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THE ECCLESIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

Abstract. The St. Thomas Christians are an indigenous Indian branch of Christianity that has been an integral part of the Malabar society from the beginning of the Christian Era. Since the Indian Christianity has many distinctive characteristics, it is an interesting area for theological and cultural research. The communities that belong to both the West and East Syriac Tradition call themselves “Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship.” In this paper, the genesis of those communities has been shown, as well as an outline of their cultural and ecclesial identity.

Keywords: Indian Christianity, Malabar, India, culture, inculturation, liturgy.

Streszczenie. Eklezjalna i kulturowa tożsamość indyjskich chrześcijan św. Tomasza. Chrześcijaństwo św. Tomasza stanowią rdzenną indyjską grupę wyznawców Chrystusa, która od początku ery chrześcijańskiej jest integralną częścią społeczeństwa Malabaru. Ponieważ chrześcijaństwo indyjskie ma wiele cech charakterystycznych, jest interesującym obszarem badań teologicznych i kulturowych. Społeczności należące zarówno do zachodniej jak i wschodniej tradycji syryjskiej w Indiach nazywają siebie „hinduskimi w kulturze, chrześcijańskimi w religii i orientalnymi w kulcie”. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono genezę tych wspólnot, a także zarys ich tożsamości kulturowej i kościelnej, która w wyjątkowy sposób wpisuje się w Kościół Chrystusowy jako całość.

Słowa kluczowe: chrześcijaństwo indyjskie, Malabar, Indie, kultura, inkulturacja, liturgia.

INTRODUCTION

In the Christian milieu, one can meet many communities which for some reasons can be called phenomena on the map of the whole Christian world. One of such phenomena is the Indian community called “St. Thomas Christians” or *Mar Thoma Nasrani*, which for the people of the West is still shrouded in the mystery. Even if the Indian Christianity appears in discussions among the Westerners, very often it is limited only to the community arose as a result of the evangelization of Portuguese missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries. It seems that until today too little attention is put on the communities which flourish in Kerala, in the south of Malabar. Such an approach raises objections among the Indian scholars who don’t agree with the wishful opinion of many Western researchers that the beginning of everything good in Indian Christianity should be found in the activities of the “colonial masters”. One of the authors writes as follows:

Colonial historians of India regardless of any reasonable bounds would like to expatiate on the ‘civilizing mission’ (*missio civilatrix*) of the colonial masters and to elucidate the ‘white man’s burden’ which entailed in the ‘development of underdevelopment’ of the colonies. They are not prone to concede the fact that India received Catholic faith from the preaching of an apostle of Christ before they themselves were brought to the Catholic faith. If anything good is found in India, it should have its origin from the colonial masters, they may hold¹.

The phenomenon of the *Mar Thoma Nasrani* is to be seen in the fact that their origins are ancient, date back to the apostolic times or – at least – to the 3rd century.

The aim of this study is to show the genesis of St. Thomas Christians and to outline their cultural and ecclesial identity.

¹ K.S. Mathew, “Arrival of St. Thomas and His Missions: Historiographical Approach,” in *Early Christian Communities of the St. Thomas Tradition in India*, ed. Peter Kannamphuza (Kochi: Liturgical Research Centre Publications, 2017), 52.

1. THE ORIGINS OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

The issue of the origins of Christianity in Malabar and in the Indian Subcontinent is not obvious. There are several hypotheses, some of them historically verifiable and some others must remain a part of the legends, passed down in the local traditions. One of these unverifiable hypotheses claims that the Indian Christianity was initiated by the missionary activity of St. Thomas the Apostle². Despite the lack of sources that would unequivocally confirm this genesis of the community, many researchers (especially the Indian ones) take it as a certainty³, often accusing Western critics of plain ignorance: in a substantive confrontation with Western scientists who *a priori* inscribed Thomas' origins of Christianity in India into the space of pure legend, the Indian Christians ask for hard evidence of the presence of St. Peter in Rome⁴. But the fact is that there are three traditions describing Thomas' mission to India.

The first has been based on the apocryphal work *The Acts of Judas Thomas* (3rd century)⁵. According to this document the Apostle came to India by journey overland through Persia. The expedition was to be a response to the request of King Guandaphur, who decided to bring a talented architect from Jerusalem into his kingdom. This architect was St. Thomas himself, who – after his arrival to India – received funds needed for the construction of the new palace. But, instead of construction, he distributed everything to the poor and needy people. Eventually, he explained to the king that he had built for him a wonderful palace in heaven. In a night dream the king had a vision of that building and, finally, he himself converted to Christianity. St. Thomas continued his mission in the neighbor-

² See more: Przemysław Turek, "Syriac Heritage of the Saint Thomas Christians: Language and Liturgical Tradition," *Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia* 3 (2011):115–130.

³ Xavier Kochuparampil, "The St. Thomas Christians of India: Ecumenical and Missiological Challenges," *Exchange* 25 no. 3 (1996): 243–244.

⁴ Simonton, Edward, *A Concise History of the Nasrani Christians of Kerala and the Continuation of the Church of the East in India*, <https://www.anglicanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Saint-Thomas-Paper.pdf> (accessed 18.06.2021).

⁵ Albertus Frederik Johannes Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 1962); James Montague Rhodes, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2003).

ing kingdom of the king Mazdai, where he had to be martyred in a place called Calamina. According to this tradition, the relics of the Saint were transferred to Edessa in 394⁶.

According to the second tradition, widespread mainly among Christians belonging to the Syriac communities in South India, St. Thomas arrived on the island of Socotara, and in the year 52 landed on the famous backwaters of Kerala, in the ancient port of Muzaris (today's Kranganore). During his extremely successful mission the Apostle established seven communities-Churches: in Kranganore (കൊടുങ്ങല്ലൂർ), Palayur Kottakavu (കോട്ടക്കാവ്), Kokkamangalam (:കൊക്കമംഗലം), Niranam (:നിരണം), Kollam (:കൊല്ലം), Nilakal (:നിലക്കൽ) and Palayoor (പാലയൂർ). In 72 the Apostle was martyred in Mylapore, near today's Chennai (Madras), where his tomb is venerated until today⁷.

There is one more tradition, this time patristic, which interestingly presents the very context of the mission of St. Thomas the Apostle. One can find it in a poem of St. Jacob of Sarug († 520). According to this writing, at the beginning of evangelization, just after the Pentecost, the Twelve Apostles were to cast lots about the place where they should proclaim the Good News. Thomas' fate led him to India. The apostle was the only one to disagree. He claimed that he would never share the fate of the biblical Jonah and would not go to people who worship demons and are dark both in appearance and in their hearts. Ultimately, however, Thomas was to experience the revelation of Jesus Christ himself and undertake this difficult mission⁸.

Even if historically and factually the presence of Thomas the Apostle in India cannot be proven and the above traditions seem unlikely, there are some circumstances that make this strong Indian tradition plausible. The Indian researchers refer to the following factors:

- the physical possibility to reach India: there is historical evidence that shows the regular political exchange and trade that developed especially in the first century BC. The fact that there were regular

⁶ Richard Garbe, "St. Thomas in India," *The Monist* 25 no. 1 (1915): 3-4.

⁷ Paul Pallath, *La Chiesa cattolica in India* (Roma: Mar Thoma Yogam, 2003), 3-5.

⁸ Geevarghese Panicker, "St. Thomas in India According to Jacob of Sarug," *The Harp* 2 no. 1-2 (1989): 59-64.

sea connections between the Greco-Roman world and Malabar made possible for the Apostle to come to the Subcontinent relatively easily;

- the presence of the Jewish communities: probably in the 10th century BC there was a relationship between South India and Palestine. The tradition assumes that the Hebrew colonies (some of them, for example in Kochi and Ernakulam, still exist) were founded in the time of the king Solomon. They may have become direct reason for sending the apostolic mission to these areas; the aforementioned seven Churches founded by St. Thomas, were near the Jewish colonies;
- the local traditions: the presence of Thomas in Malabar has been emphasized from immemorial times in the folk art (songs, prayers of popular piety, and later also the breviary);
- the patristic tradition: many Church Fathers speak directly or indirectly about the Indian martyrdom of St. Thomas, e.g. Ephrem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Hieronymus, Gaudentius, Paulinus of Nola, Beda the Venerable, Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great or Izydor of Seville;
- the apocryphal writings: some ancient documents such as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (3rd century) or *The Acts of Jude Thomas* (4th century) locate the mission and martyrdom of St. Thomas in India;
- the tomb of the Apostle: from the immemorial times the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle has been venerated on the hill of Mylapore near Chennai; despite the emerging historical reservations, the inhabitants of the Peninsula (Christians and others) are convinced of the authenticity of the tomb;
- the liturgical traditions: in all liturgical traditions the missionary activity of St. Thomas the Apostle is associated with India; this fact, of course, may be related to the great influence that early Christian literary works had on individual communities, but it cannot be ruled out that other factors also influenced this tradition;
- the ancient Christian community: the most important factor in favor of the apostolic origin of Christianity in South India are the

Christians themselves, who proudly call themselves “the children of St. Thomas”⁹.

The fact is that the Indian Christianity is ancient and – as mentioned above, it was certainly present there already at the end of the 2nd century, and – as noted by Philip Jenkins – other missions and monasteries followed. In 6th century India had an indigenous church with its own hierarchy¹⁰. What was that Christianity like? In what language was the liturgy performed? According to the tradition, initially it was the Jerusalem liturgy, which over time began to resemble the one celebrated by the Persian metropolitan. From the very beginning, the liturgical language was Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic). However, by embracing the Christian faith, the people of South India kept certain native customs and traditions. Hence, they often say about themselves that they are: “Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship”¹¹.

2. THE ECCLESIAL IDENTITY OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

As mentioned above, it is impossible to state unequivocally what the original Christian community of St. Thomas looked like. As for its exact origins, we move into the space of hypotheses. From some information we know that around the 4th century a merchant, Thomas of Kana (Knai), came to South India. He was the leader of a large number of Christians from Palestine (several hundred families according to some sources); until today some groups of Indian Christians are called after him “knānāya”¹². This Palestinian migration liturgically and theologically was probably as-

⁹ Pallath, *La Chiesa cattolica*, 3–9.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (Oxford: A Lion Book, 2008), 66.

¹¹ Placid Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship,” *Ostkirche Studien* 8 (1959): 82–104; Geevarghese Panicker, “The Indian Identity of Thomas Christians of India (Kerala),” *The Harp* 19 (2006): 201; Pallath, *La Chiesa cattolica*, 34–35; C.D. Sebastian, “Saint Thomas Christians of India: A Paradigm of Cultural Identity in the Eastern Christianity,” in *Philosophy, Religion, and Culture of Asian Countries*, ed. Sergey Pakhomov (St. Petersburg: University Press, 2009), 130–137.

¹² Mateusz Rafał Potoczny, „Kościół dla wybranych? O specyfice indyjskich chrześcijan knānāya,” *Teologia i człowiek* 28 no. 4 (2014): 237–257.

sociated with the developing communities in the Middle East, which quite early shaped the Syrian traditions. Therefore, it must be said that the Indian Christian communities, strengthened by the presence of the arrived confreres, have been deeply impregnated with the Syro-Oriental liturgical tradition, originating in Mesopotamia. Actually, the Church of St. Thomas very quickly became canonically dependent on the Church in Persia. It was the Assyrian patriarch who for many centuries appointed and sent Middle Eastern bishops to India. It is difficult to point out direct reasons for this tradition – the interested parties themselves claim that the primary reason was the ever-existing spiritual connection between Persia (Christianized according to the tradition by St. Thomas on his way to India and by his disciple Addai). It seems quite probable, especially since the Catholicate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon already in the 5th century was considered the center of all Churches outside the Roman Empire [the fact sanctioned in the canon 12 of the Synod of Mar Isaac in 410]¹³. The superior of the Church in India became the Archbishop of Rewardashir in the province of Fars in Iran, bearing titles such as: »Gate of India«, »Head of India«, »Metropolitan of India«, »Bishop of India«¹⁴. However, since the metropolitans usually did not speak the local languages, their duties were limited to administration of certain Sacraments or blessing the Holy Oils. The real jurisdiction over the Churches of South India was in the hands of a local priest called the »Archdeacon of all India«, whom we would compare today to a high ecclesiastical prelate. In fact, until the arrival of the first Portuguese colonizers, archdeacons exercised civil and religious care over the entire Indian Christian community¹⁵, and their supporting body was a synod called *yogam* or *palliyogam*¹⁶.

It should be noted that, through the ecclesial communion with the Patriarchate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and later Baghdad, the Church in In-

¹³ Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 266; Pallath, *La Chiesa cattolica*, 10).

¹⁴ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, v. 1 (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 267–268, 353.

¹⁵ Ronald G. Roberson, *Chrześcijańskie Kościoły Wschodnie*, transl. Krzysztof Bielawski, Daria Mionskowska, (Kraków: Homini, 2005), 85.

¹⁶ Sylvester Kanjiramukalil, *Ecclesial identity of the Malankara Catholic Church* (Vadavathoor: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, India & Bethany Publications, 2002), 53.

dia was one and undivided throughout the centuries. Actually, until the 17th century, we can speak of a single community in communion with the Church of Persia. With the arrival of the European colonizers, the cultural, liturgical, theological and canonical contrasts began to emerge more and more. Portuguese missionaries, giving various lofty reasons, began to change the liturgy and ecclesiastical discipline from Syro-Oriental to Latin and to hierarchically subordinate to the Portuguese bishop of Goa (1553). Although initially the romanization was peaceful, quickly it started to be introduced by force. Using the *sede vacante* of the metropolitan capital established in the Middle Ages in Angamaly, the Latin missionaries convened in 1599 the so-called Synod of Diamper, by which all those who would remain faithful to the old tradition were subjected *sub poena excommunicationis latae sententiae*. It was nothing but an attempt to absorb by the Latin church the ancient Syriac-founded churches in Kerala. One of the main activists in those events was the Latin archbishop of Goa, Alexio de Meneses, who among the Indian Christians remains as a symbol of European imperialism¹⁷. The Statutes of the Synod were confirmed six months later by Pope Clement VIII, who elevated Francis Ross SJ as the first the Latin bishop of St. Thomas Christians¹⁸.

As it is easy to guess, all these changes, including forceful attempts to introduce the Latin Rite, caused not only dissatisfaction but, above all, the confusion of local Christians. After unsuccessful appeals to the Pope and the Patriarch in Baghdad, and after the imprisonment of the Syrian bishop Cyril Mar Ahatallah Ibn Issa (1652), the faithful St. Thomas Christians gathered with their archdeacon at the Church of Our Lady in Mattancherry (January 3, 1653) and solemnly denounced their obedience to the Latin bishop and any Jesuit superior. The entire rite was extremely dramatic: the gathered people tied themselves to the cross with numerous ropes, lit candles and laid their hands on the Bible. This event, known as the *Koonan Kurishu Sathyam* (the Coonan Cross Oath), was nothing more than an element of defending one's identity and human dignity. Following this act, on May 22, 1653, at the church in Alangad, twelve priests laid their

¹⁷ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 148.

¹⁸ Thomas Koonammakkal, *The Church in the Churches: A Syriac Ecclesiology* (Kuravilangad: Beth Aprem Nazrani Dayra, 2018), 15.

hands on the Archdeacon, calling him from that moment “Metropolitan Thomas”. After this invalid consecration, Mar Thoma began his ordinary episcopal ministry¹⁹.

Turbulences in the Indian Church, caused by the deeds of Latin missionaries, opened a way to divisions of this previously unified community. One can even speak of horrific scenes that gave a completely different dimension to the local Christianity. The Christians who remained faithful to the Jesuit bishop wanted to preserve the Syrian tradition. Although initially it was forbidden eventually the Syro-Malabar Church was finally established. Unfortunately, she became a training ground for Latinization. Those who wanted to remain «oriental» secretly called on the bishops from the Middle East and decided to submit them to their jurisdiction (thus began the Indian chapter in the history of the West Syrian Churches). Not everyone agreed to that and in 1772 the Indian Independent Syrian Church was established in Thozhiyoor. A separate “contribution” to the split among the St. Thomas Christians was made by post-Reformation communities: as a result of their activities was the creation of several independent Churches; among them the most interesting is the Mar Thoma Church. Due to all these complexities of history, today there are the following denominations of Christians in India: the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, the Malankar Orthodox Syriac Church (the so-called Jacobites), the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, the Independent Syrian Church of Malabar, the Syro-Malankara Church of Mar Thoma and the Evangelical Church of Saint Thomas. Of course, today’s India is also a great field of evangelization for numerous post-Reformation communities and sects²⁰.

This entire mosaic finally prompts us to ask a question: what is the real ecclesial identity of St. Thomas Christians? Is it possible to speak of any identity at all? From the Western point of view, such divisions exclude a common identity. In India, however, things are different. Despite their diversity, all Christians of St. Thomas, i.e. those who refer to an ancient heritage, whether belonging to the Chaldean Church, Syro-Malankara or Syro-Malabar, have many common features that constitute the tangible heritage

¹⁹ Pallath, *La Chiesa cattolica*, 93–96.

²⁰ Koonammakkal, *The Church in the Churches*, 16.

of an ecclesial identity born in a common past²¹. The first is the reference to the oriental roots: “oriental in worship”. Regardless of the denomination, it is extremely important for all heirs of Thomas’ heritage that their faith was built on the tradition of the Syriac Fathers, which in an extraordinary way fit into the cultural context of their previous lives. Hence, they say that they are Christians of the Church of India: completely independent and different from the faithful of the other Christian Churches. Their ecclesial identity is strongly linked with the cultural identity to which the next section of this study will be devoted.

3. THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

The culture and inculturation or assimilation to the local culture, was always a distinctive characteristic of Christianity. Geevarghese Panicker wrote an outstanding paper regarding the culture and cultural identity of the Indian Christians, so we can omit here some general reflections. It should be noted, however, that St. Thomas Christians form the perfect example of the assimilation to milieu: remaining Indian in their way of life, they are Christian in faith, and they create a very indigenous group of Indians. The scholars note, that those people have also been loyal to both the Christian ideals and the Homeland, the “Mother India” which culture was always their heirloom²².

From the very beginning, since the Gospel reached the Indian Subcontinent, for the local people Christianity was a “way of life” (*margam*), which was to ensure their salvation and lead them to the eternal life. This »way of life« was at the same time deeply rooted in the context of life of St. Thomas’ communities²³. This cultural uniqueness and, at the same time, the identity of St. Thomas Christians shows – in a very interesting way – the sign they use to identify their belonging, i.e the so-called “Saint Thomas Cross” (which has been borrowed from the Persian Christians and some-

²¹ Koonammakkal, *The Church in the Churches*, 16.

²² Panicker, “The Indian Identity,” 202.

²³ Paul Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage of the Syro-Malabar Church. Shadows and Realities* (Changanacherry: HIRS Publications, 2019), 15.

times is called the “Persian Cross”). The Indian Christians gave to it an extremely dynamic interpretation. At the top of the empty cross one can find a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit that brought Christianity to India. The cross itself is rooted in the lotus flower, which is one of the symbols of India – this representation is to show that over the centuries Christianity has truly become an essential component of India’s religious heritage, and now it is not something alien but an element of their multicultural identity. The crossbeams are crowned with blooming buds, which in turn indicate, on the one hand, the truth that the “way of life” proposed by Jesus Christ is the only sure path leading to salvation, to a new life. However, these blooming buds make also a proof that Christianity rooted in Indian culture is so embedded in the local context that it already bears concrete fruit²⁴.

As for the specific cultural elements that in the history have become characteristic of Indian Christianity, they are mainly associated with worship. Although in the sacred architecture of today the Indian churches reflect the Western architectural trends, mainly inspired by Portuguese heritage, in the past Christians of St. Thomas used the heritage based on Hindu architecture adapted to their own kind of cult – very often the churches from outside did not differ from commonly known Hindu temples²⁵. Currently, there is an increasing tendency to build churches filled with the Indian vision of theology and reflect the local aesthetic sensitivity, which is not always understandable from the Western point of view²⁶. Also some representations of Jesus Christ are modeled on the traditional Indian art.

The cultural identity of St. Thomas Christians concerns also the way of the administration of the sacraments. In the past, especially before the Synod of Diamper, the liturgy of the Indian Church was characterized by numerous local features. For example, the local Christians, before entering the church, had a custom (like the Hindu) to take a bath and put on clean clothes. After crossing the threshold of the temple, they prostrated and kissed the floor. The lay faithful were the habit of participating with

²⁴ Varghese Pathikulangara, *Mar Thomma Margam. A New Catechism for the Saint Thomas Christians of India* (Kottayam: Denha Services, 1989), 10–12.

²⁵ Kanjiramukalil, *Ecclesial identity*, 53.

²⁶ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 32–34.

clergy in the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours (many communities keep this attitude until today).

It is important to note that the Syrian Christians of Malabar stood next to the Brahmins in the social scale, therefore they kept several customs which were traditionally part of the ancient priest caste²⁷. As in Brahmanism, for example, the Christians had an interesting practice related to the birth of a child: 36 hours after the birth, the father prepared a mixture of honey and herbs, which he put in the mouth of the newborn, and then whispered the words *Maran İšo Mšīha* ("Our Lord Jesus Christ") in his ear along with the utterance of the baby's name. In addition, on the 28th day of child's life, black thread was tied on the boy's belt, and six months after the birth, the *annaprasnam* ritual, i.e. feeding the child with boiled rice, was performed. Also the giving names were basically taken from the saints of the Church, but Indianized; e.g. Zacharias was Cherian or Kurian; Joseph – Ayupu or Jausep; Matthew – Matai or Matan and Thomas – Umman or Thomman²⁸.

St. Thomas Christians adopted also of the matter of the Eucharist, which was prepared from what was available. For example, until the arrival of the Portuguese, rice bread and palm wine were used, and later forbidden²⁹.

Another local custom was the education system based on the *Malphana* (teacher) institution, which we can compare to the institution of Hindu guru. In the case of the Christians such a *Malphana* was the elderly priest whose task was to prepare a candidate for the priesthood. Many local customs concerned also the habits related to the marriage, as the arrangement, the solemn engagement, the blessing of the sari³⁰. As Panicker notes:

[...] during the night previous to the marriage it is necessary that the couple should bathe. Before the bath the bridegroom has to be ceremoniously shaved by a barber. Songs commemorating the origin and privileges of the Syrian Christians are sung before and after the bath. The nails of toes and

²⁷ Panicker, "The Indian Identity," 203.

²⁸ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 16–17.

²⁹ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 18–20.

³⁰ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 22, 24–26.

fingers of the bride and the bridegroom must be painted with the juice of the shrub *mailanchi*. [...] In the church the bridegroom ties *Thali* or *Minnu* which is blessed by the priest round the neck of the bride. The cross-made of 21 small gold balls attached inside a small pear-shaped ornament of god called *Minnu*, distinguishes the Christians from the Hindu Thali³¹.

In the case of sacred oils, the palm oil was also used [there are no olives in India]³².

The cultural identity manifested itself also in the rituals related to the Christian death and funeral. One can find among others the 40-days fasting after death, the ritual washing 2 weeks after the death of people who may have been in contact with the deceased³³.

The rituals related to the any celebration were also modeled on the Hindu rituals, as – for example – the usage of umbrellas, instruments, lamps, etc³⁴.

One should also mention the abstinence and asceticism, which are very characteristic of religious life in India. According to the Hindu concept, repentance is necessary to achieve the final state of perfection. The methods to achieve the final scope are meditation and mortification of the body. St. Thomas Christians also devoted a lot of time to the asceticism: more than half of the days of the year were Lenten days [Lent of the Annunciation and Nativity – 24 days, Lent of Nineveh – 3 days, Lent – 50 days, Fasting of the Apostles after Pentecost – 50 days, Lent of the Assumption – 14 days, Lent of the Birth of Mary – 7 days /for women only/, Lent of the Transfiguration – 14 days; apart from that, on Wednesdays and Fridays of the whole year, eve of great holidays, etc.]³⁵.

One more important characteristic is made by the clothes. The St. Thomas Christians usually dress like Hindus. As noted by Panicker, a white loin cloth “is fastened round the waste and reaches down to the heels. A towel is thrown over the shoulders. [...] Women generally used to wear

³¹ Panicker, “The Indian Identity,” 203–204.

³² Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 26–27.

³³ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 27–28.

³⁴ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 28–29.

³⁵ Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage*, 29–31.

a close-fitting jacket, a piece of cloth tied round the waste reaches down to the ankles. A fan like appendix is arranged at the back. This manner of dress is now being displaced by the use of sarees. When going to church or to any public place the women cover themselves with a white muslin cloth veil. [...] The men used to go out naked from their waist upwards except on solemn occasions when some would put on a loose ornamented chemise. They used to bore the lobes of the ears for wearing ornaments”³⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

The indigenous Indian Christianity, i.e. the Syriac speaking Christianity, in its ecclesial dimension is closely related to the Metropolitan Cities of Persia and Syria. Even if the communities are divided into West and East Syriac traditions, the Christians proudly underline their Middle Eastern provenience. This heritage concerns the liturgical and theological tradition. But in the customs of popular piety St. Thomas Christians are deeply rooted in the local Indian culture which make this branch of the Church very unique.

In the past the Indian Churches suffered huge impact of Latinization, which tried to deprive the local Christianity of its original face. Fortunately, this process has been stopped and now we can notice the renaissance of the forgotten heritage. However, the real problem of today is the secularization which also in India incrementally pushes the religious life back which can provoke the annihilation not only of Christianity but also of its original Indian face. This state requires, therefore, the further studies which will help St. Thomas Christians to keep their ecclesial and cultural identity and to keep the rest of the world aware of that unique and yet wonderful part of the Church as a whole.

³⁶ Panicker, “The Indian Identity,” 204.

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