

A CHRISTIAN PORTRAIT OF A BHAKTA YŌGI: BLESSED CHAVARA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The title reflects the Indian *yōga* tradition, which consists of *bhakti*, *jñāna* and *karma* trends. The term *yōgi* derives from the root *yuj*, 'yoking' (to another). It refers to yoking mind and body to achieve perfect unity, which functions on the profoundest levels of the unconscious, and flows freely in the currents of the energy that pervades space and time.¹ *Bhakti yōga* denotes reintegration the scattered life through love and unswerving devotion. *Jñāna yōga* implies reintegration through knowledge. *Karma yōga* indicates reintegration through action.

In this essay the term *Bhakta yōgi* is used in the following sense. First of all, the Indian Christian *Ṛṣi* (visionary) Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1905-1971) of Kerala was a *yōgi*, who had yoked his mind and body in order to achieve union with God and the world. He excelled himself in *bhakti*, *jñāna* and *karma yōgas*. The contemporaries attest to his love and unswerving devotion (*bhakti*) towards God and the entire creation. He was one of the most learned men of his time (*jñāni*). Simultaneously he was a man of action. This *karma* is the result of his life of *bhakti* and *jñāna*. He wanted to bestow the divine knowledge and sublime devotion to his fellow human beings. Because of ignorance and lack of proper devotion, the people of his time were leading a miserable life. At this time there did not

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¹*Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism* (London: Harper & Row Publishers), s.v. "Yoga," by Marjrete and James Stutley.

exist sufficient learned persons in Kerala who could instruct the people and guide them to the heights of divine union. Being aggrieved at this situation, Chavara, the holy *R̥ṣi* immersed himself in action. Since *bhakti*, *jñāna* and *karma* were happily blended in his person, he could achieve the desired results. In fact, for him these three trends form a single reality; one necessarily leads to another. A true *jñāna yōgi* has to be a *Bhakta* as well as a *karmanny* (one who is expert in action). The same way, a Christian *Bhakta yōgi* will never be satisfied with spending his whole time in mere practice of *bhakti sādhana*. He/she will be concerned with the wretched state of others. One who is filled with the divine love cannot hold it for himself/herself. The devotion has to be imparted to others. It will make him/her a *guru* who teaches the divine art of knowledge and action. Chavara was blessed with these threefold charisms. He could not separate one charism from the other: his *bhakti* was flowing to others and his *jñāna* made him a man of action. To disregard one charism is a failure in projecting the total personality of this man of God. He was a true *yōgi* whose mind and body were yoked to God, and his living images, the creatures. In Chavara we find a *Bhakta yōgi* of Christian tradition.

Chavara's *bhakti* experience has three basic trends. It was rooted in Eastern, Carmelite and Indian spiritual traditions. Still one cannot imprison it in these traditional categories. His *bhakti* enjoys original and personal traits. We shall try to shed light to some of these creative characteristics in the following paragraphs.

2. A BHAKTA YŌGI IN HIS DARSANAVEEDU

Every *Bhakta Yōgi* enjoys the divine vision concerning the creation. Just as God, he/she is gifted with a mystical inner experience, in which he/she can see the divine faces, and hear the divine voices in every animate and inanimate being. The *Bhakta Yōgi* lives in the celestial world, and tries to give articulation to that blissful experience. In order to grow in that inner vision he/she leads a life of *tapasya*.

It was the ardent desire of Chavara to live in constant communion and communication with God. For this he gave form to a community, members of which would "live, move and have their being" (Acts 17:28)

in the world of the divine vision, as Jesus had done during his earthly life. Chavara named the abode *darśanavīdu*,² the house of those who dream the dreams of God concerning humanity and the entire creation. He called it also by another name, *tapasubhavanam*,³ the house of those who are assiduously engaged in ascetic practices in order to attain the boon of the mystical grace of vision. The abode of this religious community is designated as the "house of the Lord,"⁴ the *Bethel* of Genesis 20:10-22, where Jacob was granted the divine vision and could hear the divine voice. Like the prophet Elijah, the early members of the *darśanavīdu* lived in solitude, *tapas* and the divine intimacy (1 Kg. 19:8-18). Like the prophet they were burning with zeal for the Lord. Their cells were the habitual abode⁵ where they enjoyed the divine sweetness and peace.⁶ Chavara, in fact, considered the religious house a tiny heaven.⁷ The celestial communion and communication, which reigned there, is manifested in the expressions used by Chavara to address his confreres: "*snehikkappetta priyamulla kūdappirappukale*," meaning "the beloved ones who are born together."⁸ Though the members of the Congregation belonged to different communities, they were living as a single family. The inmates were considering themselves as having been nursed and brought up by one and the same mother.⁹ They became shameless persons for the sake of the Lord.¹⁰ As the members were gifted with the divine vision of seeing and hearing in the cosmos the divine faces and voices, they devoted their entire life to transform the whole creation into Godhead.

Chavara excelled himself in ascetic practices. He was known as a man of solitude and contemplation. As he has written to the members of

²Chavara, *The Chronicles* (Mannanam Chronicle), I, 15.

³Chavara, *The Chronicles* (Mannanam Chronicle), I, 15.

⁴*The Founding Fathers*, 33.

⁵Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/1.

⁶Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/2.3.

⁷Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/4.1.

⁸Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/1 (4 times); VI/4 (it is a very frequent expression in his addresses).

⁹Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/4.2.

¹⁰Chavara, *The Letters*, IX/7.

sisters' community, which he had founded, he locked up his heart in the tabernacle of Jesus.¹¹ He meditated intensively on the love of Jesus Christ.¹² He was ever ready to listen to the sweet voice of Jesus, the beloved spouse,¹³ who always stood before him without leaving him alone even for a single instant.¹⁴ Most willingly Chavara gave himself to his beloved bridegroom, who took him to the heights of spiritual espousal.¹⁵

In his work, *Colloquies* he thus articulates his idea of meditative prayer:

Meditation is a colloquy with God, a conversation between friends, in union and together with God, a colloquy with Jesus Christ, the bridegroom of the soul...As friends sit close to each other, they find enough topics to talk about, without cessation. If there is love, conversation goes unlimited. No one needs to teach each other of the two friends how to go on talking. For, the heart has a language of its own. The very close presence of the friends with no utterance of words is quite gratifying and heart warming.¹⁶

The testimony of Louis of Manjummel, who was then a novice under the direction of Chavara and later a priest of the religious community he founded, is worth citing: "The time of the evening meditation was then one hour. Father Prior [Chavara] used to spend the whole time on his knees, shedding tears, and was in trance... When the time prescribed for meditation was over, others had to inform him... Shedding tears he used to retreat to his room."¹⁷ As he recommended to the sisters, he made a covenant with God, which consisted in offering up to God every pulse beat of his heart, every winking of his eyes, every breath of his nostrils, every

¹¹Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/9.

¹²Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/6.

¹³Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/7.

¹⁴Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/6.

¹⁵For details, see *Compunction of the Soul*, VII.2: "Jesus as Maṇavālan." Hereinafter *Compunction of the Soul* will be referred to as CS.

¹⁶Chavara, *Colloquies*, Meditation I.

¹⁷Letter of Fr. Louis, 12 January 1936. For other instances, see Fr. Valerian CD, *Vannya Divyasree Chavara Kuriakose Eliachan*, p.242

little chirping of the birds – indeed, everything as his prayer. He offered all these in union with the works of the Lord.¹⁸ “O Lord, do not separate from us until we are one with you” – this was the constant *mantra* on his lips.¹⁹

3. “WHAT A WRETCHED MAN I AM!”

Like all the great souls, who enjoyed deep intimacy with God, Chavara was gifted with an extraordinary and mystical sense of sinfulness. He made the words of Saint Paul in Rom. 7:24, with which this section is entitled, his own. The cry of Prophet Isaiah at the very sight of the holy God in heaven was constantly on his lips: “Woe to me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips” (Is. 6:1-5). This *Bhakta yōgi*, who delved into the depths of the mystery of Christ, considered himself as the most ungrateful among the creatures and least worthy to be called a human being. Thus, he calls himself a sinner,²⁰ a great sinner,²¹ unworthy one (CS VII:162), and the most unworthy one.²² He is the wicked one as well as the one without luminosity.²³ He considered himself as the least one (CS III:39-40), one who does not have any ability (CS II:278), deaf and dumb,²⁴ the blind one,²⁵ the idiot²⁶ and the destitute.²⁷

The *Bhakta yōgi* is not satisfied with these derogatory titles from the human world. He attributes to himself the status of base creatures. He speaks of himself as worm,²⁸ pitiable worm *kaṣṭa puzhu*²⁹ and senseless

¹⁸Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/3.

¹⁹Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/6.

²⁰CS I:129; III:55; Appendix 64,67; V:142,144; Last Petition: 3.

²¹Chavara, *Colloquies*, Introduction; CS II:242.

²²Chavara, *Colloquies*, Introduction.

²³Chavara, *Colloquies*, “Act of Humility,” Introduction.

²⁴Chavara, *Colloquies*, “Act of Humility.”

²⁵Chavara, *Colloquies*, “Preparatory Prayer of Meditation.”

²⁶Chavara, *The Chronicles* (Mannanam Chronicle), I.71, 75.

²⁷Chavara, *Colloquies*, Introduction.

²⁸CS I:6, 17; Chavara, *Colloquies*, “Act of Contrition,” and “Act of Humility.”

²⁹Chavara, *Colloquies*, “Preparatory Prayer of Meditation.”

worm *akrtha puzhu*.³⁰ These designations may remind us of Ps. 22:6, the first verse of which was recited by Jesus on the cross. Chavara goes further than the Psalmist, by adding qualifications to the worm. The contrite soul finds itself viler than the wretched and despicable creatures such as worms. He thinks that he does not deserve to be called even by this title. In his eyes he is mere soil, *mannu*.³¹ In his writings he tries to find or create opportunities to belittle and debase himself in the eyes of others. As the *Chronicles* amply makes clear, Chavara confesses even minute and insignificant blunders or wrong doings, which he reports as great faults or crimes.³² Contemplating on the passion of Christ he laments: "my sin, great sin, augments my woe" (CS VI:205) Because of this humble attitude he calls himself the servant of priests, novices and laity of the Third Order.³³

A study of these designations will fill us with awe and wonder at the depth of the mystical and supernatural graces bestowed on this saintly soul. Chavara seems to have been gifted with inner insight about the holiness of God, in whose presence he felt as a nonentity. He appears here as a true son of Teresa of Avila, who had a deep insight into the reality of grace, sin, the Church, the Eucharist and the communion of the saints.³⁴

Although the sense of sinfulness and unworthiness filled the whole person of Chavara, it did not deter him from approaching the divine presence with confidence and trust of a loving child for its parents. Such an attitude is resulted from the conviction that he cannot subsist without the divine guidance and protection. Chavara, who is a destitute (*agathi*),

³⁰Chavara, *Colloquies*, "Act of Humility."

³¹Chavara, *Colloquies*, "Act of Humility."

³²Chavara, *The Chronicles* (Mannanam Chronicle), I,69.

³³Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/4 (The Testament).

³⁴Kieran Kavanaugh, in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 3, ed. Louis Dupre and Don E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 74-80. For Chavara's deep love for Church, see his letters to the Pope (*The Letters*, I/1), Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Propagation of Faith (*The Letters*, II/1-5), and the Bishops (*The Letters*, III/1-10). Chavara had a profound veneration for the Eucharist. See his letters to the sisters (*The Letters*, VII/2,4,6,9). For his insight into the mystery of communion of saints, see no. 8: "a Son of the Saints."

must cling to God for his survival, as He alone could give him salvation (*gathi*). He was certain that God would never forsake or reject him (Chavara felt himself as a child on the breast of mother, Ps. 131:2). He entrusted himself into the hands of God, the source of all riches (Eph. 2:7; 3:8). Then he could exclaim thus:

O joy of joys! O Lord. We are mere worms incapable of understanding anything. Like unto the mother who nourishes her children with milk even while they are asleep, or are unable to express in words their hunger and thirst, you are looking after our needs everyday.³⁵

He was certain that God stands always near him to make him happy and to do whatever he desires.³⁶ According to him, the Lord is ready to provide him things even without his asking for them. The divine Master ever blesses him, and bestows His well being (*shālôm*) to him.³⁷ Chavara declares that God is making him happy in both temporal and spiritual spheres.³⁸ He tells the members of the community that the Congregation came into existence and has grown not because of human efforts; indeed, it was the work of God who founded and nurtured it with marvelous deeds.³⁹ In the introductory part of *Colloquies* he confesses that whatever has been achieved is not because of his ability or expertise; it was God who has performed all the things, even though he did not deserve or merit them.

Such affirmations emerge from the demeanor mentality of the Blessed. He felt that although he is nothing and has nothing, in God he has got everything. He could make the words of Jesus his own: "All I have is yours, and all you have is mine, and I am glorified in them" (Jn. 17:10). With Mary he could exclaim: "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Lk. 1:46-47). He even applies to himself the words of Paul in

³⁵Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/10.

³⁶Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/6.

³⁷Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/1-2.

³⁸Chavara, *The Letters*, VII/7.

³⁹Chavara, *The Letters*, VI/1.

Phil. 4:13: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."⁴⁰ It was this conviction that made him a daring person who could undertake risky projects and activities. He could approach God, Christ, Mary the Mother, St. Joseph, St. Teresa of Avila with such a filial attitude. He was not ready to leave them without getting the favours for which he was pestering them. His work *Colloquies* amply attests to this fact.⁴¹ He could even speak to the ecclesiastical authorities with the freedom and daringness proper to the little children. In *The Chronicles* he narrates how he, with obstinacy, demanded the bishop to make him free for the construction work of the monastery at Mannanam.⁴²

4. THE TURNING DYNAMICS OF CHAVARA'S SPIRITUALITY

Jesus, the beloved *guru* of Chavara, thus epitomized the theme of his proclamation: "Repent, the Kingdom of God has come" (Mk. 1:15).⁴³ He invites everyone to 'turn' (which is the original meaning of the Hebrew *shûb*) to God's Kingdom, which has come in his person. One has to turn to it with heart and soul, strength and mind (Dt. 6:5). In that act the entire person is to be involved, and nothing such as sorrows and sufferings, failures and falls, despair and hatred, is to be set aside. Further, the *shûb* dynamics presuppose the presence of others. One has to take to the Kingdom of God the whole humanity (along with their joys, sorrows, sins, etc.), the animate and inanimate kingdoms as well as the entire cosmos.

Chavara was gifted with a sublime sense of this *shûb* dynamics. He imbibed its spirit and made his whole life a *shûb* story. It was from the Holy Family that he drew inspiration and illumination for it.

⁴⁰Chavara, *The Letters*, V/14.

⁴¹In *Colloquies*, appealing to St. Teresa, Chavara says: "... you have to teach me the method of meditation by reciting it in my heart;" "you have to get for me this love;" "teach me." Frequently Chavara addresses Jesus as his beloved and merciful papa.

⁴²Chavara, *The Chronicles* (Mannanam Chronicle), I,70.

⁴³According to scholars, the first and last statements of Mk. 1:15 do not form part of the original proclamation of Jesus.

Ātmānuthāpam (or *Compunction of the Soul*) deserves to be called a *shūb* treatise. In its Cantos I and II Blessed Chavara recollects how the Heavenly Family has turned to him during the days of his childhood. The acts of the Lord of mercy⁴⁴ are enumerated in minute detail. God formed him as the son of Adam (CS I:2); “gave the beginning of human birth” (CS I:14); “created me from the dust” (CS I:18); “made me without deformities” (CS II:77-84); “created me in the image of the divine glory” (CS I:11); “You, the Lofty One has willed to make me ascend to the divine heights in Your presence” (CS I:15-16). Thus, Chavara finds a divine satisfaction and thankful joy in going into more particular details of God’s turning to him.

The Lord of mercy has bestowed on him His choicest graces: “O Lord, your ocean of mercy unstinted lavished on me, how happy am I” (CS II:57-58)! He gave Chavara eyes to see and understand the celestial beauty radiated in this world (CS II:291, 299). He was granted ears to listen to good things (CS II:341).

Chavara adds more items to the *shūb* list of God. His heart is throbbing with love and gratitude for the divine gift of Guardian Angel, who always stood by his side, and protected and guided him (CS I:20, 32). He was born of Catholic parents; God made him a believer in Christ. According to Chavara, this was another *shūb* act of God (CS I:43-44; II:67-72). He is full of praise on behalf of the gift of his mother, who with great affection looked after him (CS I:45-47). The mystic turns to God with a tender heart while enumerating the divine graces of saving him from the hands of Satan who tried to kill the baby in the very womb of his mother (CS II:97-100). Later, the devil made another attempt to take away his life before receiving the sacrament of baptism (CS II:101-105).

The poetical soul makes an elaborate description about the sublime grace of baptism, which was the climax of God’s turning dynamics. The Holy One freed him from the effects of the original sin and the danger of

⁴⁴The terms related to mercy are used 32 times in the Cantos I and II. Chavara addresses God as *karuṇākaran* (one whose hand is merciful, CS I:29); *kāruṇyan* (one who is mercy, CS I:33); “one who is kindness without boundaries” (CS I:30); *karuṇānādhan* (the Lord of mercy, CS II:1); *karuṇānidhi* (the Treasure of mercy, CS II:241).

eternal death. He decked him with celestial brightness and other virtues (CS I:33-36; II:105-109). By this sublime act of *shûb* God made him His son and the heir of the heavenly bliss (CS I:41-42; II:110, 135). He clad him with goodness to the lustrous joy of the angels (CS II:112-113). His name was written in the Book of Life (CS II:114). He adds: "A waxen candle, lit I held in sacredness to bring forth my divinity to the world at large" (CS II:155-156). Blessed salt was given to the child with the admonition that he may never be decayed by the ugly sin (CS II:157-158).

Chavara adds two more turning acts of God in his life. He was providentially saved from the grave epidemic (CS II:35-44). He was full of gratitude that God did not make him a very rich man or a poor man (CS II:85-96).

God's purpose of turning to Chavara was to make him turn to Him. Accordingly, he turns to God with intense sentiments of gratitude and love. In an angelic tone he sings the divine praises and looks at every divine act as the manifestation of His infinite mercy. In this unreserved and uninhibited act of *shûb* the man of God becomes a turning son, a true image and likeness of the Holy Family and the triune God. He becomes a hymn of divine mercy. Canto I of the *Compunction of the Soul* ends with a further unfolding of God's act of *shûb*. At the age of ten the Lord in His great mercy called the young Chavara to His service (CS I:113-140).

As the Heavenly family has turned to him, Chavara could find the loving and living reflections of the divine presence in nature. He could look at the family of heavenly bodies, vegetative family and the whole earth, and turn to the triune God with blissful attitude of affectionate gratitude accompanied with angelic praises:

O! Gaze a movement, the spotted canopy of heaven, the radiant sun and pale fair moon, the mighty globes and bright cluster of stars, the green grass of the earth, its floral wealth. Gaze at the universe entire and quietly muse. Why they were called to be, and judge your worth, and gazing understand your glory. If such be your fortune on the transient earth, how great, the treasures in store for you above (CS II:291-299).

5. THE FAMILY VISION OF THE BHAKTA YŌGI

God's dream concerning the creation may be understood in family. His plan for it is that all live as members of the same family. They are destined to form a cosmic family, which consists of humans, animals and birds, trees and plants, minerals, heaven and earth, and so on. All these should become the living and loving reflections of the divine family, as the biblical God is envisaged as Trinity in whom there are three persons. Chavara and the inmates of *darśanavīdu* were granted with such a family vision. Everywhere they could see families, the extended forms of the Trinitarian family: human family, ecclesial family, family of the animal kingdom, family of the vegetative kingdom, family of heavenly bodies consisting of sun, moon, stars and planets, etc.

The destiny of humans is to lead on earth the life of the Trinitarian family. Under their guidance and leadership the whole creation has to be transformed into a single cosmic family. When all the beings, in the company of the humans, exalt the Creator and Saviour God, and exult in the divine presence, they could find God realization (*īśvara sākṣātkāra*) and self-realization (*ātma sākṣātkāra*), thereby the whole cosmos would be transformed into a single face and voice of the Ultimate. To present this fact in the Indian terminology, there will be in the entire creation a single form, state of being, voice, tune, rhythm and of becoming integrated (*ēka rūpa, bhāva, nāda, rāga, thāla* and *laya*).

Chavara considered the Holy Family, consisting of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, as the earthly pattern of the Trinitarian Family. The members led a *shūb* life of being turned to each other. They were human models of *niveditar* (the consecrated ones), *arpitar* (the offered ones), *tadīyar* (those who belong to Him), *tanmayar* (those who are full of Him), and *niyatar* (those who are with a firm resolution).

Chavara, on his deathbed, confided to the members of the community a singular truth. Affectionately looking at the portrait of the Holy Family, he said: "I have spent my whole life in this Holy Trinity. As a memorial I am bearing the name Kuriakose of the Holy Family..."⁴⁵ "I

⁴⁵"Letter of Fr. Louis Manjummel," in *Positio*, 561.

have always seen, remembered, venerated the great Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph... I am consecrating our poor Congregation to the Holy Family. All of you who are its members should entrust each one to them. Let the Holy Family rule over your hearts" (*Positio*, 548). The blessed *yōgi* lived his life as a devoted son of the Holy Family. Borrowing the words from his deathbed, we can call him a name bearing son, a 'seeing' son, a 'remembering' son, a honouring son, a consecrated son, an entrusting son and a son under the dominion of the Holy Family. Here we are content with the presentation of only one trait of Chavara.

6. THE BHAKTA YŌGI AS A 'SEEING' SON

Chavara could claim that he always enjoyed the vision of the Holy Family ("I always saw them in my heart," as he asserted at his deathbed). He was granted the mystical grace of living in the presence of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In *Compunction of the Soul* he narrates the incidents in the life of the Holy Family as if he were a living witness to these occurrences. His narration of the birth of Jesus in the cave of Bethlehem captivates everybody's mind (CS V). Chavara repeatedly expresses his ardent desire to see the Infant Jesus, Mother Mary and St. Joseph, as well as everything that occurred at that scene: "The Lord of mercy, the Son of God, his glorious splendour, I long to see." "... His parents, having been denied a resting place, though painful, I long to see." "... His mother, without pain or stain, gave birth, I long to see..." "The Holy Child gazing at his mother, with dazzling eyes, I long to see." "... The tiny hands embracing the mother, with longing love, I long to see." "The mother fondly feeding her child, with milk at her breast, I long to see." "... The limitless joy, Joseph felt, while watching them both, I long to see." "... How she placed her lovely babe, in his arms, I long to see." "... The praises he poured upon his son, together with his spouse, I long to see (CS III:1-2; 17-18; 23-24; 29-30; 33-34; 37-38; 41-42; 47-50). "Your beauteous face, blooming life a blossom, with love of solitude, I gaze" (CS III, Appendix: 55-56).

These words poignantly attest to the truth of Chavara's declaration, "I always saw them in my heart." In other words, he was always seeing the faces of these three persons. As Jesus could see the face of his heavenly Father in the whole creation, Chavara could live in the constant company

of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. One may call it beatific vision. Chavara was a visionary. This vision made him a man of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In this Holy Family he could see the very face of the Trinitarian Family.

7. APPAN AND MAṆAVĀLAN: A MYSTIC'S VISION

A. Jesus as Appan

Chavara, the *bhakta yōgi*, like any other mystic of the Indian tradition, had a very simple vision concerning the heavenly realities. This attitude had its origin from his intimate and intense relationship with God, Christ and the saints. He considered himself as member of this divine community. He was not bothered to give dogmatic and theoretical articulation to the nature of his loving fellowship with them.⁴⁶ According to the speculative theology, the first person of the Trinity is called Father; Christ is the firstborn Brother of humanity. Now Chavara transcends such well-defined categories. He does not want to be imprisoned in the logical fetters of human thinking. Rather, he is motivated by the existential milieu. According to the prompting of the context, he dares to address Jesus with different titles. One of his favorite themes of meditation is the parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32). In *Colloquies*, Chavara provides a detailed and intimate reinterpretation of that parable. He takes the part of the younger son, while Jesus is given the role of the compassionate and loving father. Chapel becomes the house of the father. Now he, the younger son repeatedly addresses Jesus as *appā*.⁴⁷ The father is sitting on the throne of grace. The mystic adds the following adjectives with the title *appan*: *ente priyamulla appā* (my beloved father: 6 times); *ente manōguna appā* (my compassionate father: 4 times); *ente*

⁴⁶This is similar to the attitude of the Eastern mystics. They offer no abstract theories about prayer and contemplation. They were not interested in giving logical definitions or impersonal diagrams of various stages on spiritual union with God. This unsystematic and existential approach is proper to the nature of the divine mysteries, which cannot be fully understood by human mind and articulated by the earthly language. See Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 395-426.

⁴⁷The term is used 25 times in *Colloquies* (original Malayalam version).

anugrahamulla appā (my gracious father: once); *ente nalla appā* (my good father: once).

Although *appan* remains the preferential name for Jesus, Chavara also addresses him with a different term, *pitāv* (Father). Thus, Jesus is his *priyamulla pitāv* (dear Father, *Colloquies*, 62), *ente manōguṇamulla pitāv* (my compassionate Father, *Colloquies*, 27, 62), *ente anugraham nirañja pitāv* (my gracious Father, *Colloquies*, 25, 62), *karuṇayulla pitāv* (merciful Father, *Colloquies*, 26), and *ente pattāṅgayāya pitāv* (my true Father, *Colloquies*, 46, 52).

For Chavara, Christ belongs always to him; He is his own: *ente*. He is bound in an intimate and exclusive relationship with Christ. Although he has grievously offended his *appan*, he does not feel estrangement from Him. "Even then *ente appā*, my heart does not allow me to address you with any other name" (*Colloquies*, 17). He is confident that *manōguṇamulla ente appan* will be always ready to forget and forgive his wickedness and ingratitude. Using the terminology of Exodus 34:6, with which God had introduced Himself at Mount Sinai, he says: "*ente appan* is most merciful, abounding in love and maintains the compassionate love, which is His very name." Like a pertinacious child he clings to the feet of his Father; he will not leave them unless the Father forgives and blesses him. His words reflect the utterance of Jacob during his nocturnal encounter with the divine stranger (Gen. 32:26). He sheds bitter tears at the sight of the afflicted, smitten and wounded figure of his beloved Father. It was his sins that had caused this pathetic situation. No reader of the passion account in *Colloquies* can remain unaffected by the emotional and intensive language of Chavara. The mystic was gifted with a penetrating and intimate experience of the sufferings of Christ.

B. Jesus as *Maṇavālan*

One may say that the concept of Jesus as beloved Father is the original contribution of Chavara. It has resulted from the intimate and affectionate experience of the mystic. Equally important is his concept of conjugal relationship between Christ and himself. Here he follows the theology of the mystical espousal of the Christian traditions, as well as the Indian

bhakti sādhana, especially of Mirabai. It is nothing but the biblical vision, which characterizes God-man relationship as that of a marriage union. Israel in the Old Testament as well as Church of the New Testament conceived themselves as brides of Yahweh (Jer. 2:2) and of Christ (Eph. 5:22-32). Here we are in the world of metaphors. Chavara has transcended the logic of the ordinary world and literal meanings. He has entered into the mystical world and embraced its own logic, ways of thinking and imagery. When a person is endowed with such a vision, he/she becomes a celestial being. Then this enlightened one (*buddha*) gets liberated from the fetters of *avidya* (ignorance) and *māya* (illusion). The *siddha*⁴⁸ attains four types of *mukti*: *sālōkya* (the status of living in the world of God), *sāmīpya* (the status of being near God), *sārūpya* (the status of getting the form of God) and *sāyūjya* (the status of being one with God). The *bhakta* becomes a being who lives in *ēkāgrata*, which makes him/her a 'complete' one or God-realized being,⁴⁹ who continues to live in the world, though not belonging to it (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

Chavara entitles the religious vow of chastity as the vow of *manavāttithvam*, which escapes an adequate English rendering. One may translate it as "bridal status." In this mystical vision every consecrated person embraces an espousal state and becomes a bride of Christ. In the Indian terminology he/she is a *nivēdita* (a consecrated one), *arpita* (an offered one), *tadīya* (belonging to Him), *tanmaya* (full of Him) and *niyatha* (one with a firm resolution). The world in which that person lives, moves and has his/her being (Acts 17:28) is that of the Divine Bridegroom. The *bhakta* inhabits the world of the "Song of Songs."

As Chavara exhorted the sisters, he himself dwelt in the love of Jesus Christ, sat always before His eyes, walked by His side, and conversed always with Him (*The Letters*, VII/6). For him the religious life was an ascent through the spiritual stages, leading to a union with Jesus the Lord (*The Letters*, VII/10). He looked at his cell as the bridal chamber of the Divine Spouse where he could beam with joy (*The Letters*, VII/2). The mystic repeatedly addressed the sisters as the brides of Christ, the Divine

⁴⁸The Sanskrit term means 'fulfilment'.

⁴⁹G. N. Ganapathy in *Hindu Spirituality*, ed. K. R. Sundararajan and Bithika Mukerji (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 232-252.

Bridegroom (*The Letters*, VII/2). In such a sense, he finds the religious state as the most sublime and glorious call. A consecrated person assiduously invites the Divine Bridegroom to come and live in his/her heart (*The Letters*, VII/4). Chavara practised the interior solitude⁵⁰ and took delight in reading the Word of God. Then the Divine Bridegroom came to converse with his bride. He led her to the wine cellar, and poured out some wine for her – in the beginning only a little. As she savoured the wine she could understand the love language of the Bridegroom. Then, He begins to speak to her clearly and distinctly, and to demonstrate the magnitude of His love. As love for the Divine Spouse had increased in her, Jesus rejoiced over it. He adorned her with ornaments (*The Letters*, VII/8). This language reflects the contemplative and mystical dimension of the Carmelite spirituality, which speaks of seven stages in the interior journey to God.⁵¹

The unique contribution of Chavara to the theology of the mystical espousal may be found in his contemplation of the Calvary episode.⁵² Both works, *Compunction of the Soul* and *Colloquies* provide detailed descriptions of Jesus' journey to Calvary. Chavara looks at that journey as the royal procession of the Divine Bridegroom towards the marriage tent, *kalyāna pantal* (CS VIII:13-34; VIII:70-105; *Colloquies*, 22-23). The Divine Bridegroom eagerly and impatiently waits for that day of the nuptial procession and for the bridal bed of the Cross (CS VIII:13-34). On his *maṇavālvathvathinte divasathil* (the day of marriage) His mother puts on his head the royal crown made of the most precious diamonds (CS

⁵⁰One may compare it with the *hesychia* (tranquillity and inner stillness) of the Eastern mystics. It signifies plenitude, not emptiness, presence, not a void. See Kallistos Ware, in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1, 399-402.

⁵¹See the classical work, *Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila. It advocates the prayer of quiet and prayer of mystical union. See Keith J. Egan in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 50-62. Its similarity with the Indian *bhakti* trends deserves our attention. Especially, one can compare this love language to that of Mirabai. She speaks of 'conjugal love' for Krishna. See Braj Sinha in *Hindu Spirituality*, ed. K. R. Sundararajan and Bethika Mukerji (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 144-155.

⁵²The work *Colloquies* is an excellent meditation of fancy upon the instances of Christ's passion. Also the Eastern Fathers offer detailed and imaginative meditations upon the life of Christ, more especially on His passion.

VIII:72-74; *Colloquies*, 22). Now the nuptial procession starts to the *kalyāṇapantal*. The Bridegroom is vested with a shining dress; He is decked with golden garlands; he has girded up his loins with golden cloth. He carries in His hands royal scepter, which is also compared to a sharpened sword. Two well-decked comrades walk on both sides. The band set, which loudly plays musical instruments, go in front of Him. They sing and announce the fact of marriage (*kalyāṇasaṅgathi*). They invite the beautiful daughters of the beloved Zion: "You, the most lovable ones, behold your Bridegroom! Appreciate the glittering crown, which the beloved Mother in her love for this Solomon, has put on his head" (CS VIII:71-74)! They are allowed to cherish the ornaments and dress of the Divine Spouse. He bids farewell to his dear mother. On the way He is often given sweet drinks so that He may not feel fatigue of the journey. Behold, the procession reaches the wedding tent, the Calvary Mount, and the nuptial ceremony finds its climax, as the Bridegroom enters His bridal chamber, the Cross.

This is indeed, mystical language, which the ordinary people cannot understand or appreciate. Only those who are gifted with the mystical grace can cherish this poetical narration. One fact deserves our attention. Till the scene of the procession to Calvary, Chavara was using intensively emotional language. His narration was often interrupted with words full of compunction and contrition. Now all on a sudden there occurs a shift in the tone, style and the theme. He pours out imageries after imageries of love language. It seems that the mystic has entered into the celestial world, where the marriage feast of the Divine Lamb is solemnly celebrated (Rev. 19:5-9; 14:1-5). This vision takes us into the lofty heights of biblical reality, which looks at passion as glorification. Only those who enjoy a heavenly perspective of suffering can comprehend this vision.

8. A 'SON' OF THE SAINTS

A peculiar type of devotion to the saints forms part of the spiritual vision of Chavara. He enjoys a deep insight into the mystery of the communion of the saints. He seems to have been blessed with the mystical vision of such a communion. He maintains a very natural and spontaneous relationship with them as if he were a member of that family. He addresses them as his mother, father and elder brothers and sisters. Chavara speaks to

them with the freedom and openness of a beloved child. It seems to him as the most proper thing to do.

A. Mary

Mary and Joseph adorn the primary positions in the life of Chavara. His major work, *Compunction of the Soul*, may be understood as an attempt to turn to the world of Mary, and live there. He narrates the incidents in the life of the Holy Family as if he were present on the scene. He weeps over the misfortunes that happened to them as if his sins were the causes behind them. After the resurrection of Jesus we find a sudden shift in the style of the narration. The poet dwells in the world of Mary with blissful forgetfulness of everything else including himself. Chavara sees with his inner eyes every episode of her life on earth. He dares to describe even her assumption into heaven and the solemn reception accorded to her by the three Persons of the Trinity. The work concludes with a final petition for her powerful intercession for him at the moment of his death.

The affectionate invocations to Mary shed light on the intensity of Chavara's relationship to Mary. In *Compunction of the Soul* he addresses her with innumerable titles. It seems that he revels in singing her praises. Just to look at the 'Last Petition' of *Compunction of the Soul*, Chavara addresses her with 15 titles. She is for him mainly a mother (8 times), who is full of compassion and affection (4 times). To sum up, the mystic considers himself as a child of Mary. He clings to her at every moment of his life: he runs to her in difficulties and dangers. When he feels his unworthiness to approach Jesus, he appeals for her intercession. Thus, Mary was for him more than an earthly mother.

B. Joseph

Chavara exhibits a singular intimacy and filial affection to Joseph, the head of the Holy Family. Here he resembles Jesus himself. Chavara as a *Bhakta* enjoyed inner freedom to act as a son, and never hesitated to have recourse to Joseph in all his needs. In *Colloquies* he addresses Joseph with the following titles: *priyaṁ nirañja pitāv* (Daddy full of affection, 4

times), *ente pitāv* (my Daddy, 5 times), *karunayulla pitāv* (compassionate Daddy, once), *dayayulla pitāv* (merciful Daddy, 3 times), *ente anugrahamulla pitāv* (my gracious Daddy, once), *punya pitāv* (saintly Daddy, once), *punnyavān* (the holy person, once), and *maddyastan* (mediator, twice).

In the mystical vision of Chavara, Jesus and Mary can never be separated from Joseph. He is attached to the saint as Jesus and Mary were bound to that *māmunīndran* (the great Silent One). The work *Colloquies* abounds in long conversations with Joseph. He enters into the agonies and worries, which the saint had to undergo during his life (*Colloquies*, 29-31). Canto V of *Compunction of the Soul* provides us with a charming portrait of Jesus in the cave of Bethlehem. Chavara becomes a living and loving witness to the scene of the birth of the Son of God. He participates in the zealous prayer of Joseph, his humble attitude, his blissful tears and thoughts, and the homage rendered to the Holy Child (CS V:17-30; 99-140). In the Morning Prayer, which Chavara recited daily, he used to offer himself to the Trinity together with the virtuous deeds of Saint Joseph (*Colloquies*, 68). The same way he offered his sleep in union with the blessed works of Joseph (*Colloquies*, 69).

C. Teresa of Avila

Chavara showed a childlike love, trust and veneration for Teresa, the foundress of the Renewed Carmelite Religious Order. Only with the title of *ammā* (mother) he addressed her. In *Colloquies* he calls her *ammā* at least fifteen times. Often he attaches the adjective 'my' to that title. This son even dares to designate her as the "One who has given birth to me" (*Colloquies*, 41). According to him, she loves him more than a *māmsa talla* (literally, mother of flesh, *Colloquies*, 14). With pride and joy Chavara calls himself her son (7 times). With the loving freedom of a child, he approached her in all his needs. He could pester her with requests: "As I cannot grasp the language (of contemplation), teach me this language, or teach it by repeatedly reciting it in my heart" (*Colloquies*, 14); "Teach me;" "Give me love for Jesus;" "Pray for me and obtain this grace for me."

D. The Three Mary Mothers

Chavara maintained an extraordinary intimacy with Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt and Mary of Cortona. He considered them as models of total repentance and of vigorous penance. He says: "As I do not have repentance proper to the magnitude of my sins, I pray that I shall have repentance and penance of these mothers. Mother Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary of Egypt and Mother Mary of Cortona, always help me" (*Colloquies*, 16). "Mothers Mary of Egypt and Mary of Cortona are mediators of my reparation. Their merciful hands are waiting to put their penance and tears on my behalf on the divine balance" (*Colloquies*, 31). Like the three Mary Mothers he loved Jesus very much and shed bitter tears for having offended Him in the past life. He repeatedly addresses them with the title of *ammā* in *Colloquies* (16 times). Chavara loved them as their dearest son. Mother Mary Magdalene was his favourite, since "She embraced the foot of the cross" (*Colloquies*, 31) and later clung to the feet of the Risen Lord. Other Mary Mothers were steadfast in their devotion to Jesus. Chavara insists: "Dear *appā*, I will not leave your holy feet unless you announce to me, as you have done to my mother Mary Magdalene, Mary of Cortona, and as you have opened the door of the church to mother Mary of Egypt" (*Colloquies*, 18). Insistently Chavara, the *Bhakta*, asks his mothers: "O, my mothers, pray for me!"

These three mothers, according to Chavara, love their dear son and are meeting him regularly (*Colloquies*, 41). We do not know the details of these encounters. Perhaps, he has received some mystical grace of having communion with them on earth.

E. Other Mothers

Chavara has other mothers too. Indeed, every female saint is his mother; thus, he appeals to mother Mary Clopas (Jn. 19:25) and Mary Salome (Mk. 15:40; 16:1). They are his beloved mothers (*Colloquies*, 40-41), since they stood near the cross of Christ. Martha and Mary are designated "my mothers," since they took Jesus into their house (Lk. 10:38-42). Like them Chavara also wants to invite Jesus into his heart. Hence, he requests them to furnish his heart with things that are dear to Jesus. Besides, he mentions:

“Other mothers who love me and are eager to remedy my poverty” (*Colloquies*, 41). He requests all these saintly mothers to furnish the house of his heart with all the ornaments, which they had in their own houses.

F. Communion with Other Saints and Angels

The mystic lived in the world of the saints. He was surrounded by them. Thus he mentions numerous persons of the Bible. Adam and Eve, the Patriarchs (*Colloquies*, 42), Job (*Colloquies*, 36) Esther, (*Colloquies*, 37), Peter (*Colloquies*, 33), Paul (*Colloquies*, 38), Zacchaeus (*Colloquies*, 39, 41), apostles, martyrs, confessors, Fathers of the desert, holy virgins, venerable men and women and holy infants are included in that list (*Colloquies*, 42). He calls them “My dear elder brothers and sisters, *kōdappirappukal* (twins), who are waiting for his arrival in heaven (*Colloquies*, 31-32).

The family of Chavara is extensive as to embrace the celestial beings. Thus, he maintains contact with nine choirs of angels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and other archangels, as well as the seven captains of the heavenly army (*Colloquies*, 42).

All these indicate that Chavara lived in the heavenly world. The angels, Mary and Joseph, and all the saintly persons, from the creation of this world form part of his family. He is their beloved child, to whose help they most willingly would hurry up. Indeed, we are here in a world, which is alien to the people of ordinary faith.

9. AN AUTHENTIC NĀMABHAKTA

It is *nāmajapa* which makes one an authentic Indian Christian. The divine name is the mystical bridge between the finite and Infinite; it links up the human with the Divine. According to the Indian tradition, *nāmajapa* awakens one’s spiritual consciousness. “When one sings the Name of God,

all differences melt away.⁵³ *Nāmajapa* has its roots in Biblical, Eastern, Hindu and Sufi traditions. It helps a person to experience mystical oneness with the Deity. This has induced the holy men and women to chant, for instance, *Vishnu Sahasra Nāma* (Thousand Names of Vishnu) in India. Selfless love and *ahaituki bhakti* underlie *nāmajapa*. This is the highest form of worship (*Bhāgavata Purāna*, I.5:38), love, praise and service.

The works of Chavara well attest how he was continuously engaging himself in *nāmajapa* of God and Christ. He seems to be in love with Jesus, and finds his joy in singing the praises of his Beloved, by attributing to Him novel titles. We select *Compunction of the Soul* as an example, and merely enumerate some of the names given to Christ. They are classified under two groups: the titles which express the Divinity of Christ and the names which denote His humanity.⁵⁴

Titles Expressing the Divinity of Christ: *Dēvan* = God (XI:165; XII:169); *mamadēvan* = my God (VII:308, 425; VIII:1, 105; XI:169); *snēhadēvan* = the loving God (VII:332); *niśchaladēvan* = the Unmoveable God (IX:209); *naradēvan* = the Man God (XI:380). *Dēvandēvan* = God of Gods (II:216); *paramadēvan* = the Supreme God (IV:7). *Sarvathinnāadhan* = the Lord of all (VII:53); *samasthēsan* = the Lord of everything (IV:30; VII:258). *Pithrusamakūdasthan* = the Loftiest who is equal to the Father (VIII:258); *mangelēśvaran* = the Lord of Bliss (XI:196); *kauthūhalan* = the Charmful (III, Supplement: 38); *nirmalan* = the Immaculate One (V:143; VII:413, 426, 464). *Dharmapālan* = the Keeper of Dharma (IX:97); *nītiśvaran* = The Lord of Justice (VII:552). *Kāruṇyanāadhan* = the Lord of Compassion (III:1; VI:262); *kāruṇyavāridhi* = the Ocean of Compassion (III:3); *deyānidhi* = the Treasure of Mercy (V:152). *Dēvasudhan* = the Begotten God (IV:31; VII:7); *paramapitrusutan* = Son of the Supreme Father (III, Supplement: 4); *paramadeivasutan* = Son of the Supreme God (VII:257); *kudastapitāputran* = Son of the Loftiest Father (VI:41). *Vēdanāadhan* = the Lord of Religions (III:96);

⁵³Swami Chidananda, "Foreword" to *Nāma Japa* by Vandana Mataji (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995).

⁵⁴On the Christological titles in CS, see Sunny Pulparambil, "The Spiritual Vision of *Ātmānutāpam*" (M.Th. Thesis, Bangalore: St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, 2002).

Brahmanādhan = the Lord of *Brahman* (VI:29); *lōkarakshitāv* = the Saviour of the World (XI:397).

The Titles Denoting the Humanity of Christ: *Naranāmyēsu* = Jesus the Man (X:183); *dāvīdinsutan* = Son of David (VII:260); *nirmalasarīri* = the One with the Pure Body (VII:428); *sundarasarīri* = the One with Beautiful Body (VII:426); *sundarakumāran* = the Beautiful Son (V:36); *guruśrēṣṭan* = the Supreme Teacher (IX, Mother's Grief: 75; X:266)

10. Conclusion

The *nāmabhakti* of Chavara amazingly exhibits Christological and soteriological dimensions. He is very original and creative in attributing titles after titles to Christ. Here we find a soul who is deeply in love with his beloved. The names seem to flow from his mystical experiences. They reveal his deep experiential knowledge of Bible. At the same time some of the titles are authentically Indian. Chavara's thoughts, one may conclude, are experiential, intuitive and mystical. He is an authentic Indian Christian *bhakta yōgi*.