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Review Article

IS THE SYRIAN CHURCH MORE THAN A MUSEUM PIECE ?

C. E. ABRAHAM

Ever since Cladius Buchanan presented to the world in 1811 his discovery of the Syrian Church of Malabar in his *Christian Researches in Asia* not a few monographs and books have been written on different aspects of the life and history of this ancient church. But the book¹ under review stands out from the rest that we have seen in the thoroughness of its scholarship and the sympathetic understanding of the subject by the author. One may hazard the prophecy that the book will become a classic in the field in course of time.

The book is in three parts. Part I deals with the St. Thomas tradition and the chequered history of the Church, Part II with the social life and Part III with the worship and faith of the St. Thomas Christians. The book gains an unusual interest from the last two sections where the author gives an extremely interesting account of the pattern of the social life of the Syrian Christians, their modes of worship and their theological outlook. The author has taken great pains in bringing together materials from various sources dealing with the above subjects and for this readers are very much in his debt.

The book raises several points of unusual interest and we may notice some of them in a brief compass in this article.

1. *The Apostolic Origin of the Church of Malabar.*—Speaking generally, to the Syrian Christians it is almost an article of faith that their Church was founded by the Apostle Thomas. Some of their own scholars however vehemently oppose this theory. The author has examined the evidence for and against the apostolic origin of the Church and comes to the conclusion that perhaps it is 'a reasonable probability'. In the same context he makes the interesting statement: 'It is not impossible that St. Bartholomew was in fact India's apostle, but his claim can no more be proved than that of St. Thomas' (p. 63).

In dealing with this thorny problem the author has shown a degree of scholarly objectivity which is highly commendable.

¹ *The Indian Christian of St. Thomas*: by L. W. Brown. Cambridge University Press, 1956. Pages i-xii+315. Price 40s.

However, against this background it is rather difficult to understand why the author, in speaking of the members of the Syrian Church in Kerala, instead of using a non-committal name, should refer to them as 'St. Thomas Christians' in various parts of the book.

2. *The litigious spirit of the Syrian Christians.*—The modern period deals with developments in the Church beginning with the arrival of the C.M.S. Missionaries in 1816. The mission of help of the C.M.S., the foundation of the Anglican Diocese of Travancore and Cochin, the Reform movement and the formation of the Mar Thoma Church and the modern divisions in the Church are all included in the scope of the author's discussion. This chapter, it must be said, makes extremely sad reading. It is doubtful if in the history of the Church in any other part of the world there have been so many causes of dispute taken to the law court as in Travancore and Cochin within the last 75 years. The Syrian Church probably holds a record—an unenviable one—in the matter of litigation. Church authorities and members alike take to the law courts as fish to water; this blight is found in all sections of the Church except perhaps the Roman Catholic. In this matter the prophet's words have come true: 'Our fathers have eaten sour grapes and our teeth are set on edge.' The dependence of the Church on state recognition, mutual excommunication by Bishops and patriarchs, setting store by property to enhance the prestige of the Church and other similar worldly means adopted by leaders of the Church in the past are some of the factors responsible for inducing a worldly and legalistic frame of mind in the rank and file of Church membership. The author will have done a service to the Church if by the cataloguing and objective description of what seems to be interminable disputes in the Church the attention of the world Church is turned to this trait in the make-up of the Kerala Christians and a sense of shame is induced in their Christian consciousness. Unless the 'devil of litigiousness' is driven out there is not much of a future for the Syrian Church in India.

3. *Indigenization.*—There is no doubt that Christians in Travancore and Cochin are rooted in the cultural soil of the country. Though they profess a religion different from that of the majority of their countrymen they are not looked upon as 'foreigners' in a cultural sense. In matters of dress, social customs, ways of thinking and pursuit of culture they are as true Indians as any of their countrymen in Kerala. In modern times the integration of Christianity with cultural patterns which owe their inspiration to non-Christian sources is gaining importance in the discussion of the ways and means of the communication of the Christian gospel. One looks with great interest and expectation, therefore, to the example of the Syrian Church in Travancore. The author has given a faithful description of the way of life of the Syrian Christians in Kerala in Part II of this book. When it comes, however, to drawing lessons from Syrian

history for present-day application the emphasis seems to be on the side of warning rather than of positive guidance. Their cultural adjustment was so perfect that for all practical purposes the Syrian Christians were a recognized part of the social hierarchy in Kerala whose dominant principle was privilege based on caste and rank in society. The Syrian Christians apparently were altogether indifferent to the duty of evangelism towards their non-Christian neighbours until the coming of the Western missionaries. Many customs and practices unworthy of the faith they professed crept into their social life and the total picture we get is not altogether an encouraging one for those who advocate wholesale adoption of cultural patterns by Christians of the countries they happen to live in. If there was one thing that saved the situation it was the influence of Christian worship. As the author says: 'There seems no doubt that it was the cultus which enabled the St. Thomas Christians to remain authentically Christian down the ages' (p. 5). But even about this it may be noted that the mode of worship of the Syrian Christians, though Eastern, has little that is distinctively Indian about it.

4. *The Faith of the St. Thomas Christians.*—In the last chapter the author gives an account of the faith of the Orthodox Church basing it on expositions of the faith published in Malayalam. The use of the title 'St. Thomas Christians' in this section as well as in certain other parts of the book is rather misleading because by this phrase the author means not the whole Syrian Church but the main branch of it which is called Jacobite and Orthodox, i.e. the two sections known popularly as the Patriarch's Party and the Catholicos' Party. The theology of the Syrian Church has been suspect for a long time on account of the Church connection at different stages of its history with the Nestorians on the one hand and the Jacobites of West Syria on the other. The author tries to remove this misconception. There has not been much theological thinking on the part of the Syrian Christians though they have been anxious to preserve intact what they believed to have been delivered to them by their fathers. In some of their beliefs as in their practices one notices the influence of Hindu ideas. This section also contains the surprising statement that 'The Syrians look for a literal bodily resurrection at the Last Day' (p. 295). Even if by 'Syrians' the author means 'the Orthodox section of the Syrian Church' it is doubtful if the statement will pass muster with their theologians! Though the liturgy of the Syrian Church contains a great deal of Scriptural material and the Eucharistic Order keeps close to the life of our Lord there are some parts in the worship of the Church in which ideas which are but loosely connected with the teaching of the New Testament have found lodgement. This is not to be wondered at when it is remembered that while the Syrian Church in Malabar had its liturgy with it for centuries together the Bible was translated into Malayalam only about a hundred years ago.

On the whole, excellent as the book is, the Church that is described in its pages looks more like a museum piece than a living and actively functioning part of the Body of Christ. This is not the author's fault; the subject of his study, by which we mean the Syrian Church in all its branches, unfortunately bears the stamp of death on it in many of its activities. Yet it is not the whole truth. The author refers here and there to signs of new life in the Church, which could have been amplified. Further if he had widened the scope of his work and described to us the workings of the spirit of God in the different sections of the Church in Kerala he would have conveyed a totally different impression of this ancient Church.

If the Syrian Church is to be more than a museum piece it is necessary that the leaders of all sections of the Church should cease from glorying in the past, and look with real concern on some of the present-day tendencies in the Church and pray for the guidance of God that she may be loyal to the Master who said 'And other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring . . . and they shall become one flock, one shepherd'.

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A Sanskrit writer even goes to the length of asking: 'How will it help a hungry man if you eat rice pudding? How will it help another man if you pray for him?' This reflects the general trend of religious thought in India. The privilege of interceding for others has not been realized or used in any large way in our country. But if . . . our love of God is real only in so far as it becomes actual in our love of man, prayer too, that highest of all religious experience, must be as much for others as for ourselves. Selfishness in prayer is the worst form of selfishness.

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THE WILLIAM CAREY LECTURE, 1957

In January, 1957, Dr. Pierce Beaver delivered the William Carey Lecture in Serampore College; this has now been published by the Baptist Mission Press, 41a Lower Circular Road, Calcutta (from whom it may be obtained). We commend this lecture to our readers and hope to give a full review in our next number.