to remain only with prayer inside the Church or his room. Instead it gave him more and more strength to reach to the fellow human beings by extending charity and at the same time working for his own salvation. St Chavara's life expressed the spirit of poverty, which made him to depend on God's power and to commit totally to God as the outward expression of his baptismal commitment.²² His own words in *Atmanuthapam*, "How wonderful oh God, oh Lord, (am gratified) that Thou gavest me such eyes as to see all these in their proper perspective and then know, love and serve Thee only."²³

His interest to experience the presence of the Lord made him to think about going for contemplative life inspired by his gurus Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukara. The guidance of the Bishop made them to realize that their experience of God should not be limited only to themselves but they need to be the instruments in extending such experiences to others. We find the great efforts of St Chavara in establishing the religious congregations of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in 1831²⁴ and Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) in 1866²⁵ for many men and women to experience God and serve people.

Paul H. Beattie, one-time president of the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, refers to the strength and power of a community in their efforts, "There is no better way to spread a set of ideas about how best to live, or to intensify commitment to

²⁰Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation*, 117.

²¹Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation*, 119.

²²Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation*, 122.

²³Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Athmanuthapam, Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol. II, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1986, 14.

²⁴Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Chronicles, Complete Works of Bl.Chavara Vol. I, The Chronicles*, Mannanam: Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, 2-21.

²⁵Chavara, *The Chronicles*, 105-106.

such ideas, than by means of religious community.”²⁶ The CMI and CMC religious communities were driven by passion, charisma and commitment through the exemplary life of St Chavara. It was at the invitation of the faithful that he started many of the monasteries in other places. Taking the vision of social and spiritual uplift with the co-operation of the people and the fellow religious to new pioneering efforts was in fact the style of functioning of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara. In fact he visualised the development of a society resulting from the empowerment of each individual member of the society. That was precisely the reason to start religious congregations for men and women.

The practical religion of St Chavara looked at opportunities to be extended for men and women to be zealous before the Lord so as to spread the Kingdom of God. The religious congregations which he established were the epitome of sanctity and love. He created these centres for solitude and contemplation, which came out of his ardent love for God and people.²⁷ They worked as a larger force of hundreds of men and women involved in the uplift of the common people. Their spiritual leadership and service in the fields of healthcare, education, care of the poor and the downtrodden, organizing training centres for priests and laity, spreading of worthy messages through literature, reunion of separated people from the Catholic fold, starting of special schools, orphanages, centres for the handicapped, old age homes and hospitals were truly humanistic in nature. The men religious in the CMI Congregation became authentic preachers of the Word of God as they contemplated the Word of God and enriched the lives of many Christian and non-Christian people.²⁸

St Chavara took special efforts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to improve the spiritual growth of the priests and laity. He introduced improvements and reform in the Syro-Malabar Liturgy. The exposure to Latin liturgical practices had distorted

²⁶Thoughtco., "What is Religious Humanism?" *Philosophic Humanism; Modern Humanist Philosophy and Religion*, <<https://www.thoughtco.com/philosophic-humanism-248113>>, (8 March, 2017).

²⁷Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation*, 108.

²⁸Vadaketh, *Aggiornamento of the CMI Congregation*, 109.

the spiritual practices of the faithful.²⁹ So he published a book of rituals for the celebration of liturgy named *Thukasa* and liturgical calendar in 1865, and introduced and popularized devotions like rosary, way of the cross, retreats, novenas to Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph, Sunday sermons and Eucharistic adoration. His energy and enthusiasm continued to guide and contribute in this field by publishing divine office for the dead, office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, prayers for different blessings, prayers for the Holy Week and liturgy for Holy Saturday. He also tried to ensure the spiritual enrichment of the laity by strengthening the spirituality of the priests by introducing for them annual retreats and divine office for priests.

The spiritual element of the religion has a significant role to play in the society. According to APJ Abdul Kalam, "...the spiritual component of religion spreads the value to be inculcated by human beings for promoting a good human life and welfare of the society, while pursuing a material life."³⁰ The areas of service taken up under the leadership of St Chavara speaks about this aspect of furtherance of human lives. His intention was sanctification of the self and that of others. The Spirituality for him was not a matter of saving the soul alone. It comprised of the temporal wellbeing of the fellow beings as well.

6. Leadership in Society through Women Empowerment

The society of Kerala was in a status of static position due to the rigid and non-progressive nature of the caste system in the nineteenth century.³¹ Each of the groups in the society were following their own occupation, dress and customs and as such it remained highly discriminative for the lower strata of people. It was not possible for them to come out of the social status given by

²⁹Lucas Vithuvattical, "Efforts of Chavara to Conserve the Identity of the Syro-Malabar Church," in *Herald of the East*, Vol. 2, Issue-2, (December 2007): 51-65.

³⁰APJ Abdul Kalam, "Selfless Service Leads to a Great Nation," in *Light on the Burnt Horizon*, 419.

³¹Samuel Nellimukal, *Keralathile Samuhyaparivarthanam* (Transformation of Kerala Society), Kottayam: KS Books, 2003, 156.

the direct and indirect control of the society. The position of women were not different. In the patriarchal society of nineteenth century Kerala, women were denied freedom in the society, home and even in the Church.³² The effect of the same was felt in the society in general in the form of general backwardness, lack of education, poverty, and marginalization of women.³³

It is in this regard we need to evaluate and understand the efforts of St Chavara to nurture the position of women by giving them leadership in the society with the establishment of Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) in 1866. According to Fr Leopold Beccaro, “it was his (St Chavara) great desire to start a religious house for women with the main intention of making it a safe place for girls in Malabar to live their religion as good Christians and to learn spiritual things.”³⁴ Thus providing a platform for those who want to live a life of celibacy and prayer, with the first four members the Congregation named as Third order of Discalced Carmelites got started in a house made of coconut timber and thatched coconut leaves (*panambu madam*) at Koonammavu. The early activities of the religious sisters of the first indigenous congregation for women in Kerala included rendering of education and social service to the women of the locality, teaching of handicrafts like embroidery, rosary making and *edukkantat*.³⁵ Boarding for girls became one of the first attempts in Kerala in the organised skill training for women in 1868. The members of the congregation were given training in tailoring, embroidery, flower and rosary making. This is to be considered as the beginning of a great movement towards raising the dignity of

³²Cleopatra, “Blessed Chavara and the Uplift of Women, *Journal of St Thomas Christians*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (Jan-March 2005), 127.

³³Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Socio-Pastoral Vision for Women and the Legacy of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 98.

³⁴Leopold Mariya Beccaro, “Life of a Blessed Soul,” in *Lead Kindly Light: A Voyage into the Saintly Life and Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, K. C. Chacko, Cochin: Beth Rauma, 2014, 153.

³⁵Chavara, *Chronicles of Koonammvu Convent*, 79.

women and attempt at making them self-reliant.³⁶ The members of the CMC congregation were empowered for social action and transformation of society by making a new trend solving the problems of society by the women for women. Numbering around 6000 today they are involved in various ministries for the integral development of the women in the family and society.³⁷ If the role of women is degraded, the society would perish or suffer. He visualised the development of society on the foundation of the basic unit in the family.

7. Printing, Literature and Humanism

In 1846, the first Syro-Malabar Catholic press and the third press of Kerala was started by St Kuriakose Elias Chavara at Mannanam.³⁸ The efforts to establish a press for him was pivotal for the spiritual and intellectual progress and the development of the clergy and laity.³⁹ Strenuous efforts were made to establish a press in order to bring literacy and contribute to the development of Malayalam language. Named in Malayalam language as *vazhathada viplavam* (revolution in the pith of banana plant) led to the producing of multiple copies and circulating them to a wider circle of readers. Starting with the first book *Jnana Piyusham* (Spiritual Ambrosia), the press under the leadership of St Chavara commenced the publication of a series of spiritually oriented books. This brought to the public spiritual and secular literature and tried to take away several misconceptions in the society and increase accessibility to education.⁴⁰ It was his strong belief that

³⁶Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 145.

³⁷Joseph Varghese Kureethara, "Education as a Mission that is Inclusive", *Educa, International Catholic Journal of Education*, 2, 2016, <<http://educa.fmleao.pt/no2-2016/education-as-a-mission-that-is-inclusive-2/>> (3 April 2017), 183.

³⁸Chavara, *The Chronicles*, 47.

³⁹Thomas Mampra, "Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Saint of Our Times," *Herald of the East*, 10, 1 (January-June 2014), 17-43.

⁴⁰M. Gopinath, "The Sainly Entrepreneur" in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara, New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2015, 198-208.

light of knowledge will illumine their hearts and through self-confidence they will reach greater levels of growth in personhood. From the same press came the oldest daily newspaper of Malayalam language, *Nazranideepika*, which later came to be known as *Deepika*. The advantages received by the community through the printing of books and Newspaper *Nazrani Deepika* and Magazine *Karmela Kusumam* cannot be underestimated.⁴¹

Varieties of writings were produced from the pen of St Chavara, which were reflections of a personality with deep insights, broad vision and an indomitable spiritual quest.⁴² The main categories of writings were Chronicles, Literary works, Spiritual Writings and Letters. The *Nalagamangal* (Chronicles) with two volumes covers the events from 1829 to 1855 and 1855 to 1870 depicting the history of the foundation of CMI and CMC congregations, history of the Church in Kerala in nineteenth century with the major struggles of the Church. Among the Literary works, *Atmanuthapam* (Compunction of Soul), *Maranaveettil Paduvanulla Pana* (Dirge to Sing in the Bereaved Home) *Anasthasiyude Rakthasakshyam* (Martyrdom of Anasthasia) are significant contributions.

Anasthasiyude Rakthasakshyam is considered to be the first narrative poem in the Malayalam Literature and presents the courage and faith of Anasthasia in the wake of enemy attack. *Dhyana Sallapangal* and *Collection of Prayers* were useful to strengthen the faith of the clergy and the laity with aspects of God's merciful love, sentiments of repentance and the virtue of humility.⁴³

⁴¹Valerian, *Malakara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veerasanthanam or Divyasree Chavara Kuriakose Eliasacha (A Great Son of Malankara Church or Chavara Kuriakose Eliasachan)*, Mannanam: St Joseph's Printing Press, 1939, 97.

⁴²Mellanie Marquez Shibu and Maleeha Raghaviah, "A Sign from Above, Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara," in *Light on the Burnt Horizon*, 17-45.

⁴³Sebastian Kalappura, "Spiritual Composition of Chavara: Poetry Powered with Hope," *Herald of the East*, 12, 1 (January-June 2016), 45-63.

Grouped into three, his letters are mirrors of the then society. In the most popular letter known as *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Testament of a Loving Father) addressed to his parishners in Kainakary), he was trying to guide the families as to the significance of following certain basic principles to make the life more meaningful and giving strength to the bond in the family. Known popularly as *Chavarul* they were guidelines for building up deep family bonds for all generations.⁴⁴

His regular dialogue with the society was through the medium of letters to enlighten them and lift them up in the mainstream of society.

8. Education for Constructive and Critical Thinking in Society

In 1846, along with the establishment of printing press St Chavara took another revolutionary step of starting a Sanskrit school which admitted students of all castes and creed. The language of the elite, Sanskrit, was offered to all the aspiring students which commenced the march for an ideal pluralistic community.⁴⁵ His efforts were at transforming churches as repositories of knowledge and a transactional platform for inclusive literacy.⁴⁶ In order to bring the advantages of education for many, as Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Catholics, St Chavara had issued a decree that all the Churches should start a school or else Churches will be closed.⁴⁷ The call for 'a school for every church' had far reaching effects whereby in the coming years and decades many Churches started educational institutions and due to the proximity to the schools, more and more families began to send their children to schools. This was a slow revolution that brought Kerala to the level of reaching the best literacy rate among all the states in India. Sending children, irrespective of the caste and

⁴⁴John Paul, "The Testament of a Loyal Servant," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 132-133.

⁴⁵Shibu and Raghaviah, "A Sign from Above," 17-45.

⁴⁶Ommen Chandy, "Chavara: A Golden Feather in India's Cap," in *Light on the Burnt Horizon*, 62-65.

⁴⁷Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal (Chavara Letters)*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2011, 197-198.

creed, to schools became a part of the culture of Kerala and thus education brought uplift of the society and growth in the economy. It had many repercussions in the equations in the society, like the uplift of all sections of the society, including the dalits and people from the lower castes, recognition in the society and changing of space for the women. As education brought prosperity in the family, their position also experienced social mobility.

The effort at Mannanam was followed by starting another school nearby at Arpookara in 1868. There was a unique approach to the running of the school. He inspired the dalits to send their children to schools, and the students were offered free noon meal and paddy fields, with the co-operation of people, were bought for the same purpose. His efforts were at liberating the individual from lack of opportunities and to the development of the human person. In short he made training as a tool for developing the individual for personal fulfilment and the uplift of the society. Chavara is credited with using education as a tool for social inclusion.⁴⁸

It was his strong belief that good training centres for priests are needed as only erudite, scholarly and well informed priests can lead the community.⁴⁹ So the first seminary for the Syrian Christians was started in Mannanam in 1833 followed by others in Vazhakulam in 1866 and Elthuruth in 1868. Location of the seminaries also became centres of education in Kerala,⁵⁰ which has got a parallel in the history of Buddhist *viharas*, which were also centres of education. The seminaries which he started trained priests who in turn became the leaders of the society.

⁴⁸Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Letters, Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol. IV* 96; Valerian, *Malakara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veerasanthanam or Divyasree Chavara Kuriakose Eliasacha (A Great Son of Malankara Church or Chavara Kuriakose Eliasachan)*, Mannanam: St Joseph's Printing Press, 1939; 79-85; Kureethara, "Education as a Mission that is Inclusive," 184.

⁴⁹Kureethara, "Education as a Mission that is Inclusive," 179.

⁵⁰Kureethara, "Education as a Mission that is Inclusive", 179.

The merit of a society remains in the intellectual richness. St Chavara grasped this truth and tried to disseminate wisdom as much as possible. He was able to take up dialogue with the society as he was a true seeker of knowledge. That prompted him to attract the intellectual mind of that century.

9. Liberating the Human through Social Uplift

The depiction of Christians as the “people of God on the march” is about their contribution of giving an eternal value by their lives and by apostolic sharing to the society.⁵¹ The need of playing a prophetic role in the world in the context of rampant injustice,⁵² inequality and unjust social structures were strong in the mind of St Chavara. The efforts taken by him to root out these emanated from his faith in God who is love and it is expressed in mercy and charity and he tried to convey that merciful face of God to the fellow human beings.⁵³ Believing and belonging were the two sides of the coin of his life. His strong belief in God made him belonging to God and transformed him to be a compassionate human being.⁵⁴ He started an *upavisala* (home for the destitute), in 1869 at Kainakaray to take care of the sick and the destitute.⁵⁵ It was also in his initiative that in the same year a ‘Confraternity of St Joseph for a Happy Death’ was started to prepare the dying for a happy death.⁵⁶ His attitude of pro-existence is reflected once in Koonammavu in his way of reaching out to a patient with small pox even though people objected him from doing so.⁵⁷ The mid-day meal programme was organized by the *pidiyari* system.⁵⁸ This

⁵¹Kavalackal, *Hominisation and the Kingdom of God*, 55.

⁵²Athappilly, “Church and Social Welfare,” 375.

⁵³Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice: Theological Reflections on the Life of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 67.

⁵⁴Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 67.

⁵⁵Chavara, *The Letters*, 126.

⁵⁶Chavara, *The Letters*, 93-94.

⁵⁷Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 68.

⁵⁸Chavara, *The Chronicles*, 108-109. The people were asked to keep a handful of rice before it is taken for cooking at home, to be donated for the Mid-day meal programme.

is considered to be a great and revolutionary step in solving the problem of poverty among the poor and the dalits of Kerala. It is to be noted that the state of Travancore tried to implement the *pidiyari* system during the rule of C. Keshavan in 1951 and Pattam Thanupillai in 1961.⁵⁹ His call for the just wages and timely distribution of wages to the dalits and daily workers had its great effect on the society which understood its responsibility to give justice to all sections of the society. In this regard he can be called as the first liberator of the dalits in Kerala.⁶⁰

It is considered that the day when St Chavara gave admission in the new school in 1846 to the dalits and the lower sections of the society he also commenced the civil society in Kerala.⁶¹ His efforts of this nature was almost 50 years prior to Mahatma Gandhi's public co-operation movement. Chavara's efforts at considering the dalits and the poor for their social mobility was years ahead of other reformers like Ayyankali and Sri Narayanaguru.⁶²

His works for the betterment of the poor and the depressed and welfare of the lower classes are meaningful even in this modern world. The pioneering steps he took and implemented to raise the living standards of women, the dalits, and the downtrodden by educating them and the attempt to eradicate caste system is unparalleled in the history of Kerala. His Christian life order in the form of Testament of a Loving Father had universal appeal and it served as a guide to many of the families and individuals.

A true socialism calls for a recognition of dignity of all members in the society. Since he was a true social reformer and since he was dialoguing with society, he tried to enliven that dignity by means establishing *upavisala* and by his option for the poor and the marginalised.

⁵⁹Thomas Jacob, “*Charitram Kudichu Maranna Uchakanji*” (The Mid-day Meal Forgotten by History), in *Malayala Manoram Azhchapathippu* (Weekly), (22 March 2014), 11.

⁶⁰Jacob, “*Charitram Kudichu Maranna Uchakanji*,” 11.

⁶¹Jacob, “*Charitram Kudichu Maranna Uchakanji*,” 11.

⁶²Jacob, “*Charitram Kudichu Maranna Uchakanji*,” 11.

10. Conclusion

The saying of St Ireneus, "Glory of God is human fully alive and life of man is the vision of God" is very meaningful to understand the total transformative effect of the life and contributions of St Chavara. He had a realization that life in man is the glory of God and it needs to be fully alive.

The above arguments refer to his attempts as a transformative leader developing leadership in religion towards leadership in society, women empowerment, extending wisdom to the masses and uplift of the dalits and the poor. These were the road maps to his extended humanism. His humanism is basically dialogical in nature. He was not a secluded humanist but instead he was dialoguing with the society on a regular basis. That is well expressed in his pioneering efforts in the field of social reforms.

In the secular world of today the question is what is the very meaning of human life? Individualisation with a view of the other as a stranger, the self-righteousness tendencies, counting the value of the neighbour on the basis of the returns are some of the characteristics of this age. The very core and authenticity of human life is at stake in the contemporary world. The life of a Christian humanist in the person of St Chavara was the answer to these questions. His life and humanistic approaches are still relevant and valid in today's age.

For the future generations, his vision about the integral development of human beings, temporal as well as spiritual are to be promoted from school days onwards. Understanding the transformative leadership of St Chavara, the youth of today should be facilitated to acquire the qualities of an inspiring leadership. From the family itself the role of women should be ascertained and respected which will be felt in the society as a whole. The literacy and reading revolution at any cost should be given importance. There is the urgent need of instilling ethical practices in media world. Let us understand this herald of the East, a true Christian humanist who was in constant and constructive dialogue with the society in its genuine historical reality.