

**The Organizational Solidarity of the Christian
Community in India, both with the Orthodox
Churches and Western Christianity
(Churches of Reformation), in a path way to
Ecumenical union**

**印度基督教的組織團結，東正教和
西方基督教走向合一之道**

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[ABSTRACT] The Church in India has had a long tradition of ecumenism and also stands out as front-runner in the ecumenical journey. Christianity came to India in an ecumenical form - in terms of One Church, socially conscious, open to all faiths and persuasions and affirming the unity of God's creation.

According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus, came to India in 52 A.D. and initiated a church. It was truly ecumenical in the sense that it was not a denominational church and it had a very open and friendly relationship with the predominantly Hindu society. In feudal central Kerala, the society at that time was dominated by upper castes and hence the early church was very much upper caste in nature. However St. Thomas's ministry was not

confined to upper castes alone. It transcended the barriers of caste as is visible in his ministry in Tamil Nadu (south east of India). So it was ecumenical in essence and in practice.

I approach the Topic in three steps. Firstly, I would briefly present the history of Christianity in India, its political social status which gave a way for spreading Christian faith among the high caste Hindus, who did not change their caste practices even after conversion to Christianity and how the social structure changed after the arrival of Western Christianity.

Next, I would briefly discuss about the role of Orthodox Church in India along with Western Christianity, especially the Churches of Reformation that laid the foundations of the expressions of wider Christian Communalism.

Thirdly, I would like to focus on the Ecumenical dialogue happening in India in the Asian Context, which creates a dialectic space to understand what they have in common and only then weigh the significance of their differences. Presently, the wholeness of the life of the Church and salvation is diverted more towards the social/political status.

To conclude, I would like to speak on how cultural assimilation is one aspect that must become an important part of how Christian churches can express its belief structure in the language of the local culture, taking into consideration the context of Asia. It has been this dichotomy introduced between the gospel and a culture that has led many to view Christianity as a “foreign religion” and a threat to local stability and harmony.

[摘要] 印度教會有著悠久的基督教傳統，並且在基督徒合一的旅程中脫穎而出。基督教以一種普世的形式來到印度——就一個教會而言，具有社會意識，對所有信仰和信念開放，並肯定上帝創造的統一。

本文分三部分。首先，簡介印度基督教的歷史，它在政治社會上的地位，它為在高等種姓印度教徒中傳播基督教信仰提供了一種方式，他們即使在皈依基督教之後也沒有改變他們的種姓習俗，而隨著西方基督教的到來，社會結構也作出了改變。

第二部分簡要討論東正教在印度的角色，它聯同西方基督教，尤其是新教，為更廣闊的基督教奠定了基礎。

第三部分集中討論印度在亞洲環境中的基督教對話，這種對話創造了一個辯證空間，可以理解它們的共同點，然後權衡它們之間的差異。目前，教會生活的全部性和救贖更多地轉向社會和政治。

Introduction

There are certainly challenges involved in ecumenism. The article here analyses a few contextual problems involved in ecumenical relationships. Christianity came to India in an ecumenical form - in terms of One Church, socially conscious, open to all faiths and persuasions and affirming the unity of God's creation. It was truly ecumenical in the sense that it was not a denominational church and it had a very open and friendly relationship with the predominantly Hindu society. Focus has been given to the particular tradition. In order to look through the contextual issues it is significant that one has to present the perspectives of the subject in the particular tradition.

The three major ecclesiastical traditions found established in India over the centuries, beginning from the first to the twentieth, are Syrian Church, Roman Catholic Church, and various Protestant Churches. And in reference to evangelization of India through the centuries: "It is generally recognized that evangelism came to India in three waves: Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant. During the first century apostolic evangelism through St. Thomas resulted in many high caste conversions, mainly in Kerala. The Catholic wave of evangelism resulted in the conversion of the many castes, especially of the lower ones. In the Protestant wave of evangelism, especially during the colonial days, most of the converts came from the lowest classes like the harijans and from the tribals of North - East India."

Even the secular historians in India acknowledge that Christianity is one of the ancient religions of India. So an Indian Church, even though it was not an autonomous one- as it received its bishops from the Church of the East and used Syriac as its ecclesiastical language, had been in existence since the earliest days of Christianity when most of the European countries were still pagan. Though the early Indian Church was rather inactive in its evangelistic efforts to measure by today's standards, no doubt, it had made a good impact upon the non-Christian environment because the Indian Christians of those days were accepted by the Hindus as equivalent to one of their higher castes." The early Indian Christians had started a theological expression of Indianization even at these earliest stages of Christianity. That Christian community could make a sense of Christian presence felt in a predominantly non-Christian world, so much so that this small Christian community could survive through the centuries till the arrival of western Christianity towards the close of the fifteenth century.

History of Christianity in India

Indian society which is multicultural, multilingual and multireligious bringing about a melting pot or a cultural mosaic has formed itself as a unit by taking elements from diverse entities and also made its contribution for the emergence of several cultural fabrics in the world. The Syrian Christians who trace their origin to the first century A.D. constitute one such community which has played an important role in the process of nation building.¹

Kerala - a beautiful land caped in greenery, situated to the west of the captivating Western Ghats at the southern tip of the Indian sub-continent. Long lines of palm-fringed, lush green paddy fields, beautiful mountains with rivers streaming down from them, placid lakes and backwaters. This land that epitomes the splendor of nature was renowned for its spices even before the time of Christ. This brought merchants from across the seven seas, leading to the region becoming a meeting point for different religions. Christianity and Islam reached Kerala in their nascent stages and ran deep roots, even as the prevalence of Buddhism and Jainism was already strong.

This, centuries later, still is the land of churches, mosques and temples, where calls to prayer resonate five times every day from mosques, where the festivals of the Christian community spread a festive mood and where the 'Gayathri' mantra from temples invigorate the mind. Kerala, the valley of Western Ghats, is known to foreign traders as the Malabar Coast. This beautiful land surrounded by mountains became the birthplace of the Malankara church, one of the first Christian churches. It is believed that St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, is the founder of Malankara church.

¹ Lazar, Dr Joseph K. *Syrian Christians and Nation Building, A case study of Kerala*. IRISH, Tellicherry, 2012, 8.

St. Thomas reached India at the decree of Christ after his resurrection. When Christ commanded his disciples to spread his word across the world, they took lots to decide their destined lands and it fell to St. Thomas's destiny to scour the pagan lands of India. At first he was reluctant to embark upon the journey to India due to the distance and unfamiliar language. But Christ appeared and persuaded him. It is believed that St. Thomas set out to India on the ship of a merchant named Laban. Laban was on a mission to find an architect to build a palace for an Indian king, Gondoforos. Jesus appeared before Laban and told him that he had a slave to sell and that the slave was an excellent architect. It was St. Thomas whom he referred to. In his 20 year tenure in Kerala, he established seven churches and a chapel popularly known Arappalli. ²

The one who questioned Jesus' resurrection when first told of it and later when Christ appeared before him proclaimed "My Lord and my God", St. Thomas, is the epitome of faith. Many ancient families of Kerala became staunch believers of Christ, under the influence of this great man. Those who became believers under the influence of St. Thomas later united to form a Church and were known as the Malankara Church as St. Thomas had started his gospel work from Malankara. Some historians are of the opinion that the name Malankara was given to the church as it was the church of a land surrounded by 'mala' which means 'mountain'. ³

After his work in Kerala he moved to the eastern coastal regions of India and from there to China. Later he returned to India and continued preaching the gospel. On 18 December AD 72 he was stabbed to death at Chinnamala in Mylapore near Chennai by hostile

² Lazar, Dr Joseph K. *Syrian Christians and Nation Building, A case study of Kerala*. IRISH, Tellicherry, 2012, 32.

³ Thomas, Meledath Kurian. *The Way of St. Thomas: a brief history of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church*, MOC Publications, Kottayam, 2012, 16-17.

Hindu Brahmins. The small hillock where he was killed is now known as St. Thomas Mount and a shrine has been built there. It was with a life full of sufferings and sacrifices and finally through martyrdom that the apostle laid the foundation for Christianity in Kerala. The growth and development of the first Christian church was centered on the seven churches established by St. Thomas. After the death of the Apostle the church was led by the priests whom he had directly ordained. The followers were internally referred as Nazranis. They were proud of their Christian Origins from St. Thomas, the Apostle.⁴ Socially they were well placed in the Brahmin centered Jyathy-Caste System. They were treated in the privileged caste of Vysya, the trader, under the law of Kuladharmā. They were allied with the Church of the East, otherwise referred as the Persian Church. It is generally presumed that they were accustomed to the sacraments of the Church of the East but making it more fitting into the concept of sacredness that they have imbibed from the native cultures. The arrival of the Portuguese and allegiance with them initially founded to be fruitful by the Nazranis but shortly they realized the danger which resulted in open resistance with the Roman Catholic missionaries and the Portuguese. The Nazranis drew out their own identity as *the way and lineage of St. Thomas. The way and lineage of St. Thomas*, this can be considered as the symbol of the indigenous Christianity in India.⁵

The divisions that took place in the Kerala church are not much doctrinal, but they are political and cultural issues. The coming of the Portuguese and later of the English, and along with them the arrival of the western missions were occasions of divisions in the Kerala church. We have assumed different cultures from the missionaries

⁴ Thomas, Meledath Kurian. *The Way of St. Thomas: a brief history of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church*, MOC Publications, Kottayam, 2012, 21.

⁵ Thomas, Meledath Kurian. *The Way of St. Thomas: a brief history of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church*, MOC Publications, Kottayam, 2012, 18-19.

and allowed them to play a decisive role in the church. Due to this, the Kerala church is divided into Syrians and Non-Syrians or Romo Syrians, Malankara Rite, Cananites, Latins, C.S.I., etc.

The nineteen hundred years of evangelization in India have produced the following: (I) Syrian (Eastern Rite): Chaldean Syrian Church, Jacobite Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, Mar Thomas Syrian Church and St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India; (2) Roman Catholic Church: Roman Catholic (Latin Rite), Syro Malabar Catholic, and Syro- Malankara; and (3) more than 80 Protestant Churches. All these churches have their own evangelistic programmes and missionary projects. But in spite of the co-operative efforts of all Christian churches and agencies, the evangelistic task remains the same and it is more challenging today.⁶

The failures of evangelization are again due to some practical hindrances from within, first the Hindu concept of Santana dharma and their view of an equality of all religions do not require them to become Christians - because Hinduism is as good as Christianity itself. Secondly, for Hindus conversion is regarded as a social and civil event. They understand religion in terms of samaja dharma and so by the time a convert takes baptism he ceases to be a member of the Hindu community and becomes a member of the Christian community. So baptism is a social hindrance. Thirdly, there are a few legal hindrances too, such as that the Hindu legal privileges will be applicable to converts to other religions; the Hindu Laws concerning caste system, joint family, inheritance make the converts to other religions as outcaste people. Fourthly, in a democratic country number does matter a lot. A Hindu who is converted to another religion may weaken the Hindu strength in the realm of politics.

⁶ K. V. Mammen, *Randayiram Varsham Pinnitta Malankara Sabha*, (Mal.), Kottayam, 1992, 112.

Fifthly, the Hindus very often understand conversion in terms of conversion by coercion and proselytization. So conversion is legally forbidden in at least two of the Indian states. And sixthly, a few hindrances with special reference to evangelistic work amongst the Islamic faith may be mentioned here, for example, a common Judaeo-Christian heritage, the Trinitarian concept of Christian theology, and the age-old conflicts of crusades.

Ecumenism in Orthodox Perspectives

During the early days, the Ecumenical Movement was understood by its leaders as a movement of the churches and Christians for the unity not only of the church but of the whole creation, a movement for peace, justice and the harmony of the whole creation. It tries to break down the walls of division and separation. Ecumenism is an effort to manifest one's concern about people, about their social, economic and cultural life, about their environment, about their physical and spiritual well-being. Churches interested in ecumenical movement and ecumenism in India must think in terms of unity of vision and plurality of action.

The first and foremost aim of the ecumenical movement has been to bring Christians of all traditions together. The ideological thrust of this move is that God is the creator of this universe and all the people. Ecumenism must cross ecclesiastical boundaries and start thinking about the well-being of all the people, people of all faiths and ideologies. This, in essence, would be the wider meaning of ecumenism.

The great scandal of the Church is its divisions. One must also note that it is difficult to bring the leaderships of these 'churches' together for a dialogue and understanding of its essential unity,

because the allegiance and often the permission to be sought for it, are from outside. The Indian churches are more related to their missionary parent churches in other countries than to other churches within our own country.

The word, concept and movement - 'ecumenism' is not anything new to the Christian churches or in the secular discussions. It is an established understanding that the very concept, and so is the word, too derived from the Greek words 'oikoumenei' and 'oikos', which literally means 'the inhabited world' or 'house' respectively. It refers to the "the whole of the inhabited world".⁷

In Orthodox perspective 'ecumenism' never understood as pseudo homogeneity where every ecclesial entity is brought together under one umbrella. In this unity there is a danger involved of the annihilation of the weaker or of the un-assumed. Here possibly the feebler one will lose its identity in getting forcefully amalgamated to the stronger. Whereas 'ecumenism' is the realm where every single identities, no matter, whether it is weaker or stronger, will be acknowledged for its existence.

Expressions of Unity

It is clear that 'ecumenism' means unity. Paulose Mar Gregorios highlights three aspects for unity to find its expressions. Those three aspects are: a) Basic unity in faith and tradition b) unity in mutual love and care and c) unity expressed through Eucharistic fellowship between national and regional churches.⁸

⁷ M. A. Brown, *et.al.*, "Ecumenical Movement", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 5, Second Edition*, Edited by Berard L. Marthaler, *et.al* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 71.

⁸ Paulos Mar Gregorios, "Ecumenism- An Orthodox Perspective" in *On Ecumenism*, edited by Jacob Kurian (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 202.

Unity in faith obviously means the faith the different traditional strands share as it is pronounced in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed as the "oneness of commitment to Father, Son Incarnate and Holy Spirit". This also means the unity in the one apostolic faith of the early Church. The second aspect 'unity in love' should not be understood in a measurable external criteria but it means that we care for each other and that we pray and work for the mutual welfare. And again, the Eucharistic union does not imply the unity with a pyramidal hierarchy but it is the sharing of the one apostolic faith as stated earlier. One cannot consider this unity in any sense of pretention or through any diplomatically coined agreements. As Thomas FitzGerald explains, "the reconciliation of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the divided churches cannot come about through a disregard for the truth of the Apostolic Faith in all its richness and fullness. True Christian unity cannot be founded upon falsehood on a cosmetic agreement, which pretends that there is agreement on essential issue."⁹

Dialogue in Perspectives

The Churches under the umbrella of ecumenical organizations and bilaterally engage in dialogues. Almost all the Christian churches have gone a long way with dialogues and dialogical theology for the time has acquired a matured position as well. Like any other branches of theology naturally dialogue for its purpose and meanings has diverse perspectives too. Dialogue, according to Paulos Mar Gregorios, is not mere conversations across the table, but it is, "a process in which people seek to transcend the boundaries of their own limited understanding of reality in order to become more open to the truth through listening to, and conversing with one's dialogue

⁹ Thomas FitzGerald, "How to Understand Christian Unity (Ecumenism) In relation to Orthodox Identity" in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism*, edited by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *et.al.*, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 15.

partner.”¹⁰ Thus dialogues are not supposed to mean to impose our ideas on others but it is the occasion of our mutual learning.

The basis for all the dialogical principles is the shared faith of all the Christian churches. As Paulos Mar Gregorios rightly put this across as, “we ought to be grateful that all the Christians do believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this is only what makes ecumenism possible.”¹¹

Doctrinal Bases for the Ecumenical Relations

It is quite clear that the shared faith for unity should be the belief in Holy Trinity and the acknowledgement of the truth of the incarnation of the Word of God. This certainly serves as the doctrinal foundation for the ecumenical relations. Further to this, elaborations are needed. The recent Orthodox perspectives developed in the ecumenical theology explore more into the authority of the methodology based on the writings of the early Christian Teachers of faith. Daniel Buda, a recent Orthodox ecumenist brings clarity to this ecumenical methodology; for his findings are based on the dialogical attempts of the early Christian Fathers, their struggles for unity and their refutations against any kind of isolations.¹² This is a completely different perspective of ecumenical theology. Many a times, the ecclesiastical histories focus on the divisions proposed by the early Church Fathers but here we see a different reading of the Church Fathers, which is in the perspectives of reconciliation.

¹⁰ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Religion and Dialogue* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 171.

¹¹ Paulos Mar Gregorios, “Some Basic Principles of Ecumenism”, in *On Ecumenism*, edited by Jacob Kurian (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 17.

¹² Daniel Buda, “Foundations for Ecumenism in Patristic Theology”, in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism*, edited by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *et.al.*, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 69-76.

This perspective of reconciliation which is to be employed in the reading of the early Christian Fathers is clearly explained by Nicholas Sagovsky as, "...to understand the 'life-world' of the early Christian communities, it was necessary to look not only at the Hellenistic background suggested by the use of the very word *koinonia*, but also at the Jewish tradition in which Jesus and the early Christians were formed, which was a tradition of covenant."¹³ Thus the Patristic interpretations are not based on their Hellenistic backgrounds but their bases on the Hebrew Scriptures too have played a role. This reconciliatory perspective should work as the Patristic basis for ecumenism and dialogue.

Contextual Problems in Ecumenical Relations

It is quite humane that for any good works there will be coexistence of unavoidable evils. The reasons for the hindrances in ecumenical movements might be diverse. It might be worth exploring a few aspects of prime significances.

Proselytizing against the Spirit of Ecumenical Relations

One of the vehement stumbling blocks of the past was the interests of particular churches in proselytizing. In fact, it appears that the sharpness of it has got diminished in the recent years. But in the general religious spheres the concept for its dynamism is getting revisited. This has been made clear in one of the recent sociological readings of the religions, where it has been stated that, "...the church's traditional posture is one in which evangelism, and

¹³ Nicholas Sagovsky, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198.

proselytizing is seen as at least one central component of the mission of the church.”¹⁴

Overemphasizing of the Particular Identities

It is significant that one has to maintain the strength of the particular identities. All the same, sometimes, the emphasis given to the identities can become counter-productive. This may sometimes slowly lead to confessionalism. If the people in leadership are holding onto the identity beyond what would be natural, it will end up in indoctrination; which will make a generation blind. This could even result in a false activism, which cannot be creative. This aspect has been elaborately subjected to studies by Roger Trig, who confirms this wrong way of promoting activism.¹⁵ Animosity and intolerances will be the outcome of it. There will not be initiatives for mutual learnings.

Uncontrollable Influences of Social Media

One may probably think on what way social media can become a challenge for the ecumenical endeavors. This is an age of social media. It goes without saying that social media could be used for constructive and positive aspects. It can be hugely destructive as well. The freedom and possibilities of interpreting an event or concept has now become handy for anybody. As if we understand in the postmodern philosophy there are no particular centers in the present day. Every single point can become a vibrant centre point. This has now been proved by the interpretative potential of the social media. And so itself, a wrong hand handling this would only give

¹⁴ Elmer J. Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Publishers, 2014), 30.

¹⁵ Roger Trigg, *Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2007), 98-112.

erroneous and detrimental interpretations. Elaborate studies have been carried out in this area to bring out the damage that the wrong exercises of social media can make in the society. Actions, campaigns and events can be wrongly interpreted. The responsible persons in the Church will not have any good control on any of these and a wrong interpretation can give detrimental results.

Selected Issues in the Particular Contexts of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

Contexts and backgrounds of diverse traditions cannot be the same. And so itself, the issues in particular traditions too will be different.

The Question of 'Eucharistic Hospitality'

In general ecumenical dialogues and approaches a coined ecumenical friendly phrase exists called, 'Eucharistic Hospitality'. By this, two Churches in dialogue, in case of celebrating the Holy Eucharist together, as a matter of hospitality and courtesy, by applying the principle of economy, should offer Holy Communion to the other. This is considered to be doctrinally and practically unacceptable in the Orthodox traditions. Catholic Church even though, in principle, does not agree with this concept, has a rather lenient approach. According to Cardinal His Eminence Walter Kasper:

“...The question of Eucharistic hospitality has arisen in some of the dialogues, doubtless in response to serious pastoral concerns. However, Catholic reluctance on this matter itself expresses concerns about a common doctrinal understanding of the Eucharist as sacrament of faith, and about the inner connection between Eucharistic

communion and ecclesial communion agreement on these unresolved questions is achieved will the issues of Eucharistic hospitality and Eucharistic sharing be capable of solution; this may indeed be an incentive to continue and intensify our dialogues.”¹⁶

Here the Cardinal takes a position that this kind of hospitality can be a starting point for the future effective and doctrinal collaborations. Eucharistic Communion, according to the Orthodox Tradition, is something that ought to be achieved in the culmination of the Dialogues. To that level of *koinonia* that the churches are expected to converge. Here offering of the communion as part of hospitality will be completely unacceptable. This can only be addressed through prolonged dialogues. There are no shortcuts about this. This can be understood as a conservative approach. But in dialogical principles, the Orthodox churches would like to see their sister churches taking this in the good spirit of respect. Say for instance, if one of our friends would have difficulty in freely offering something because of their own highly personal reasons, it is again only a matter of courtesy that in the common encounter that aspect is to be respected. Whereas if we are to interpret this as conservatism it is the spirit of dialogue that would get damaged.

Local and Hierarchical Ecumenism

The lack of local ecumenism is one of the prevalent issues in the Orthodox churches. It is true that in the communities a strong ‘dialogue of life’ exist. This is especially visible in a community where there exists a coexistence of diverse religious and denominational presence. When a person or family in the neighborhood is in need people would not naturally think of their

¹⁶ Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2009), 192-193.

caste, creed, denomination or religion. This phenomenon is what is referred to above as 'dialogue of life'. This kind of naturally strong bond is not seems to be existing when it comes to the formal ecumenical relations in the local level. These good effects of dialogue of life and the consciously separating of the relations in the local ecumenical bodies have been discussed by Michael Kinnamon.¹⁷ It is quite true that in the hierarchical strands, cordial, formal, diplomatic and effective relations are possible and it exist too. When it comes to the local parishes, the hierarchy does not seem to be that enthusiastic in offering their support. There are people who would critically approach in finding the reason for this as; it is the insecurity of the clergy lot that they will lose their flocks. Again, a counter argument is that a pastor who offers meaningful pastoral services to the flock will only have the confidence in promoting the local ecumenism. As a good pastor's flock will not leave him or her.

Factional Feuds

As a matter of self-criticism, it is unquestionable truth that the Orthodox Church in India has caught up in the complexity of factional feud. Several decades have been passed now the Church is carrying on with this unresolved issue. Here one could see longstanding issues of the question of identity and definition of relations with one of its sister Churches. The Church has sought a 'mission of help' from one of the sister Oriental Orthodox Churches. But this mission of help has cost the Church its autocephaly. It is natural that there will be different interpretations of this situation. In any case, it is an established fact that this feud is drastically resulting

¹⁷ Michael Kinnamon, *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?: Questions for the Future of Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 38.

in the spraining of the Christian witness. In fact, this internal and factional dispute has destructively started affecting the ecumenical witness of the Church. Many of the Christian churches, if not all, have now started viewing these two factions as two different churches. Only effective and strategic plans in great Christian spirit can resolve this issue. The common public and the own members, especially through the unruly communications through the social media has made worsen the situation.

Ecumenism as a new road to the reunion

The world is moving towards a “global village.” The rapid growth in the field of transportation and communication has accelerated this process. At the very same time, we can see signs of division and alienation. The increasing gap between the haves and have-nots, corruption in every field of life, etc., contribute much to this separation. It is in such a situation that the church has to seriously consider and redefine her role in such a society. It is here that the church has to stand as the example of unity. Therefore, she has to come up for the common weal of the whole mankind through active ecumenical activities. Her role is not to divide humanity into many groups, but to unite it into one and thus to lead the human kind into the love of God.

In the Indian context, the Church cannot close her eyes to this most important mission. India is a land of different religions. Evidently, the disunity among Christians is a big scandal in the eyes of the non-Christians. Due to this very fact, our Christian witnessing loses authenticity. Whenever the non-Christians look at us, they see always mutually fighting groups. Through our actions, we become antiwitnesses of what we preach. In order to realize the unity of churches, all churches should have the willingness to work for it. The

"Tanqebbar Manifest", published at the end of the dialogue between the South Indian Church and the Anglican Church, explains a very relevant matter regarding the ecumenical activities. "... but the unfortunate disunity and division among us make us incapable and incompetent to fulfill this task. To a great extent, we are not responsible for this disunity; rather it is imposed on us from outside. But we do not like to continue in this situation."¹⁸ Seeing that this disunity is improper and detrimental to the church, Christ's body, all should try to change this pathetic situation. As the Kerala churches originated from the same root, it is possible to strengthen their communion. Even though there are differences in the teachings, areas of co-operation can be found out and implemented.

The Orthodox Churches and the Unity of Churches

Malankara Orthodox Church always had the concept that there should be a wider unity of churches with mutual understanding, mutual dialogues for unity, thus to reach full communion. But it had its own limitations. With this aim in mind, the Malankara Orthodox Church took the initiative to form a meeting place of unity of the oriental orthodox churches. The Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church had its dialogue, but have not yet reached the communion of celebrating the Holy Eucharist together. The Orthodox Church does not have sacramental communion with the Protestant churches. But both of them enter into dialogues in order to find out the areas of consensus and co-operation. The Malankara Orthodox churches have the opinion that there should be perfect unity and common Christian witnessing. According to them, "Our faith must be appealing to today's man. We have to reintroduce the Christian faith considering

¹⁸ Cf. Al-Deen Noor, Hana S., and John Allen Hendricks. *Social Media: Usage and Impact*, Lexington Books, 2011, 27-45.

the problems faced by modern man".¹⁹ For this, the Orthodox Church sees the unity of churches as an essential step to be taken. Therefore, it exhorts its faithful to pray that the scandal of division in the one Church of Christ be removed and the perfect unity of churches be attained in the time and manner Christ wishes, and thereby the whole world may believe in Christ".

Today, the orthodox churches are in good relationship with other St. Thomas Christians of Kerala. They participate actively in the Unity Octave prayers and special welfare activities. They also take interest in sending candidates for priestly training in the Catholic seminaries. The meeting of the Catholicos with the Pope in 1983 helped a lot to intensify the relationship between the two churches.²⁰

Some Positive Elements for Asian Ecumenical Activities

Theologically, historically and culturally, the issues before our churches are not always the same as those facing the churches in the west. It will be foolish to see the European problem against our situations, or to accept their solutions as our solutions. The discussions in Uppsala or in Vatican II can be helpful to us. But when we come to specific issues, it is a matter we have to work out primarily in Asian context in the light of our history, culture and mission. The way to Christian unity is to work out an ecclesiology specifically for the church in Asia. We cannot give any blueprint for Christian unity in Asia but we can raise some questions to find out a way. Some of these questions are:

¹⁹ Chediath Geevarghese, *Keralathile Kristiya Sabhakaral*, Kerala, Malayalam. 2010, 210

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

1. The rediscovery of the unity of history,
2. An analysis of the causes of divisions,
3. Understanding of unity in relation to the mission of the church,
4. Certain trends in the ecumenical discussions on the unity of the church those are relevant to us.

Asia with its ancient cultures, heritage, diversity and richness - the cradle of a majority of religions in the world - seems to have lost its soul, as modernity rejects the traditional, as old customs give way to the new and as ancient philosophies recede to the background and technological advances take over. The Asian turmoil is manifested by poverty, the market economy, globalization, authoritarian regimes and hegemony of nations over others which further give rise to the continuing violation of human rights, the rise of religious fundamentalism and other forms of oppression with the minorities, women and children as primary victims, not to mention the environment.

Ecumenism and the ecumenical movement in Asia, which according to some is facing a crisis. The movement is an especially important one in Asia, where Christians are a minority in most countries, underscoring the need to work together if Christianity is to have an impact on the continent as a whole. The missionary movement, which converted oppressed and marginalized groups in Asia to Christianity, made an impact on the Asian ecumenical movement in two ways: first, it brought inherited denominational identities to Asia that affected the ecumenical spirit of the churches, and second, it ironically nurtured cooperation and unity among these same churches.

Fostering unity

It is often said that doctrines divide; praxis unites. This is most true of these movements, which forged inter-church unity more by joint cooperation and concrete involvement than by trying to resolve doctrinal differences. To be able to understand the unique Asian ecumenical contribution, we need to recall the challenging role played by the Asian Christian churches, especially through some of its outstanding representatives, at the global level right from the beginning of the 20th Century.

For example, at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, Bishop V.S. Azariah of Dornakal posed a challenge to the Western missionary approach and forcefully underlined the imperative need to indigenize Christianity. The Tambaram Mission Conference of 1938 could be called the Waterloo of Western conservative mission theology.²¹

Here the Asian participants, irrespective of the denominations they belonged to, posed a decisive challenge to Western Christianity, this time, questioning its negative attitudes towards religions other than Christianity, especially the views held by Hendrik Kraemer at the conference. It paved the way to what is known today as “wider ecumenism”, meaning the dialogue and cooperation of the churches with the various religious traditions.

The right to hope pointing to the deeper reasons for the crisis. Pope Francis says: “We know that things can change. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home”²² Sharing such signs of hope is not only a matter of mutual

²¹ *National Council of Church Review*, Vol. CX VII No.5, May 1997, Delhi (*Towards Wider Ecumenism* by Satish Gyan), 321.

²² Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, *Caring for Our Common Home: An Ecumenical and Interreligious Concern*, January 2016, 3.

psychological and spiritual encouragement. To nurture hope is a fundamental ethical principle in any human relation. It is not a matter of being purely optimistic, or even unrealistic or ignoring risks and problems. It is rather a matter of identifying those realities that are authentic signs of hope. To fail in sustaining one another's hope in any way, or even to destroy the hope of the other, is to take the meaning out of their work or lives. Who has the right to do that? All human beings have a right to hope. Faith in God, who desires fullness of life for all of humanity, is a way to relate to the world as it is with the conviction and the commitment that something more and better is possible than what we can observe immediately. This is one contribution to hope. Therefore we also need to renew a theology of hope. A relevant question in the critique of religion is: are religions and religious leaders conveying hope for all? The human rights to food, clean water and air, health services and more are already limited or violated by climate change for many people in the world. Who has the right to take away the hope of a future where the next generations can enjoy life in its abundance on this planet? Moral perspectives in public debate are often framed in terms of what has gone wrong, who ought to be held responsible, defining the bad or even evil acts to be condemned, pointing out the injustices in places of power and certain structures, and identifying the catalysts of violence and conflicts. However, moral perspectives in public debate can and should do more to point to what is good, naming the better alternatives, and showing what responsible and sustainable actions are possible.

We believe that we have the potential to do what is just for the poor, those who contribute the least to emissions yet suffer the most. We believe that we have this responsibility from God, the creator. But God has also given us the capacity to change. So we have hope.

We have reasons to hope. We have the right to hope. Therefore, I also say, as a person of faith, praise God.’

Conclusion

All human beings have a right to hope. Faith in God, who desires fullness of life for all of humanity, is a way to relate to the world as it is with the conviction and the commitment that something more and better is possible than what we can observe immediately. This is one contribution to hope. Therefore we also need to renew a theology of hope.

The Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century is a significant phenomenon in the history of Christianity. Though the search for the lost Christian unity was never lacking in the church, it took a systematic and organized form only in the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. The concern for the unity of the church means the commitment to the wholeness of the church. Thus, today, the churches happily try to focus their attention on the areas of co-operation. It is with this hope that the churches today engage actively in ecumenical activities. We may say that the Indian church, if it earnestly desires, can fulfill its hopes for unity and solidarity. The existing ecumenical landscape has traditionally focused on “broadening” and “deepening” the conversations. In the changing landscape new approaches will be required to enable reception to become a reality.

It is clear that the new landscape will be focused by “Building Bridges” that lead to engaging with churches and Christians who have been outside the current circle. As well as “Fostering Cooperation” in more open and flexible networks, the new landscape brings challenges that can only be embraced by openness and

adaptation to the opportunities that arise. The new landscape will be enriched by conversations and cooperation in global, regional and national settings where they embrace sister organizations that are traditional, Evangelical and Pentecostal in composition.

Ecumenism to the core mean is always aim at a gathering of the scattered people of God.

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