

East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

T. V. Philip, born in India and a lay member of the Mar Thoma Church, has worked and taught in India, Europe, USA and Australia. He is a church historian, and a former Professor at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by CSS & ISPCCK, India, 1998. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

(ENTIRE BOOK) An introduction to the exciting and fascinating story of the movement of the Christian Gospel in Asian lands. The evidence is slight and fragmentary, but there is enough to indicate that while Paul and other missionaries were converting Greeks, Romans and the barbarian tribes in the west, there was a movement of Christianity to the East – Edessa, Persia, Arabia, Central Asia, China and India before the arrival of western missionaries.

Introduction

A general and brief introduction to the exciting and fascinating story of the movement of the Christian Gospel in Asian lands. Christianity came to Asia in the first century itself.

Chapter 1: Asia: The Cradle of Christianity

No contemporary historian has recorded the Gospel's eastward march, but there is no doubt that the Gospel did move east even while Paul was opening his mission in Europe. And however Western scholars may write their histories of the church, from time immemorial Asia has linked the church's expansion eastward to the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas.

Chapter 2: Christianity in Edessa

On the basis of new historical evidences available, it is possible to establish the fact that there was a Christian church in Edessa (Western Mesopotamia) in the first century, and not only there but also in other places in Mesopotamia.

Chapter 3: Christianity in Persia

The earliest centers of Christianity in the East were: Edessa, Arbela in Parthia, and India. As long as the Roman emperors considered the Christians as enemies of Rome, the Persian emperors were inclined to consider them as friends of Persia. It was not until after Constantine's death in AD 337 that the Christians began to be persecuted in the East.

Chapter 4: Christianity in Arabia and Central Asia Christianity

Among the Arabs

When Christianity spread to Syria (probably by the end of the second or early third century) there is no doubt that some of the Arabs also became Christians. Islam which originated in Arabia in the seventh century was a great missionary religion. By the 13th Century, Islam became the prominent religion. Yet numerous bodies of the Nestorian Christians were still scattered over all Central Asia.

Chapter 5: Christianity in China

There are traditions that Christianity found its way to China in the first century, but the earliest more reliable report is from Arnobius who wrote in 300 AD, stating that the Gospel had been preached in China. A definitely more reliable report comes from Patriarch Yeshuyab II in about 635 AD from an excavated inscription by him which was found in an excavation in 1625 AD.

Chapter 6: Christianity in India

From the evidence available to us, especially the East Syrian and Indian traditions, it is reasonable to believe that the Indian church has an independent origin, independent of Persian Christianity, in the apostolic activity of St. Thomas in the first century.

Chapter 7: Christianity in India up to AD 1500

The expansion of Christianity in the East was not the work of Hellenistic Christian missionaries from Antioch, or a linear progression from Antioch. It was the work of Jewish Christian missionaries such as Addai in Edessa, Aggai and Mari in Persia and Thomas in India.

Chapter 8: Christianity In Other Places In Asia

Contrary to what has been said by western historians, there is evidence to show, though very scanty and fragmentary, that Christianity found its way into South East and East Asian countries even before the coming of western missionaries, through the efforts of Nestorian merchants and missionaries from Persia or India or China or from all the three places.

Chapter 9: In the Shadows of History

By AD 1500, the story of Asian Christianity, after a millennium and a half of heroic efforts and phenomenal expansion almost came to an end in several countries; so much so, the historians speak of the eclipse of Christianity in Asia. Reasons for the eclipse are suggested.

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Introduction

It is one of the ironies of history that Christianity, which was born in Asia, has become 'alien' in its own home. The Christians in China, for example, were persecuted in the ninth and fifteenth centuries because Christianity was considered to be a 'foreign' religion. One important reason for the 'alienness' of Christianity is that the history of Christianity in Asia is either forgotten or ignored even by the Asian Christians themselves. Having lost a sense of history, and thus their own identity, Christians were not able to participate fully in the historical process in the continent.

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the study of history of Christianity in Asia, among the Asians as well as among historians abroad. In 1993, an American missionary in Asia, S.H. Moffett published a book: *A History of Christianity in Asia*. John C. England from New Zealand, in several of his articles, has drawn our attention to the vast resources now available for the study of Asian church history. The programme on Theology and Culture in Asia encourages young theologians and historians to study Asian Christianity and to write theology using Asian resources.

When we speak of Asian Christianity, we mean that manifestation of Christianity that spread outside the Roman empire and east of it. The territory of the Roman empire lay mainly in Europe and in those parts of Asia to the west of the Euphrates. But to the east of Euphrates, at the time when Rome was at the zenith of its power, there existed also the

Persian empire, which extended to and included part of North India. In this vast empire and beyond it up to China, Christianity spread rapidly. There were Christian communities in Persia, Central Asia, Tibet, China, Arabia, India and Ceylon in the early centuries. Before the sixteenth century, there were Christians in several of the South East and East Asian countries. In most of these countries, Christianity was present before the arrival of western missionaries, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. St. Thomas was the great Apostle of the East as St. Paul was of the West.

Christianity came to Asia in the first century itself, not through the missionary activities of Antioch and not ecclesiastically dependent upon Antioch. Addai, one of the seventy and a disciple of St. Thomas brought Christianity to Edessa, Aggai and Mari to Persia and St. Thomas to India. It was the Judaistic Christianity which originally spread to Asia, first among the Jewish settlers. Asian Christianity shared in the general characteristics of Jewish Christianity.

The Persian (East Syrian) Church by the beginning of the fifth century had developed a national organization with the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as Catholicos and Primate of the church. When the Roman empire started to persecute the Nestorians, many of them found refuge in Persia and the Nestorian teaching spread rapidly there. Indeed, at a synod held in 486, the Persian church officially accepted the Nestorian position. The two important theological schools of the East Syrian Church were those at Edessa and Nisibis. The most important theologians were Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Narsai. From the fifth century onwards, the church was greatly influenced by the theology of Antiochen theologian, Theodore of Mopsuestia. For the Persian church, he was the doctor of doctors. In the teachings of these schools and in the writings of these theologians we see a distinctive Asian theology emerging which was in contrast to Latin theology. These theologians are the 'Fathers' of the Asian church.

One of the most important and fascinating aspects of the life of the East Syrian church was its missionary dynamism. When the western church in the Roman empire was busily engaged in theological controversies, the East Syrian church was busy preaching the Gospel to the Persians, Arabs, Indians, Turks and the Chinese. The whole life of the Christian community was permeated with missionary spirit. Whether clergy or laity, traders or refugees, wherever they went, they tried to be ambassadors for Christ.

In the missionary outreach of the Church, Monasticism played a very important part. The monastic movement reached the zenith of its prosperity by the middle of the seventh century. From hundreds of monasteries all over Persia, there poured forth a constant stream of ascetics who went forth in obedience to the Lord's command, seeking to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In the Egyptian monasticism, the saints ignored the world, retreated to the desert into caves and cells. By contrast, Syrian ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor and preaching the Gospel. Their mission is not described as withdrawal, but an advance against the forces of error and darkness. They were wanderers for God. Apostle Thomas in India gives thanks to God that he has become an ascetic and a pauper and a wanderer for God. Addai refuses to receive silver and gold from the king of Edessa saying that he has forsaken the riches of the world "because without purses and without scrips, bearing the cross on our shoulders, we are commanded to preach the Gospel to the whole creation." In the eighth century, Patriarch Timothy I wrote that in his time many monks crossed the sea and went only with staff and scrip to the Indians and the Chinese.

In less than two hundred years after Christ's death, therefore, there was extensive Christian penetration in Asia and the East Syrians were beginning to carry the Gospel not only in Persia but also towards Arabia and Central Asia. The discovery of the Nestorian Tablet in China attests that Christianity came to China in the seventh century through the efforts of the Nestorian missionaries. It found favour with the Mongol rulers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and spread widely in China. Efforts were made to adjust itself to the Chinese culture and religious traditions. Adam, one of the Nestorian missionaries in China, was considered by the Buddhists as dangerous not because he was making Christianity too Buddhist but because he was trying to make Buddhism look too Christian.

Christianity came to India in the first century through the apostolic activity of St. Thomas both in North and South India. St. Bartholomew, a companion of St. Thomas, also visited India. By the end of the third century or early fourth century, the Indian church entered into some sort of ecclesiastical relationship with the Persian church. Apart from this ecclesiastical relationship, there were at least two important waves of emigration of groups of Persian Christians to South India, one in the fourth century and the other in the ninth century, which reinforced and strengthened the existing St. Thomas Christian community. Because of

such contacts, the St. Thomas Christians were greatly influenced by the ecclesiastical and liturgical practices of the Persian church.

It will be a great mistake to think that the Christian communities were founded only in South India in the early period. There is no doubt that there were small Christian communities scattered throughout India and some of them continued to exist in North India in the medieval period. It must be noted that these were not communities of Persian Christians but of Indians by blood and ancestry brought to Christian faith by the missionary activities of Indian Christians as well of Persian missionaries.

In South India, the St. Thomas Christians were socially integrated with the wider Indian society and shared many things in common with their Hindu neighbours. They were employed as farmers and traders and in military service. A number of witnesses in the fifteenth century mention that they were a strong and well organized community, commanding respect among the Hindus and enjoying certain privileges in the society like that of higher castes among the Hindus.

The evidence for the presence of Christianity in South East and East Asia is scanty and fragmentary. Yet, there is sufficient evidence to show that Christianity was present in Ceylon, Burma, Tibet, Indonesia and Korea before the arrival of European missionaries.

A church which once exercised ecclesiastical authority over more of the earth than any other church in the world, lay in ruin by the end of the fifteenth century. What were the reasons?

What is attempted in this book is to present a general and brief introduction to the exciting and fascinating story of the movement of the Christian Gospel in Asian lands. It is much indebted to the findings, and writings on the subject, of a large number of historians and scholars. The book is written in the hope that it will, in a small way, contribute to the Asian Christian community's search for its historical roots and identity. I am grateful to Dr. Han Spykerboer and Rev. Douglas Galbraith for reading the manuscript and making useful suggestions, and also to Rev. Ashish Amos of ISPCCK and Rev. Dr. T.M. Philip of CSS for publishing the book.

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Chapter 1: Asia: The Cradle of Christianity

A History Ignored

In an address on Asia's message to Europe, delivered in Calcutta in 1883, Keshub Chandra Sen, the great Brahma Samaj leader in Bengal observed:

Is not Asia the birth place of great prophets and saints? Is it not preeminently a holy place of pilgrimage to the rest of the world? Yes upon Asia's soil have flourished and prospered those at whose feet the world should prostrate. The great religions which have given life and salvation to millions of men owe their origin in Asia...But Asia is not only holy ground, but it is a catholic ground also. In this one place you could count all leading prophets and all the great religious geniuses of the world. No great prophet was born outside the boundaries of Asia.(Keshub Chandra Sen, *Asia's Message to Europe*, Calcutta, 1919.)

It is in Asia, the great land mass which extends from the Mediterranean eastwards to the Pacific, that about three quarters of the world's present population is found. It is in Asia the roots of the present great civilizations are to be found. Here, the major religions and philosophical traditions of the world had their origin: Hindu, Buddhist, Confucius,

Jewish, Christian and Islamic.

In another address on the subject: Who is: Jesus Christ?, Chandra Sen told the Indians, "Gentlemen, go to the rising sun of the East, not to the setting sun of the West, if you wish to see Christ in the plenitude of his glory and in the fullness and freshness of his divine life." He told them to recall the true Asiatic Christ. "Behold he comes to us in his loose flowing garments, his dress and features altogether oriental, a perfect Asiatic in everything." (Keshub Chandra Sen. *Who Is Jesus Christ?*. Calcutta, 1919.) The complaint of Sen was that Jesus Christ was presented to the Asians as a western Christ and the history of the Asiatic Christ in Asian soil had been replaced by the history of western missionary organizations in Asia.

Speaking of *The hidden history of Christianity in Asia*, John C. England, a church historian from New Zealand, rightly points out that unfortunately only a few churches in the region have retained a strong sense that their history began in the early century of Christian era. Then he says:

Christianity can then be taken as an ancient Asian religion not just because of its origins in west Asian cultures and in the life of a Palestinian Jew, nor because of the Asian form of its foundation scriptures, but also because of this long and diverse presence through out central , south, southeast and north-east Asian countries. (John C. England and Archee Lee (ed); *Doing Theology with Asian Resources*, N Z, Pace Publishing, 1993, p. 129).

Like Chandra Sen, John England also complains that such a long and diverse presence of Christianity in Asian history has been so long hidden. "Clearly such a history has not been widely recognized -- and our understanding of Christian presence and identity within the particular histories and cultures of the region has been massively distorted -- often for doctrinal or ideological reasons." (*Ibid.*, p. 129.)

While we have a good deal of information about the history of the expansion of Christianity to the west of Palestine, we know very little of its expansion to the regions east of it. The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament does not give us a comprehensive and accurate account of Christianity and its spread in the early period. Its presentation is very selective and partial. A number of New Testament scholars have questioned the reliability of Luke as a historian. Howard Marshall points

out that Luke has idealized and simplified the story of the development of the early church. He has selected one strand in the history of the church that leads from Jerusalem to Rome and from the Jewish mission to Gentile mission, and he has left us in ignorance of many matters about which we would gladly be better informed. "To this extent, he has simplified the movement of church history and we do well to remember that he has not told us the whole story." (Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Zondervan, 1970, p.73.)

What about the other strands in the history of Christian expansion? There are references in the later Christian writings to a tradition that the disciples after the ascension of Jesus assigned to themselves different regions of the world for missionary work. Whether this is true or not, the New Testament writings reflect unambiguously the conviction of the early church that it was a missionary community. But we have no contemporary records to know about the work of the different apostles. The Acts of the Apostles deals only with that of Peter to a certain extent but mainly with that of Paul. Moreover there is ample evidence to show that there were groups, and parties in the early church. Michel Goulder, an English New Testament scholar points out that there were two missions: one run from Jerusalem by the Jewish Christians under the leadership of Peter, James (brother of Jesus), other members of Jesus' family; the other run by Paul and his party from various centres. Luke's concern was with the Pauline party. (Michel Goulder, *A Tale of Two Missions*, London: SCM Press. 1994.)

While Paul and other Christian missionaries were converting Greeks, Romans and the barbarian tribes in the west, there was equally a great movement of Christianity to the east -- Edessa, Persia, Arabia, Central Asia, China and India. The territory of the Roman Empire lay mainly in Europe and in that part of Asia to the west of Euphrates. But to the east of Euphrates, at the time when Rome was at the zenith of its power, there existed the Persian empire which extended to and included part of northern India. In this vast empire Christianity spread very rapidly. Beyond the borders of the Persian empire, there were Christian communities in Central Asia, China, Arabia, and India. As John Stewart observes:

It is a surprise to most people to learn that there was a large and widespread Christian community throughout the whole of Central Asia in the first centuries of the present era and that such countries as Afghanistan and Tibet

which are spoken of today as lands still closed to the Gospel message, were centres of Christian activity long before Muhammad was born. (John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928, p.xxix.)

This was a Christianity that looked neither to Rome nor Constantinople as its centre and which remained for centuries proudly Asian. After saying that the church began in Asia, S.M.Moffett writes:

Its earliest history, its first centres were Asian. Asia produced the first known church building, the first New Testament translation, perhaps the first Christian king, the first Christian poets, and even arguably the first Christian state. Asian Christians endured the greatest persecutions. They mounted global ventures in missionary expansion the West could not match until after the thirteenth century. But then the Nestorian church (as most of the early Asian Christian communities came to be called) exercised ecclesiastical authority over more of the earth than either Rome or Constantinople.(Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Harper, San Francisco, 1992, p. xiii [see also Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*. P. 2])

It is this story of the movement of God's spirit in Asian history that had been left out by Luke and ignored by later church historians. According to John Stewart, "This may be due partly to the mistaken impression that the Roman empire dominated the whole world and that outside the range of its operations there was nothing of any importance to record." (John Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. xxx.) Moffett says that one of the reasons for the neglect of the Asian dimension in church history is the comparative paucity of available source materials on eastern roots of Christianity outside the Roman empire. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. xiii.) One might also look for doctrinal and ideological reasons for such a neglect.

It is one of the ironies of history that Christianity, which was born in Asia, has become alien in its place of birth. There is no one to be blamed for this tragedy except the Christians themselves. It is very unfortunate that only a few Christian churches in the region have retained a strong sense that their history goes back to the early centuries of the Christian era. Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa, in his autobiography:

Long walk to Freedom, speaks of his life in a South African prison. With Time-pieces of any kind barred from prison, one of the first things he did was to make a calendar on the wall of his cell. "Losing a sense of time is an easy way to lose one's grip and even one's sanity" he says. Christians in Asia appear to have lost a sense of history and thus also lost their grip on Asian realities.

Jewish Christianity and Its Characteristics

It is now generally accepted that Christianity which spread to the regions east of Palestine was Judeo-Christianity. Christianity in its origin belonged to the Jewish world. Roman writers such as Suetonius and Tacitus took Christianity as a Jewish sect. However, as Jean Danielou points out, the official documents which tell us about the origins of Christianity, namely, the writings of the New Testament, were written for, and were connected with, Hellenistic Christianity. This has been, for a long time, a serious obstacle to the recognition that Christianity arose in a Jewish milieu and was, to start with, deeply involved theologically and culturally in the Jewish world. (J. Danielou, "Christianity as a Jewish Sect", in Arnold Toynbee [ed], *The Crucible of Christianity*, p. 275.) The man who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, the chief documentary evidence for the first decades of the church, was a Greek and wrote it for the Greeks. He took little interest in the history of the Aramaic speaking Christians and was hostile to Judeo Christianity. (*Ibid.*, p. 275) It is quite clear, however, that the earliest Christianity used Aramaic language and the primitive church for a long time remained in Jewish society. When it spread, it spread not only to the west but also to the east of Palestine and beyond the borders of the Roman empire, and not only Paul but other apostles were also involved in the preaching of the Gospel.

A number of discoveries made in recent years make it possible to get a better picture of Jewish community. The Dead Sea scrolls reveal in greater detail the Jewish culture of the period and the Jewish religious framework within which Christianity arose. The discoveries at Nag Hammadi particularly that of *The Gospel of Thomas*, perhaps put us in touch with an Aramean tradition of the logia of Jesus. The Judeo Christian writings -- *The Didache*, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, *The Tradition of the Presbyters* -- help us, to discover prior to or contemporary with the writings of the New Testament, an oral tradition which is a direct echo of the Judeo Christian community. In addition, there are a number of Judeo Christian inscriptions discovered in

Jerusalem and Nazareth which throw further light on the life of the community. There are also references to Jewish Christianity in the Jewish literature of the period. (H.J. Schonfield. *The History of Jewish Christianity*, London: Duckworth, 1936, p. 277.)

In analysing the Jewish tradition of the time, we notice that there were different groups or sects or parties within Judaism with their different understanding of monotheism, covenant, Torah and the Temple; and there never was a normative Judaism in the first century. "In reading the Acts of the Apostles there is a danger that we may fail to appreciate how important it was for early Christianity to belong to an extremely lively and varied Jewish milieu." (*Ibid.*, p. 277)

Jerusalem was the centre of the primitive Church and the undisputed leader of the Jerusalem community till A.D.62 was James, the brother of Jesus. It was James's party and the Judeo Christian church in Jerusalem which exercised the dominant influence in the first decades of the church. As regards James himself, the epistle to the Galatians makes clear his importance. Later non-canonical documents from Judeo Christian circles throw further light on James. In the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which appears to be linked with a Judeo Christian community in Egypt in the beginning of the second century, it is to James the risen Christ first appeared. *The Clementine Recognitions*, *The Second Apocalypse of James*, *The Gospel of Thomas* -- all agree in making James the founding figure in the Judeo Christian church. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus commits his church to James, and it is to James the disciples should go after the ascension. In *Clementine Recognitions* it is said that no teacher is to be believed unless he brings from Jerusalem the testimonial of James, the Lord's brother. One of the most conspicuous features of the church in Jerusalem was the position that was occupied by Jesus' family, very much in line with the semitic tradition.

The Jewish Christians were called Nazarenes (Nazoraioi) by their Jewish opponents. Ray A. Pritz in his study of Nazarene Jewish community. (Ray A Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, Leiden, E.J. Brill. 1988.) points out that Nazarene was the earliest name applied to Christians by their Jewish opponents. At first it did not denote a sectarian stigma as the name was applied to the entire church. The first reference to the name in the New Testament is in Acts 24:5, where Tertullus the lawyer, during the time of Paul's trial before the Governor Felix, accused Paul as a ring leader of the Nazarene sect. The reference here is not to a particular sect among the Christians but to the entire

church. The name 'Christian' was at first applied by non-Christians in Antioch to designate the believers among the gentiles. Only when the gentile Church took over and overshadowed the Jewish church, could there be any possibility of sectarian stigma attaching to the name 'Nazarene' within the church itself. Even then the name Nazarene was used for Christians in Syria as a whole for a long time and it continued to be used in India till very recently.

The Jewish Christians had a gospel written in Aramaic (Hebrew), the existence of which was attested by Hegesippus, Eusebius, Epiphanius and Jerome. Both Epiphanius and Jerome believed that *The Gospel of Nazarene* was the Aramaic original of the New Testament Matthew. This may not be a true statement but the text bears some relation to Matthew, though not an exact copy. Jerome says that Matthew in Judea was the first to compose the Gospel of Christ in the Hebrew character and speech for the sake of those who came over to the faith from Judaism. H.J.Schonfield observes that a prejudice existed in Jewish minds against committing the scriptures to writing in any other than the sacred tongue. The day on which the Old Testament was rendered into Greek was said to be as evil as that on which the golden calf was made. Pantaenus, visiting India late in the second century, reported that "he found on his own arrival anticipated by some ... to whom Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached, and had left them the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew." (Eusebius quoted by Schonfield, *op.cit.* p. 66.) This Gospel of the Nazarenes needs to be distinguished from two other Jewish gospels, that is, from the Gospel of Ebionites and from the Gospel of Hebrews. (For a discussion of this see R. Mel Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, James Clark and Co., 1991, vol.1.) J. Danielou is certain that the environment with which the Gospel of the Nazarenes should be associated is that of the Jewish Christians in Syria who spoke Aramaic and who were the most direct heirs of the Palestinian Jewish Christian community and from whom they received certain traditions. (J. Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964. pp. 21-22.)

The Nazarenes were distinct from the Ebonites and prior to them. Pritz suggests the possibility of a split occurring among the Nazarene ranks about the turn of the first century, and the Ebonites emerging out of this split, differing from the Nazarenes by their Christology.

There are a number of references to the activities of the Jewish Christians in the Jewish Talmud. (See Schonfield, *op.cit.*, ch. IV.) There

were a number of groups among Jewish Christians, and they differed among themselves in various ways. The name 'Jewish Christians' is sometimes used to refer to the Christians who remained faithful to the Jewish observances -- sabbath, circumcision and worship in the Temple, as the Jerusalem community did. But from a very early date the observances of the Jewish customs came to be regarded, even in some semitic circles, as incompatible with the Christian faith. Judeo Christianity that remained faithful to Jewish rituals did survive for a long time among small groups, but very soon it became marginal to the main body of the church. (Danielou, "Christianity as a Jewish Sect", *op.cit*, p.277.) Sometimes Judeo Christianity is equated with Aramaic or Syriac speaking Christianity. The Christianity which developed in Edessa or in Persia was the result of Judeo Christian mission and referred to as Judeo Christianity. The name Judeo Christianity is also used for a form of Christianity where liturgical, theological and ascetic structure has been borrowed from the Jewish milieu in which Christianity first appeared.

According to Danielou, the most characteristic feature of Judeo Christian culture was its concern with apocalypse. The apocalyptic frame work, which Judeo Christianity shared with contemporary Judaism, was the setting for Judeo Christian theology. Jewish apocalypse is made up of information about the hidden realities of the heavenly world and the ultimate secrets of the future. In apocalypse angelology plays an important part. Another aspect of Jewish Christianity was the stress on the ideal of encratism which involved abstention from wine and meat, and exalting of virginity. The virgins had a privileged position in the community.

It was not only in Jerusalem and in Palestine that Judeo Christianity was dominant during the first century of the church. Every where the Judeo Christian mission seems to have developed before the Pauline mission; this may be the explanation of the repeated references to the conflicts in Paul's epistles. The regions east of Palestine were a preserve of Judeo Christian missions and had not been touched by the mission of Paul. The Judeo Christian origin of the church in the eastern region of the Roman empire and beyond it to Edessa is all the more certain because the local language in general use in the region was Aramaic, the language of Judeo Christians in Jerusalem.

St. Thomas: The Apostle of The East

It was the story of the church's expansion to the west which had been told by Luke and taken up by the western historians. No contemporary historian has recorded the Gospel's eastward march, but there is no doubt that the Gospel did move east even while Paul was opening his mission in Europe. In this eastward movement, St. Thomas was the central figure. "And however Western scholars may write their histories of the church, from time immemorial Asia has linked the church's expansion eastward to the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p.25)

Thomas was one of the twelve disciples. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p.25) The name Thomas is the Greek form of the Aramaic name Thoma. In St. John's Gospel, he is called Didymus (twin). The later tradition speaks of him as the twin brother of Jesus. Nearly all what we know of Thomas comes from St. John's Gospel (John 11:16; 14:5; 20:24; 21:2.) in which he plays a fairly prominent part. While other disciples tried to prevent Jesus from going to Judea fearing trouble from the Jews, Thomas told them, "let us go that we may die with him." When Jesus had told his disciples that they knew the way he was going, Thomas asked how they could know the way since they did not know where he was going. Thomas was one of the seven who participated in the extraordinary catch of fish and to whom Jesus appeared on the shores of the sea of Tiberius. Thomas is best remembered for the event recorded in John 20:24-29. Jesus' statement, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" has influenced the later tradition of unfairly referring to Thomas as 'doubting Thomas'. In the fourth Gospel he displays a mature and strong leadership and his confession of the risen Jesus Christ as "My Lord and my God" is the greatest confession ever made, perhaps greater than that of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Is not on this confession that the church is being built?

Among early Christian literature there are a number of non-canonical books associated with the name of Thomas. Of these, the most important ones are *The Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Judas Thomas*. *The Gospel of Thomas* is one of the apocryphal gospels found among the writings discovered in Nag-Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. It consists of 114 sayings or logia of Jesus stated in question and answer forms. In the prologue to the gospel it is mentioned that the sayings are the secret words spoken by the living Jesus and which Judas Didymus Thomas wrote down. It is to Thomas that Jesus entrusted his secret sayings. In Logia 13 it reads as follows: "Jesus said to his disciples: compare me, tell me whom I am like. Simon Peter said to him: you are like a

righteous angel. Matthew said to him: you are like a wise philosopher. Thomas said to him: Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like. Jesus said: I am your master, for you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling spring which I have caused to gush forth. And he took him, withdrew and spoke to him three words. Now when Thomas came back to his companions, they asked him: What did Jesus say to you? Thomas said to them: If I tell you one of the words he said to me, you will take up stones and throw them at me; and the fire will come out of the stones and burn you up."

In the *Acts of Thomas*, which show on many points a remarkable affinity with the *Gospel of Thomas*, Thomas is addressed in the following terms: Thou twin of Christ, apostle of the most High and initiate in the hidden word of Christ, who receivest his secret orders, fellow worker with the Son of God. (chapter 39) In the Syrian tradition in which the *Gospel of Thomas* is written, apostle Thomas is the one who is particularly trusted and is the bearer of Jesus' secret teaching. (A.F.J. Klijn. *Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992, p. 97.)

Several early traditions of the East centre around Judas Thomas. F.C. Burkitt has found the following passages in a Syriac Breviary.

By S. Thomas has been abolished the error of idolatry from the Indians

By S. Thomas the Chinese also with the Ethiopians have turned to the truth.

By S. Thomas have shone the beams of doctrine of life in all India.

By S. Thomas has flown and gone up the kingdom of the Height among the Chinese.

A second passage reads, "Indians and Chinese and Persians and other outlanders and those in Syria and Armenia and Ionia and Romania bringing worship in commemoration of Thomas to thy Name, our saviour." These passages do not say that St. Thomas went to all these places or founded churches there by himself. The important thing is to note that a number of places in the East are associated with the name of Thomas. A.C. Moule points out a number of references where the names of Bartholomew, Addaeus, Aggai and Man are mentioned as

companions or disciples of Thomas. A thirteenth century Syriac writer, Ebed Jesus writes: "The holy Apostles, masters of eastern shore, Thomas and Bartholomew of the number of the twelve and Addacus and Man of the seventy, bore the sacred leaven which they had kept to all the churches of the east for the accomplishment of the mystery of the Body of the Lord until his coming." (Quoted in AC. Moule, *Christians in China before 1550*, SPCK, 1930, p.24. See also p. 19.) Whether it was Thomas personally who went to all these places associated with his name, or whether it was his disciples, Thomas is considered as the great Apostle of the East just as Paul is the great Apostle of the West.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 2: Christianity in Edessa

In the VERY early centuries of the Christian era, Rome was also an Asian Power. (One region of Asia, west of Euphrates was under the Roman rule.) Roman Syria extended from the Mediterranean up to Euphrates in western Mesopotamia. In AD. 194, the Roman emperor Septimus Severus divided this enormous territory into two -- Syria Coele in the north and Syria Phoenicia in the south. Christians in this area were predominantly Greek speaking.

Beyond the borders of the Roman empire was the Parthian (Persian) empire. The Parthians were Iranians who originally came from the steppes of Central Asia. They made themselves independent of Greek Selucids in about 250 BC. and founded an independent kingdom in Parthia under the Arsaces dynasty. In the second century BC it expanded its borders to the west all the way to Euphrates and to the east to Punjab in India. The capital of Parthia was Ctesipbon on Tigris. There were a number of buffer states such as Armenia and Edessa between the Roman and Parthian Empires. There were constant wars between Rome and Parthia for the control of border areas.

Christianity as it grew in the Iranian region came to be known by different names -- Assyrian Church, Persian Church, East Syrian Church or the Church of the East. For the sake of clarity, we shall first deal with the Church in Edessa and its neighbourhood (Western Mesopotamia) and then the church in Persia proper.

The expansion of Christianity in 'Asian' Asia is a very fascinating story. About this Moffett writes:

Before the end of the first century the Christian faith broke out across the borders of Rome into 'Asian' Asia. Its roots may have been as far away as India or as near as Edessa in the tiny semi-independent principality of Osrhoene just across the Euphrates. From Edessa, according to tradition, the faith spread to another small kingdom three hundred miles further east across the Tigris River, the Kingdom of Adiabene, with its capital at Arbela, near ancient Nineveh. By the end of the second century, missionary expansion had carried the church as far east as Bactria, what is now northern Afghanistan, and mass conversions of Huns and Turks in Central Asia were reported from the fifth century onward. By the end of the seventh century, Persian missionaries had reached the 'end of the world', the capital of T'ang dynasty in China. (Moffett *op cit.*, pp xiv-xv.)

Three earliest centres of Christianity in the East were Osrhoene with its capital Edessa; Adiabene with its capital Arbela, and India. Whether Christianity came to these places independent of one another and which one of them was the first evangelised are difficult questions for the Asian church historians to decide.

Origins of Christianity in Edessa

Osrhoene was a buffer State between the Roman and Parthian empires till AD. 216 when it became a Roman colony. When did Christianity come to Edessa and who brought it? There is an Assyrian tradition that the wise men who came from the East to visit infant Jesus were from Edessa and that they went to Bethlehem in fulfillment of a prophecy made by Zoroaster in the seventh century BC. On their return to Edessa they had told of the wonderful things they had seen and heard and this prepared the minds of the Edessians for the reception of the Gospel.

Eusebius of Caesarea (Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History* 1.13.), the church historian of the fourth century tells of another tradition about the coming of the gospel to Edessa. It tells of an invitation sent by King Abgar V (Ukkoma, the Black) of Edessa to Jesus himself to visit Edessa and cure him of leprosy. In Jesus' reply to the king, he promised that

after his ascension, he would send one of his disciples to cure the king of the disease. The tradition is that according to the promise made by Jesus, the apostle Thomas (Didymus) sent Thaddeus (Addai), one of the seventy, to Edessa. Addai on coming to Edessa first preached to the Jews there and thus began the church in Edessa. The king was healed and he became a Christian. (The tradition of Addai's mission is narrated in great detail in a Syriac document called *Doctrine of Addai*. According to this Addai's mission took place in AD. 29. See W.Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents*.) There are considerable differences of opinion among the historians as to the historicity of this tradition. Several of them have pointed out that the tradition concerning the correspondence between King Abgar and Jesus is only apocryphal and hence spurious and that the king who became Christian in Edessa was not Abgar V but Abgar VIII (called the Great) who came to the throne in AD. 177. They also reject the claim made by Eusebius and others that Christianity came to Edessa in the first century. Today, however, on the basis of new historical evidences available, it is possible to establish the fact that there was indeed a Christian church in Edessa in the first century; not only in Edessa but also in other places in Mesopotamia. J. Danielou writes:

The Christianity which developed in Osroene and Adiabene was certainly a product of the Judeo Christian mission. Though the legend, reported by Eusebius, that Christ himself has sent missionaries to King Abgar of Edessa is based in reality on the conversion of a different Abgar at the end of the second century, it is nonetheless true that the region of Edessa had been evangelised by the Apostle Thomas has some foundation of historical fact. The earliest documents we have on Edesean Christianity - - namely the Gospel of Thomas, and the Odes of Solomon -- go back in part, to the end of the first century and display the characteristic features of Judeo Christianity. (Danielou. "Christianity as a Jewish Sect", *op.cit.* p. 277.)

S. H. Moffett comes to the conclusion that it is not unlikely that Edessa was evangelised by Addai. Moffett points out that the Addai traditions were as persistent in the early Church of Mesopotamia as the Thomas traditions were in India. He says that the fact that so strong a centre as Edessa was content with one of the lesser known seventy rather than with one of the original twelve, supports the view that the history of Addai's mission was too well known to be easily set aside. (Moffett,

op.cit., p. 50) The church in Edessa believes that Christianity was brought to Edessa by Addai who is said to have been sent there by St. Thomas. For this reason, among others, the Edessians believed that their church stood in a peculiarly close relationship to St. Thomas. Judas Thomas, as he is called in the *Doctrine of Addai*, was looked upon in a special sense as their own apostle. One of the treasures of the Edessian church, according to the *Doctrine of the Apostles*, was a letter said to have been received by them from St. Thomas from India.

Arthur Voobus, the famous Syriac scholar and historian also upholds the Addai tradition. He points out that the Christian mission in Mesopotamia was the work of Jewish Christians and the Jewish settlers in Mesopotamia were a great help in the spread of Christianity. When Addai came to Edessa, he contacted at first the Jewish community there thus establishing the first Christian nucleus before the end of the first century. (Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Louvian, 1958, pp. 3-10. The *Doctrine of Addai*, a Syriac document written between 390-430 tells how Addai came to Edessa and as in the case of other apostles sought out the Jewish community. Having heard of his arrival, the king assembled all his people to hear Addai and all the city rejoiced in the doctrine and the king also believed. The *Doctrine of Addai* states, "After Jesus was ascended, Judas Thomas sent to him [Abgar] Thaddaeus, the apostle. one of seventy, and, when he was come, he lodged with Tobias, son of Tobias.")

According to Voobus we should discard the view that the beginning of Christianity in Mesopotamia was due to a process of the early expansion of Christendom developed in the general framework of Hellenistic Christendom. "The information that Antioch became a part of the scene so early is a free fabrication." (Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism*, p.6.) On the basis of information in the *Chronicle of Arbel*, he points out that by the year AD 100, the Christian faith spread not only in Arbel in Mesopotamia but also in the villages near by on the mountains, he concludes: "If, by the beginning of the second century, the Christian faith had already won converts among the inhabitants of the mountain village in Hadiab, then there can be no doubt that the Christian faith had been established before the end of the first century in Edessa and also in Osrhoene, which were on the high way connecting Arbel with Palestine and Syria." (*Ibid.*, p.7.)

Voobus states that the origin of the Christian message in Mesopotamia must have been related to Aramaen Christianity in Palestine. "This

appears quite natural when we consider the fact that in other eastern countries the Jewish community appears to be the channel through which the first seed of the Christian Kerygma was transplanted, even where Christian community was not particularly strong. (*Ibid.*, p.8.) With regard to the Christian community in the mountains near Arbel, Voobus says that the earliest Christian mission here was of Jewish Christian provenance and the earliest figures of primitive Christianity in this mountainous area, "however dimly they appear, were Christian Jews who held close to the areas where there were Jewish communities." Further Voobus points out that it was neither the Greek Old Testament which became scriptural authority for Hellenistic Christianity nor the Hebrew original text which was translated into Syriac but the scriptures of the Palestinian synagogue, namely, the ancient Palestinian Targumim which came to be used among the Jewish Christians. Also the tradition of scriptural interpretation in the ancient Syrian church bears the mark of Jewish interpretation. Moreover, the ancient Christian art bears close resemblance to the Jewish art. All these point to the real nature of the Christian beginnings in the lands of Euphrates and Tigris.

Thus the pioneer work in the expansion of the Christian faith in the lands of the Euphrates and Tigris was carried out not by the Greek speaking Hellenistic Christians from Antioch but by Aramaic speaking Christians who possessed the lingua franca of the contemporary Orient. In this, important Jewish communities in Mesopotamia, must have performed a significant function in the processes of initiating the Christian faith in the Syrian Orient.

Characteristics of Early East Syrian Christianity

When Christianity came to the east, Edessa was the capital of an independent state of Osroene in western Mesopotamia, a buffer between the Roman and Persian empires. Though an independent buffer state it was under the Parthian influence till the end of the second century when Septimus Severus, the Roman emperor, conquered it in AD 199 and made it a tributary of Rome. In AD 216 it became a Roman colony. It was the first Christian city in the world, Christianity having been brought there by Addai, a disciple of St. Thomas. Christianity flourished in Edessa and became the centre of Syriac speaking Christians for a time. In the year AD 363, after the death of emperor Julian, the frontier between the Roman empire and the Persian empire came to be clearly marked. Edessa was the principal city in the

western or Roman Mesopotamia as Nisibis was in the eastern or Persian Mesopotamia. Though Edessa was politically Roman, its cultural and religious ties were with the Syriac speaking peoples of Persian Mesopotamia and not with the Greek speaking centres in the Roman empire.

Constant wars between Rome and Parthia made the expansion of Christianity in this area very difficult. (W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, Chicago, Scholars Press, 1982, p.53.) It is also probable that the Christians in Edessa and elsewhere in Roman Mesopotamia suffered under the persecution of Decius (Al) 249-56). Yet Christianity was making progress in this area though paganism remained as a force till the end of the sixth century.

Dura Europus was a fortress town located on the Euphrates more or less due east of Palmyra. It was taken by Rome from the Parthians in AD 165, and? but after ninety years of Roman rule, the Sassanian Persians overran and, destroyed it in AD 256. From the excavations in Dura, it is now known that there was a Christian community there and that some time between AD 232 and AD 256 these Christians acquired a primitive house and converted it into a place of worship. The partition between two rooms was removed and converted into a meeting hall. The hall could accommodate about 65-75 people. On the other side of the house, a smaller room was made into a baptistery. A striking feature of the latter was that its ceilings and walls had painted decorations, the walls displaying pictorial compositions inspired by stories from the scriptures. (*Ibid.*, p.54.) This is one of the earliest church buildings discovered so far. Whether Edessa had some part in founding the church in Dura Europus, we do not know. From the coins discovered in the place, it seems that there were economic links between Edessa and Nisibis in the north and Dura Europus in the south.

It was Judeo Christianity which spread to east Syria and it shared in the general characteristics of the Jewish Christianity in Palestine. *The Doctrine of Addai*, the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, the Writings of Tatian and Bardaisan of Edessa and *Didascalia Apostolorum* are some of the important sources which help us to have an understanding of the early East Syrian church.

The Odes of Solomon, (J. H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts edited with Translations and Notes*, Oxford. Clarendon, 1973 H.J.W. Drijvers dates it to the third century as he feels that the

Odes reflect the ideas of Tatian of the second century. See also H.J.W. Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, London 1984, pp. 7-8. On the other hand, Tatian could have been influenced by the teachings already present in Edessa.) an earliest Christian hymn written in Syriac in the region of Edessa in the first century gives us some knowledge of the early Syrian community. *The Odes of Solomon* itself is a testimony to the presence of Christians in Edessa in the first century. The expressions and ideas in the Odes clearly show that they belong to a period prior to any systematic development of Christian doctrine and practice and they were the first attempt by a Christian community to express its new found faith. The strange way the Odes try to express its trinitarian faith is a good example of this.

A cup of milk was offered to me, I drank it in the
sweetness of the Lord's kindness.
The Son is the cup, and the Father is he who was milked;
and the Holy Spirit is she who milked.(Ode 19)

The Odes claim Christ as God's promise of salvation to Israel. They speak of salvation in terms of circumcising by the Holy Spirit.

For the Most High circumcised me by the Holy Spirit,
then he uncovered my inward being toward him,
and filled me with his love. (Ode 11)

Like the fourth Gospel, the central emphasis of Odes is the final victory that has been won by Christ over death and evil. In Christ, light shines casting out darkness and the believer experiences eternal life here and now. The believers are like fruit bearing trees that have been planted by the Lord in the paradise.

Their branches were flourishing
and their fruits were shining,
their roots were from an immortal land
And a river of gladness irrigating them,
and the region round about them in the land of eternal life.
(Ode 11)

Out of their confidence in eternal life came their missionary spirit. The East Syrian church was a missionary church from the very beginning.

The Lord has multiplied his knowledge,

and he was zealous that those things should be known
which through his grace have been given to us.
For there went forth a stream,
and it became a river great and broad,
indeed it carried away everything ...
For it spread over the face of all the earth
and it filled everything
Then all the thirsty upon the earth drank
and the thirst was relieved and quenched. (Ode 6)

According to the Odist, blessed are the ministers who carry the life-giving water to the dying.

Blessed, therefore, are the ministers of that drink,
who have been entrusted with this water.
They have pleased the parched lips,
and have restored the paralysed will.
Even the lives who were about to expire,
they have seized from death.
And the members which had fallen,
they have restored and set up.
They gave power for their coming
and light for their eyes.
Because everyone recognized them as the Lord's
and lived by the living water of eternity. (Ode 6:13.18)

This is a remarkable picture of the ministers of the Gospel. The early Christian community was indeed a missionary community and the East Syrian church in particular was a church on fire with missionary zeal.

The Doctrine of Addai which speaks of the work of Addai in Edessa leaves us in no doubt that Edessian Christianity was ascetically oriented. When Addeus was dying, king Abgar sent to him a noble and excellent apparel, that he might be buried in it. Addeus refused it saying: In my life time I have not taken anything from thee, nor will I frustrate the word of Christ which spake to us: Accept not anything from any man, and possess not anything in this world. (Cureton, *The Doctrine of Addai*). The same attitude to worldly things is also reported of Aggacus. It is said of Addai that instead of receiving gold and silver, he himself enriched the church of Christ with the souls of believers. With regard to the lives of Christians, the *Doctrine of Addai* says that they were chaste, circumspect, holy and pure, since they lived like anchorites and chastity

without spot. (*Ibid.*, The reference is to the purity of life (virginity) and not that they lived in seclusion.)

Tatian (Ca 110-180) was born of Syriac speaking parents in Assyria. He went to Rome in search of knowledge and became a pupil of Justin Martyr. He found what he was searching for in studying the writings of the Christians. "My soul was instructed by God, and I recognised that the teachings of the Greeks lead to condemnation, but their barbarian teachings dissolve slavery that is in the world and rescue us from many lords and myriads of tyrants." (Quoted by Arthur Voobus in *History of Asceticism, op. cit.*, pp. 32-35.) As a result, he gave himself to the cause of Christ entirely and unconditionally. Tatian was dissatisfied with what he saw in the Roman church; it lacked vigour and enthusiasm. After the death of Justin Martyr, he returned to Assyria in AD 172. There he made his contribution, and his two important works were *Apology* and *Oration*. He was a remarkable biblical scholar, linguist and ascetic. He asserted that pagan philosophy only enslaves us to the world and it is the Christian gospel which liberates us to freedom. Such a liberation is possible only when we become a dwelling place of God. This means that a Christian must take a radical stand against the world. The way of asceticism is the only form of life which is in accord with Christian life. This would mean abandonment of possessions and an entirely negative attitude towards all earthly goods. "If you are superior to the passions, you will despise all things in the world," he wrote. Restraint must also be put on the needs and desires of the human body. Particularly the use of meat was prohibited. Another state of life which was considered corrupt was marriage with its carnal union. A person who enters into union with a woman will reap perdition from the flesh. Tatian called marriage fornication. (*Ibid.*, p. 36)

Tatian's encratic views (The word encratic literally means self-control) are also expressed in *Hannony of the Gospel'* (Diatessaron). Tatian took sections out of each gospel and combined them into a more or less chronological whole. It was composed originally in Syriac. It was the gospel of the Syriac speaking communities and continued to be used for several generations, serving the ecclesiastical and missionary needs of Syrian Christianity. (Voobus, *op. cit.*, p. 39) Tatian was able to weave into the gospel his encratite views. He modified several of the sayings of Jesus in the canonical texts to suit his purpose. His *Gospel of Harmony* makes it clear that eternal life demands a radical renunciation of possessions, family life and marriage, i.e., the prize demands a life in abstinence and virginity. Tatian also emphasized the fact that Christian

life is one of suffering. *The Harmony of the Gospels* unveils the real extent of the penetration and permeation of Tatian's encratite views in the Syrian Orient in the first Christian generation. "Together with the word of salvation a message was heralded that Christian faith finds its realization only in rigid asceticism, which unites all those who bear the cross on their shoulders and follow their Master on their *via dolorosa*" (*Ibid.* p. 44.)

Because of the radical views of Tatian, the church Fathers in the west portrayed him as the epitome of heretics. But the east Syrians had their own opinions about him. They did not include him among the heretics in the company of Marcion, Bardaisan, Mani, Valentinus and others. The east Syrians knew him as the disciple of Justin Martyr and the author of the *Gospel of Harmony*. What seemed repulsive to the western mind seemed normal to the oriental mind

There were others who influenced the character of East Syrian Christianity. The *Chronicle of Edessa* mentions the names of Marcion, Mani, and Bardaisan as men closely connected with the spiritual past of Christianity in Edessa. (*Ibid.*, p. 38) The Marcionite church with its emphasis on radical asceticism found a fertile ground among the Syriac speaking Christians in Mesopotamia in the second century. Radical asceticism characterized the life of Marcionite Christianity with its deep hatred against everything that is of the world. Church life was shaped accordingly. All those who are not ready for the consequences of the Christian faith had to remain in the status of catechumen. Only the ascetics were admitted to the congregation as full members. These members were celibates, and married persons who avoided carnal intercourse. Only those categories of persons deserved to be baptized. With regard to marriage, Marcion demanded absolute continence. He also emphasized severe fasting.

Bardaisan, born about AD 154 in Edessa and converted to Christianity in about AD 175, was a poet and philosopher and a great original thinker. Western church fathers condemned him as a gnostic, but he was not a gnostic except in that he thought that matter was evil. He wrote strongly against Marcion who taught that the God of Creation is not good but evil. He also influenced the East Syrian Christianity.

The Acts of Judas Thomas originally written in Syriac in the first half of the third century gives us a picture of asceticism in the East Syrian church. It tells us clearly that the fundamental conception around which

Christian belief centered was the doctrine that Christian life is unthinkable outside the bounds of virginity. *The Acts of Thomas* offers us many illuminating arguments in favour of virginity. In it the intercourse in marriage is called 'the deed of shame', the 'deed of corruption', 'dirty and polluted pleasures', and 'filthy intercourse'. It is a union which is not of divine will and origin but founded upon earth and therefore is the 'veil of corruption' The body must be cleansed, 'the veil of corruption' must be taken away, before the divine life can enter as the spirit enters the temple. "Blessed are the bodies of the holy ones, which are worthy to become clean temples in which the Messiah shall live." According to *Acts of Thomas*, the sexual phenomenon is an obstacle to the higher level of life, and only its removal opens the way to eternal life. It declares that to have children means to have heavy cares that end in bitter sorrow. Over against a married life, *Acts of Thomas* speaks of the heavenly wedding.

In the *Acts of Thomas*, virginity is a theme which runs through the whole document. For those who are married, it means continence or sometimes giving up marriage. Voobus points out that the word *qaddis* (holy) in archaic Syriac terminology refers to sexual continence so that holy is used as a synonym for chastity or purity. This term is distinctly separated from virginity, which expression is reserved to those women and men who have kept their virginity and have not married. The term 'holiness' then refers to married couples who have not preserved their virginity but practice continence. (*Ibid.*, p. 72) There are a number of references in the *Acts of Thomas* which suggest that after receiving the Christian message, those who were engaged to be married decided not to marry and those who were already married decided to live in continence and separation.

In another Syriac source it is said that Christ the true bridegroom came for the purpose of gathering and elevating only those who followed his call with a vow of virginity. The true believers are betrothed to the celestial bridegroom and they will inherit the bridal chamber. The document pictures the joy of the virgins before the presence of Christ. "The virgins, clad in garments of immortality, sing the triumphal hymn of virginity, wear the crown of everlasting life and dance in the presence of Christ being accompanied by the angels, and enjoy heavenly bliss." But the married women, regardless of their repentance in this life and the next, experience humiliation. (*Ibid.*, p. 73.)

There were other facets of early Syrian Christianity. Voobus speaks of

the covenant consciousness of the community. (*Ibid.*, p. 73.) Christian faith is conceived as a new covenant, which moulds all the theology, ethics and organization of the community. Christians are the sons and daughters of the covenant. In the new relationship the covenant has placed them, they are called to struggle not only against evil but also against the physical-natural conditions of this world. It results in asceticism. Possessions, marriage as well as any link with the world, are sacrificed for the sake of the new covenant which God has established with His elect. As R. Murray observes the early Syriac literature is stamped with the individualistic piety of the primitive ‘sons of the covenant.’ The essence of their spirituality was the sense of being personally ‘married’ to Christ in consecrated virginity. The church in general hopes for, and journeys towards, fulfillment in the kingdom or paradise, but for many the hope was precarious unless they undertook consecrated celibacy. For several of the early Syrian writers, the visible church on earth is the foreshadowing of the church in heaven. Within the visible church each member is called a ‘temple of the spirit’ and those who follow the way of self-consecration establish in themselves a ‘hidden church’ or church of the heart, which stands in a special, almost guaranteed relationship with the church in heaven. The ‘just’ (ordinary good church members) will get to heaven, but those who cultivate the ‘church of the heart’ are the ‘perfect’.

Such an understanding of Christian life is best reflected in the military terminology they employed. Their theology was expressed in terms of ‘struggle’, ‘fight’, ‘battle’, and ‘war’. These requirements were not meant for the ‘elites’ only but also for the ordinary members of the Syrian church. Only those who were ready for this radical manner of living were worthy of sacramental life, and they alone could become the covenanters, as the full members of the Church. The candidates for the status of covenanters were exhorted to search their hearts as to whether they had the strength to leave possessions behind, to renounce marriage for ever, and to accept the ascetic life. The covenant conception in the context of asceticism is related to the sacred militia which determines the entire thought-world. The covenanters are fighters in the army of God. The function of the priests is to blow their trumpets signaling the engagement in the battle with the enemy.

Thus there is considerable evidence pointing to the role of abstinence in the lives of the East Syrian Christians. Its role was so strong that the writers of the period portrayed the great biblical figures such as Peter, James, Thomas or Jesus himself as paradigms of asceticism. In pseudo-

Clementine literature Peter is depicted as a vegetarian who ate only bread and olives or Jesus as a confirmed vegetarian.

In the East Syrian church, asceticism had influence on the concept of the church. For if the ascetic way of life was the only reason for which Jesus came into the world, then only those who are ready to follow this rigorous way in 'his fellowship in incorruption' and 'the form of a new person' constitute the church. Such a concept of the church naturally meant that the sacraments were the privilege of the assembly of the ascetics. Baptism became the prerogative of the ascetic elite only. It was the sign of those who had courage to turn their back on the world and walk in conformity with asceticism. In the baptismal liturgy, baptism is called 'the water of proof'. i.e., the baptism will prove those who are selected and fit for combat. The act of baptism was followed by the Eucharist which was also limited to ascetic Christians. The lay people are associated with the church as catechumens or penitents or companions.

But such a rigid view of Christian life did not commend itself to all, nor did it last too long. The Syriac church order of the third century, *Didascalia* did not support such a view. Ephrem and Aphrahat, two great fathers of the fourth century did not limit church membership to such ascetics. By the fifth century, the synods of the Persian church decided that even the clergy could marry. From where did East Syrian Christianity inherit this ascetic tendency? Arthur Voobus notes that at first glance the asceticism of primitive Syrian Christianity flatly contradicts everything we know of the Judaism of the time. Judaism was not interested in asceticism. But Judaism of the first century was very complex and there were radical groups in Judaism who withdrew from the world and practiced asceticism. Recent discoveries and studies have brought this out very clearly. For example, the Essenes lived in poverty and surrendered their possessions to the ascetic community which they entered. Concerning the Essenes, Josephus tells that they hated riches and held a common treasury. The ascetic ethos manifested itself also in fasting and in the reduction of sleeping time in order to study the scriptures and meditate at the expense of nightly rest.

Judaism had a very positive view of marriage. But some ascetic groups among them viewed marriage with certain suspicion. In certain groups, virginity was made the norm. Josephus writes about Essenes who adopted a life in virginity. These groups thought of themselves as covenanted community, the true Israel as distinct from the rest of the

Jews. A military terminology permeated all aspects of their thought and life. The features of both movements, those of the covenanters in the primitive Syrian Christianity and those of the covenanters in the new movements in Judaism are very similar so that one could assume that they stand in a casual relation to each other. Such Jewish sectarian groups seemed to have influenced Jewish Christian communities all over the East, not least in Adiabene where sectarian Judaism might well have taken root even before Christianity arose. Voobus suggests the possibility that the same ascetic groups on the periphery of Palestinian Judaism also in turn were influenced by the Christian message and they contributed to the formation of a distinct group in the Palestinian Aramean Christianity. (Ibid., p. 25) There is no doubt that there was an ascetic stream among other streams in the primitive Christianity in Jerusalem. It must be remembered that what we possess of the Aramean Christian literature is very fragmentary. New Testament sources do not give us a full picture of the character of Aramean Christianity in Palestine. We should look to Palestinian Aramean Christianity as the source or the first influence on the East Syrian church for the development of its ascetic character.

Church Life in The Third Century

Didascalia Apostolorum (The Teaching of the Apostles) (R. H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* Oxford, Clarendon, 1929.) a Syriac document written in the first half of the third century gives a detailed description of the Christians in the East Syrian Church. It was written by a bishop on the Roman side of Syria. It was also widely used in Persia. Its purpose was to give instructions to church officers and members on Christian conduct and worship. Its claim of direct apostolic authorship cannot be accepted but it helps us to get a picture of Christian life in the third century. Its theology conforms to the New Testament teachings, though there is an overemphasis on the efficacy of baptism. It also makes a distinction between greater and lesser sins committed after baptism. Some Christians unable or unwilling to give up all their old habits and sins at once rationalized themselves into thinking that they could wash away the stain of each sin after it was committed by being baptized again. Against this *Didascalia* pointed out that there can only be one baptism. Willful sins, it said, are not washed away by the repetition of baptism, though the unrepentant sinner should "bathe in all the seas and oceans and be baptized in all the rivers, still he cannot be made clean." Repentance remains the condition for the forgiveness of sins.

Contrary to the encratic teachings that were spreading in the church at that time, *Didascalia* blesses marriage and approves of the grateful use of all God's material creation. The author was very much concerned with the Judaizing tendency in the church and sharply distinguishes between the ceremonial law and the Law given through Moses. He condemns severely the ceremonial law with its purifications, sprinklings, baptisms and dietary rules and regulations. For him, "the circumcision of the heart is sufficient." He exhorts Christians to assemble on Sunday, the first day of the week, without fail for worship. If they are not there, by their absence they would 'rend and scatter' Christ's body. The bishop who sits on the throne at the eastern end of the sanctuary is pastor, preacher and judge, and at his side sit the presbyters (elders). A deacon acts as usher, showing each believer to his or her place, men in the front, the women behind them, and the young on the side if there is room. If not, they stand. Young women with children have a separate place along with the aged women and widows. The deacons are also charged with keeping order. The bishop is told how to treat the visitors. If a rich man or high official enters the church, the bishop is told to take no notice of him but to go on with his preaching, offering the visitor no special seat in the congregation unless in Christian love one of the brethren wishes to offer him his seat. "But if a poor man or woman comes ... and especially they are stricken in years, and there be no place for such, do thou, O bishop, with all thy heart provide a place for them even if thou have to sit upon the ground." (*Ibid.* pp. 122-124)

The *Didascalia* gives great attention to Christian family life. It was more disciplined and serious in those days. Like other early church fathers, the author warns Christians against overemphasis on dress or cosmetics. The men did not shave and the women wore veils in public. Marriage demanded complete fidelity from both the partners. If a spouse died, second marriage might be allowed but a third marriage was considered a shame. As to the children, the author advises the parents to be very strict with them, they should be taught a craft to keep them from idleness and debauchery and they should be married early to save them from "the temptations and fierce heats of youth." (*Ibid.* pp. 122-124)

The life of the Christian community as it is reflected in the *Didascalia* is a very disciplined one. It accepted with gladness God's gifts of creation such as food, work and conjugal love. This is in sharp contrast to some of the ascetic tendencies we have discussed earlier. The Christian community of *Didascalia* was aware of the needs of the poor and the

imprisoned, the orphaned and the widows. They shared what they had, whether much or little, with those who had less. As Moffett notes, through all its righteous denunciations of sin there runs like a counter melody the sweet note of God's forgiving love. (Moffett, *op. cit.*, p.97.) It says: "Judge strictly (but) afterward receive the sinner with mercy and compassion when he promises to repent. Do not listen to those who desire (to put to death) death, and hate their brethren and love accusations. ... But help them that are more sick and exposed to danger and are sinning ... How abundant are the mercies of the Lord ... Even sinners He calls to repentance and gives them life." (Connolly, *op.cit.*, ch.6.)

East Syrian Church and Monasticism

It has often been held that the monastic movement in Mesopotamia originated as part of the general movement which started in Egypt under the influence of Anthony and Pachomius. Today historians are inclined to believe that monasticism in East Syria is independent of and prior to the Egyptian movement. The primitive Christian movement in Mesopotamia and Persia found itself in the midst of a number of movements and groups such as the Marcionites, Valentinians, Manicheans, which were very congenial to asceticism. All these movements displayed a uniform hatred toward the world and the body. Mesopotamia was a playground for such radical ideologies and groups which evoked mutual competition. These movements had great impact on Christianity producing various interpretations and sects within Christianity itself. According to Voobus, during the third and fourth centuries, real spiritual and religious strength was found precisely in these movements and the demarcation between orthodoxy and heresy in this situation was very thin and fluid. It was also true that numerical strength lay with such groups. Ecclesiastically organized Christianity was a mere minority in comparison. (Arthur Voobus, *op.cit.*, p.161.). This was true in Edessa as well as in several other places. One writer described the situation thus. "A single ear of wheat on a huge field full of weeds which the Devil has sown full of heretics....(*Ibid.*, p.161.)

Such ideologies and movements also influenced the shape and development of Christian monasticism. The question is, to what extent they influenced Christian monasticism? Voobus points out that Christian ascetics had a thirst after mortification and self annihilation. Not only did they persist in severe fasting and extreme self-deprivation, they actually went so far as to despise life itself. Voobus thinks such an

extreme form of asceticism developed due to the influence of Manicheism. Manicheism also brought Mesopotamian monasticism into contact with various forms and manners of Indian asceticism. The recent excavations have shown that Buddhist colonies were in existence in eastern Persia. It is also probable that Mani himself went to India and thus Manichean monasticism was greatly influenced by certain extreme forms of Indian asceticism, which in turn, influenced Christian monasticism as it developed in east Syria.

While admitting that there might have been some extreme form of asceticism practiced by some Christian groups, the question has been asked whether we can speak of the whole of the Christian monastic movement as similar to that of Manichean monasticism. Was it greatly influenced by the strong anti-worldly and anti-bodily Manichean dualism? H.J.W. Drijvers (H.J.W. Drijvers. *East of Antioch*, p.301.) disagrees with the conclusion of Voobus. He asks: Is the Christian ascetic practice an expression of contempt for the human condition and hatred of the body? He says that the social role of Christian holy men is in flagrant contradiction to such an explanation. The Manichean ascetics are a religious elite who never interfere with the body-social but always live at a safe distance from the cares and worries of daily life. We never hear about their social activities. Contrary to Christianity it never became a social movement, its ideology leads away from the trivial and material aspects of human life. Christian holy men are always ready to participate in the daily life of the common people in order to protect and integrate that life. They may cherish the ideal of virginity, but when necessary, they repair a marriage and they pray for the barren women.

Drijvers points out that the life style of the Christian saint is an exact replica of the essential-elements in early Syrian christology. Anthropology is part of christology. The literary heritage of the early Syriac speaking Church is reflected in the *Acts of Thomas*, *Odes of Solomon* and in Tatian's *Diatesseron*. In all these, Christ is considered God's eternal thought and will incarnate in the human body in order that human beings might return to the original state in which he or she was created according to God's thought and will. Christ manifests the divine will by his obedience unto death, which means by denouncing human passions and strivings, revealing in this way God's eternal thought concerning the salvation of humankind. The life style of the holy man or woman is an imitation of Christ's passion, a training of his or her will in dominating his or her passions and human strivings. He or she shows a certain Christ conformity. Virginity is the ideal of the holy person not

because he or she is filled with a deep hatred of the human body, but because Christ was *ihidaya* meaning that Christ had singleness of purpose to be the instrument of God's will and thought. The doctrine of free will of the human being by which he or she can control all passions and guide his or her body is an essential part of Syriac theology. In the hard exercise of his or her will, the holy person gains insight into God's saving thought. Asceticism and acquisition of wisdom are two sides of the same *Imitatio Christi*. The *Acts of Thomas* illustrate this. The holy person displays this insight of wisdom in his or her acts of power, which always aims at salvation of people. The Syrian holy person is the image of Christ and the continuation of incarnation so that, the divine is manifested in human shape by transforming that shape, into an instrument of God's thought and will. The central aspect of the main line east Syrian monasticism is not the fleeing from the world or despising the human body, but the exercise of self-discipline by the use of the human will and acquisition of wisdom to be used for the salvation of people.

The monks were popular with the masses. In the prayers of these spiritual men, the masses saw expiatory acts in the interest of the whole nation. The masses knew that the monks had particular compassion for those who suffered and they were never tired of hearing the complaints and worries of the people. They were always willing to help the people spiritually as well as materially. The monasteries became the congregating centres of the poor and those who suffered. There was competition between monks and regular clergy. The general masses believed that the monks' explanation of the scripture was more accurate, their teachings more powerful and their prayers more effective. Large number of believers made pilgrimages to the monasteries even on Sundays. As a result the church was forced to make a rule that the people should go to churches on Sunday and they should visit the monks only on weekdays.

Several of the monks entered the ministry of the church and became priests, bishops, metropolitans and even Catholicos. One important activity of the monks was the education of children and youth. The monasteries were also a sort of Bible training schools.

In the fifth century, the spread of the monastic movement throughout Persia was very rapid and a large number of monasteries were founded both inside Persia and outside where the Persian church undertook missionary work. The monastic movement reached the zenith of its

prosperity by the middle of the seventh century, but started declining afterwards. From hundreds of monasteries all over Persia and central and eastern Asia, there poured forth a constant stream of ascetics who had completed their training and went forth, in obedience to the Lord's command, seeking to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. They introduced letters and learning among peoples who were previously illiterate, such as Turks, Uighurs and Mongols, all of them are said to have derived their alphabet from Syriac. About these monks it is said that they were people of great faith, well versed in the Scriptures, large portions of which they knew by heart, fervent in prayer, gentle and humble in manner, full of the love of God on the one hand, and love to their neighbour and all humankind on the other.

Hence there was a missionary dynamics involved in east Syrian asceticism. In the Egyptian monasticism the saints ignored the world and retreated to the desert into caves and cells. On the contrary, Syrian ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor, and preaching the gospel. They moved from place to place. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 77.) R. Murray describes them as "homeless followers of the homeless Jesus on ... ceaseless pilgrimage through the world." (R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in early Syrian Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.29.) A. Gerd Thessen, a German sociologist and New Testament scholar speaks of the first followers of Jesus as 'wandering charismatics'. In the traditions of the first missionaries of the East, there is the same note of wandering mission, moving out across the world for Christ. Thomas in India gives thanks that he has become an ascetic and a pauper and a wanderer for God. (*Acts of Thomas* 6:60-61; 12:139, 145) (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 78.) Addai refuses to receive silver and gold from the king of Edessa, saying that he has forsaken the riches of this world "because without purses and without srips, bearing the cross on our shoulders, we are commanded to preach the gospel in the whole creation." The *Gospel of Thomas* exhorts the faithful to "become wanderers" perhaps as a call to mission. It says that travelling and healing are higher callings than fasting, praying and giving alms. And it quotes the Lord's call to mission- "The harvest is great but the labourers are few." (*Ibid.*, p. 78.)

The East Syrian church was a great missionary church. It was a church on fire. The Monastic movement played a very important role in the missionary enterprise of the church.

Ephrem the Syrian

Ephrem is the most widely celebrated figure in the Syrian church. The tradition is that he was born of Christian parents in AD 306 in or near Nisibis. In AD 363 when Nisibis was handed over to the Persians by Jovian, many Christians including Ephrem from Nisibis and the neighbourhood migrated to Edessa because of the persecution of Christians in Persia under Shapur II. It was in the city of Edessa, which housed the great church of St. Thomas the Apostle, that Ephrem spent the remaining ten years of his life, mostly in a cell. Here he continued the writing he had been engaged in Nisibis. R. Murray speaks of him "as the greatest poet of the patristic age perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante." (R. Murray, *op.cit.*, p.31.) An anonymous *Life of Ephrem* tells how he wrote his hymns and sang them to the harp, teaching them to the 'Daughters of the covenant'. Singing was that age's effective means of propaganda as Arius had found in Alexandria and Bardaisan in Edessa. (*Ibid.*, p, 30.)

Ephrem's authentic writings are all in Syriac or preserved in Armenian versions. His works fall into three groups: biblical commentaries, homilies including controversial writings, and hymns and odes. Ephrem wrote against the heretics of his day -- Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. In one of his sermons he said "He who prays with the Manichees prays with Satan, and he who prays with the Marcionites prays with Legion, and he who prays with Bardaisans prays with Beelzebub, and he who prays with the Jews prays with Barabbas, the robber." (Quoted in McCullough, *op.cit.*, p. 59.) The popularity of his poems and sermons, and the careful elucidation of the text displayed in the biblical commentaries, ensured Ephrem of a permanent place among the great figures of the Syriac church! (*Ibid.*, p.60)

The School of Edessa

The East Syrian church had a number of famous theological schools and centres such as those at Edessa, Nisibis, Seleucia and Arbela. Of those the most important ones were those at Edessa and Nisibis. Edessa was in western Mesopotamia and since the fourth century directly administered by Rome. It was the centre of Syriac Christianity. The beginnings of its celebrated theological school are obscure. The Edesseean population gave the school the name, 'the school of the Persians or the Christian Didascalion for the Persians.' From this Arthur Voobus and several others mention the possibility of the school being founded by the Christian refugees from Persia. (" See Arthur Voobus, *History of the*

School of Nisibis, Louvain, 1965.) When Nisibis was transferred to Persian control in AD 363, many Christians from Nisibis moved westwards to the Roman territory where their Christian faith could be easily practised. What is proposed by Voobus and others is that it was these Persian Christians who later in the fourth century founded the school in Edessa to train the clergy. There can hardly be any doubt that there were teachers among the refugees from Persia. Ephrem, the -- great Christian poet was one of them. There is a tradition that he founded the school but it is doubtful if he had much to do with the founding of the school. The most famous of the teachers who came from Persia was Narsai. He was the director of the school at Edessa from AD 451 to 471 and under his' direction the school made great advancement.

Here as in other schools of Syrian tradition, the students began their course with the reading of the psalter. The art of reading required for liturgical usage was considered an integral part of the course. The study included the study of New Testament and Old Testament books and the original writings of Syrian Fathers. At first the commentaries of Ephrem were the principal aids to scriptural studies, but later the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 392-428) came into use. Theodore's works were translated into Syriac. The name of Hiba (Ibas), the great translator is associated with the translation of the works of Theodore and other Antiochean fathers. Instructions and study were saturated with the Antiochean biblical exegesis and theology especially those of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore

The school also was caught up in the christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries which engulfed eastern Christianity. The school became a centre of the Diophysite (Over against monophysite) movement. The bishop of Edessa at that time, Rabbula was in favour of the Diophysite movement at first, but by AD 352 he changed his position and turned against his friends in the school of Edessa as well as the Antiochean theologians as a whole. By AD 353 the Christian community in Edessa was divided by the rift between the bishop and his adherents on the one hand and the school of Edessa and the majority of the Christians on the other. Rabbula wanted to wipe out the Antiochean influence completely from Edessa. It was reported that he had all the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia burned. Rabbula introduced, the writings of Cyril of Alexandria to Edessa. Thus the Monophysite movement began to grow. It already permeated Egypt, Palestine and western Syria. It soon engulfed the rest of Syria and Osrhoene.

During the struggle, the school of Edessa had increasingly become the centre of operations for the Antiochean theology. As such it had become the target for its adversaries. The position of the teachers became precarious and finally in AD 489 the emperor Zeno expelled them. On the spot the school had occupied, a church dedicated to Mary was erected.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 3: Christianity in Persia

The earliest centres of Christianity in the East were: Edessa, Arbela in Parthia, and India. While some early traditions speak of Aggai, a disciple of Addai as the missionary to Parthia, there are other traditions which speak of both Aggai and Man (another disciple of Addai) as those who brought the gospel first to Parthia. In some other traditions, Addai, Aggai and Man are mentioned as missionaries to Parthia.

The *Teaching of the Apostles* in describing the work of various apostles says:

Edessa and the countries round about it which were on all sides of it, and Zoba (Nisibis) and Arabia, and all the north, and the regions round about it, and the south and all the regions on the borders of Mesopotamia, received apostles' ordination to the priesthood from Addaeus the apostle, one of the seventy-two apostles. (Cureton, W. *Ancient Syriac Documents*, Ante-Nicene, Christian Library, Vol XX, T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1871, p.48. (see also Cureton, W. *Ancient Syriac Documents* Amsterdam, Oriental Press 1967 p.24). These Syriac Documents are sometimes referred to as *The Doctrine of the Apostles*, *Doctrine of Addai* etc.)

The document goes on to say:

The whole of Persia, of the Assyrians. of the Armenians, and of the Medians, and of the countries round about Babylon, the Huzites and the Gelai, as far as the borders of the Indians. and as far as the land of Gog and Magog. and moreover all the countries on all sides, received the apostles' ordination to the priesthood from Aggaeus, a maker of silk, the disciple of Addaeus the Apostle. (*Ibid.*)

According to another tradition, it was Mari, another disciple of Addai who evangelised Persia. There is no need to see any contradiction in these traditions. There was always a possibility that more than one apostle went to a particular country. Perhaps all the three were missionaries to Parthia. In the document, *Teaching of Addaeus, The Apostle* it is specially mentioned that Addaeus associated others with his ministry. "Aggaeus, moreover, who made the silks and headbands of the king, and Palut, Barshelma and Barsamya, together with the others, their companions came to Addaeus the apostle; and he received them, and associated with him in the ministry." (*Ibid.*)

According to Moffett, there is something appealingly believable about the story of Mari. In the tradition, Man who was a disciple of Addai, who in turn was a disciple of Thomas, like the doubting Thomas himself was a reluctant missionary. He was sent out to Persia from Edessa, but he begged the home church to allow him to return; but the church in Edessa asked him to continue his work. Grudgingly he set himself to the evangelization of Parthia and undertook difficult missionary journeys that brought him almost to India, "there", he said, "when he smelt the smell of the apostle Thomas", he felt at last he had done his duty and had gone far enough. (Moffett, *op. Cit.*, pp. 78-79)

One of the earliest centres of Christianity in Persia is said to be Arbel the capital of Adiabene. It was a small Persian border kingdom. Its capital Arbela was about fifty miles east of river Tigris. There is no doubt that the early advance of Christianity in eastern Mesopotamia, as was the case in western Mesopotamia, was upon the ground prepared by the Jews. There was a large concentration of Jews in Arbela and in Nisibis in eastern Mesopotamia. Nisibis which was situated west of Tigris was the seat of a Jewish Academy of learning whose fame was acknowledged in the first century even by the Rabbis in Palestine. Christianity spread in these areas in the first century itself. It is of importance that the Christian faith spread not only in bigger cities but also in the villages on the mountains round about Adiabene. By the end

of the Parthian dynasty (AD 225), Christian communities were seen all the way from Edessa to Afghanistan. The Edessian philosopher, Bardaisan in his book:

Book of the Laws of Countries written about AD 196, speaks of Christians living as far as Bactria (Northern Afghanistan).

Looking at the expansion of Christianity in the Parthian empire in such an early period, historians have raised the possibility that Arbela, the capital of Adiabene, if not prior to Edessa, could have been an independent focus, independent of Edessa, for missionary work throughout the Persian empire. In fact there is a theory that Christianity first came to Arbela and from there to Edessa. We have no historical evidence for such a theory. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus mentions that a king of Adiabene accepted Judaism about AD 36. Such a conversion could have made Arbela a natural centre for Jewish Christian mission at a very early date.

Robert Murray is also of the opinion that the first Christians in Adiabene were the Jews. According to him Adiabene which was the neighbouring state to Osroene had a flourishing Jewish community which made effective converts, the movement culminating in the conversion of the royal household itself in the first century. "Whatever is the truth about Christian origins elsewhere in the Syriac speaking area, the Christianity of Aphrahat and Ephrem is best accountable for a break away movement among the Jewish community in Adiabene. The latter did have historic links with Palestine..." (R. Murray, *op.cit.*, p.8. See also Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians or The Lost Tribes of Israel*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1841.)

Who were the Jews in Persia? Were they descendants of the 'Lost tribes of Israel'? There is a tradition among the Nestorian Christians in Persia that they are the descendants of Israel. But this does not mean that all Christians in Persia were of Jewish origin. Though the initial response was from the Jews, Christianity spread among the Persians. By the third century, according to Mingana, the majority of the inhabitants of Adiabene were Christians, and the majority of these and of the Christians in Persia generally were of Persian and not of semitic or Aramean birth and extraction. (*Ibid.* p.8.)

According to Stewart McCulloch there is no evidence of large numbers of Jews turning to Christianity and that most of the converts must have

come from the ranks of either pagans or Zoroastrians. (John Stewart, *op. cit.*, p.5.) However, by the end of the second century, Christians were found as far as northern Afghanistan. *The Chronicle of Arbela* reports that by this time there were already more than twenty bishops in Persia. In less than two hundred years after Christ's death, there was extensive Christian penetration in Asia and the Syrian Christians were beginning to carry the faith not across the Roman Asia only, not in Persia alone, but also towards Arabia and Central Asia.

Church and the Persian State

In the third century, while the Persians had considerable success in their constant struggles against the Romans, there developed an internal rebellion within the Persian empire which resulted in the overthrow of the Parthian dynasty by the Sassanian dynasty in AD 226. The Sassanians ruled Persia for the next four centuries till the coming of Islam. The policies of the Sassanians had considerable effect on the life of the Christian community in Persia.

The Sassanians organized their government on new lines. The first Sassanian king Ardashir began emphasising the close co-operation of the throne and Zoroastrian priesthood. Ardashir founded his power on a combination of religion and state. For him, religion may exist without a state, but a state cannot exist without religion; and it is by holy laws that a political association can alone be bound. He used the Zoroastrian clergy to legitimize his rule and in turn granted them special privileges. Thus the position of the king in Sassanid Persia was made far more stronger than it had been in Parthian times because of the close working alliance between the king and the priesthood formed by Ardashir I. In Sassanid period, Zoroastrianism became the official religion of the state which led, from time to time, to the severe persecutions of religious minorities. There were persecutions of Christians under Shapur II in the fourth century and under Bahram V and Yezdegerd II in the fifth century.

Although certain Sassanian kings were tolerant towards Christianity, the Zoroastrian hierarchy on the whole remained consistently opposed to all non-Zoroastrian religions. However, during the first hundred years of Sassanian rule there was more or less religious toleration.

For the first three hundred years of Christianity, it was in the Roman empire that the Christians were persecuted. The Persians, especially the

Parthians were tolerant of minority groups and the Sassanids at the beginning were too busy fighting the Romans. Moreover, as long as the Roman emperors considered the Christians as enemies of Rome, the Persian emperors were inclined to consider them as friends of Persia. By the time of Shapur II who came to the throne in AD 309, Christianity became the favoured religion of the Roman emperors. Constantine the Great even claimed a protectorate over all Christians everywhere and in AD 315 wrote to Shapur II asking protection and favour for the Christians. "I rejoice to bear that the fairest provinces of Persia are adorned with ... Christians ... Since you are so powerful and pious, I commend them to your care, and leave them in your protection." (*Ibid.*, p. 110)

The two empires being almost constantly at war, it was only natural that such a letter made Shapur II suspicious of Christians as an ally of the Romans. The fact that the Christians, including those who spoke Persian, used Syriac in their church services tended to foster the suspicion. Moreover, the hatred of the Zoroastrian clergy towards Christians was an additional factor. One cause of offence was that the Christians differed from Zoroastrians in their habits and customs. For example, the Christian custom of burial of the dead, and their tendency to look upon celibacy as a superior form of living, were repugnant to Zoroastrian clergy. The Persians considered the Christians as a threat to national security as well as to national religion.

It was not until after Constantine's death in AD 337 that Shapur II began a persecution of the Christians which lasted for most of his reign. The taxes to be paid by the Christians were doubled and the bishops were asked to collect the taxes for the government. Bishop Simon of Seleucia who protested saying, "I am no tax collector but a shepherd of the Lord's flock," was put to death on a Good Friday along with a large number of clergy. As time went on, the persecution was intensified. The churches were destroyed, the clergy who refused to participate in Sun worship were executed. The severity of anti-Christian measures varied from one locality to another and seems to have depended on the whims of the local authorities. The Persians who were converted to Christianity were especially persecuted. At first the Christian faith had spread among the Jews and the Syrians. But by the beginning of the fourth century, Persians in increasing numbers were attracted to Christianity. For such converts, even during peaceful times, membership in the church meant loss of family and property and other civil rights. During the time of persecution, many of them were put to death. It was to the great credit of

the Persian Christians that they remained faithful to Jesus Christ without floundering.

In AD 363 Jovian, the Roman emperor, concluded a treaty with Shapur II. By this treaty, Mesopotamia and Armenia came under the control of Persia. There was temporary peace between Rome and Persia. In AD 409, the Persian king Yazdegard, by an edict of toleration brought an end, for the time being, to the persecution of Christians. The peace brought about by the edict helped the Christian community to re-organize its life.

The Re-Organization of the Persian Church

From the beginning of the fourth century, under the leadership of bishop Papa bar Aggai of Seleucia, there were efforts made to shape a national organization for the Persian church. Papa was fully aware of the need for a strongly centralized Persian church. However, it was only at the beginning of the fifth century, as a result of deliberations by a number of synods, that the re-organization of the Persian church came into effect.

The Synod of Seleucia (The Synod of Mar Isaac) met in AD 410. (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, quoted by Moffett, *op.cit.*, p.138.) under the presidency of Mar Isaac, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The most important decision of the Synod which had a very far reaching effect on the life of the church, was to declare the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the primate of the Persian church; and in recognition of this preeminence he was given the title 'Catholicos'. The Synod confirmed Mar Isaac as Catholicos and Archbishop of all the Orient. The Synod also declared its adherence to the decision of the Council of Nicea and subscribed to the Nicene Creed. It laid down that there should only be one bishop to each See and that the ordination of bishops should be by three bishops. It laid down rules regarding the holding of biennial synods, hospices associated with the churches, the requirements for ordination, the duties of archdeacons, the precedence, dignity and duties of metropolitans, the honour and obedience due to Catholicos and on other such matters. The minutes of the Synod mentions bishops from more distant places-in Persia, on the islands of the Persian Gulf, in Media and even in Khursan.

The Canons of the Synod leave no doubt as to the authority of the great Metropolitan, the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Without his

approval, no election of bishop would be valid.

The king Yazdegard himself approved of the organization of the Persian church on this basis and issued a firman (edict) giving recognition to the Catholicos as the head of the Persian church. Thus the Christians in Persia received a definite standing among the population, with freedom to manage their own affairs, but answerable to the state authorities through the Catholicos. In this way, the Catholicos became a civil as well as a religious head. The chief defect of the system was that in future, the election of a Catholicos had to be approved by the king of Persia, which in practice meant that the office could only be filled by his nominee.

Following the synod of Isaac, there were other synods. The most important of them was the Synod of Dadyeshu. Towards the end of the reign of Yazdegard, the Christians were again persecuted in AD 420. Dadyeshu was elected Catholicos in AD 421 and himself suffered during the persecution and was imprisoned. It was also a troubled time for the church due to internal divisions and parties. It was in such a situation the third synod of the church met.

The Synod of Dadyeshu met in AD 424 in Markabata of the Arabs under the presidency of Mar Dadyeshu. It proved to be one of the most significant of all Persian synods. The first synod of Isaac in AD 410 had decided that the Catholicos of Seleucia Ctesiphon be supreme among the bishops of the East. The Synod of Dadyeshu decided that the Catholicos should be the sole head of the Persian church and that no ecclesiastical authority should be acknowledged above him. In particular it was laid down that "easterners shall not complain of their Patriarch to the western Patriarchs; every case that cannot be settled by him shall await the tribunal of Christ." For the first time, this synod referred to the Catholicos as Patriarch and that their Catholicos was answerable to God alone.

The Synod declared:

By the word of God we define: The Easterners cannot complain against the Patriarch to western Patriarchs; that every case that cannot be settled in his presence must await the judgement of Christ...(and) on no grounds whatever one can think or say that the Catholicos of the East can be judged by those who are below him, or by a

Patriarch equal to him he himself must be the judge of all those beneath him, and he can be judged only by Christ who has chosen him, elevated him and placed him at the head of his church. (In the early Catholicate of Timothy I (780-823). the canons of various Nestorian synods were collected into one volume known to us as *Synodicon Orientale*. The *Synodicon Orientale* begins with the Synod of Mar Isaac in AD 410, though it is probable that there were gatherings of Persian bishops prior to AD 410. It is an important historical source for the history of the Persian church.)

The assembled bishops- six metropolitans and thirty conventional bishops from all over Persia- threw themselves at the feet of the reluctant Dadyeshu and vowed him allegiance in terms that unequivocally set apart the church in Asia as free in Christ under its own head the Catholicos, not opposed to the west but equal in rank and authority to any western Patriarchate. This was not an act of schism as some Roman Catholics have interpreted it. (Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, p.296.)

What distinguishes the Synod of Dadyeshu from the previous Persian synods is that it claimed for the church of the East all the rights of a Patriarchate. Clearly specified among these rights was the privilege of independent administration- not of heresy, or of separation, but of freedom from outside jurisdiction. Moffett is right when he says that there is no reliable evidence of the church outside the Roman empire in Asia ever acknowledging the supremacy of Antioch, much less of Rome or any other western patriarch. The Synod of Dadyeshu thus merely made explicit what had long been recognized in practice. To the Persian bishops in the Synod of AD 424, Christians of the west were brothers and sisters in Christ, not separated brethren and sisters. But their jurisdiction as ecclesiastics ended at the Persian border. Persian Asia was beyond western control not by schism, but as a matter of patriarchal privilege. (" See Fortescue, *Lesser Eastern Churches*, p. 51 -- "From 424 we must date the independence of Persia from Edessa and Antioch. This involves, of course, independence from Antioch's superior at Rome. So, from the Catholic point of view, it seems that we must date the Persian Church as schismatical since the Synod of Markabta." This is a curious way of argument by a Roman Catholic.)

The affirmation of the independence of the Persian church from

ecclesiastical control or interference from outside had important political consequences for the church's existence in Persia which was in constant war with the Roman empire. Persian Christians could no longer be suspected as an ally of the Roman government.

At the Synod of Mar Acacius (486) a revolutionary canon was adopted with regard to marriage of clergy. Metropolitan Harsauma of Nisibis was advocating the marriage of clergy including the bishops for some time. He himself married a nun. It was in the Synod of AD 486 the church made an official decision which went against the radical ascetic tendency of the East and against the canon laws of the West. The canon specifically affirmed the rights of all Christians to marry, whether they be layperson, ordained priests or even bishops. It enjoined that bishops must not put obstacles in the way of marriage within their dioceses. In the text of the Canon, it is prescribed. (a) that bishops can bestow ordination for the diaconate only on married men, and it is implicit, following 1 Timothy 3:1-5, that bishops should be married; (b) that those who voluntarily choose not to marry, must live in a monastery in purity and continence; (c) that a bishop cannot oppose the wish of an unmarried priest to marry, or if a priest is widowed, to marry again. In short, the choice for Christian clerics is either the perfection of celibacy, or marriage adorned by the procreation of children. Penalties are set forth for those who disregard the rules. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, pp.197-199.)

In the next synod, the Synod of Mar Babai (497), the decision of the synod of AD 486 on clerical marriage was reaffirmed and it was publically stated that any Christian cleric, from the Catholicos (Patriarch) down, can openly contract a marriage.

A number of reasons were given for such a decision: scriptural (1 Timothy 3:1-2), moral and cultural. It was conceded that the application of so strict a rule as celibacy to those not called to a life of asceticism but ordained to the diaconate in preparation for ministry in the church had led to widespread abuse and immorality. It is better to marry than to burn (I Cor.7:9). Moreover, the Zoroastrians held the unmarried clergy in derision. Persians considered celibacy as a cause of weakness in the empire. The virtue of virginity irritated them. The state also pressured the church to change its stand on celibate clergy.

The Persian Church and Nestorianism

In the Roman empire, the fourth and fifth centuries were centuries of

theological controversies and ecumenical councils. In the early fourth century, the question was raised: If God is one, how could Jesus Christ be God? The controversy that followed was between those who wanted to maintain the oneness and unity of God and those who wanted to uphold the deity of Christ. The Council of Nicea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381) were convened with this issue and came to define a Trinitarian faith.

The next controversy was on two natures in Christ. The church always believed that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. But the difficulty was to explain how one person can at the same time be fully God and fully man without appearing to be two persons. The question was how the two natures can be united in one person and at the same time be distinguished clearly. The two opposing schools of theology in this controversy were those of Alexandria and Antioch. While the Alexandrians wanted to safeguard the divine nature of Christ, the Antiocheans wanted to stress the human nature of Christ. To the Antiocheans, the teaching of Alexandrians seemed to weaken the humanity of Christ and failed to distinguish the two natures properly in one person. Their incarnate Christ seemed to have only one nature, namely, the divine nature. They were known as Monophysites. To the Alexandrians, the Antiocheans seemed to have minimized the divinity of Christ and to have distinguished the two natures in such a way that Christ seemed to be two persons. In the incarnate Christ two natures are not properly united to form one person. They were called Diophysites.

The great theologian of the Antiochean school was Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428). Nestorius was his pupil. Nestorius became the leading figure in this controversy. At that time he was the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Council of Ephesus in AD 431 condemned the teaching of Nestorius and he was excommunicated. He was banished to Egypt and, emperor Theodosius issued an edict ordering all his writings to be destroyed. The Antiocheans were forced by the state to make peace with the Alexandrians who were very strong in Egypt.

The church of the East did not accept the Council of Ephesus. Though the influence of Nestorius ended in Antioch which formerly supported him, his influence did not die out in the East. Edessa became a centre of Nestorianism. Many of the teachers in the theological school at Edessa were still attached to the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and approved neither the decisions of Ephesus nor the way the emperor tried to impose peace. The attitude of the School at Edessa was important

because it was there that most of the clergy of the Persian church were trained. Here the students were given a good understanding of Nestorian views and when they returned to Persia, they became strong supporters of Nestorianism. Thus the controversy divided the Syrian church into two camps. While the west Syrian Christians living under Byzantine rule made peace with Alexandria and tended to accept Monophysitism, the East Syrians under Persian rule became Nestorians.

At the time of the Nestorian controversy Rabbula was the bishop of Edessa. At first he was a strong supporter of Nestorius. But when Antioch came to terms with Alexandria, Rabbula also changed side. He forsook Nestorius for the sake of peace with Alexandria. He burned the works of Theodore and called him the father of Nestorian heresy. Ibas, the head of the school remained faithful to Nestorian teaching. When Rabbula died in AD 435, Ibas was elected the bishop of Edessa. But it was very difficult for Edessa to remain a centre of Nestorianism in an empire where Nestorianism was condemned. In AD 489 the school was closed by the order of the emperor Zeno. Many of the teachers and students migrated to Persia.

While Nestorianism was declining in the Roman empire, it was in ascendancy in Persia. The majority of the Persian clergy who had studied at Edessa and who were Nestorians in their theology came into prominence in the Persian church and through their influence, the Nestorian views were widespread. One such former student of Edessa was Barsauma who became the bishop of Nisibis. He made Nisibis the chief Nestorian centre in Mesopotamia. It is said of him that Nestorianism owed more to Barsauma for its spread in Persia than to any one else.

As a theological opinion, Nestorianism had therefore been long in evidence in Persia. But there was also a political factor in the spread of Nestorianism. The Persian government had opposed Christianity partly because it was the religion of their national enemy, the Romans. But now Nestorians had been condemned in the Roman empire and they were seeking refuge in Persia, there was no longer any danger that such a form of Christianity would be a link with an alien power. On the contrary, it would be politically wise to encourage Nestorianism among the Persian Christians so as to alienate them from Christians in the Roman empire. King Peroz (457-487) gave up persecuting the church, except for a persecution in AD 465 which was directed against those who wished to remain in communion with the church of the Roman

empire. Thus the attitude of the Persian government and the influx of Christians from Edessa helped the rapid spread of Nestorianism in Persia.

It was in the Synod of Acacius in AD 486, which met in Seleucia, the church officially accepted Nestorian teaching. The first action of the Synod was to draw up a 'true apostolic and orthodox' confession of faith which repudiated both Monophysitism and Chalcedonian orthodoxy of the West. The Synod defined its doctrine of the Trinity. It confessed, "one divine nature, in three perfect persons, one Trinity, true and eternal father, son and Holy Spirit

It was explicitly Nestorian in its statement on incarnation and the nature of Christ. (*Ibid.* p. 198) A second canon guarded against Monophysite schism by re-asserting the authority of the bishops over monks and hermits who, it was feared, showed some tendency towards the heresy. It forbade those ascetics to wander indiscriminately through the villages. (*Ibid.* p. 198)

Acacius was succeeded by Patriarch Babai. In his synods in AD 498 and in AD 499, Nestorian teachings were re-affirmed and it became the official teaching of the church. Though the West condemned Nestorius as a heretic, the east never did. For them the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius were orthodox. Recent scholarship has vindicated their position. It is now seen that Nestorius never taught what he was accused of teaching by his opponents. He was more 'orthodox' than many of his adversaries.

Aphrahat, the Persian Sage

Like Ephrem in Edessa. Aphrahat was the greatest theologian in Persia in the fourth century. We know very little of his life. Some say that he was a convert from Zoroastrianism, but there are others who maintain that he was a Jewish convert. He was an Assyrian born in northern Mesopotamia in the region of Adiabene and was a monk, probably a bishop. His only surviving work *Demonstration* contains 23 treatises which he wrote between AD 337 and AD 345. The first ten chapters of *Demonstrations* deal with ten specific aspects of Christian life and doctrine such as faith, fasting, prayer and humility. In this he displays a very simple faith, firmly centered on the Scriptures. His basic theological position is a simple one:

One Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of all our faith. In treatise xix, we have what may be called Aphrahat's credo.

Now that is faith: when a man believes in God, the Lord of all, who made heaven and earth, and the seas and all that is in them; he made Adam in his image; he gave the Law to Moses; he sent his spirit upon the prophets. He sent, moreover, his Christ into the world. Further more, that a man should-believe in the resurrection of the dead; should further more also believe in the sacrament of baptism. This is the faith of the Church of God.

For Aphrahat, Christians are in the service of Christ. So he exhorts them to take heed what is needed for the service of Christ: pure fasting, pure prayer, love, meekness, virginity and holiness. In his instruction to the monks (covenanters), he reminds them that their life must be a life of unrelenting warfare between believers and the devil. Satan will tempt them with all the enticements of world's luxuries and pleasures. The most dangerous instrument of satanic temptation has always been women; the safest path for man, therefore, is to renounce the love of a woman, and live alone for Christ. As for women, their highest calling is to espouse virginity and thus rob the devil of his tool for temptation. But Aphrahat recognised that this will not be possible for all Christians. He acknowledged the fact that marriage is instituted by God and therefore is good. So Christians may marry. But if they do, it might be best to marry before baptism. It is interesting to note that Aphrahat in his address to the monks mentions that if a monk desires that a woman bound by celibacy, should dwell with him, it would be better for both parties to marry and live openly together. (*Demonstrations* VI.4, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers [second series]. vol. XIII, p. 306.) About Aphrahat and Ephrem, R. Murray writes, "They definitely affirm the lawfulness of marriage, but their enthusiasm is all for the state to which without any doubt they both were committed, namely, a life of consecration to Christ as a virgin." (*Ibid.* p. 116.)

The resurrection of the dead was part of Aphrahat's credo. Against those who hold that the resurrected will have a heavenly body, he pointed out that resurrection means initially the resurrection of the body laid in the earth. "In the day of resurrection, your body will arise in its entirety." Like Ephrem, a notable feature of Aphrahat's writings is his interest in Jews and Jewish practices. Both Aphrahat and Ephrem emphasized the fact that the chosen people of God (Jews) were replaced by a new

people, the Church of the Gentiles, which they called, 'the nation from the nations.' In developing the theme of election of Gentiles in the place of former Israel, they used two traditional techniques or literary forms: typo-logical parallels and lists of testimonia.

For Aphrahat, the election of Israel needs to be understood in the light of God's plan of universal salvation. The privileges of the chosen one are to be extended to all nations; all Israel's rites were types seeking fulfillment in the church. The significance of Abraham is, first, that God in fact promised to extend his salvation through Abraham to all nations, and second, that the story of Abraham reveals not only the temporary sign of the covenant (circumcision), but also the means (faith) by which a person of any nation can come and share in the promised blessing. (R. Murray, *op.cit*, p.12.)

While Marcion rejected Christianity's Hebrew past, the Syriac fathers did not reject it. For Aphrahat, the Christian church is the authentic fulfillment of the former nation and its heroes are simply our fathers.' He shows a devotion to the Old Testament saints. Israel is essentially the carrier of future blessings, the cradle of the coming Messiah. God's choice of Israel, therefore, is not complete in itself but it is a movement in history, pointing to fulfillment; and this is true of all institutions -- circumcision, covenant, passover, priesthood and its sacrifice, kingship, assembly or synagogue. The church is for all, and there is no further need of distinctions. Circumcision was a type which is fulfilled in baptism. For God is faithful and his covenants are exceedingly trustworthy and every covenant in its time was sure and found true. (*Ibid.* p. 44.)

In Christ all the covenants are fulfilled. "For those who are circumcised in their hearts have life and are circumcised a second time by the true Jordan, the baptism of remission of sins." For Aphrahat, whatever might have been the meaning of sacrifices in former times, it is fulfilled by and in Christ.

The purposes of the Law were brought to an end by the coming of our Life giver, who offered himself in place of the sacrifices in the Law, and was led like a lamb to the slaughter in place of the lamb of propitiation ... He gave his blood for all mankind, so that the blood of animals should not be required of us. (*Ibid.* pp. 50-51)

Since the Syriac fathers see the old order of sacrifices as having lost its former value, it is curious how firmly both Aphrahat and Ephrem held a tradition which is strange to the New Testament, namely, that Christ as High Priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek', actually received the Aaronic priesthood by unbroken succession of imposition of hands through John the Baptist, who was of priestly family; when the former priesthood was repudiated, the power continued in Christ and he passed it on to the Apostles. (*Demonstrationss* 11. 57. 13-20. Quoted in R. Murray, p. 55.)

For Aphrahat, as for Ephrem, it was at his baptism that Jesus received the priesthood from John. Ephrem says:

The Most High descended on Mount Sinai
and stretched forth his hand over Moses.
Moses laid it on Aaron,
and so it continued till John.
Therefore did our Lord say to him
'It is right that I be baptized by you,
that the Order may not perish'
Our Lord gave it to the Apostles,
and behold, in our Church is its handing on,
Blessed be he who gave us his Order.

Elsewhere, Ephrem says that it is the old man Simeon in the temple (Luke 2:25-32), regarded as a priest, who communicated to Christ the Priesthood that came from Moses. At another place, Ephrem says that Christ's priesthood came from Melchizedek. (Murray, pp. 55, 179)

Though Aphrahat wrote against the Jews, he showed great respect for the Jewish believer. If so, why did Aphrahat devote so much of his *Demonstrations* to the problem of Jewish-Christian relationship? From very early times Adiabene in the northeast, along with Edessa and Nisibis in the north west and around Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the south, had been major centres for the Jews in the East. At first it was in these Jewish communities that Christian expansion in Persia took place. Jewish Christians in turn began to evangelize the Gentiles. Yet the Jewish and Christian communities must have remained socially connected, especially in a milieu which was largely pagan or Zoroastrian. The relation between Christian faith and Judaism must have been a difficult issue in Persia and the Church fathers might have felt the need for Christian apologetics against the Jews. Moreover, during

the time of persecution (Jews were not persecuted) there was a danger of Jewish Christians reverting back to Judaism. As Stewart McCullough pointed out, "It is difficult to determine the purpose of those particular treatises. Some may have been useful in persuading Jews to enter the church. Others may have been intended to guard Jewish Christians from slipping back into Jewish ways. This may have been a real danger, for the evidence indicates that Shapur's persecution of non-conformists did not extend to the synagogue."

In his day, the church of Persia suffered severe persecution under Shapur II and Varuhara IV. In his treatise on persecution, Aphrahat told his fellow believers that they are the followers of a persecuted Jesus and that God in his mercy will bring good out of evil.

The School of Nisibis

For generations Persian Christians came to Edessa for their theological education. Edessa was the great theological centre for the East. But, as we have seen, christological controversies in the Roman empire affected Edessa also and as the Monophysite influence spread strong in Edessa, the school was closed down and teachers were expelled.

In the peace treaty which emperor Jovian concluded with Shapur II in AD 363, Nisibis was reverted to Persian control. Nisibis remained under Persian control till it fell to the Arabs in AD 640-41, and it was a leading city in the western part of the Persian kingdom. As we stated earlier, when Nisibis came under Persian control, many Christians left for Edessa. Now many of them returned to Nisibis. The bishop in Nisibis at that time was bishop Harsauma, a great champion of the Dyophysite (Nestorian) group. He welcomed Narsai and other teachers from Edessa to Persia. It was with the initiative of Barsauma and under the leadership of Narsai, the school was restarted in Nisibis.

While the date of the actual founding of the school of Nisibis is not known, it was started after AD 489, with the closing down of the school in Edessa. As McCullough observed, "whatever the date may be, the school of Nisibis was in fact the continuation of the one at Edessa and the heir of its scholastic traditions." (McCullough, p. 115)

Narsai enjoyed immense reputation. Among his contemporaries, no one was equal in this respect. He was the *mepasqana* (interpreter or exegete of the scriptures) in the school. He was a great poet. He wrote a large

number of *memre* and most of his literary creation grew out of the world of the Bible. The *memre* were on biblical figures -- Joseph, Samuel, Solomon, Job, John the Baptist, Paul, Mary and others; on New Testament events such as the birth of Jesus, temptations etc, and on the events in the history of salvation: Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost.

Narsai's gift for language made him a master of the Syriac idioms. With his poetic gifts he charmed his hearers. He also knew how to make his poetry popular. He put his theology into *memre* with pleasant melodies. The immense renown he had secured for himself is echoed in the epithets by which tradition has immortalized him. Abdiso spoke of him as the harp of the Holy Spirit. It was a time when the foundations of the Persian church were being laid. His scholarship helped the church to be built on strong biblical and theological foundations. He was a great teacher. His learning and knowledge were esteemed so singular that his grateful admirers, in their amazement and veneration, believed that they saw angels hovering around his chair when he taught. In the tradition Narsai lives on as 'the doctor and the tongue of the Orient' or as the 'admirable doctor'. The church has bestowed on him the honour, Rabban the Great'. (*Ibid.*, p.128.)

A. Voobus points out that another source of Narsai's reputation lies in the sanctity of his life. His asceticism spoke to the simpleminded much louder than his scholarship. He chastised his bodily needs. "In him the figure of the athlete emerges among the leading spirits." The only possession he had were his books. (A. Voobus. *History of the School of Nisibis*. p.82.)

The central aspect of the school was its spiritual discipline and Bible study. Scripture was the heart and centre of curriculum. Within the frame work of the general biblical knowledge, students were given systematic training in the exegesis of the biblical passages after the manner of 'the Great Interpreter', Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose sober, literal textual interpretations were always the Nestorian model. (*Ibid.*) Narsai pays tribute to Theodore thus:

It is proper to call him doctor of doctors, the agility of the spirit without which there would be no doctor who could give good instruction; through the treasury of his writings they have enriched all they have gained; and through his commentaries they have acquired the ability to interpret;

from him I have learned the habit of meditation of the divine word; his meditation became for me the guide towards scripture; and he has elevated me towards the understanding of the books of the spirit. (A. Voobus, *op.cit.*, p. 106.)

Homiletics was not neglected in the school, but it was based on a careful interpretation of the text. Theodore's sense of history and disciplined thinking had compelled him to reject the allegorical method of the Alexandrians. "They (the Alexandrians), indeed, turn everything backward," writes Theodore, "since they wish to make no distinction between what the text says (historical) and dreams in the night." (*Ibid.*)

The school of Nisibis was a confessional institution and the Nestorian faith was the precondition for admission. But it was more than a school of the Bible or confessional institute. It was a school of spiritual discipline. A good many of the rules were related to the internal discipline of the school. It was a close knit community and resembled a monastery rather than a school. It was expected that the students leave the world and take the vows of chastity as long as they are enrolled in the school. The students roomed together in small cells in groups of three or more. A student's life was a rigorous one. While in school he was up at cocks crow, and spend the day reading, hearing lectures, copying manuscripts and practising the recitations of the liturgy (canons 8 & 9). Tuition was free but the students were to pay for their meals. At Nisibis, during long vacation (August to October) they were sent out to labour and earn their keep. Discipline was very strict. A long list of prohibitions governed student conduct. Witchcraft, heresy, theft, falsehood, and immorality were forbidden along with causing 'confusion in the school.' The penalty for such offences was immediate expulsion from the school. Like some monasteries, the school enjoyed independence even from the jurisdiction of the bishops. One rule is particularly significant. Students were forbidden to cross the border into Byzantine (Roman) territory both for theological and political reasons (canon 4). Byzantium was in the hands of the Monophysites. There was also a political factor. It could give the appearance of collaboration with Persia's old enemy, the Romans. We need to remember that the Persian church always lived under the shadow of political suspicion. (Moffett, p. 202.)

The school was not only a school of spiritual discipline based on the study of the Bible, its theology was also a missionary theology. This

explains to a large extent the astounding way the church expanded. The roots of this missionary theology arises from Narsai's theology, the first great teacher in Nisibis. His theology effectively combined doctrines of creation, salvation and a universal mission patterned after two biblical models, Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. But the ultimate mandate for mission comes from neither Peter nor Paul, but from Jesus himself, who, as Narsai paraphrases him, told his disciples:

Your (task) is this: to complete the mystery of preaching!
You shall be witnesses of the new way which I have
opened up in my person ... You, I send as messengers to
the four quarters (of the earth) to convert the Gentiles to
kinship with the House of Abraham ... By you as light I
will banish the darkness of error, and by your flames I
will enlighten the blind world. ... Go forth! Give gratis the
freedom of life to immortality. (F. G. McLeod, *Narsai's
Metrical on the Nativity, Epiphany and Ascension* (19879
[sic.]). Quoted in Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 202.)

Narsai died about AD 503. He was succeeded by Elisa Bar Quzbaie and after him by Abraham De-Bet Rabban. During Abraham's time the school reached its peak and enrolment climbed to more than thousand students. Henana of Adiabene who became the director of the school in AD 570-571 was a gifted teacher, especially in the exegesis of the scriptures. But theologically he was inclined to the monophysite side and he preferred John Chrysostom to Theodore of Mopsuestia. The Nestorian church repudiated his leadership but he remained in the school with the support of the state. The result was that the majority of the teachers and students left the school and went to the monastery of Mar Abraham in Mount Izla which was also an important theological centre; and to other theological institutions in Persia. One such institution was the school of Seleucia. The fame of Nisibis as a teaching centre and as a stimulus to scholarly writing came to an end. We do not know when exactly the school of Seleucia was founded. As long as the school of Nisibis flourished, it remained in the shadow of Nisibis. When Nisibis declined, the school-of Seleucia gained in prominence.

Henana, at one time was a real threat to the Nestorian church. He won the support of the state and that too at a time when the state was inclined to favour the Monophysites. During the controversy that followed, the Nestorian church was forced to define its theological position over against the Monophysites on the one hand and the Chalcedonians on the

other. In this crisis situation, the great mouthpiece of the church was Mar Babai the Great (not the patriarch Babai II). He was the abbot of the monastery of Mount IzIa (569-628) and was a theologian of considerable merit. His *Book of Union* appears to have settled the final version of the Nestorian beliefs. He taught, "One is Christ the Son of God, worshipped by all in two natures. In his godhead begotten of the Father without beginning before all time; in his manhood born of Mary, in the fullness of time, in a united body. Neither his godhead was of the nature of the mother, nor his manhood of the nature of the Father. The natures are preserved in their qnume, (qnume : It is the essence of a given nature in concrete, realized form. The word is used for the discussions of the Persons of the Holy Trinity in credal affirmation. Nature is general and descriptive; qnume is specific and exemplary. When Babai speaks of Christ as "God and man" he insists on specificity: a divine qnume [not the Holy Trinity] and a human qnume [not mankind in general]. It is a singular essence. It is distinctive among its fellow qnume [only] by reason of any unique property. It is because of this distinctiveness, Paul is not Peter.) in one person of one sonship. (Aziz Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, London. Methuen & Co Ltd. p. 254.)

Theodore of Mopsuestia and the East Syrian Church

From the fifth century onwards, Theodore of Mopsuestia was the greatest theological influence in the life of the East Syrian Church. Theodore was the doctor of doctors in the church. When Henana of Adiabene, the director of the school at Nisibis (570-71) preferred John Chrysostom to Theodore, the Persian church repudiated his leadership and the majority of teachers and students left the school. Such was the popularity of the theology of Theodore in the Persian church.

"The bishop of Mopsuestia is a mysterious and intriguing figure", writes Robert De Vriesse. "Highly esteemed by his contemporaries, he was condemned as a heretic 125 years after his death. His works, as those of a heretic, have mostly perished, he has borne the reputation, for 1400 years, of the father of Nestorianism, the Patron of Pelagianism, and the first rationalist interpreter of the Bible." (John L. McKenzie, " A New Study of Theodore of Mopsuestia". *Theological Studies*. vol. 10,1949, p. 394. Theodore was condemned as a heretic in the fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in AD 553.)

Theodore's life (350-428) almost coincided with the golden age of the

Patristic literature. He was fellow student and friend of John Chrysostom and the teacher of Nestorius. He was the contemporary of Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Augustine and Jerome. As bishop of Mopsuestia, Theodore's influence extended far beyond his bishopric. As an exegete, Theodore was supreme among the scholars of his day. It is said that he was the greatest exegete before the Reformation. So great was his reputation as an exponent of the Scripture and as a leader of Christian thought that his contemporaries used to say, "we believe as Theodore believes, long live the faith of Theodore." His was a voice and not an echo among echoes. Even distant churches received instructions from him. After his death, his was the leading theology in the East Syrian Church. True to the tradition of the Antiochene Church, he was an enthusiast for missionary work. One of his books, which is now lost, was on missionary work. Bethune Baker writes: He died in the peace of the church and in the height of a great reputation, retaining to the last the warmest affection of Christendom and the highest regard of the Emperor. An excellent scholar, far-famed in his day as a pillar of the truth and a commentator, he may thus be taken as a good representative of the theological thought of the eastern Church at the end of the fourth century. (Bethune Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of the Christian Doctrine*. London, Methuen & Co Ltd. 1903 (reprinted 1954), p. 225.)

The school of Antioch, of which Theodore was the most outstanding and influential theologian, was not so much a recognized institution with regularly appointed teachers but as a succession of brilliant scholars and thinkers in and around Antioch. They were not all professional teachers but most of them had many followers and disciples. There were marked differences between the scholars of Alexandria and that of Antioch. The Alexandrian school was speculative and mystical in its tendencies, while the Antiochene school had a strong bent towards the scientific and rational. Consequently there was much room for misunderstanding between the scholars of the two schools. In the Christological controversies of the fifth century, they were on opposite sides. However, the theologians of the Antiochene school were very much impressed and influenced by the thoroughness of scholarship and spirit of enquiry of Origen of Alexandria. Diodorus of Tarsus in the 4th century is said to have initiated the theological tradition of Antioch. Recent discoveries of the works of Theodore: *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, fragments of commentaries on the Psalms and Genesis, and Catechetical homilies, help us to get some understanding of the Antiochene theology in general, and Theodore's theology and

scholarship in particular. The distinctive features of Antiochenes were in their interpretation of the scriptures, in their Christology and in their reflections on human nature.

The Antiochene theologians were biblical scholars. The exegesis of Antiochenes was based -on sound commonsense principles, being opposed on the one hand to the allegorical interpretation of Alexandria and on the other to crude literalism. They were convinced that the wholesale allegorizing undermined the historical truth of the Scriptures. They aimed primarily at finding out what the inspired writers originally meant to say. Although they held strongly to the inspiration of the Bible, they believed that the best way to arrive at their true meaning was to treat them as human documents. Inspiration to them was ethical and not pathological and consisted in a divine enrichment and ennoblement of the personalities of the sacred writers which enabled them to grasp something of the truth of God and understand something of His character and purpose. Though they recognized the Bible as the word of God, they also recognized the human elements in it. They searched the Scriptures not to see what could be read into them but to discover what was actually there. To this end they used all the aids at their disposal derived from grammar, philology and history. Instead of teaching the Bible as a collection of isolated texts, each to be interpreted literally, they endeavored to treat each book in the Bible as a whole. The contexts of passages were specially noted, the authorship, date, and circumstances of writing were carefully studied. The personality of the writers where it could be discovered and the peculiarities of their language and thought were investigated and taken into account. Difficulties were treated with intellectual courtesy and fairness and not opportunities for ingenuous explaining away as the allegorist did.

It is generally accepted that Theodore was a pioneer in textual criticism. He was the first to apply literary criticism to the solution of textual problems. He was a defender of the primacy of the literal sense and was strongly opposed to the Alexandrian school and its methods. He applied his critical tools to the study of the Psalms. Theodore was the first interpreter to insist that the Psalm must be read against its historical background. He pointed out that many of the Psalms are not from the time of David and several of them reflect the Maccabean period; while only three or four Psalms refer directly to the Messiah and His times.

The Antiocheanes were certainly before their time. They were undoubtedly the true forerunners of the biblical scholars of today. As

John McKenzie points out, "if modern exegesis is to be classified in one of the Patristic schools, it is certainly Antiochean rather than Alexandrian" (John L. McKenzie, *op.cit.*, p. 394.)

As to Christology, both the Alexandrians and the Antiocheans taught that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. It was in explaining the way in which full divinity and full humanity are united in one Person that they accused each other of heresy. While confessing two natures, the Alexandrians wanted to emphasize the unity of two natures in one person. The Antiocheans, while confessing the unity wanted to distinguish the two natures in one person.

The Antiocheans had a real, appreciation of the glory and the value of human life of Jesus without minimizing his divinity. To them, Jesus Christ represented the humanhood at its highest, holiest and fullest. One of the essential elements in human nature, according to them, is free will and the capacity for choosing either good or evil. As a human being Jesus possessed this free will. It was this which made them oppose Apollinarius who denied 'human soul' in Jesus. They recognized in the synoptic Gospels a certain process of growth, development and progress in the inner life of Jesus. They saw in Jesus a progressive development by means of conflict and trial by the exercise of free will. For them, the reality of human life of Jesus is necessary for the complete work of redemption.

Alexandrian theologians such as Origen and Athanasius, under the influence of Platonic ideas, believed that the human soul is immortal. So redemption for them means the fallen soul returning to the place of origin. Athanasius explains "For he was made man that we might be made God." Here the distinction between the creator and the creation vanishes. Further the redemption of the body, of the creation itself, is in no sense required by this platonic soteriology. It was Theodore's greatest insight to realize the difficulties involved in this notion of redemption as divinization. (Rowan Greer, *Theology of Mopsuestia*, pp. 14-18.)

According to Theodore, salvation of the human being is not to be described as divinization but rather as the fulfillment of the community of human being and God, which belongs to the human being by virtue of his or her creation. We are created in the image of God. This fulfillment is perfectly brought about in the life of Jesus. Jesus Christ is fully human and such is the perfect expression of the image of God. By union

with Jesus we are restored to community with God.

For Theodore the human being is the crowning work of creation. A most important aspect in human nature is the free will and the capacity to choose either good or evil. "The present life is a wholesome discipline, affording room for the exercise of free will and the attainment of goodness, which without our effort would be destitute of moral worth." But he recognizes the need for help. Although human-nature is free and we have a responsibility in conquering evil, it is insufficient to conquer the forces of evil and attain perfect virtue without supernatural aids. The mission of Christ is primarily to restore the shattered unity of the cosmos, and gather-up all things to himself by realizing in his person the position of the human being as the visible image of God and the head of all creation, and to restore humankind by union with himself. To fulfill this mission it was necessary that God the word should become perfect human being in possessing a rational soul capable of exercising a real choice between good and evil and entering into conflict with the passions of the human soul. This is how Theodore explains Incarnation and Redemption.

Many of the church fathers saw redemption as divinization, that is, going back to the original state. Human being is created perfect and the fall represents the fall from perfection. Death is the punishment for sin. For Theodore, on the contrary, Adam was created mortal, death was not a punishment for sin but natural, and concupiscence already lived in Adam as in a mortal being. But the human being is created with freedom to choose his or her destiny -- either the image of God or the image of the devil. The fall then is not a fall from perfection but a falling short or failure to obey the call of destiny." (Rowan Greer, *op.cit.*, p.24.) With the help of Christ, the human being is gradually brought to perfection, that is, community with God. In this process, the freedom of will to make choices plays an important role. Theodore explains this process thus: "God separated history into two ages that man might be led from mortality and mutability to immortality and immutability in the new age." (*Ibid.* p. 18.) According to Theodore, if God had made the human being as immortal and immutable to begin with, we would be differentiated in no way from the irrational creation, since we would have no knowledge of our own good. Theodore considers the human being as a creature. The human being has fallen in the sense that he chose the way to sin that was open to him. This choice and the knowledge of good and evil were necessary if human beings were to be rational. The destiny and the highest faculty of the human being is

dependent upon his or her being mutable and responsible. The destiny of immortality-in the second stage is possible only through the rational functioning of the human being in this age. Our life in this age becomes a training to prepare us for the perfect obedience and immutability of the age to come. This is possible if only human beings are given the freedom of choice. For Theodore, sin has nothing to do with human nature. However powerful are the effects of Adam's fall in intensifying the inclination for concupiscence and sinning, the free will and the moral ability to make decisions between good and evil are not impaired.

In the fifth century Theodore found a very favourable hearing in the East Syrian Church as his teachings were very congenial to those who were reared in the ancient traditions of Ephrem and Aphrahat. When the school of Nisibis introduced the teaching of Theodore, there was a continuity with the existing theological tradition.

Ephrem represents the ancient Syrian-thought world. Ephrem does not accept original sin. Sin for him is a matter of freedom and its roots are in the will. He defines sin thus, "Sin is this, a nature (furnished) with will and a being (furnished) with freedom becomes guilty." Sin cannot be located in human nature. Therefore one cannot say that human nature has been fundamentally affected by sin or transformed into evil. Thus Ephrem can speak of the innocence of children, and the righteousness and perfection of those in biblical history. He regards life lived in virginity as an angel like form of existence. (Arthur Voobus, "Theological Reflections on Human Nature in Ancient Syrian Traditions," in E. Ferguson (ed). *Studies in Early Christianity*, vol. x, Garland Publishing Inc. London, 1993, p. 40.) According to Ephrem, since Adam's fall, outward conditions have experienced catastrophic changes, but neither human nature nor the spiritual-ethical level in human existence has been affected. Human being's moral power and ethical strength have received a blow from Adam's example; in themselves, however, they have not been seriously endangered. Indeed, it is intact. This is so because human being's freedom has not been seriously affected. "If our created nature is ugly, the reproach falls on our creator; but if our freedom is evil, the reproach accumulates itself on us." (*Ibid.*, p. 40.) As human freedom, so also the will has remained intact (Nisbene Hymns xxi, 5). Thereby human beings are furnished with qualities which make them capable of co-operation with the saving work of Christ, being able through their ethical strength and will to take on themselves the consequences of their calling. (Hymn of Faith xxxi, 5)

Voobus points out that statements emerge again and again which reveal Ephrem's keen interest in and his vigorous stand for the human being's freedom. "The Master of Edessa is confident that the reigns of the will are laid in the hands of man," writes Voobus. The will 'born' free is the power that frees from sin. Through free will, sin falls. Although human power is weak, the will guarantees victory. What Ephrem stresses is the responsibilities and obligations of the Christian faith. Although Ephrem seldom speaks of grace, it is his religion. His concern was how human beings could and should react to God's gracious invitation. He saw grace in all what God has done in and through the ministry of Jesus Christ. That provides the context for human action. It is in this sense that he speaks of co-operation between God and human being. He also says that by grace, human will receives strength from God.

Just as in the case of Ephrem, Aphrahat also does not accept original sin. Human nature is not subjected to corruption and depravity through the fall of Adam, as if Adam's fall has made humankind a mass of sinners. But he takes seriously the devastation released by the example set by Adam's disobedience and fall. Adam's bad example is an instigation which others emulate. For Aphrahat, Grace is understood in terms of the indwelling of Christ's Spirit in the believer. In baptism, the Spirit descends and takes a place in the believer's life. However, this spirit is envisaged as one which enhances ethical sensitivity, thus moving the believer to strive for sanctity of life.

What we see in the Syrian tradition is a Christianity which in its understanding of human nature was eager to preserve the freedom of the human being and a certain degree of self-reliance, thereby laying strong emphasis on ethical power and the sense of responsibility.

Theodore's theology was very congenial to the East Syrians who were brought up in the theological tradition of Ephrem and Aphrahat. From the fifth century on the impact of Theodore's theology and approach on East Syrian theology was immense and the most important disciple of Theodore in Persia was Narsai, the head of the theological school in Nisibis. Voobus notes that Narsai simply absorbed Theodore's theology - that death was natural and therefore not a punishment for Adam's sin carried over to humankind." (*Ibid.*, p. 43.) The school of Nisibis, where Narsai was the great master, became a centre for spiritual renewal for the Persian Church. The authority of Theodore, along with Diodore and Nestorius, was established as normative for hermeneutics as well as for

theology. "Thus Theodore's theological heritage found a safe repository where it was guarded and cherished by faithful hands and thus became the very heart in the body of the Nestorian church." (*Ibid.*, p. 46.)

It is in their reflections on human nature, sin and grace, that Western and Eastern theologians parted company. From Augustine onwards, Western emphasis on original sin, the bondage of the will, and the irresistibility of grace have resulted in the doctrine of double predestination. But in contrast, as Voobus points out, that the East "with their emphasis on freedom, the ethical strength and the moral responsibility of man preserves something of that which, in its deeper layers, rests in the Gospel tradition itself." (*Ibid.*, p. 49) The Theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia stands as a strong critique to that of Augustine. Wherever Nestorian missionaries went, the theology of Theodore also went.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 4: Christianity in Arabia and Central Asia Christianity Among the Arabs

Christianity Among the Arabs

J. Spencer Trimingham (J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London, Longman, 1979) points out that we should discard the notion that until the Muslim Arab expansion in the seventh century, the Arabs lived mainly in the Arabian Peninsula and that the term Arab meant camel nomads. Even before the emergence of Islam, the Arabs were found in all the regions beyond the northern border in Syria and Palestine, Mesopotamia and Babylon, and even in western Persia. They intermingled with the Aramaic speaking peoples of the region and spoke Aramaic. Some were cultivators of the land and some were nomads, while some lived in cities. When Christianity spread to Syria and Persia, there is no doubt that some of the Arabs also became Christians. Unlike the Greeks, the Aramean Christians showed no interest in metaphysics as an end in itself. They were concerned with a joyful transformation of life within the world accomplished through the possession of the Holy Spirit. For them the Lord is a spirit and salvation in Christ meant victory over the powers of the evil spirits. The deserts were the abode of such demonic spirits. Trimingham says that the conversions of many Arab leaders came about through their deliverance from the possessive spirits or the cure of maladies caused by the spirits. For example, a number of nomad Arabs in the valley of the

Euphrates accepted Christianity because they were attracted to the Christian faith by the power which the Christian monks and hermits exercised over the evil spirits in the name of Jesus." (*Ibid.*, p. 128.)

There were a number of small independent buffer States between Rome and Parthia and several of them were of Arab tribes. There were Christians among them. According to Trimmingham, the ruler of Edessa, king Abgar who became a Christian, was of Arab origin. Two of the important Arab tribes which lived between Persia and the Roman empire with whom the great powers maintained relationships were Banu Ghasan on the Syrian frontier and Banu Hira on the Persian frontier. In course of time Banu Ghasan became a strong Monophysite stronghold. Not all Banu Hira were Christians but several clans among them were Nestorian Christians.

It is very difficult to say when and how exactly Christianity came to peninsular Arabia; through Arab Christians from the north or through Persian missionaries or through Christian traders from Persia or through Christian immigrants. It might have been through all these means. There were three important trade routes to Arabia connecting it to Persia, Syria and Egypt. It is important to note that it was along these trade routes that Christian centres developed. Several historians have suggested that the most important mode of entrance had been by emigration of Christians from Persia at the time of persecution, particularly in the latter part of the reign of Shapur II (310-379) who persecuted the Christians severely from AD 339 onwards. These immigrants must have mostly gone either by land through the semi independent Arab state of Hira or across the Persian Gulf to the coast of Oman, and from there southwards to Yemen. *The Chronicle Seert* mentions that one Abdisho built a monastery on the island of Baharin, perhaps about AD 390. However, one should consider the possibility of Christianity being present in Arabia even before the persecution of Shapur II. As we mentioned earlier, there were Arab Christians throughout the eastern part of the Roman empire as well as in Persia, and a church with a great missionary spirit might have taken the Gospel to Arabia at an earlier date, probably by the end of the second or early third century.

The main centre of Christianity in Arabia proper was in Yemen and in Najran in South Arabia. The *Book of Himyarites*, (A. Moberg, *The Book of Himyarites*, London: Oxford University Press, 1924.) fragments of a Syriac work written in AD 932, gives us some information about Christianity in South Arabia. There is a tradition which says that during

the reign of Yazdegerd I (399-420) in Persia, a merchant named Hayyan, from Yemen of the Himyarites kingdom, went to Constantinople. On his return he stopped at the Arab tributary kingdom of Hirta on the Persian border east of Euphrates. While there he frequented the company of Nestorian Christians and was converted to Christian faith. On his return to Yemen, he proclaimed the Gospel in Yemen as well as in the neighbouring places. In Yemen, the Jews were numerous and they persecuted the Christians.

There is another tradition about the introduction of Christianity to this area. About AD 354, the Roman emperor Constantius, son of Constantine the Great, sent Theophilus "the Indian" to lead an embassy to southern Asia. On his way, the embassy visited the southwest corner of Arabia. There Theophilus, who was a deacon in the church preached the Gospel. As a result the Himyarite king was converted and three or four churches were built -- in Zafar, the capital of the Himyarite kingdom, in Aden, in Sana (a place half way between Nairam and Aden) and at Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. By about AD 500, Nairam was a great centre of Christians, Christians being numerous in that region. In the list of bishops consecrated by Catholicos Timothy I (780-820), there is the mention of bishops of Yemen and Sana.

Christianity in Central Asia

From its very beginning, the East Syrian church expressed its faith through missionary efforts. When the western church was busily engaged in theological controversies, the East Syrian church was busy preaching the Gospel to the Persians, the Arabs, the Indians, the Turks and the Chinese. The existence of trade routes connecting Syria with China, India and Tibet offered great opportunities. Marco Polo tells us that in his day the trade route from Baghdad to Peking was lined with Nestorian churches.

By the end of the fifth century, Persian missionaries were making converts among the Huns and the Turks in Central Asia." (Huns and Turks occupied the steppes in central Asia. They were a nomadic people. Sometimes the word 'Turks' is used to designate a group of people all of whom used one form or other of a Turkish family of languages. The Turks of Central Asia in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries occupied a strategic situation. Economically they were important because of their control of the land routes from east to west. Politically they held a key position in a power struggle involving China,

Turks in Mongolia, Tibetans and the Muslim Caliphate. They felt the cultural influences of all these groups.) When the Persian king Kavadh I had to flee his country to Central Asia in AD 499, he met on the way a group of Christian missionaries -- a bishop, four presbyters and four laymen -- going to Central Asia to preach to the Turks. Their mission was successful and many Turks became Christians. In addition to the work of Christian missionaries, Christian influence was making its way through the agency of Christian doctors, scribes and artisans who were readily able to find employment among the Turks and Huns. It needs to be noted that the Christians in the Sassanian kingdom were chiefly from the Syriac speaking population of the empire. In Mesopotamia most physicians, the larger portion of the mercantile and artisan classes and many members of the civil bureaucracy appeared to have been Christians. In the middle of the sixth century, a priest of the Hephthalite Huns was consecrated as bishop for his people by the Nestorian Catholicos. (R. Aubrey Vine, *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians*. London. Independent Press, 1937, p.62.)

From the fourth to the seventh century, Merv was an important missionary base from which mission was undertaken to Central Asia. From Men', the urban centres of Bukhara and Samarquand in Transoxiana were reached with the Gospel. Mingana speaks of a large number of converts beyond the Oxus river as a result of missionary work undertaken by Elliya, the metropolitan of Men' in the seventh century. (Lawrence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1933.) In due course Samarquand became an important Christian centre and a base for missionary expansion further eastwards. About the Christian community in Samarquand, Wilfred Blunt writes:

The Christian community there, like that found in many Central Asian countries, included at different times Jacobite (Syriac Christians of the Syrian Orthodox Church), Melkites (Syriac Christians of the Greek rites) and Armenians (of the Armenian Apostolic Church). But as early as the fifth century, it was an important 'Nestorian centre', and by the eighth century, continuing until the fifteenth century, had its own metropolitan. (Wilfred Blunt, *The Golden Road to Samarkund*, London, Hamish Hamilton. 1973. Quoted in John C. England, *op. cit.*, p.137.)

Many members of this church of the East lived often in village settlements, and remains of Nestorian Christian villages north of Samarquand date from at least as early as the ninth century. They were active in trade, education, and medical occupations, and drew freely on the scholarship and traditions of the East Syrian Church with which they appear to have been in regular contact.

Like other communities also, Samarquand retained its churches, schools and monastic cells under a succession of Arab and Turkish rulers for almost 1000 years, the Samarquand Churches surviving even the Mongol invasion of 1220. In 1248, an Armenian visitor to Samarquand attended worship there and Marco Polo estimated one in every ten to be Christians at the time of his visit (c 1265). In the mid-thirteenth century also, church buildings were restored and used, new churches were built, one of circular structure, dedicated to John the Baptist, and 200 years later Lopez de Clavijo reported the presence there of many Christians. (*Ibid.*, p. 139.)

Timothy I was one of the energetic patriarchs of the Persian church. He had sent more than eighty monks for mission work in Turkestan (a region in Central Asia extending approximately from the Caspian Sea to Lake Baikal). In the 8th century, the number of Turkish Christians had increased so much that Patriarch Timothy, in about AD 781, consecrated a metropolitan for them. It is also mentioned incidentally in one of his letters that he was about to consecrate a metropolitan for Tibet. Browne comments that these references are tantalizing because they show that there must have been great missions of which we have no record. (Lawrence Browne, *op. cit.*, p.95.)

There were Nestorian missionary activities further to the northeast, toward Lake Baikal. During the 10th and 11th centuries, several Tartar tribes were entirely or to a great extent Christian, notably the Keraites, Uighurs, Naimans and Merkits.

Keraites were a Turko-Mongolian tribe. The Kerait capital at this time was Karakoram, where Marco Polo found a church. They were a cluster of hunting tribes east and south of Lake Baikal. The principal tribes evangelized there by the Nestorians were the Naiman, the Merkit and the Kerait. It seems that the Gospel was taken to those tribes by

Christian merchants. An account of the conversion of the Keraites is given by the thirteenth century Jacobite historian Gregory Bar Hebraeus. According to Hebraeus, at the beginning of the eleventh century, a king of the Keraites lost his way while hunting in the high mountains. When he had abandoned all hope, a saint appeared in a vision and said, "If you will believe in Christ I will lead you lest you perish." He returned home safely. He remembered the vision when he met some Christian merchants. He inquired of them of their faith. At their suggestion he sent a message to the Metropolitan of Merv for priests and deacons to baptize him and his tribe. As a result of the mission that followed, the Kerait prince and two hundred thousand of his people accepted baptism. (R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1970, p. 191. See also Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* pp. 400-401.)

Mosheim writes, "It is placed beyond controversy that the kings of the people called Carth, living on the borders of Cathai, whom some denominate tribe of the Turks, and others of Tartars, constituting a considerable portion of the Mongols, did profess Christianity from this time [tenth century] onward, and that no inconsiderable part of Tartary or Asiatic Scythia lived under bishops sent among them by the Pontiff of the Nestorians. (Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History*; Vol. 11, p. 123. He places the conversion of the Keraites at the end of the tenth century.)

The historical basis of the Pester John legend may well have been connected with a Christian ruler of the Keraites. "The history of this race of Christian kings, afterward so celebrated in Europe under the name of Pester John, is properly referable to the two succeeding centuries." (Asahel Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 376.)

The Keraites organized themselves into a confederation and thus influenced the political organization among the later Mongols. It was the Keraites who patronized and helped the growth of Temujin who later became the Chengis Khan (1162-1227) of the Mongols. The Keraites also had religious influence over the Mongols through royal marriage. Chengis Khan's eldest daughter-in-law was a Nestorian Kerait princess called Sorkaktani -beki (or Sorghaghtani). She became the Christian mother of three imperial sons, an emperor (Great Khan) of the Mongols, an emperor of China and an emperor (ilkhán) of Persia. To the south of the Keraites were the Uighurs and there were Christians among them. The Uighur script had been created for them by the Syrian Nestorians. It was this script which was passed on to Mongols who still had no written

language.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Nestorian missionaries were very active in Central Asia.

In the Tartary and the adjacent regions, the activity of the Nestorians continued daily to gain over more people to the side of Christianity; and such is the mass testimony at the present day, that we cannot doubt but that bishops of the highest order, or metropolitans, with many inferior bishops subject to them, were established at that period in the provinces of Cashgar, Naucheta, Turkistan, Genda, Tangut and others, whence it will be manifested that there were a vast multitude of Christians in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in those countries, which are now devoted to Mohammadanism or the worship of imaginary gods. That all these Christians followed the Nestorian creed, and were subject to the superior pontiff of the Nestorians residing in Chaldea, is so certain as to be beyond controversy. (Mosheim, *op.cit.*, p. 161.)

The rise of Mongols into an Asian power in the thirteenth century affected the whole history of Asia in various ways. Chengis Khan, founder of the Mongol empire was born in Mongolia, probably in AD 1167. In his war against his enemies, he was greatly helped at first by Toghril, chief of the Nestorian Christian Kerait tribe. Chengis was a man of extraordinary stamina and resourcefulness. He eliminated his rivals one by one and brought all the Mongol tribes under his control, including Naimans, Merkit and the Keraites. He was elected Khan of all Mongols. That was the starting point of a series of conquests which led to the creation of the greatest empire the world has ever known. The conquest of the whole of China was not achieved during his life time, but a large part of northern China was under his control. The Mongol presence in China continued under his successors. Chengis' grandson, Kublai Khan (1259-1294) subdued the whole of China in AD 1279 and the Mongol rule over China lasted until AD 1368. Under the two successors of Chengis Khan, the seat of Mongol power remained in Karakoram. It was only under the reign of Kublai Khan that he moved his winter capital to Peking.

The conquest of China brought the Mongols to the threshold of South East Asia. The Mongols made several campaigns in South East Asia and

the old empires of Burma and Vietnam came under their control. It was the destruction by the Mongols of the power of the kingdom of Mien (Burma) in the eleventh century that secured the independence of Thailand and saw the establishment of the first independent Thai kingdom centered in Sukhodya.

About the Mongol empire Denis Sinor points out that there was a sudden widening of the geographical horizon of the peoples within the boundaries of the Mongol sphere of influence. It was an epoch when, "all the territory within the four seas had become the domain of a single family; civilization had spread throughout, and all barriers were removed. Fraternity among the races had reached a new zenith. (Denis Sinor, *Inner Asia*, Indiana University Publication, 1969, p. 163.)

Though Christianity made great success in Central Asia, it did not mean Christianity was the predominant religion there. Except among certain tribes such as Keraits, Naimans, Merkits and Uighers (partially Christian), Christianity was only a small minority among the Central Asian people. From the beginning of the Christian era, Buddhism from India was widespread among the Turks. The famous Indian monk Jnana Gupta spent ten years (575-585) in the court of one of the Turkish Khans, T'o-Po, and organized a centre for translation and cataloging of Buddhist books. In the 16th century, it was Lamaism, the Tibetan Buddhism, which spread rapidly in central Asia.

Islam which originated in Arabia in the seventh century was a great missionary religion. Islam slowly began to penetrate into central Asia and by the 13th century, Islam became the predominant faith among the Turks in central Asia. Yet numerous bodies of the Nestorian Christians were still scattered over all Central Asia.

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Chapter 5: Christianity in China

Origins of Christianity in China

The Chinese empire attained its greatest brilliance under the T'ang dynasty (618-907). The Song dynasty (960-1279) fell to the Mongols under Chengis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century. Chinese rule was restored by the Ming dynasty, in AD 1386, who in turn was ousted in 1664 by the Manchu dynasty.

The period of T'ang rule was a time of prosperity and peace. People could travel safely along good roads in almost any part of the country; mules and horses were available to travelers. Chang'an (Hsi-an-fu) was the capital of the empire. It was the largest walled city ever built and about 2 million people lived in and around the city. Officials from every part of the great empire, travelers, merchants and representatives of other countries were able to meet and exchange news and opinions. People became receptive to new ideas and customs. In the sea ports, especially Canton, there were large permanent communities of Arabs, Persians, Indians, and other foreign traders, people of many races, religions and backgrounds.

A.C. Moule in his book: *Christians in China before 1550* mentions a tradition that St. Thomas visited China. Both the Latin and Syriac writers in the medieval period (Francis Xavier, de Cruz and de Gouveia, de Burros among the Latin writers and Ebed Jesus among the Syrians) mention this tradition.

John Stewart refers to another tradition current among the Chinese of Chang-an, a tradition referred to also in the Chinese records. According to this tradition, in AD 64, the Chinese emperor Ming-ti, as a result of a dream, sent messengers along a road leading to the west to find out who was the greatest prophet who had arisen in the west. They met two Christian missionaries on the way to the court and returned with them. The missionaries remained there till they died six years later. The only relic of their stay is to be found in a scripture of forty-two sections and a logia of the New Testament. We are not sure of the reliability of this tradition.

Arnobius who wrote about AD 300 tells that the Gospel had been preached in China; so also Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century. From the end of the fifth century, Nestorian missionaries were working in Central Asia and there was a possibility of Christians coming into contact with the Chinese. Moreover, the Sassanid Persia had opened trade connections with China in the fifth century and Nestorian merchants were numerous in the merchant class of those times and Persian Nestorians might have gone to China for trade. About this, K.S. Latourette writes,

For centuries commerce between its [China's] millions and Central and Western Asia had been carried on by way not only of the sea, but also by overland routes across what is now Sinkiang and through the oases of the Oxus valley. Since so many of the Mesopotamian Christians were merchants, Christianity was especially strong among the mercantile communities in such caravan centres as Merv and Samarquand, and many of the traders who traversed the land routes to the Far East and settled in China were probably Christians. So, too, in the coast cities of China Christian merchants who had come by the sea from Mesopotamia and Syria might be expected. (K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. ii, London, Eyre and Spottis Woode, 1955, pp. 275-76.)

However, the first effective Christian missions to China of which we have definite knowledge was that sent by the Patriarch Yeshuyab II in about the year AD 635. Early in AD 1625 when trenches were being made for the foundation of some building near Chang'an (Hsi-an), the

capital city of T'ang empire, a great slab of stone with an Inscription both in Syriac and Chinese was discovered. The monument was erected in 781. The long inscription speaks of the coming of one Alopen about the year AD 635 bringing Christianity to China. The inscription contains a long list of Persian missionaries and also a summary of the teachings of the church called Ta-Chin (Syrian).

Alopen came to China during the reign of T'ai-tsung (627-649). The emperor received Alopen warmly and after studying the Christian scriptures (sutras) he brought with him, the emperor thoroughly understood "their propriety and truth and specially ordered their preaching and transmission." The emperor was favourable to the new religion. It is said that the emperor's mother came from a Turkish-Mongolian Nestorian family. It is difficult to say whether it contributed to a favourable reception of the first known Christian mission to China or not.

Though the religion of northern China was basically Buddhism, the first emperor of T'ang dynasty, Kao-tsu, the father of Tai-tsung turned anti Buddhist accepting the usual Confucian argument that Buddhism was alien and unChinese. One of Kao-tsu's ministers, Fu-yih, presented a petition to the king criticising the Buddhists. His criticisms of Buddhism was not theological but social. He asked the Emperor to deal with the hundred thousand Buddhist monks and nuns whose idle, unproductive lives he felt to be a scandal. In his petition he said:

The Buddha was of the west. His words were mischievous and he was far from us. The Han Dynasty unhappily caused Hu books to be translated, and thus gave free course to this false teaching. This caused disloyal people to cut off their hair,(to become monks and nuns), and to give only second place to their prince and to their parents. On the other hand idle vagabonds donned the cowl in order to avoid the usual forced labour.... They fear no rules to the contrary, and are always ready to break the country's laws. (John Foster. *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty*, London, SPCK. 1939, p.40.)

The same argument would have applied to Christianity also. Had Alopen arrived ten years earlier, in the reign of Kao-tsu, he would have been expelled.

In AD 626, Tai-tsung came to the Chinese throne by a palace coup with the help of some Buddhist priests. In return for their support he reversed the anti-foreign and anti-Buddhist policies of his father. The twenty-two years of his reign was a period of wide religious toleration. In AD 635 he welcomed the Christian bishop Alopen. To the Christians it seemed that the reign of Tai-tsung was the fullness of the time for God's purpose in China.

The historical section of the Nestorian Tablet begins with the following words:

If there is only a way (Tao) and no sage, it will not expand. If there is a sage and no way, nothing great will result. When a way and a sage are found together, then the whole Empire is cultured and enlightened. (*Ibid.*, p. 37.)

The coming of the Christian way was at a time when there was a worthy emperor upon the throne. It was the greatness of the Emperor T'ai-tsung which gave the Christian Church its opportunity. In AD 638 the emperor issued an edict of universal toleration and granted approval to the propagation of Christianity throughout the empire. It reads:

The Way has no constant name, nor the sage a constant form. According to environment religion is set forth quietly affording salvation to all living. The Persian monk Alopen, bringing a scriptural religion, has come to present it in our capital. If one studies the meaning of his religion, it is mysterious, wonderful, spontaneous, producing perception, establishing essentials, for the salvation of creatures and the benefit of man. It ought to spread through out the Empire. The officer of works is to build in the I-ning ward one monastery to house twenty-one monks. (*Ibid.*, p. 53.)

The church and the monastery in the I-ning ward of Chang'An was built by grant from the imperial treasury. As a mark of special honour the emperor sent his portrait to be hung on the church wall. This was the sign of special patronage. This first Christian church of China remained one of the noted buildings of the capital. It is mentioned in *Records of Chang 'An*, a book completed in the year AD 1076, and this seems to imply that it was still there, though only as a relic of the past.

A.C. Moule points out that a large number of manuscripts were discovered in north west China which speak of Christianity in China in the seventh and eighth centuries. One of the manuscripts written around AD 800 contains a hymn addressed to the Holy Trinity.

When T'ai-tsung died in AD 649, he was succeeded by his son Kao-tsung who continued his father's policy of religious toleration and favoured the Nestorians. The Nestorian movement speaks of his establishing a number of monasteries or churches in the latter half of the seventh century. He gave Alopen the title 'the Great Patron and Spiritual Lord of the Land.' It was during Kao-tsung's reign that Christian missionaries began to extend their work from one centre at Chang'An to other cities.

After Kao-tsung's death, one of his queens Wu-Hou (Wu Chao) seized power (690-705). She was pro-Buddhist and against the Christians. She officially declared Buddhism as state religion in AD 691. The Buddhists hailed her as an incarnation of Maitreya Buddha. She persecuted the Christians. The Nestorian tablet does not say much about the persecution. But it did say that after the persecution in the capital "there were fallen roofs and mined walls to raise, desecrated altars and sanctuaries to restore." (*Ibid.*, p. 655.)

During the reign of Wu Hou's grandson, Hsuan-tsung (712-756), it was a period of recovery for the church. At the time of the Arab invasion of Persia in AD 636, many refugees including the Persian Shah, found shelter in China. Thus there was a very high ranking Persian community in the Chinese capital in the seventh century. The spread of Arab empire across Asia, rather than interrupting mission to China, actually stimulated the Nestorian mission. Nestorian missionaries accompanied Arab embassies to China, taking advantage of Arab sea and trade routes. The Arab embassies employed Nestorian missionaries as interpreters and advisers in their dealings with the Chinese government.

As for the church in China, the years between AD 712 and 781 were years of greater progress. New missionaries arrived in China with a bishop named Chi-ho. Christians were enjoying again the generous patronage of the emperor. Monasteries had been restored at Chang'An, Lo-yang and in the provinces. In AD 745, the official Chinese name for the Christian religion was changed from the Persian religion to the Syrian (Ta-ch'in) religion. Chinese records include an imperial edict of the year AD 754, which says: "The Persian scriptural religion began in

Syria (Ta Ch'in). By preaching and practice it came and long ago spread to China. It is necessary to get back to the original name. Its Persian monasteries shall therefore be changed to Syrian monasteries ... throughout the Empire." The reason for such a change, John Foster suggests, was that Christians in China wanted to free themselves from some of the misunderstandings under which they had hitherto laboured. Those were connected with the name 'Persia' by which they had been called. Christianity had been confused with Zoroastrianism and Manicheism since all are from the same root, about the same time and have the same popular name, 'Persian barbarian religions.' Now Islam also was added to the jumbled confusion. Besides, retention of the old name looked as though their religion belonged to a fading past. Old Persia had disappeared. For the Christians, the name 'Persian' had become a misnomer. The name 'Syrian' means to the Christians, restoring the original name. Christ was born and lived his earthly life in Ta-Chin. If their religion must have a geographic label, that is the most fitting one. John Foster further states that in discarding the term 'Persian', they naturally thought of their pre-Persian history. "Their Church had for centuries been dependent upon the patriarchate of Antioch, which was the capital of Ta-Chin (eastern part of the Roman empire). It is still a common experience for the missionaries in a pagan land to find the divisions of the Christian church of less significance than in the place of their origin. Among the Nestorian missionaries in China there is evidence of such growing catholicity." (*Ibid.*, p. 89.)

What was the real reason for the change of Persian to Syrian? Some of the reasons suggested by John Foster seem to be far fetched. It does not seem that the change was made because the name Persian belonged to a fading past nor because they wanted to reaffirm their connection with the church in the Roman empire. The main reason was political. The church in China did not want to be tied up with any particular nation, Persian, Arab, Mongolian or Chinese empires. In the west the church was part of the political system -- the Roman empire. This was the reason that Christians were persecuted in Persia. They were suspected as an 'ally' of the enemy of the Persians. Even in China, foreign religions were suspected as dangerous to the security of the nation. The anti Buddhist sentiments among the early T'ang rulers were due to this. It seems that this was the main reason the Nestorian Christians in China rejected the name 'Persian' and adopted the name 'Syrian'. Syria was where Christianity was born. Syrian Christianity refers to the origin of Christianity. There is no political overtone in the name Syrian. Syrian Christianity also means the Christianity which maintained the Jewish

Christian heritage. Moreover, 'Syrian' is often used in a linguistic sense. The Syrian church—whether in Edessa, Persia, or in China—maintained the liturgy in Syriac. So when the church in China rejected 'Persian' for Syrian they were reaffirming their origin as well as the special theological and linguistic character of their church. At the same time they were also rejecting any idea that its loyalty was with any particular nation politically, as was the Latin or Byzantine church in the Roman empire. The Nestorian church was an independent church and 'catholicity' did not mean for them that they should be under Antioch or Constantinople. The adoption of the name 'Syrian' was not an effort to re-establish its link with Antioch or an effort to acknowledge the glories of the Roman empire, as John Foster suggested. (*Ibid.*, p. 90.) The Persian church in its origin was independent of Antioch.

There were Christians in China who distinguished themselves by their service to church and state. One of them was Yazdbozid known by the Chinese name I-ssu. Another was one Adam (Ching-Ching). It was Adam who brought the church of the T'ang dynasty to its classical period of literary production in the second half of the eighth century. In him the church can boast, a scholar who, though a foreigner from the west, knew the Chinese classics and was able to fill his works with classical allusions. He had studied the writings of Taoist mystics, and was skillful in choosing illustrations from them. Above all, he was able to talk with Buddhists in terms of their philosophy, and was accustomed to borrow from them both background and terms to expound his Christian theme. Adam was first and foremost the chief composer of the Nestorian Tablets' inscription. He has translated a number of Syriac books into Chinese.

He borrowed many terms from Buddhism. "Not only was this missionary endeavoring to make Chinese people Christian, he labored also to make Christianity, in a worthy sense, Chinese." But the opposition to such attempts came from the Buddhists. The fierceness of Buddhist attack was an evidence of their nervousness. "Christianity as represented by Adam is called a perversion, even wrong. Contrasted with Buddhism, it is as the Ching and Wei rivers, one of which was very muddy." John Foster comments, "Undoubtedly Buddhists regarded Adam as a dangerous man. He was dangerous not because he was making Christianity too Buddhist. But because he was trying to make Buddhism too Christian." (*Ibid.*, p. 114) According to A.C. Moule, it is clear that a Christian literature existed in Chinese. The Hsi-an-fu inscription displays a grace of style and contains literary allusions and

phraseology which indicate competence in Chinese language and familiarity with Taoism and Buddhism. He points out that one of the Christian documents discovered in recent years begins as does a Buddhist sutra and has a Buddhist coloring.

The ninth century was a century of persecutions in China. During the reign of Wu-Tsung (841-846), Uigurs who were a powerful force in Central Asia and had great influence in China came to the end of the period of their power. Uighurs were patrons of Manichacism. The eclipse of the Uighur power brought about the disappearance of Manichacism from Chinese soil. Throughout the empire Manichaeian monasteries were closed. This state of things affected the security of the Christian churches. Manichaeism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism were classified together as Persian religions in popular thought.

Before long it was the fate of Christianity, too, to disappear from China, and to persist only in those lands beyond the Tarim desert from which it had previously made its triumphal entry in the days of T'ang Tai Tsung. "There were also strong anti-Buddhist feelings. The Chinese intellectuals thought of Buddhism as superstition. The Confucian scholars advised the government to extend the persecution to that greater 'foreign religion' Buddhism" (*Ibid.*, p. 121)

Taoists were also against Buddhists. There are a number of important Chinese records which speak of the great anti-Buddhist persecution which broke out in AD 845. In these records it is definitely stated that the smaller 'foreign' religions, Zoroastrianism and Christianity were regarded as heretical forms of Buddhism, and were included within the scope of the edicts. According to the report prepared by the Board of Worship, there were 4600 monasteries, 40,000 hermitages (places of retreat), 260,500 monks and nuns. By the edict of AD 845 all these monasteries were abolished except for a very few. When the monasteries were broken up the images of bronze, silver or gold were to be handed over to the government. "As for the Tai-Ch'in (Syrian) and Muh-hu (Zoroastrian) forms of worship, since Buddhism has already been cast out, these heresies alone must not be allowed to survive. People belonging to these also are to be compelled to return to the world, belong again to their own districts, and become tax payers. As for foreigners, let them be returned to their own countries, there to suffer restraint." (*Ibid.*, p. 123.)

One of the reasons for the suppression of monasteries was that it

affected the economic prosperity and social life of the nation.

Buddhist monasteries daily grew higher. Men's strength was used up in work with plaster and wood. Men's gain was taken up in ornaments of gold and precious stones. Imperial and family relationships were forsaken for obedience to the fees of the priests. The marital relationship was opposed by the ascetic restraints. Destructive of law, injurious to mankind, nothing is worse than this way (Tao). Moreover, if one man does not plough, others feel hunger, if one woman does not tend the silk worms, others go cold. Now in the Empire there are monks and nuns innumerable. All depend on others to plough that they may eat, on others to raise silk that they may be clad. Monasteries and Refuges (Homes of ascetics, *kuti* in Sanskrit) are beyond compute.

All are as high as the clouds, beautifully ornamented; they take for themselves palaces as a dwelling.... We will repress this long standing pestilence to its roots ... In all the Empire more than four thousand six hundred monasteries are destroyed, two hundred and sixty thousand five hundred monks and nuns are returning to the world, both (men and women) to be received as tax paying householders. Refuges and hermitages which are destroyed number more than forty thousand. We are resuming fertile land of the first grade, several tens of millions of Ch'ing (1 ching is 15.13 acres). We are receiving back as tax paying householders, male and female, one hundred and fifty thousand serfs. The aliens who hold jurisdiction over the monks and nuns show clearly that this is a foreign religion.

Ta Ch'n (Syrian) and Muh-hu-fo (Zoroastrian) monks to the number of more than three thousand are compelled to return to the world, lest they confuse the customs of China. With simplified and regulated government we will achieve a unification of our manners, that in future all our youth may together return to the royal culture. We are now beginning this reformation; how long it will take we do not know. (*Ibid.*, p. 125.)

The suppression of monasteries and persecution of foreign religions was part of a reformation undertaken. The persecution lasted for twenty months -- not long, but long enough to have permanent effects. Buddhism, for all its strength, never completely recovered. For centuries afterwards, it was merely a tolerated religion. The days of its greatest building, sculpture, and painting, and its most vital creative thought, were past.

Its effect on the Christian church might also have been several. The foreign leaders who were not able to remain in hiding must have found their way back across the Tarim desert or gone by the merchant ships which sailed from Canton to the Persian Gulf. Their Chinese colleagues - - how many of the three thousand, we do not know -- being freed to return to the world, would scatter to home villages to seek a living.

In AD 847 Hsuan Tsung came to the throne and he issued an edict of religious toleration. The second part of the 9th century was a period of internal rebellion and civil wars in China which contributed to the decline of the Tang dynasty. In AD 907, the last T'ang emperor was deposed. After a period of divisions, the Sung dynasty reunified the empire and established their control over China by AD 960. Their rule lasted almost towards the end of the 13th century. But they were defeated by the Mongols and the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty came to power in China (1259-1386) when Christianity found a second opportunity to enter China under the toleration of Mongols.

Christianity at the Time of the Mongols

The history of the church in Asia in the 13th and 14th centuries outside the subcontinent of India to the south, says Moffett, was dominated by the political power and traditions of three great Mongol conquerors, Hulegu, Kublai and Timor (better known as Tamerlane). (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 422.) Hulegu and Kublai were sons of the Christian queen, Princess Sorkatani. Tamerlane was an outsider, not of royal Mongol blood and more Turk than Mongol. Hulegu and Kublai protected Christians; Tamerlane destroyed them.

Kublai Khan was the ruler of China from AD 1215-1294. He was a friend of Christians, but not a Christian himself. With the use of Mongol power in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Nestorian church followed by Roman Catholics, began to come to China once again. In spite of the low state to which the church in China was reduced in the 10th and 11th

centuries, a recovery undoubtedly took place. Marco Polo's account of his journey to China and of the Christians he found there is one of the most important pieces of information that has come down to us about the church in China in the 13th century. Marco Polo's travels speak of Christians not only in China but also in Central Asia and in other parts of Asia

Marco Polo speaks of widespread Nestorian communities scattered across the Chinese empire. At Foo Chow, a Muslim told Marco Polo about a religious community whose religion nobody understood. Marco Polo traced them and found that they were Christians. They had books and they had preserved their faith for seven hundred years. They had a temple which was dedicated to three persons, painted on its walls. It is possible that the reference to a seven hundred year old tradition indicates that they might have been surviving descendants of the Christians at the time of Alopen. The three apostles celebrated were the three earliest leaders of pre-Nestorian, East Syrian Christianity -- Addai, Aggai and Mari.

Polo also reports of Christians and Nestorian churches in at least eleven other Chinese cities. The largest concentration of Christians was in the northwest along the old silk road. Another area with many Christians was on the southeast coast of China in the province of Chinkiang and Fukein. There was a strong Christian community at Chinkiang between Nanking and Shanghai. At one time the Nestorians had seven monasteries there, all of them founded about the year AD 1279 by Mar Sargis, a devout governor of that city. Kublai Khan appointed in that district a succession of Christian governors and assistant governors and the Christian community greatly benefited from it. After Kublai Khan's death, between AD 1309 and 1333, Buddhist pressure at the imperial court compelled the Christians to surrender the monasteries one after the other to the Buddhists.

Though Kublai Khan was tolerant of all religions, he had a special affinity to Buddhism. But he knew that China cannot be governed long without the co-operation of the Confucian bureaucracy. To the Confucians, Buddhism was not only superstitious and unacceptable intellectually, it was a foreign religion and unacceptable culturally. He built Confucian temples in the capital and encouraged the veneration of ancestors. Christians benefited from the fact that Christianity was the faith of Kublai Khan's mother. Christian advisers were well known at the court. Kublai Khan's vulnerable situation as a foreign Mongol ruler

of a conquered but thickly populated and highly civilized Chinese nation led him to adopt a strategy of governing through intermediaries. This in turn tended to enlarge the powers of foreign advisers, including Christians. One of them, the only European, was Marco Polo. He was governor of a district on the Grand Canal for three years. Marco Polo says that Kublai Khan was not anti-Christian, and that he was convinced that the Christian faith was the best of all religions but the low level of learning he found among the Nestorians and his fear that adherence to any one religion would divide the people and set the other religions against the government, prevented him from being baptized. But this did not seem to be the case. This mistaken notion was based on a conversation between Kublai Khan and the uncles of Marco Polo, when the Khan sent them as ambassadors to the Pope. They asked the Khan why he had not accepted the Christian faith. He said to them:

How do you wish me to make myself a Christian? You see Christians in these parts are so ignorant that they do nothing and have no power; you see these idolators do what ever they please, and when I am sitting at tables the cups which are in the middle of the hall come to me full of wine or drinks of other things, without anyone touching them, and I drink with them. They compel the bad weather to go any direction they please and do many wonderful things. And as you know their idols speak and tell them all that they want. But if I am converted to the faith of Christ and make myself a Christian, then my barons and other people who are not attached to the faith of Christ would say: What reason has moved you to baptism and to hold the faith of Christ? And these idolators say that what they do they do it by the holiness and power of the idols. Then I should not know what to answer them; and these idolators who do such things with their arts and knowledge could easily make me die. But you shall go down to your High Priest and shall pray him on our behalf to send me a hundred men skilled in your religion who before these idolators may be able to reprove what they do and may say to them that they know and can do such things but will not, because they are done by diabolical art and through evil spirits, and may so restrain them that they may not have power to do such things in their presence. Then when we shall see this we shall consider them and their religion; and so I shall be

baptized, and when I shall be baptized, all my barons and great men will be baptized, and then their subjects will receive baptism, and there will be more Christians here than there are in your parts. (Moule, *op.cit.*, p. 156.)

A number of western historians have misread the statement of Kublai Khan and his intentions. Stephen Neil wrote, "If attention had been paid to this request at the time, the result might have been considerable. But twenty years passed; and when Pope Nicholas IV decided, in 1289, to resume the practice of embassies, he sent two men, one of whom died on the way." (Stephen Neill. *A History of Christian Missions*, p. 126.)

The first Roman Catholic missionary to China was John Montecorvino who came to China just after the death of Kublai Khan in AD 1294. Shortly after his arrival, he converted a Nestorian prince, Prince George to Roman Catholicism, which made the Nestorians furious. There developed a strong friction between John Montecorvino and the Nestorians. With the help of prince George, Montecorvino made about six thousand converts and built a church. In AD 1307 he was made the Archbishop of Peking.

In AD 1318 Pope John XXII divided Asia into two missionary districts; one for China under the jurisdiction of Franciscans and the other for Ilkhanate Persia under the Dominicans.

By the time of Montecorvino's death, sometime between AD 1328 and 1333, the Mongol dynasty that gave the Christians the freedom to preach and build churches, was disintegrating. There were rebellions against the Mongols. "Farmers rebelled against the rich; Chinese rose against the Mongols, the south invaded the north under the anti-Mongol slogan, These barbarians are created to obey and not to command a civilized nation." (M. Pradwin, *The Mongol Empire: Its Rise and Legacy*, 1940, p. 36.) By AD 1368, the Mongol empire had fallen. "The Mongols had been dominant in Asian history from AD 1203 to 1368. Their genius in war and astounding victories had created a great military empire, stretching from Japan to Austria. Yet their disintegration was rapid, they had shown little cohesion and had consequently been quickly assimilated by other cultures."

With the defeat of the Mongols. China turned Chinese in the matter of religion also, "China as it has so often done, turned away from the world and turned in upon itself. The new China was to be isolationist,

nationalist, and orthodox Confucian, ruled by a completely China centered dynasty, the Ming (1368-1644)." (Moffett, *op.cit.* p.474.) But there is little evidence of direct religious persecution. Later writers have assumed that foreign proteges of Mongols whether Christian or Muslim were massacred with their patrons. K.S. Latourette observed, "It is just as likely that Nestorians and foreigners were killed indiscriminately in the pursuit of Mongols, and without foreign support a church that became dependent upon it withered away." (K. Latourette, *Missions in China*, p. 74)

Did Christianity completely disappear from China after the fall of the Mongols? We are not sure of this. It is unlikely that Christianity completely disappeared. There might have been small groups here and there. But its visibility has disappeared. Moffett observes that it is no surprise that the church fell with the old dynasty. This was the pattern of past Chinese history. Both Nestorian and Roman Catholic Christianity were considered foreign by the Chinese. Compounding the hardship, this imposed on the church, the Mongol dynasty itself was foreign. So to the Chinese, Christianity appeared as a foreign religion, protected and supported by a foreign government. Roman Catholic missions gave the impression of being even more foreign than the Nestorians, who were almost entirely Mongol, for they received far more visible support from outside China than was ever true of the Nestorians either in the ninth or fourteenth century. The Catholic cathedral in Zaithun was built and endowed by the wealthy wife of an American trader. An Italian trader bought the land for John Montecorvin's church in Peking. (Moffett. *Op.cit.* p. 471.)

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 6: Christianity in India

India and the Western World in the First Century

India has been open to the outside world from ancient times and a vigorous commercial activity went on between India and the Mediterranean world even before the Christian era. This is testified by both the western and Indian classical writers. Knowledge of Indian geography and India's trade with the Mediterranean world is abundantly testified by western classical writers on India such as Strabo (63 BC-24 AD), Pliny (AD 23-79), Ptolemy (AD 100-160) and the author of *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. They give detailed information about the people, climate, trade routes, ports, cargoes and the economic condition of India. In their writings Muziris (Crananore), about twenty miles north of today's Cochin, on the Malabar coast in South India is mentioned as an important port and trading centre. [Periplus of the Erythrean Sea states that Muziris abounds in ships sent with cargoes from Arabia and by the Greeks.] The Tamil classics also speak of the great commercial activity in South India during the first centuries.

There were three main routes which connected India with the western world. First, there was an overland route which linked India with the silk route from Antioch to Central Asia and to China. In normal circumstances the Himalayan range in the north was no serious obstacle to India's trade with Central Asia along the silk route. Secondly, there was a route through the Persian Gulf. It connected the mouth of Indus to the mouth of the Euphrates and thence up the river to the point where

roads branched off to Antioch and the Laventine ports. The third route was from India to the Red Sea and from there by road to the Nile and to Alexandria.

It was the third route through the Red Sea which was commonly used in the first centuries of the Christian era. Roman ships leaving the ports of the Red Sea and using the monsoon winds sailed across the Arabian sea to the ports of South Indian kingdoms. Cargoes such as textiles of various kinds, spices and semi-precious stones were shipped back to Egypt and from there on to Rome. The Romans paid for these goods in gold coins which have been found in large numbers in South India. *The Akananuru*, a first or second century Tamil work mentions that ' the Yavanas came in large vessels carrying gold and they returned with pepper.' It was no wonder that Pliny, the Roman historian complained of the luxury trade with India draining the Roman treasury. Some Roman coins from the time of the Republic have been found in North India. But the coins from the time of Augustus and Tiberius are numerous especially in South India. The firm establishment of Augustus as the emperor brought peace and prosperity and the fashionable Roman world began to demand oriental luxuries, on a scale unknown before, which increased the trade. Moreover, the discovery of the direction of the monsoon winds by Hippalus in AD 45 helped the trade by sea immensely.

The sea route from Egypt to India became very vital for the Roman trade and Augustus had to take steps to ensure its safety. The veiled hostility of Parthia, the irruption of Scythian tribes into central Asia, the great length and the uncertainty of the land routes, and the enormous expenses incurred in bringing wares through desert routes of Arabia --all these conditions influenced the Romans towards using as far as possible the route through the Red Sea. The constant presence of the Sabaeans, Nabataean, and Axumite intermediaries along the route impressed upon Augustus that for the sake of his empire's welfare and for the sake of his own interest in Egypt, the necessity to take steps to make Roman trade with India easier and more profitable for state and people. (E. H. Warmington, *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India*, London, Curzon Press. 1928, p.14.) He took steps to guard the journey from the Nile to Myos Hormos and to Berenice. The Himyarites and Sabaeans, the intermediaries in the trade, were the most substantial barriers to direct trade with India. Against them, Augustus turned the force of the Romans.

People were grateful. Augustus was hailed as a god and temples were raised for him at several places including one at Muziris by the Greek residents in India. It was only natural that the Romans should direct their great efforts towards an active and direct trade by a cheap, quick and tolerably safe route by sea. Such trade activities helped the movements of people and cultural influences between India and the outside world. According to Warmington, after the discovery of the monsoons, (*Ibid.*, p.78.) the presence of Indians in Alexandria was numerous and the Greeks, Syrians, Jews and in some cases Arabians dwelt in India. *Shilappadikaram*, a Tamil work of the second century, describes the homes of wealthy Greeks in the capital city of the Chera kingdom. It says, "All night lamps were burning, the lamps of the foreigners who talk strange tongues, who watch over precious cargoes near the docks." The settlement of Jews in India in the first century and before, demonstrates how a foreign religious community could settle down peacefully and become part of the Indian society and also the religious tolerance that existed in India.

The Origins of Christianity in India

All historians agree that the Indian church is very ancient but they differ as to how early the Gospel had been brought to India and who or what agency brought it and to which part of India. No book or inscription or monument of the first two centuries exist to enlighten us on the origin of Christianity until the third century when the ancient Christian writers began to mention the church in India. The historians of the origins of Christianity in India have to depend mainly upon traditions both within India and outside and occasional references here and there in later writers.

Broadly speaking there are two views among the historians as to the origins of Christianity in India. One view is that the Indian church has an apostolic foundation arising out of the apostolic activity of St. Thomas in the first century. The other view is that the church was founded in India at a very early date (during the course of the first three centuries) by Christians from East Syria. The more general view is that the church had its origin in the first century in the apostolic activity of St. Thomas. The St. Thomas community (Syrian Christians) in South India hold the apostolic foundation of their church as an article of faith. This view is based mainly on two traditions, one existing among the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala and the other among the East Syrians. There are some references in early Church Fathers, both the western and

Syrian, supporting the view that St. Thomas's activity was in India.

The tradition current among the St. Thomas Christians in India is as follows: St. Thomas, after visiting Socotora (an island in the Arabian Sea off the north-east coast of Africa) came to Muziris (Cranganore or Kodungallur) on the Periyar estuary north of Cochin in about AD 52. He is said to have preached to the Jewish colony settled there and to have made converts. He traveled south and converted high caste Hindus and established churches in seven places (Maliankara, Palayur, Parur Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayal and Quilon) in four of which places Syrian churches still exist. Then he went to the eastern coast where he died as a martyr in AD 72. There is a tomb in Maylapore (near Madras) which is believed to be that of St. Thomas. This tradition has been persistent among the St. Thomas Christians for centuries and the community entertains little doubt as to the truth of the tradition. There are a number of different versions of the tradition expressed in songs and stories, all of them of later dates. But it is important to note that there is no other rival tradition in the church with regard to its origin and there is no other country in the world that claims that St. Thomas died there.

Similar to the Indian tradition, the East Syrian church holds a strong tradition of the apostolic activity of St. Thomas in India. This tradition is found in the writings of the Syrian fathers from the third century onwards. About this Mingana writes, "It is the constant tradition in the Eastern church that the Apostle Thomas evangelized India, and there is no historian, no poet, no breviary, no liturgy, and no writer of any kind who, having the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India. Some writers mention also Parthia and Persia among the lands evangelized by him, but all of them are unanimous in the matter of India. The name of Thomas can never be disassociated from that of India. To refer to all the Syrian and Christian Arab authors who speak of India in connection with Thomas would therefore be equivalent to referring to all who have made mention of the name of St. Thomas. Thomas and India are in this respect synonymous." (Mingana, *Early Spread of Christianity in India*, p. 301.) Among the non-East Syrian writers, while Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose and Jerome (fathers of the fourth century) held to the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas, Origen, Clementine Recognition, Eusebius of Caesarea, Rufinus of Aquileia and Socrates say that Thomas worked in Parthia. Here we are not to see any contradiction as the Parthian empire extended up to North India at that time. "The Parthian empire had

spread into India and in the middle of the first century BC, a new Parthian kingdom, centered on Taxila, had been founded in northwestern India. Orosius in the fifth century said that generally the country (from the Indus to the Tigris) was called Parthia." (L. W. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 46.) By the end of the fourth century the western sources are more or less unanimous that Thomas worked in India. Some writers have pointed out that the name 'India' has been very loosely used by some early writers. A few western writers might have used the name, India, as a convenient term for the lands of the East. But we need to remember, as we have already pointed out, that India was well known in the West because of the vigorous commercial activities that went on between India and the Mediterranean world. This was specially true with regard to East Syrians. "For them," says Mingana, "India is nearly always our modern India." (*Ibid.*, p. 47.)

Among the East Syrian writers, the most important writer is St. Ephrem, in the fourth century, who lived in Edessa for some time and was a great hymn writer. Edessa claims to be the resting place of the bones of St. Thomas brought back from India by a Syrian merchant. An annual festival on July 3rd is celebrated there commemorating the transference of the bones of St. Thomas from India to Edessa. St. Ephrem has several hymns in honour of St. Thomas in which he sings of the apostle's preaching of the Gospel in India, of the bringing of his bones to Edessa, of the honour that the Edessene church got thereby, and of the miracles wrought at the shrine. (C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, Madras, CLS, 1968, p. 5.) Ephrem sings:

Blessed art thou, Thomas, the Twin in thy deeds.
Twin is thy spiritual power;
nor one thy power, nor one thy name:....
Blessed art thou, O Thrice- Blessed city, thou hast
acquired, this pearl, none greater doth India yield;
Blessed art thou, worthy to possess the priceless gem.
Praise to thee, O Gracious Son, who thus thy adorers dost
enrich. (A.E. Medlycott. *India and the Apostle Thomas*,
pp.26-27 quoted by Firth p. 6.)

One example of the evidence for the Indian apostolate of Thomas is *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Teaching of the Apostles), a book probably written around AD 250, which says, "India and all its countries and those bordering on it, even to the farthest sea, received the Apostle's Hand of the Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was Guide and Ruler

in the church which he built and ministered there." (Firth, *op.cit.*, p.8.)

However, the earliest available record and a detailed one of St. Thomas' travels and his missionary work in India is contained in the book: *Acts of Judas Thomas*, written in Syriac probably by a Christian in Edessa around AD 200. It is a very lively account in narrative form in thirteen acts. The book ends with the statement, "The acts of Judas Thomas are completed, which he wrought in the land of the Indians, fulfilling the command of him, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

The book begins by telling how the eleven apostles, after the resurrection of Jesus, met in Jerusalem and divided the world by lot among themselves for missionary work. India fell to Judas Thomas, "who is also called Didymus." He was reluctant to go saying, "how can I, who am a Hebrew, go and preach the truth among the Indians." The Lord Christ appeared to him at night. Thomas pleaded with the Lord, "send me anywhere but not to India." The Lord assured him saying, "Fear not, my Grace is sufficient." The story tells how Thomas was sold for three pounds to a merchant Abban from India who was looking for a carpenter for his king Gundaphorous to build him a palace. They began their voyage to India and arrived first at Andrapolis, (Historians differ as to the exact location of Andrapolis, whether it was within India proper or a nearby place. In the story it is said that from Andrapolis, Abban and Thomas left for India. According to Warmington, Andrapolis was the capital of the Andhra Kingdom in Deccan and was in India.) a royal city where there was a wedding of the king's daughter. Abban and Thomas were also invited to the wedding. After a prayer by Thomas and the appearance of Jesus to the bride and bridegroom, they decided to forego marriage and live in celibacy. From there Abban and Thomas left for India. Having arrived in India. Thomas undertook to build a palace for the king Gundaphorous and received some money in advance. Thomas, instead of building the palace, distributed the money to the poor. In answer to the king's enquiries Thomas said that he has indeed built it, but the king will not be able to see it till he has departed this life. The king was very angry and sent both Thomas and Abban to prison. At this time the king's brother, Gad, fell ill and died. In heaven the angels asked him in which of the mansions he saw in heaven would he like to live. He selected a certain building only to be told that he could not have it because it was built for his brother, Gundaphorous, by Thomas. Gad asked permission to go back and buy the palace from his brother. His return astonished Gundaphorous. Thomas was released from prison and the king and his brother were baptized. Thomas continued his preaching,

making many converts.

Then Thomas was sent for by another king called Mazdai in another part of India to heal his wife and daughter who were possessed of devils. The women were restored to sanity and they decided to abandon marriage. Many members of the royal family were converted. The king was angry and put Thomas to death. Later when one of the king's sons became insane, they opened Thomas's tomb hoping that a touch of the holy man's bones may cure the child. But the grave was found empty. However, the king took some dust from the tomb and put it on the child. The child was cured and the king became a Christian.

For a long time several historians considered the *Acts of Judas Thomas* as of no historical value. They pointed out that the teaching of the Acts was unorthodox and the stories told were fantastic. The aim of the author was to establish the doctrine that marriage is sinful and Christians ought to abstain from it, and therefore the book was of Gnostic origin. Today historians are inclined to take more seriously the historical value of the Acts of Thomas and its theological orthodoxy. In our earlier sections, we have noted that F.C. Burkitt, Arthur Voobus and several other historians have shown that the emphasis on celibacy and abstinence from marriage belonged to an authentic tradition of the Syrian church till the fourth century. L.W. Brown observes, "The great stress on celibacy as a way of salvation, and the emphasis on the miraculous are not in themselves proof of a non-Catholic origin for the Acts, as even in the time of Aphrates only the unmarried could be baptized in Edessa." (LW. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.43.)

R. Murray points out how at several points the *Acts of Thomas* reflect the theology of the East Syrian church. Reflecting the asceticism of the East Syrian church, the Acts tells how Thomas refused to receive silver and gold from people. In Acts six of the book, Thomas thanks God that he has become an ascetic and a pauper and wanderer for God. The East Syrian writers when they speak of incarnation, speak of Christ putting on the body as a garment. Murray writes, " 'Christ put on the body' . This simple image of clothing is the Syriac fathers' favourite way of describing the Incarnation. It occurs consistently in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, while in *Didascalia* it comes as a heading.... (R. Murray, *op cit.*, p.69.) Again Murray says, "The invocations to the Mother-spirit to descend on the candidate for baptism in the *Acts of Judas Thomas* are typical of early Syriac literature." (*Ibid.*, p. 80.) Drivers also points out that the literary heritage of the early Syriac-speaking church is reflected

in the *Acts of Thomas*, *Odes of Solomon* and in Tatian's *Diatessaron*.

Perhaps for a historian, a more important and interesting observation is that of Warmington when he says:

Even if we cast aside as unhistorical every allegation of fact in the stories about St. Thomas, we must at least admit that they reflect voyages habitually undertaken to India during the most prosperous period of the Roman Empire. Thus the story which brings the saint to Gondophares is an echo either of land-journeys taken through Parthia towards India, or of voyages taken to Indus by using monsoon. The tradition which makes him land at Andrapolis is, I think, a reminiscence of voyages taken with monsoon to some port in the west coast of India under Andhra control. Again the south Indian tradition which makes St. Thomas land close to Cranganore recalls voyages of the final stage, and lastly, when the tradition brings him overland from Malabar to Chola coast, we have an echo of inland penetration of Greek merchants possibly to Madura. (Warmington, *Op.cit.*, p. 83.)

There is no doubt that the *Acts of Judas Thomas* is a very imaginative reconstruction of the world of Judas Thomas and his travels and work in India. It is neither fiction nor history but it is both. It contains truth and fiction written in very lively narrative form reflecting both theology of the East Syrian church and the history of the origins of Christianity in India.

Till the middle of the 19th century, no king by the name Gundaphorus was known in Indian history. Since AD 1834 numerous coins have been found in the Punjab and Afghanistan bearing his name in Greek on one side and in Pali on the other, and they are dated to be from the first half of the first century. In some coins the name of Gad, his brother is also found. There is also a stone inscription (now in Lahore museum) containing his name and dates which tell us that he was an Indo-Parthian prince in the north western part of India (from AD 19-45) at the time when St. Thomas is supposed to have come there. In this connection Stephen Neill has raised an important point. "We have no means of knowing how it came about that the name of Gondophorus whose time and succession had wholly vanished from the earth was still

remembered in a syriac speaking country at least a century, perhaps considerably more than a century, after his death". Stephen Neill himself answers it thus: "It appears that there had been more contact between north-west India and the countries now known as Iran and Iraq, than had been generally supposed. (Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.28.) He is certainly right in pointing out the frequent contact between north-west India and the countries now known as Iraq and Iran in the early centuries of the Christian era. But contacts alone need not retain in Edessa the memory of a Parthian king after a century and half. What Stephen Neill failed to recognise was the possibility of a tradition existing in Edessa at the time of the writing of the *Acts of Thomas* that Thomas worked in the kingdom of Gundaphorus. Whatever else may be legendary, one thing is certain that the author of the *Acts of Judas Thomas* was fully aware of a tradition in Edessa of St. Thomas's work in the kingdom of Gundaphorus in north west India. As L.W. Brown notes there was a considerable Jewish colony in north-western India in the first century, which might have attracted the attention of the first Christian missionaries.

There are other facts which seem to indicate a northern locus for St. Thomas's work. Bardaisan in his *Book of Fate* (AD 196) speaks of Parthian Christians living among pagans, which might be a result of the destruction of the Indian Parthian empire by Kushan invaders about AD 50. There are also said to be Christian tribes still living in north India, but holding their faith a secret from all others. For example, at Tatta in Sind (the ancient port of Pattiala at the mouth of Indus), there is a fakir community which calls itself by an Aramaic name, something like 'Bartolmai', and claims to have been descended from St. Thomas's converts and to have books and relics to prove it. Unfortunately no outsider has ever been allowed to see this alleged proof. (L.W. Brown, *op.cit*, p.47. The information about the Bartolmai tribe is given by R. A. Trotter in a paper presented at a conference in Sind in 1947.)

The historical information provided by the *Acts of Judas Thomas* about the coming of St. Thomas to north west India and also the information that Christianity came to India for the first time with the apostolate of St. Thomas can be accepted as reliable.

There is another tradition that Thomas came to south India. On the basis of the *Acts of Thomas*, there are historians who argue that Thomas went only to the north west and they deny the south Indian tradition. Then there are others, who deny the *Acts of Thomas* as a reliable historical source and accept only the south Indian tradition. They point out that we do not possess any concrete evidence for the early preaching of the Gospel in northwest India as we have for south India. They say that the south Indian claim to apostolate is supported by the fact that there is the community of St. Thomas Christians with their living tradition and the tomb of St. Thomas which is claimed to be that of the apostle Thomas.

The fact that there is no strong Christian community in north western India need not lead us to conclude that there was no Christian community there at any time. There are a number of instances in the history of the church that countries and places which were once strong centres of Christianity have become, in later years, centres of Islam or Buddhism. This is true with regard to North Africa, some places in Arabia or Persia, Central Asia or China.

There is a third group who argue for both places. Bishop Medlycott, H. Heras, J.N. Farquhar and S.H. Moffett are some of them. Medlycott thinks of two separate journeys, one from Palestine through Mesopotamia and Persia by land to north west India, the other, after a return to Palestine, via Egypt and Ethiopia and Socotra and thence across the Arabian Sea to Malabar. (Medlycott, *op.cit.* pp. 147-148.) J.N. Farquhar thinks of one journey in the East. He says that St. Thomas first went to north western India travelling by sea and up the river Indus, but had to leave because of the Kushan invasions, which eventually wiped out the Christians of that region so that no trace remained. Then he left India by sea, landed in Socotra and spent some time there during which he made converts; and afterwards he sailed for India again and came to Malabar, from where in due course he crossed over to the east coast. He mentions that Thomas even went to Burma, and after returning to India he was martyred at Mylapore. (C.B. Firth *op.cit.* pp. 16-17: IN. Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in North India and the Apostle Thomas in South India,' Manchester, The *Bulletin of John Ryland's Library*, x:1 and xi:1.) About this John Stewart comments:

Whatever difference of opinion there may be as to how, when and where St. Thomas died, or as to what he did and the churches he founded, it is at all events practically certain that he did visit India both north and south, and

spent a considerable time preaching the Gospel wherever he went. The mass of tradition, especially that bearing his stay in the south is too great to be ignored or lightly passed over. There is the additional evidence that large Christian churches calling themselves by his name and claiming him as their founder still exist. (John Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 104.)

S.H Moffett summarizes the general consensus that is emerging among historians when he writes:

The consensus of the majority is that both theories are reasonable and, far from being mutually exclusive, can be interpreted as strengthening each other. It is not implausible to believe that after preaching in Gundaphar's kingdom in the North, Thomas moved on as all traditions affirm, to preach the Gospel to other kingdoms as well, the kingdoms of south western and south eastern India, until at last he was put to death, perhaps near Madras. If, as seems quite possible, he was the apostle to India at all, it is satisfying to believe with considerable reason that he was the apostle to all India. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, P. 36.)

The fact that St. Thomas went to north west India does not rule out the possibility of his work in the south. In fact the south Indian tradition gains more importance in the light of the living tradition of the community of St. Thomas, the presence of a Jewish community in south India and the existence of considerable commercial activity that went on between the Mediterranean and south India. It is reasonable to believe that Thomas was the apostle to all India. Both theories are reasonable and far from being exclusive, strengthen each other. This is the general consensus that is emerging among the historians.

The second view about the origin of Christianity in India is that Indian church was founded by Christians from East Syria during the course of the first three centuries. L.W. Brown can be considered as a representative of those who hold this view. In the Introduction to his book he mentions, "It will be suggested in this book that the founders of the Church were 'East Syrian' traders, from the Persian Gulf area, and it will be apparent that a most important feature of its history is the succession of contacts with foreign Christians, drawn to the Malabar coast by trade." (L. W. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.2.) About the *Acts of Thomas*

he writes:

Plainly, no confidence can be put in the historical reliability of these stories. They are written to magnify St. Thomas, so that reflected glory would come on the Edessene (Chaldean) Church which claimed him as its founder. There were two reasons why this was necessary. In the fourth century, there was bitter war between Parthia and Rome and it was essential to the safety of the Edessene Church that she should show her independence both in the origin and administration of the Church of the western Empire. Not only that they were not reckoned Orthodox by the Church of Antioch and the West, and the claim to apostolic foundation-made in the Abgar legend where we read of Judas Thomas himself sending Addai (Tatian) to Edessa- was a claim to be on an equal footing with the great Church of the West. When the Acts was written there were known to be Christians in India and the story here told of their origin linked them with the Edessene Church and demonstrated its apostolic outreach.

Those Fathers who mention St. Thomas all rely on the Acts for their information; no independent tradition remains. (*Ibid.*, p. 45.)

Again, after speaking of the trade that went on between India and the Mediterranean and the existence of a Jewish community in south India in the early centuries, Brown comments:

The evidence given above does not prove the apostolic mission of St. Thomas in south India. It does show that there was no physical reason why Christian traders or the Apostle himself, could not have come to Malabar in the first century. The existence of an old local tradition and of families whose ancestry seems ancient and indigenous, rather than of foreign immigrant trading stock, are factors which suggest the possibility of an early evangelist in the country, but the dependence of all traditions on the Edessene Church prevents us considering those factors conclusive proof that this early evangelist was St. Thomas. In fact, the Edessene dependence inclines most scholars to skepticism. (*Ibid.*, p. 63)

Brown rejects the St. Thomas tradition on the ground that it depends on the Edessean Church. According to him, The Acts of St. Thomas which embody the tradition of the Edessean church is written to magnify St. Thomas so that the reflected glory would come on the Edessean church which claimed him as its founder. Brown's conclusion is based on this premise and it is here that Brown has gone wrong in his argument. As pointed out earlier, though the Edessean Church had a special relation to St. Thomas, they never claimed him as the founder of their church. The Addai tradition was so strong in Edessa that even if the Edessean church wanted to claim apostolic foundation for their church, they could not have succeeded in their effort.

About the Addai tradition in Edessa, S.H. Moffett significantly observes:

The Addai traditions were as persistent in the early church of Mesopotamia as the Thomas traditions were in India. By the end of the fourth century Addai was commonly accepted by Syrian writers both Eastern and Western as the founder of their church. The fact that so strong a centre as Edessa was content with one of the lesser known seventy rather than one of the original Twelve supports the view that the historicity of Addai's mission was too well known to be easily set aside. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, 50)

It was not only the Addai tradition that was strong in Edessa but also the tradition that St. Thomas worked in India and died there. The Edessean church, long before Ephrem in the fourth century wrote his hymns, started celebrating the feast of St. Thomas on July 3 in commemoration of the transfer of his bones from India to Edessa. There is an indication in the *Acts of St. Thomas* that the relics of the apostle were already transferred to the west at the time when the book was written. Long after the martyrdom and burial of Thomas, when king Mazdai opened the tomb of the apostle with the hope of healing his sick son with the touch of the relics, the bones were not found, 'for one of the brethren had taken them away secretly and conveyed to the west'. St. Ephrem in his hymns recognizes that the relics were very much venerated in Edessa. The hymns of St. Ephrem in the fourth century are a clear proof of the Edessean tradition that Thomas worked and died in India. *The Acts of Thomas* written around AD 200 reflected an earlier tradition. It reflected a strong and genuine tradition in Edessa and not something fabricated to bring glory to the Edessean church. Mingana, who is skeptical of the

apostolate of St. Thomas in India, however, as we noted earlier, strongly affirms the unanimous opinion among the Syrian writers that Thomas worked in India. According to him, "there is no historian, no poet, no breviary, no liturgy, and no writer of any kind who, having the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India," As Moffett stated, the fact, so strong a centre of Christianity as Edessa was content with Addai instead of Thomas as their apostle and unanimously attested to the fact that Thomas died in India supports the genuineness of the Edessean tradition.

Brown is of the opinion that the story in the *Acts of Thomas* is fabricated to assert Edessean independence of the 'great church' and to prove its orthodoxy. As we stated the Acts was written at the beginning of the third century, reflecting a tradition that existed earlier. We need to ask whether the church in Edessa was under the administration of any western churches in the second or early third century and whether it was accused of holding any unorthodox views at this time. We need to remember that orthodoxy was not a pre-supposition with the early church and in the second and third centuries the demarcation between heresy and orthodoxy was rather thin or fluid everywhere in the church. There is no strong ground to reject the Edessean tradition of Apostle Thomas. On the contrary there is strong reason to accept it as genuine.

Eusebius the church historian of the early church (early fourth century) in his *Ecclesiastical history* mentions that Pantaneus, the first known head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, visited India about AD 180.

[Pantaneus] displayed such zeal for the divine word that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the east and was sent as far as India. ... It is reported that among the persons there who knew Christ, he found the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language which they had preserved till that time. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:10.)

Later in the fourth century, Jerome mentions that a deputation from India asked Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria to send Pantaneus to India to hold disputations with Hindu philosophers. Accordingly the

great Christian scholar Pantaneus was sent and there he found the *Gospel of Matthew* in Hebrew left by Batholomew.

In the first place, this tradition of Pantaneus going to India and finding a Christian community there which was visited by Bartholomew in the first century confirms the first century origins of the Church in India. Secondly, it raises the question as to who was the apostle of India, Thomas or Bartholomew or both? For a long time the historians tended to down play the apostolate of Bartholomew in India as it seemed to take away the apostolate from Thomas and gave it to Bartholomew.

We cannot easily dismiss the apostolate of Bartholomew. Today historians are beginning to accept both the visit of Pantaneus and with it the earlier mission of Bartholomew. Indian historians George Moraes and H.C. Perumalil argue for such an apostolate. They hold that the Bombay region on the Konkan coast was the field of Bartholomew's missionary activity, In an earlier section we have shown that the Jewish Christian community in Edessa (Nazarenes) had a *Gospel of Matthew* in Aramaic. It is possible that what Pantaneus found in India was a copy of this Gospel. In the Christian tradition Bartholomew was the apostle to Arabia, Persia, India and Armenia. It may be that he visited India after his travels in Persia and brought with him a copy of the *Gospel of Matthew (Gospel of the Nazarenes)* which was already in circulation in East Syria. The tradition of Bartholomew does not weaken the tradition concerning the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas. We have already mentioned that there are references in which the names of Batholomew, Addacus, Aggai and Mari are mentioned as companions or disciples of St. Thomas. There is always the possibility of more than one apostle visiting a particular place or country, It is important to note that both Eusebius and Jerome who mention the apostolate of Bartholomew in India also speak of St. Thomas apostolate in India.

There is no Indian tradition concerning the work of Bartholomew in India. Moraes explains this relating to the fact that the history of the Christians of Bartholomew got intermingled with that of St. Thomas Christians who came under the control of the Persian church. Perumalil thinks that Bartholomew Christians continued as a separate community till the coming of the Portuguese and then merged with the Christians of Bombay. (A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.I, Church History Association of India, 1984, p. 66.) The fact that Batholomew left a copy of the *Gospel of Matthew* in Hebrew (the Gospel of the Nazarenes) is an indication that the first Christian converts

in India were Jews. With regard to the Bartholomew tradition Moffett comments:

As to whether the apostle in this particular case was Bartholomew as Pantaneus understood it or Thomas as most Indian Christians would insist, the evidence is too slight for a firm conclusion. Suffice it is to say that the overall evidence for an apostolic presence in India overwhelmingly favours Thomas. Even Jerome, who is one of the two earliest sources for the mention of Bartholomew, seems elsewhere, when writing to Marcellus, to acknowledge the primacy of Thomas. He [Jesus] was present in all places with Thomas in India, with Peter in Rome, with Paul in Illyria, with Titus in Crete, Andrew in Greece, with apostle and apostolic man in his own separate region. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 39.)

For C.B. Firth, the apostolic origin of the Indian church is a possibility. For L.W. Brown the truth of the Indian tradition that the Apostle Thomas worked in India is a reasonable probability. But he believes that the Indian church has been founded by East Syrian traders from the Persian Gulf area. His assumption is that Antioch brought the Gospel to East Syria and East Syria in turn brought the Gospel to India. He further says that the East Syrian church was under the ecclesiastical control of Antioch and the whole story of Thomas's work in the East is a fabrication by Edessa to assert its independence of Antioch and also to prove its orthodoxy in faith, Hence Brown rejected the East Syrian tradition concerning the apostolic activity of Thomas in India.

C.S. Song, an Asian theologian speaks of the western God as a straight line God who operates in a certain logical order. Arnold Toynbee, a British historian speaks of the ego-centric illusion of the western historians who think that everything of some importance originates in the west and from there move to other areas in a linear progression. In the case of Christianity, the Gospel moved from the great centres of the Roman Empire such as Antioch or Rome to the places outside of the Roman Empire and Christian communities thus formed were dependent upon the churches in the Roman Empire for their ecclesiastical life. L.W. Brown considers the coming of Christianity in Asia this way and he cannot conceive of the possibility of the Gospel coming to the East independent of Antioch or some other centre in the west, nor can he think of an independent church in the East. Stephen Neill also argues

more or less on the same line.

On the contrary, the church in 'Asian Asia' in the early period was proudly Asian and did not depend upon Antioch for its origin or ecclesiastical life. As Christianity expanded in its early years, Antioch was a great centre for missionary work in the Hellenistic world. The Christian expansion to the East among the Jewish communities and their semitic relatives in the Syrian orient was not undertaken by the Greek speaking missionary movement from Antioch but by the Aramaic speaking Palestinian Christians. This is true not only in the case of Edessa but also of Adiabene. About this A. Voobus observes:

Thus, at the dawning of Christian history in the lands of the Euphrates and Tigris, we see something peculiar to the gains of the Christian movement. The historical eye can see little, but that which we see commends itself as trustworthy by virtue of its naturalness. It is natural that the pioneering work in the expansion of Christian faith in the semitic areas was carried out, not by Greek-speaking Hellenistic Christians, but by Aramaic-speaking Christians who possessed the lingua franca of their contemporary orient. (E. Ferguson (ed.), *Studies in Early Christianity*, Vol. X, Garland Publishing Inc. New York, 1993, p.13.)

In the case of Adiabene, a number of historians are raising the possibility that the Gospel came there independent of Edessa or even prior to it. We must be prepared to accept a similar possibility in the case of the origin of Christianity in India.

From the evidence available to us, especially the East Syrian and Indian traditions, it is reasonable to believe that the Indian church has an independent origin, independent of Persian Christianity, in the apostolic activity of St. Thomas in the first century. The Indian tradition of its apostolic foundation is much stronger than that of Rome or Alexandria or Constantinople. We may further assume that St. Thomas is the apostle of all India, and Bartholomew who was a companion of Thomas also visited India and brought with him a copy of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 7: Christianity in India up to AD 1500

The early disciples of Jesus Christ were wandering missionaries. After the resurrection of Christ, the disciples went to different parts of the world to proclaim the Gospel. There was the possibility of an apostle visiting more than one country or more than one apostle preaching in the same country. The expansion of Christianity in the East was not the work of Hellenistic Christian missionaries from Antioch, nor a linear progression from Antioch. It was the work of Jewish Christian missionaries such as Addai in Edessa, Aggai and Mari in Persia and Thomas in India. In the East Syrian tradition, St. Thomas is the great apostle of the East. The Christian churches thus formed were ecclesiastically independent of Antioch or any other centre in the West.

It is difficult to present the early history of St. Thomas Christians in India as a connected story due to lack of sufficient historical records. But we get certain glimpses of the life of the community in the writings of foreign visitors, sometimes in the traditions preserved in India and East Syria, occasionally in casual references by Indian writers, and in a few monuments and inscriptions. No serious archeological work has been undertaken in India in this area.

The Visit of Pantaneus in the Second Century

Pantaneus visited India about AD 180 and there he found a *Gospel of*

Matthew written in Hebrew language, left with the Christians there by St. Bartholomew. This is mentioned by Eusebius, and by Jerome in one of his letters. Born a Jew, thoroughly trained in Greek philosophy, and converted to Christianity, Pantaneus was a remarkable person and the most outstanding Christian scholar of his time. He is reported to be the first principal of the catechetical school in Alexandria and was the teacher of Clement. Clement paid great tribute to his teacher when he wrote, "A truly Sicilian bee, he drew honey from the flowers of the meadow of apostles and prophets and imparted in the souls of his pupils pure knowledge." (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1. p. 301.)

According to Jerome a deputation from India came to Alexandria. Impressed with the scholarship of Pantaneus, they asked Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, to send Clement to India "to preach Christ to the Brahmans and philosophers there." (St. Jerome, Letter LXX, *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (second series), vol.vi, p.150.) About his visit, Eusebius writes:

Now at that time there was a man of great renown for learning named Pantaneus, who had charge of the school of the faithful at Alexandria, where it has been a primitive custom that a school for sacred studies should exist. This school has continued even to our day, and although we understand that it was filled with men of great learning and zeal for divinity, it is recorded that the said person was especially distinguished at that time, in as much as he had come from that sect of philosophers who are called Stoics. Now, it is said that he displayed such an ardent love and zeal for the divine word that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the East, and that he journeyed even as far as the land of the Indians. For there were, yes, even still at that time, many evangelists of the word, desirous to contribute an inspired zeal, after the manner of the apostles, for the increase and building up of the divine word. Pantaneus also was one of these, and is mentioned as having gone to India; and the story goes that there he found, in the hands of some persons who had come to know Christ in that land, the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his arrival; for that Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left behind the writing of Matthew

in the actual Hebrew characters, and that it was preserved up to the said time. But to resume, Pantaneus after many good deeds ended by becoming the head of the school at Alexandria, where he expounded the treasures of the divine doctrines, both orally and by means of treatises. (Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:10.)

There are people who argue that the country which Pantaneus visited was not India and the India of Eusebius was in fact Ethiopia or Arabia Felix. It is difficult to accept such an argument. As Stephen Neill points out, "But there is little to be said in favour of this view. When ships in hundreds were going from Egypt to South India. it is unlikely that any one in Alexandria would be the victim of such a confusion." (Stephen Neill, *History of Christianity in India*, p. 39. Mingana is one of those who deny that Pantaneus went to India. John Stewart observes, 'Notwithstanding the high reputation of Dr. Mingana and his well known erudition, one ventures to differ from him in the conclusion to which he has come.'" (Stewart, *op.cit.*, p.106) While we acknowledge the contribution made by Mingana to the study of Eastern Christianity, some of his inferences and interpretations are to be treated with caution.) Jerome is very specific that Pantaneus was invited to preach to the Brahmans and philosophers of India. Moreover, Pantaneus's pupils Clement and Origen wrote about India as if they knew more of that land than passing myths and in no way confused it with Arabia or Ethiopia. (S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 38.)

Pantaneus's visit to India is historically authentic and there is general agreement among the historians today that he went to South India. The story of Pantaneus's visit to India is of great importance for an Indian historian. In the first place it tells us that there was in existence at that time a Christian community in South India and that those Christians were fully aware of their Christian responsibility to preach the Gospel to Brahmans and philosophers in India. Further, the finding of a *Gospel of Matthew* left with the Christians by Bartholomew is very strong evidence to the existence of a Christian community in India in the first century at the time of the visit of St. Bartholomew. It traces the history of the Church in India to the first century. In fact it is an independent confirmation of the Indian church's ancient and apostolic origin. Secondly the discovery of the *Gospel of Matthew* in Hebrew character suggests that the earliest Christians in India were Jewish converts. We have pointed out earlier that the Jewish Christians had a gospel written in Aramaic (Hebrew) known as the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* as the

Jewish Christians were called Nazarenes and this gospel had some relation to the New Testament Matthew. The Jews were all over the Mediterranean world, and in Persia and Arabia even before the destruction of the temple in AD. 70. It seems that the Jews were in India even before the beginning of the first century AD. The Bene-Israel at Kalyan near Bombay traces its beginnings back to the second century BC. (According to Black-Well Dictionary of Judaica (Black-Well, 1992. p. 51), Bene-Israel, the Jewish community in India claim that their ancestors left Galilee because of the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BC. Stephen Neill says that Bene-Israel at Kalyan near Bombay traces its beginnings back to the period of the second Temple about the time of Christ. G.M. Moraes, an Indian historian is also of the opinion that the Bene-Israel came to India before the destruction of the second Temple.) The arrival of Jews in Cochin might have been little later. It was the apostolic missionary tradition to preach the Gospel first to the Jews. Moreover, it was Judeo-Christianity which came to Asia and in the case of Edessa, and Adiabene, the first converts were Jews. The fact that Pantaneus was a Jewish convert also points to the possibility that the first Christians in India were Jewish converts. We need to note that according to the *Acts of Thomas*, the first converts made by Thomas in the kingdom of Gondaphorus in north west India was a Jewish flute girl who knew Hebrew.

Thus the story of Pantaneus's visit is a strong and independent witness to the fact that the history of the Christian community in India goes back to the first century and the earliest converts were Jews and they were in possession of the *Gospel of Nazarenes* written in Aramaic, left to them by St. Bartholomew. Just as the Christians in Palestine and Syria were called Nazarenes, the first Christians in India might have been known by that name. (This name is not of later origin as Mundadan suggests. [*History of Christianity*, p. 174]. Nazarenes or Nazranis was the earliest name applied to Christians.) This community from the very beginning was conscious of its missionary responsibility to the people among whom they lived and late in the second century they secured the services of Pantaneus a famous Alexandrian theologian, for discussion with philosophers and Brahmins in India. The visit of Pantaneus also tells us of the frequent travels of people between India and Alexandria at that time and the mutual awareness of the Alexandrian church and the Indian church of the existence of each other. It also raises the probability of previous contacts between the two churches.

The Indian Church and the Church of the East

When we take into consideration the vigorous trade that was going on between Alexandria and the Indian ports in the first few centuries of the Christian era, it is only reasonable to take seriously the probability of the Indian Christians coming into contact with the Alexandrian church even before the visit of Pantaneus towards the end of the second century. The visit of Pantaneus might have been a consequence of earlier contacts between the two churches. It is also true that the Mesopotamian merchants were in India from a very early date and it is probable that there were Christians among them. L.W. Brown remarks, "it is not unlikely that there would be Persian Christians settling on the Malabar coast for trade throughout the early centuries." (L.W. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.65.) Though small in number, the Christians in India in the first two centuries were not completely an isolated group from fellow Christians in Alexandria or Persia. But we have no evidence of any ecclesiastical relationship which the Indian church entered into with the church in Alexandria, except the visit of Pantaneus. But in the case of the East Syrian (Persian) church, there came into existence some sort of ecclesiastical relationship between it and the Indian church from a very early date, though it is difficult to say when this relationship was established.

We may wonder why the Indian church came to establish a relationship with the Persian church and not with the church in Alexandria. A possible explanation would be that while Alexandria claimed St. Mark as its apostle, both East Syria and India claimed St. Thomas as their apostle. The Indian church claimed St. Thomas as its founder and the East Syrians had a special relationship with St. Thomas as it was he who sent Addai to Edessa and Aggai and Mari who evangelized Persia were the disciples of Addai. Edessa and Persia always unquestionably upheld St. Thomas as the Apostle of India. However, we also need to note here that according to certain traditions existing in India, St. Thomas, on his way to India, embarked at Basra, (William Yong, *Handbook of Source Materials for Students of Church History* Madras, The Senate of Serampore College and C.L.S, 1969, pp 26-27.) in the Persian Gulf. In all probability, St.Thomas might have preached in Basra and its neighbourhood; and thus they also claimed him as the founder of their church. This would explain the statement of Bar-Hebraeus (Abu'l Faraj) the great Jacobite scholar and writer of the 13th century about a dispute between Catholicos Timothy I (779-823) with the clergy of Fais (Basra) in about AD. 795. Bar-Hebraeus writes:

It is said that down to the time of this Timothy, the

bishops of the province of Ears were wearing garments like secular priests, were eating meat, and marrying, and were not under the jurisdiction of the Catholicos of Seleucia. They used to say: "We have been evangelized by the Apostle Thomas, and we have no share with the see of Mad." timothy however, united them and joined them to him. He ordained for them as Metropolitan a man named Shim'un, and he ordered him not to eat meat, nor marry, and wear white garments made only of wool. He further permitted him to confirm bishops whom he would ordain, without coming for such confirmation to the Catholicos. (*Ibid.* pp. 326-327.)

There is no local tradition or historical evidence connecting Thomas with the Parthian empire proper; but it is very probable that Thomas worked in Basra and its neighbourhood on his way to India and the first contact of the Indian church was with the church in Basra (Fais), the name of Thomas linking them together. The available evidence indicates that this relationship of the Indian church with the church in Basra existed at least from the third century. *The Chronicle of Seert*, an important East Syrian document of the seventh century, mentions that Dudi (David), bishop of Basra in the Persian Gulf, an eminent doctor, left his See between AD. 295-300 and went to India where he evangelized many people. (*Ibid.*, p. 27.)

Eusebius of Caesarea mentions the presence of a bishop from Persia at the Council of Nicea in AD. 325. In another account he is mentioned as bishop of Fais. In the list of bishops who signed the decrees of the Council as mentioned by Gelasius, there is one, "John the Persian, on behalf of the churches in the whole of Persia and the great India." A.M. Mundadan accepts the Gelasian list as genuine and authentic'. (A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1984, p. 79.) The Council of Nicea was called together by emperor Constantine and it was a council of bishops in the Roman Empire. It was very unlikely that a bishop from Persia had attended the Council of Greek bishops, officially representing the whole of Persia and great India. We need to remember that it was only in the Synod of Isaac in AD 410, almost a century later, that the Persian church, with some modifications, accepted the decrees of the Council of Nicea. Moreover, it is very doubtful that the various Christian congregations in Persia became a nation wide community by the time of Nicea so that one bishop could represent the whole of Persia.

In all probability the inclusion of 'John of Persia and Great India' was a later interpolation to convey the truly ecumenical character of the Nicene Council. However, it shows that when this interpolation was made, the interpolator was aware of the connection between the Indian church and the Persian church (more specifically with the Christians in Fars as Persia was changed to Fars in another document).

When the episcopal hierarchy of the East Syrian Church was fully organized by the beginning of the fifth century (410), the bishopric of Rewardastir was elevated to a metropolitanate and given jurisdiction over relations with India. Rewardastir was strategically located on the direct sea route to India near the head of the Persian gulf on its eastern side and the province included Basra. This arrangement continued till the seventh century when Patriarch Isho-Yahb II(628-643) appointed a metropolitan for India separately. The reason might have been the increase of Christians in India. Mingana mentions that between six and twelve suffragan bishops were also consecrated for India and that the metropolitan of India outranked that of China and that China outranked that of Central Asia. Metropolitans of distant seas such as India, China and Samarkhand were exempted from attending the General Synod of the Church because of the great distance. Instead they had to write a letter to the Patriarch declaring their allegiance to him and informing him of the state of their province.

We get a glimpse of the relationship between the two churches in the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes (the Indian navigator) which was written about A.D. 547. Cosmas was probably a native of Persia and a Nestorian. His commercial interests carried him into seas and countries far removed from his home. "I myself made voyages of commercial purposes in three of these gulfs -- the Roman, Arabian, and the Persian, while from the natives or from sea-faring men I have obtained accurate information regarding different places", he wrote. His book, *Christian Topography* is essentially controversial, his purpose being to refute from scripture the pagan cosmography. His arguments are absurd in the extreme. According to him, the figure of the universe can best be learned from a study of the structure and furniture of the Tabernacle which Moses prepared in the wilderness. In dealing with the fulfillment of the prophecy and the expansion of the church throughout the world, he speaks of Christians in Ceylon and India thus:

Even in Taprobane [Ceylon] an island in further India,
where the Indian sea is, there is a Church of Christians,

with clergy and a body of believers, but I know not whether there be any Christians in the parts beyond it. In the country called Male [Malabar], where the pepper grows, there is also a church, and at another place called Calliana [a place near Bombay], there is moreover a bishop, who is appointed from Persia. In the island, again, called the island of Dioscorides [Socotora], which is situated in the same Indian sea, and where the inhabitants speak Greek, having been originally colonists sent thither by the Ptolemies who succeeded Alexander the Macedonian, there are clergy who receive their orders in Persia and are sent on to the island, and there is also a multitude of Christians. (J. W. McCrindle (ed), *Christian Topography of Cosmas An Egyptian Monk*. Burt, Franklin Publisher, 1967, Book III, 64.)

In Book XI, Cosmas specifically speaks of Ceylon thus:

It is a great mart of the people in these parts. The island has also a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a Presbyter who is appointed from Persia and a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual. But the natives and the kings are heathen. In this island they have many temples. (*Ibid.*, Book XI.)

The account of Cosmas speaks of Christian communities in Ceylon, Malabar, Calliana, and Socotora with bishops appointed from Persia. In the case of Ceylon there was a church of Persian Christians. The account attests to the fact that by the middle of the sixth century the churches in the above places had maintained a connection with the church in Persia, which by this time had become Nestorian and that there were Persian Christians residing in Ceylon and they had a church of their own. Though Cosmas did not mention it, there were Persian Christians residing in India also.

Because of this Persian connection, some historians such as L.W. Brown and some other western historians have drawn the wrong conclusion that the Indian church was a daughter church of the Persian church and the early churches of Malabar were connected with colonies of foreign traders. In this connection, the observation made by S.H. Moffett is significant. After noting that by the middle of the sixth century, the Indian church was organized and well established with bishops, clergy

and believers, and that it was strongly related to and dependent upon the Persian church, he says:

But two other important facts must be recognized as modifying that general picture. For one thing, it was not a daughter Church of the Persian hierarchy. It already had a long history of its own. Ever since the ancient, third century *Acts of Thomas*, Persians and Syrians had been unanimous in recognizing the apostolic, independent origins of Indian Christianity. Moreover, however dependent the Indian Church structure later became on the Syrian Persia, the fourth-century report of Theophilus the Indian is evidence that at least two hundred years before Cosmas it had already begun the indispensable process of accommodating Christian practice to Indian ways. (S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 269. The visit of Theophilus the Indian will be discussed later.)

Migration of Persian Christians to Kerala

Apart from the ecclesiastical relationship that had been established with the Persian church, there were at least two important waves of immigration of Persian Christians to India, one in the fourth century and the other in the ninth century, which strengthened the already existing communities in India. (Mingana writes, "We do not deny that the persecution of Sapor gave a stimulus to the emigration of more Christians from southern Persia to India; and indeed there is every possibility that such an emigration did actually take place: but we do make that there is also every possibility that a Christian community of comparatively important size existed before that time in India, and it was more the existence of this community that attracted co-religionists from Persia in the time of persecution than the bare sword of Sapor." pp. 439-440.)

Different versions of the traditions about these immigrations exist both in East Syria and India which are of a later origin and are clouded with discrepancies. Yet we might be able to discover in these versions certain historical facts.

The fourth century was a time of severe persecution of Christians in Persia under Shapur II. The first immigration of Christians from Persia to Malabar is believed to have taken place during this period. The

tradition speaks of one Thomas of Cana, a Nestorian merchant reached Kodungallur (Cranganore) on the Malabar coast in south west India in A. D. 345, bringing with him a group of about 400 Christian families including deacons, priests and a bishop. The Indian Christians received them with great joy and all proceeded to Cheraman Perumal, the king of Malabar, and were favourably received by him. The king granted the Syrian Christians seventy-two marks of distinction enjoyed by high caste Hindus and they received land at Cranganore to build for them a settlement and a church. In some traditions it is also mentioned that the king invested the Christians with royal honours inscribed on copper plates which were in existence till the 16th century but after that the whereabouts of the plates are not known. (Some suggest that the plates were taken to Portugal by the Portuguese.) But the content of the grant is available in various reports. A report based on a version of the plate kept in the British Museum says:

The king not only gave Thomas [of Cana] this town [Mahadevappatanam] but also 'seven kinds of musical instruments' and all the honours, and to travel in a palanquin and that at weddings the women should whistle with the finger in the mouth as do the women of the kings and he conferred on him the duty and privilege of spreading carpets on the ground and to use sandals and to erect a pandal and to ride on elephants. And besides this he granted five taxes to Thomas and his posterity and to his associates both men and women, and for all his relatives and to the followers of his faith for ever. (LW. Brown. *op.cit.*, p. 86.)

The St. Thomas Christians have kept many of their traditional privileges in practice, and the songs sung at weddings recount the Syrian history and the royal grants. The town built by the migrants is supposed to be the Christian quarter of Kodungallur which is called Mahadevapattanam. To this day there is among the Syrian Christians a social distinction which is said to have originated in the settlement between those who intermarried with the Indians and those who did not. Those who intermarried were called Vadakkumbagar (Northists) and those who did not were called Thekkumbagar (Southists). About this C B. Firth comments:

It would be rash to insist upon all the details of the story of Thomas the merchant as history. Nevertheless the main

point, -- the settlement in Malabar a considerable colony of Syrians- may well be true; and granted this, it is not unnatural that there should have been a difference of practice among the settlers in the matter of inter-marriage with Indians, leading to a permanent social distinction. (C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*. Madras C.L.S. First published in 1961. p. 30. For a detailed discussion of the Northist-Southist division. see Mundadan *op.cit.*, pp. 95-98.)

Though the ecclesiastical relation between the two churches existed at least from the end of third century, the immigration of Persian Christians to Kerala not only strengthened the existing community, but also influenced its liturgical life. AM. Mundadan refers to Jesuit Dionsio as saying that "it was consequent on the arrival of Thomas of Cana that the Christians of Malabar accepted the rites and ceremonies of the Syrian Church." (A.M. Mundadan, *op.cit.* p. 106.) This was not a complete acceptance of the Syrian rites and ceremonies. As we shall see later, there was a growth of indigenous traditions in the Indian Church. However, it is most likely that the arrival of the Persian immigrants in the fourth century was the beginning of Syrian influence on the liturgical life and practice of the Indian Church.

The second immigration is dated in the year AD 823 and the tradition claims that the Christian immigrants rebuilt the town of Quilon in AD. 825, from which date the Malayalam era is reckoned. A Syrian account of the 18th century recounts the tradition thus:

In those days and in the days that followed, Syrian Fathers used to come to that town by the order of the Catholicos of the East, and govern the diocese of India and Malabar, because it was from it that the Syrians used to go to other parts until they were dispersed. Then in the year 823. the Syrian Fathers, Mar Sapor and Mar Parut (Peruz) with the illustrious Sabrisho, came to India and reached Kullam. They went to the king Shakirbirti, and asked from him a piece of land in which they could build a Church for themselves and erect a town. lie gave them the amount of the land they desired, and they built a church and erected a town in the district of Kullam, to which Syrian bishops and Metropolitans used to come by the order of the Catholicos who sent them. (Mingana, *Early Spread of*

Christianity p.45.)

The contemporary evidence of this event is available in five copper plates which are still in existence -- three in the Orthodox seminary at Kottayam and two with the Mar Thoma Church at Thiruvalla. These copper plates contain records of grants made to the Christians in Quilon by the king. Among these grants, certain rights are reserved in perpetuity to the Christians in Quilon. Most important of these is the guardianship of steel yard, the weights and the royal stamp. The church is given land let out under certain conditions and also certain families of lower caste are assigned for the maintenance of the church. The Christians have the sole responsibility of administering justice in their territory. The Christians are to enjoy protection from the Venat Militia called six hundred and from the Jewish and Manigrammam leaders. (There is considerable differences of opinion about the identity of Manigrammam. Probably it refers to the indigenous trade guild in Quilon when the immigrants arrived.) In the light of the royal grants, Stephen Neill comments, "The picture which emerges is important. The Christians are clearly a well-established community, accepted and highly respected. The granting of responsibility for the weights and measures is an unusual sign of confidence; it may indicate that the immigrants had a higher level of mathematical and commercial competence than the Indians among whom they had settled." (Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, p.46.)

There are also certain inscriptions and monuments surviving from this period which speak of the connection between the Indian Church and the Persian Church. The monuments consist of five carved stone crosses (known as St. Thomas crosses), which have been discovered in South India, the first at St. Thomas Mount near Madras and others at Kottayam and some other places in Kerala. They are Persian crosses and are dated 7th or 8th century.

The Extent of Christianity in India Before AD. 1500

The Gospel was first proclaimed in the kingdom of Gundaphorus in north west India and in the neighbouring places and then in Malabar and on the Coromandel coasts. Bartholomew was in Kalyan near Bombay. The first Christians were Jewish converts and later the Gospel was preached to other communities in India. South Indian tradition speaks of Namboothiri Brahmans becoming Christians. There were Persian merchants, probably including Christians among them, residing in the

chief commercial centres in India. There were several immigrations of Persian Christians, the two important ones being in the fourth and ninth centuries, to Kerala in south India. According to Mingana, the fifth century opens with an Indian Christianity which was in such a state of development that she was able to send her priests to be educated in the best schools of the East Syrian church, and to assist the doctors of that church in the revision of the ancient Syriac translations of the Pauline epistles. He says, "In a precious Colophon to his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Isshodad writes as follows: This epistle has been translated from Greek into Syriac by Mar Komai, with the help of Daniel the priest, the Indian." (Mingana, *Christianity in India*. p. 459.)

Cosmas in the sixth century, in his *Topography*, speaks of Christians in Bombay, Malabar and Ceylon.

And so likewise among the Bactrians and Huns and Persians, and the rest of the Indians, and among Persarmenians and Greeks and Elamites, and throughout the whole land of Persia, there is an infinite number of Churches with bishops, and a vast multitude of Christian people, and they have many martyrs and recluses leading a monastic life. So also in Ethiopia, and in Axum, and in all the country round about, among the Happy Arabians who are nowadays called Homeritae, and all through Arabia. (I.W. McCrindle, *op.cit.* pp. 118-121; Mingana, *Ibid.*, p. 462.)

Mingana points out that Cosmas' text is important not only as regards the existence of Christian communities in Bombay, Malabar and Ceylon, but also and 'especially by the addition of the significant sentence: among the rest of the Indians.' (Mingana, *Ibid.*, p. 462.) According to Mingana the statement of Cosmas "proves the existence of numerous Christian communities among many Central Asian people and in India." (Mingana, *ibid.*, p. 462.) By the time of Cosmas, Christianity seems to have been widespread not only in Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia and Central Asia, but also in India. In India it was not confined to North West India, or Malabar or Coromandal coast. When Cosmas wrote, 'the rest of the Indians,' there is no doubt that he was aware of the vast extent of the country. By this time the East Asian writers were familiar with the geography of India. In the seventh century, when the Nestorian Patriarch Isho-Yahb III (650-660) wrote to Simemon, the Metropolitan of Riwardashir, admonishing him for "closing the door of the episcopal

ordination in the face of the many peoples of India", he speaks of India as a country 'that extends from the borders of the Persian Empire, to the country which is called Kalah, which is a distance of one thousand and two hundred parasangas.' (*Ibid.*, p. 464.) Referring to the above correspondence between the Patriarch and the Metropolitan, Mingana observes that we can infer from the correspondence that "there was a considerable number of bishops and priests in India, whose sees and parishes were apparently scattered in the vast country to the distance of one thousand and two hundred parasangas." (*Ibid.*, p. 465.)

According to John Stewart there were strong Christian communities all over the continent. Mingana gives a list of no less than thirty six bishoprics, some of them metropolitan sees either on the routes to or in the proximity of India including Afghanistan and Baluchistan. (*Ibid.*, pp. 489-90.) Stewart observes that, "with so many centres of influence it would have been strange if Christian merchants and missionaries from those different centres had not penetrated the passes leading into India from the north and northwest, bringing their faith with them." (John Stewart, *op.cit.*, p.85.) According to him there is a solid ground for believing that a fairly large Christian community existed in north India also from very early times. "The majority of these were undoubtedly Indians by blood and ancestry who had embraced the new faith for its own sake, as proselytes of Christian missionaries from Persia and Mesopotamia." (*Ibid.*, p. 86.) Stewart writes:

Whether their beginnings were due to the teachings of Thomas as tradition strongly asserts, or some one else whose name is unknown, it can be asserted that the missionary activity of the Nestorian merchants, artisans and clergy in the subsequent centuries must have contributed considerably to their development and growth. The fact stated by Prof. Herzfeld in a recent lecture that 'the whole of north west India was a vast province of the Persian Empire in the third century governed by Persian officials' must also have been a contributing factor in the spread of Christianity in these regions. (*Ibid.*, p. 86.)

Stewart further points out that if the Persian refugees during the persecutions under Sapor II in the 4th century and Yezdegard and Bharan V in the 5th century and bands of earnest missionaries from the monastery of Beth-Abhe and other centres carried the Gospel to other provinces of the Persian Empire, it is inconceivable that the province of

India would be left untouched. Assemani, Osorius and Jarricus who -- wrote a century after Cosmas speak of numerous Nestorian communities in the regions along the river Ganges and also in central and eastern India. (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* vol. 2, p. 486. See also John Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 89.)

We do not have detailed and in some cases reliable accounts of the various Christian communities in India. Yet the available evidences indicate that there were Christian communities scattered throughout the country in the early period. It will be a great mistake to think that Christianity in the early period was only found in south India. Some of these Christian communities continued to exist in North India in the medieval period. John Stewart points out that in *Wiltsch's Geography and Statistics of the Church*, Patna is mentioned as a seat of a metropolitan in AD. 1222. Marco Polo who visited India at the end of the 13th century states that there were in Central India, six great kings and kingdoms, and three of these were Christians and three Saracens. (Yule, *Book of Ser Marco Polo* [revised by Cordier], vol. ii, p.427.) According to Polo, St. Thomas preached in this region and, after he had converted the people, went to the province of Malabar. John Stewart says that Abder-Razzak, who visited India in AD 1442, mentioned that the Vizier of Vijayanagar in Deccan was a Christian, his name being Nimeh-Pezier. (John Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 192.) Nicolo Conti, a Venetian Merchant from Italy who visited India in the 15th century wrote that he visited Mylapore where he found thousand Nestorians and these Nestorians are "scattered all over India as the Jews among them." (Medlycolt. *op.cit.*, p. 95.)

It is very difficult to verify the truth of the above statements coming from various sources. It is also difficult to get a clear and precise state of Christianity in India up to AD. 1500. However, all these pieces of information from various sources, though very scanty, point to the fact that there were scattered communities of St. Thomas Christians (Nestorians as they were referred to in some of the documents) in different parts of the continent. Marco Polo speaks of St. Thomas preaching in Central India, a tradition which might have existed in Central India at the time of his visit.

Church historians are in general agreement that there was a concentration of Christians in South India. Speaking-of the diffusion of Christianity in medieval India, E.R. Hambye, a Roman Catholic historian writes:

The majority of its faithful was concentrated in Kerala, more precisely between Cranganore in the north and Quilon in the south. Syrian Christian communities were also found scattered along the west coast, in Goa, Saimur (Chaul), Thana, Sopara, Gujerat and Sind. The east coast of Mylapore had also such a Christian community close to the St. Thomas' shrine. It should also be noted that scores of stones marked with a cross have been found on the southern slopes of Nilgiris. This relatively wide, though sparse, diffusion extended up to Kashmir where near Tenkse, on the eastern side of Leh, rock inscriptions still bear witness today to a settlement of Syrian Christians, which existed there around AD. 800. (H. C. Perumalil & E. R. Hambye (ed), *Christianity in India*, Prakasam Publications. Alleppey, 1972. p. 32.)

St. Thomas Christians and Missionary Activities

How did the Gospel spread in India? The early stages of the growth of Christianity in India did not seem to be spectacular. Yet we know that in the medieval period, Christianity was diffused throughout the country. There are a number of instances where the East Syrian missionaries came to India for evangelistic purposes. David, Bishop of Basra left his see in AD 295-300 to go to India where he evangelized many people. According to John Stewart the spread of the Gospel in north India was due greatly to the efforts of the missionary activities of Nestorian merchants, artisans, clergy and the monks of the Beth-Abe from Persia. There is no doubt that at least from the beginning of the fourth century, the Persian church had a missionary relationship with India. However, the Persian missionaries were not the only people who spread the Gospel in India.

Several western and some Indian writers have stated that the Indian church had no missionary zeal and it was only later through the contact with European missionaries that evangelistic spirit was awakened in the church. Stephen Neill writes, "There is no clear evidence of attempts by the Indian Christian community to propogate its faith in the non-Christian society in the midst of which it had its existence." (Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India* (1984), p. 47.) According to L.W. Brown,

The result of the honourable place given by the rajas to the Christians, and of their assimilation in social custom to their Hindu neighbours, was that they were accepted as a caste, and often thought of their community in this way. They ranked after the Brabmans and as equals of the Nayars. Many Christians would claim that there was Brahman convert blood in the community and that for this reason they were superior to Nayars.

It was in consequence of this position that the St. Thomas Christians. so far as our evidence goes, never attempted to bring their non-Christian neighbours to a knowledge of Christ, and so into the Christian church. The Portuguese Archbishop Menzes did his best to create a sense of evangelistic responsibility among the Indian Christians by preaching to the Hindus whenever he could, and the eighteenth-century Carmelites had a number of baptisms from the heathen every year, so much so that they had to defend their actions before the Raja of Travancore, but the Indian Church itself was not (L. W. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 173.) aroused to share this work.

George Moracs, an Indian historian, after pointing out that St. Thomas Christians became a closed corporation, like the fire temples of our times in Bombay, where there is no admission except for Parsis, says:

The result was that the Christians had only added one more caste to the multiplicity of the Indian caste system. It is because Christianity became a caste that it could offer no challenge to the Hindu mind, which would have otherwise tried to steal its thunder by first trying to understand its principles and then incorporate them into itself. (George M. Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India from Early times to St. Francis Xavier: AD. 52-152*. Bombay, 1964, p. 293. [see also Mundadan *op.cit.* p. 496.])

Did the St. Thomas Christian community become a caste among the other castes and thus had no encounter with Indian society and culture? Was it true that St. Thomas Christians had no sense of responsibility of Christian witness? The conclusions of Stephen Neill, L.W. Brown and George Moraes are sweeping generalizations and cannot be accepted as

such. The Portuguese sources coming from the 16th century speak of Thomas Christians practicing 'untouchability' like caste Hindus. This might be true but it did not mean that the St. Thomas Christian community from the very beginning was a caste community and had not felt any missionary responsibility till the coming of the Portuguese. The majority of the St. Thomas Christians before the 16th century were found in Kerala and in all likelihood they were mostly Dravidians who had not yet developed the rigid caste structure which came to exist in South India in the medieval period. Though Aryans began to come to South India even before the Christian era, Aryanization of the south was a slow process. Before the thirteenth century there was much social mobility.

The St. Thomas Christian community was conscious of its missionary responsibility from an early date and they did not wait for the Portuguese Archbishop Menzes to teach them their evangelistic responsibility. In the second century they invited Pantaneus from Alexandria to preach the Gospel to Hindu philosophers and scholars. The Nestorian church with which the Indian church established ecclesiastical relationships since the fourth century was a great missionary church. It was a church on fire with great missionary zeal. One can only expect that the Indian church has caught something of the missionary spirit of the church. About the evangelistic efforts of the Indian church, E.R. Hambye observes:

For centuries, the Thomas Christians expanded, thanks to their zeal, though inspired also by the apostolic spirit of their East Syrian brethren. We know that some monks from India went to the Far East, if not to China and central Asia. Thomas Christians during the 10th-11th centuries tried to spread their faith in the Maladive Islands, and as late as the 15th century, Nairs in Kerala were joining their ranks.

There even existed among those Christians four prominent families of very ancient origin, whose own duty was to foster the integration of new members into the community. (H. C. Perumalil and E. R. Hambye, [ed] *op.cit.*, p.37.)

H. Hosten mentions that in AD. 780 a 'Nestorian missionary from India received an award from the Chinese superior. (*Ibid.*, p. 321.)

Because St. Thomas Christians were socially integrated with the Indian society, one important way the Christian influence was exerted might have been through their daily social intercourse with caste Hindus. Several scholars of History of Religions have pointed out the probability of a significant missionary encounter that took place between Hinduism and Christianity in the early centuries of the medieval period. One important development in Hinduism in South India from the 7th century onwards was the development of the Bhakti Movement (theistic movement characterized by ecstatic piety) especially in Vaishnavism and Saivism.

George A. Grierson mentions the possibility of a Christian encounter with Hindu Bhakti tradition in North India in the sixth century. In his article on 'Bhakti Marga,' in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* he mentions that "in the year AD 639 the famous Indian king Siladitya of Kanauj, a patron of the Bhagavatas, received a party of Syrian Christians, headed by the missionary Alopen, at his court." Grierson is very emphatic about Christian Influence on Bhakti tradition in South India in the medieval period.

It was in south India that Christianity as a doctrine, exercised the greatest influence on Hinduism generally. Although the conceptions of the fatherhood of God and of bhakti were indigenous to India, they received an immense impetus owing to the belief of Christian communities reacting upon the medieval Bhagavata reformers of the South. With this leaven their teaching swept over Hinduism, bringing balm and healing to a nation gasping in its death throes under the horrors of an alien invasion. It is not over stating the case to say that in this reformation India rediscovered faith and love; and the fact of this discovery accounts for the passionate enthusiasm of the contemporary religious writings. (George Grierson in James Hastings' (ed), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1909, pp. 539-551.)

Grierson sees some influence of Islam (Sufism) also in Bhakti revival. Bhakti doctrine is pre-Christian in origin and not a product of Christian influence. But its development in South India in the early middle ages was qualitatively different from the Bhakti of earlier Hindu tradition.

The chief emphasis of the new movement is on a relationship with a God who is personal, full of love and grace for his creation, and on the grace of God as the means of salvation. Salvation is achieved through Bhakti and Bhakti leads to union with the divine. But this unity is not to be conceived as an ontological unity in which all distinctions between the soul and the deity are done away. The new movement is often spoken of as a religion of Grace.

The two chief theologians of the movement were Ramanuja (11th century) and Madhva (13th century). There is no doubt that there is a close resemblance between Christianity and the new movement in Hinduism. Some, like Grierson, have seen Christian influence in this development, while others have not. For example, speaking of development of Bhakti in Saivism in Tamil Nadu, Stephen Neill says, "The sober verdict of historical judgement must be that any such Christian influence in Tamil literature is unlikely." (Stephen Neil. *op.cit.*, p. 62.) However, there is much in the teaching of Madhva which is very similar to Christian teaching, so that a western historian of Indian culture, A.L. Basham observes, "The resemblance of Madhva's system to Christianity is so striking that influence, perhaps, through the Syrian churches of Malabar, is almost certain." (A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India*, p. 333.) If this new development in Hinduism was influenced by Christianity then it shows that the Christian impact was being felt in Indian society through the witness of Indian Christians long before the arrival of western missionaries. In the missionary encounter, Christian witness cannot be measured only in terms of the number of converts made. A similar encounter took place between Christianity and Hinduism in the 19th century. Though it also did not result in many conversions of caste Hindus, it partly resulted in encouraging new religious and social movements within Hinduism itself.

The inherent missionary dynamism of the St. Thomas Christian community seemed to have diminished by the end of the 15th century due to several reasons. After the 13th century, south Indian social life was marked by a rigid caste system. Because of the social integration of St. Thomas Christians with the upper social group, caste consciousness also crept into the church. That might be the reason that the Portuguese sources coming from the 16th century speak of the St. Thomas Christians practicing 'untouchability' like the caste Hindus. It was this which prevented them from undertaking any missionary work among the 'depressed classes'. But the more important reason for the diminishing of missionary dynamism was the coming of the Muslims

into political power. In the territories under Muslim rule, conversion became difficult. Moreover, Hinduism under Muslim rule became self-defensive in the late Middle Ages, the consequence of which was that Hindu rulers prevented the conversion of Hindus to any other religion. Thomas Christians who were living in the territories of these Hindu rulers had to respect the wishes of these rulers. Even the Roman Catholic missionaries, with Portuguese political power behind them, had to confine themselves to work among the low caste people in Cochin and Travancore area. About this A. Meersman writes:

When the Portuguese first arrived in Cochin, its king welcomed them. With their aid he hoped at least to neutralize the preponderance of Calicut in Malabar affairs and enrich his kingdom through trade. However, as far as the spreading of the Gospel in his realm was concerned, he was not enthusiastic and he forbade the missionaries to approach the members of certain castes for the sake of conversion. They were permitted to seek catechuments from other castes or sections of the population, which they did. (A. Meersman, 'Development of the Church under Padroado', H. C. Perumalil and Hambye (ed), *Christianity in India*. p. 69.)

Moreover, due to the interference of the Portuguese missionaries in the life of the church, St. Thomas Christians were involved in internal dissensions and attempts at self-preservation. All these factors contributed to a loss of missionary dynamism in the church from the end of the 15th century to the middle of the 19th century. In the second half of the 19th century, their missionary zeal was again awakened by the contact with western missionaries and this time they also evangelized the depressed classes. (The statement of L. W. Brown that Archbishop Menzes tried to encourage a spirit of missionary responsibility among the Syrians to which they did not respond, is rather misleading. It was difficult even for western missionaries to evangelize the caste Hindus in the 16th century.)

Social Life of the Christian Community During the Early Period

The Gospel was first preached to the Jews and then to the Hindus. At first, the Jewish Christians might have been very small in number; but as time went on, the majority of the Christians were Hindu converts. The Indian tradition speaks of Christian converts from high caste Hindus.

They continued the social organization and life they lived before conversion and thus there was no social dislocation between the Christians and the Hindu community. Christians shared with the Hindus very many of the social customs and practices. There were instances of intermarriage between Christians and the Nairs in Kerala. The coming of Christian immigrants from Persia did not seriously affect the social life of the Indian Christians, as the immigrants (except the Thomas of Cana group) intermarried with the Indians. From the very beginning, the Indian Christians were an indigenous community, having social and community life with the Indians. (It was not a question of adaptation as Mundadan suggests, but not rejecting the social milieu in which the Christian converts were born. They were not the product of foreign missionary enterprise. A. M. Mundadan, *op.cit.*, vol.i, p. 154.)

Some trial excavations were done in Cranganore in AD 1945-46, though much more has yet to be done. From the result of those excavations, Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg conclude "From such scant remains, it is clear that religious harmony was the rule of the land." (Nathan and Ellen Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*, Columbia, University of South Carolina, 1993, p. 53.) There were Christian communities to either side of the palace, one the 'Vadakkumbhagam', or 'Northists,' and the other the 'Thekkumbhagam,' or 'Southists'. Both claimed Jewish ancestry. (Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg, *The last Jews of Cochin*, Columbia, University of South Carolina, 1993, p. 53.)

The religious harmony and toleration that existed in South India was remarkable till the Middle Ages. The Church in north Parur near Cranganore is called Kottakavu which was built in 1308 on the site of another old church which was originally a temple converted into a church. It is said to be the site where St. Thomas converted several Nambudiri Brahmins. There is a Hindu temple just across the lane and to this day Christian processions make their first stop at that temple to pay respect to Hindus, and Hindu processions make a similar stop at the church. This interreligious aspect of procession rituals in South India is not confined to North Parur. (Achan P. Anujan, "A Trial Excavation at Cranganur", *Bulletin* of Rama Varma Research Institute, 13 [July 1946] pp. 40-42 quoted by Katz and Goldberg. *Ibid.* p. 53.) Susan Bayly in her study of Christians and Muslims in South India also speaks of the inter religious co-operation and harmony that existed in South India.

In many parts of Malabar, Nayars accepted Syrians as participants and donors in local temple rites and took part

in turn in Syrian church festivals. The acknowledgement of the Syrians' right to share Hindu sacred space' was expressed in some centres by the construction of Syrian churches on sites virtually adjoining Hindu temples... Christians used Hindu-style torches, umbrellas and banners in their Cattam festivals, and in some localities actually had a single collection of processional regalia which was shared between both Church and Hindu temple. At least one Hindu temple regularly lent Out its temple elephants to Syrian worshippers for use in their festival processions. (Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900*. Cambridge University Press. 1989, p. 253. see also Katz and Goldberg, *op.cit.*, p. 54)

From the grants given by the local Rajas to the immigrant Christians, we can infer that the Christians had a position of privilege in society and shared certain honorific titles (most of which they shared with the Nayers) such as Tharakan, Muthalali, Menon and Panickar. The commonest name of the Christians was Nasrani Mappila. L.W. Brown observes:

The Christians shared many other things beside names with the Nayers. They occasionally took wives from the community, and their children often went to school with Nayar children. They joined in many of the ordinary celebrations of the country such as Onam and Vishu or New Year's Day. (L. W. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 171.)

Christians observed many of the ceremonies connected with birth, adolescence and marriage and death like Hindus. In their day to day life the Christians differed very little from the higher castes of the Hindu society.

According to Monserrate:

In their dress they do not much differ from the nairs except for this that they do not cut their hair around the head as the nairs do, but grow it fully and tie up and arrange it in such manner that it is very beautiful and serves for a hat or a cap. The old people, however, shave their heads and use hats. Another matter in which the men

differed from the nairs was that when they come to battlefield, they do not smear their heads nor do they paint their bodies with the ashes of cow-dung blessed by the cursed jogues, ie, the yogis or the Hindu priests, which the nairs make very much of. (Quoted in A. M. Mundadan, *op.cit.*, vol.1. p.158.)

Monserrate says that the Christian women were much more modestly dressed than the Nayar women. On the streets and when they went to Church, they covered themselves with some white cloth which made them look very modest.

St. Thomas Christians were employed in agriculture and trade and military service. From the Portuguese sources we gather that the Christians were predominantly agriculturists and pepper-growing was their sole monopoly. The St. Thomas Christians were also engaged in trade. But by the 16th century, they had lost most of their trade to the Muslims who controlled the main trade between the countries of west Asia and the East. But still some Christians were engaged in overseas trade. Vasco da Gama, on his first voyage to India is reported to have met on the East African coast some ships of the Christians of Malabar. (*Ibid.*, p. 156.) Just like the Nayars, St. Thomas Christians were good soldiers and the local rulers highly valued their service in the army.

The Christians in South India lived under many local rulers, chief among them being the Cochin Raja. There is a tradition of a Christian king of the Villar Vattam family as the temporal ruler of St. Thomas Christians. When the family ceased to exist, the Christians came under the protection of the king of Cochin.

Ecclesiastical Life of St. Thomas Christians

The growth of the ecclesiastical organization -- the clerical order as well as other institutional structures and practices of the church was a slow process in the early period of Christian history. To begin with, the Christian church did not uphold a particular form of structure, ministry and liturgy. We do not find any one particular ecclesiology and ministry developed in the New Testament. Jesus did not teach any model of the church or ministry to be followed by those who believed in Him. St. Paul used a number of different metaphors and images to denote the Christian community life. The primary responsibility of the apostles was to be evangelists and missionaries, travelling through the countries and

not to govern a community. They lived as those who expected the end of the world in their own life time. Therefore, the setting up of a permanent and uniform pattern of ministry or church structure would hardly have seemed a high priority for them. As the church approached the second century, there was no uniform development in structure, theology and practice among different Christian groups. This was true with regard to Christian ministry also. The Christians have often tended to read back into the past the later development that took place in the church.

According to the first Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, a permanent constitution of the church had been conferred upon it by the Lord Himself. (T. V. Philip, *Ecumenism in Asia*, ISPCK & CSS, 1994, pp. 73-74.) In the case of the Persian Church there is little evidence to show that there were bishops much before AD 300. (S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p.118.) The Christian congregations there, to begin with, were independent of one another and only in the fifth century a national ecclesiastical body was established.

Because of the lack of documentary evidence, it is very difficult to speak about the ecclesiastical organization of the St. Thomas Christian community in the first few centuries. What we know of the community came from a later period, some from the writings of the Portuguese as they saw them in the 16th century.

Where did the earliest Christians meet for worship? Did they meet in Christian homes; or as the first Christians were converts from Judaism, did they organize themselves into synagogues led by elders? We do not know for sure when the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyters and deacons came to be accepted in India. There was a Persian bishop among the immigrants who came with Thomas of Cana in AD 345. It is probable that this immigration of a large number of Christians from Persia was the beginning of East Syrian influence on the ecclesiastical and liturgical life of the church in India. Was it also the beginning of the threefold ministry in the Indian church? In the fifth century when the Indian church came under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Riwardashir, were there bishops stationed in India? Where were there any Indians among them? When, in the seventh century a metropolitan was appointed for India, was he an Indian and where was he placed? According to Mingana, with the appointment of a metropolitan, between six and twelve suffragan bishops were also consecrated for India. "We infer that there was a considerable number of bishops and priests in India, whose sees and parishes were apparently scattered in that vast country to the distance of one thousand and two hundred parsangas."

(Mingana, *op cit.*, p. 464) Were there some Indians among these bishops and priests? In the absence of adequate answers to such questions, it is difficult to accept the statement of A.M. Mundadan that "tradition is unanimous in asserting that the prelates of St. Thomas Christians came from Babylon (Persia) for many centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese in India." (Mundadan, *op.cit.* p. 174.)

While the arrival of immigrants was the beginning of Persian influence on the life of the Indian Church, it was not a wholesale acceptance of Persian traditions. From the very beginning, the church was taking roots in India and there was the growth of indigenous traditions, practices and leadership. Western church historians mention that Emperor Constantine sent a Christian embassy in AD 354 to certain countries bordering the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea under the leadership of an Asian Christian Theophilus, the Indian, who appears to have been a native of Maladive Islands. During this journey, he visited India also where, it is reported, he "reformed many things which were not rightly done among them; for they heard the reading of the Gospel in a sitting posture, and did other things which were repugnant to the divine law; and having reformed everything according to holy usage, as was not acceptable to God, he also confirmed the dogma of the Church." (Mingana, *Early Spread of Christianity in India*. pp. 26-28. A.E. Medlycott points out that the value of the report of Theophilus is its evidence that by the middle of the fourth century India or its adjacent territories had indigenous, worshipping congregations ministered to by local clergy, with customs such as sitting for the Gospel, that were well adapted to the Indian culture though divergent from accepted western practice. (A. E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas (1905)*. pp. 188-202.) Both in western and Syrian traditions, the congregation stood for the reading of the Gospel during the Eucharist. He writes "if there be any doubt as to whether the congregation be indigenous or foreign, such doubts ought to be set aside by the peculiar customs found among them." In the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. (Margaret Dunlop Gibson [tra], *The Didascalia Apostolorum in English*. London: C. J. Cloy & Sons, 1903, p.19.) of the Syrian Church, it is said "The Apostles have also decreed that at the end of all the scriptures, the Gospel shall be read as the seal of all the scriptures, the people rising to their feet to hear it; because it is the salvation of all men." It is important to note Medlycott's observation that Lie worshipping congregation at this time were ministered to by local clergy. It seems very unlikely that there were no Indian bishops among the clergy by this time. All this shows that the Indian Church was not simply a copy of the Syrian or Persian church and that there was the

growth of an independent indigenous Christian tradition in India.

In the controversy between the clergy of Fars and Timothy I in the 8th century, we have seen that the bishops of the province of Fars, contrary to the practice in the rest of Persia, were wearing white garments like secular priests, were eating meat and marrying. Was the Indian Church following the practice in Fars when it was under the jurisdiction of Riwardashir from the 5th to the 7th century? However, as time went on the Persian influence was felt more and more in matters of ministry and liturgical practices. In addition to the three fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, there also came Chorepiscopas and archdeacons. Mundadan writes "It is beyond any doubt that from very early times the St. Thomas Christians had an arch deacon to serve their church and community. The documents which are available today, though not many, are clear about it." (Mundadan. *op.cit.*, p. 180.) This office was received from the East Syrian Church and there is a tradition that the first archdeacon in India was from the family of Pakolomattam. He was the chief assistant to the bishop in the administration of the diocese.

There were monks and monasteries in India. It is very difficult to say when exactly the monastic tradition came into existence in the Indian church. Did the Hindu and the Buddhist ascetic and monastic traditions influence Indian Christianity? If so, monastic tradition began to develop in the Indian church much earlier than the Persian connection in the fourth century. We have noted earlier that even the asceticism in Persia was affected by Indian ascetic tradition. If it were a borrowing from the Persian church, it began to develop only after the 4th century. In a passage in Jerome (late 4th century or early 5th) he tells that he was visited in Palestine every day by monks from India, Persia and Ethiopia. Mingana could not think of daily crowds of monks from India visiting Jerome and he interprets India to mean South Arabia. It is surprising that wherever India is mentioned, Mingana sees it referring to some other place and we can hardly accept his views in this matter. We have seen that monasteries were a great missionary and educational instrument in the life of the Persian church and wherever the Persian influence spread, the monasteries sprang up. This was so in China and in Arabia, and Mingana points out that in the fourth century "the way to India was not only strewn with bishoprics, but also with monasteries." (Mingana, *op.cit.* p. 438.) Naturally, one could expect a rapid development of the monastic movement in India after the Persian connection. Monks from Persia also used to come to India. In one of his letters Patriarch Timothy (9th c) mentions that "many monks voyage to India and China with only

a stick and a purse." (See Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p. 101.)

Mingana mentions the biography of hermit Yonan, the archimandrite of the Monastery of St. Thomas in India written by the end of the fourth century. The monastery was situated on the borders of an island called 'the black Island', south of the coast of Baith Katraye. The island was in the vicinity of a town called 'Milon', the inhabitants of which fished for pearls. Mingana comments "The existence in about AD 390 in the shores of the Arabian sea of a monastery under the name of Thomas is highly interesting, and constitutes the weightiest proof of all those which have so far been addressed to bolster up the historicity of the mission of Thomas. Interesting also in the story is the narrative dealing with the inner life of the two hundred monks of the monastery in that far off period. Some of the proper names of the monks of the monastery imply a country like Baith Katraye, because they have an undoubted Arabian origin." (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p. 307.) There is considerable difference of opinion about the location of the island. Some have identified the 'black island' with Ceylon, some others locate it on the Coromandel coast. while Mingana thinks that the island is on the Arabian side of the Persian gulf and is between Oman and Baharin. However, Mingana admits that the tradition about the existence of a monastery of St. Thomas in India, is very old. Mingana himself asks: Would it be possible to assume that there were, in the fourth century two monasteries of St. Thomas, one on the coast of Oman, and the other on the Coromandel coast? Gregory of Tours who died in AD 594 speaks of a monastery of St. Thomas in India. In AD 883, King Alfred of England sent to the Pope the alms which the king had vowed to send to Rome and also to India to St. Thomas and Bartholomew. (*Ibid.* p. 307.) As in other instances, in this case also Mingana says that the mention of Bartholomew renders almost certain that King Alfred's India was not India at all, but south Arabia and Abyssinia. On the contrary, we have pointed out earlier that St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew were missionaries to India and that it confirms that King Alfred's India was our India and a monastery of St. Thomas existed in India from ancient times. The existence of a St. Thomas shrine and church is also attested by medieval visitors to India, such as Marco Polo (1223), John of Monte Corvino (1293), Friar Odoric (1325). John de Marignolli (1349) and Nicolo Conti (1440). Early in the 16th century, writing to the Patriarch, three Nestorian bishops in India mention in their letters a monastery of St. Thomas. They wrote "As to the monastery of St. Thomas the Apostle, some Christian men have gone into it, have inhabited it, and are now busy restoring it; it is distant about twenty-five days from the above

mentioned Christians; it is on the shores of the sea in a town called Mailapore, in the country of Silan, one of the Indian countries. (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p.471.)

With a very close relationship established between the Indian Church and the East Syrian Church from the fourth century onwards, East Syrian influence was strongly felt in the liturgical practice. It was as a result of this relationship that in due course of time, Syriac came to be used as the liturgical language. Also St. Thomas Christians came to be referred to as Syrian Christians. It is very puzzling for the historian that the Nestorian missionaries who were eager to create alphabets for Central Asian people and who helped the growth of indigenous theology among the Chinese Christians did not encourage translation of the Bible into Arabic or the Syriac liturgy into the language of the people in India. It is not very easy to find an adequate answer to this problem.

Mingana mentions that the Indian Church never had a definite ecclesiastical language except Syriac till the arrival of western missionaries. He says "The fact proves first of all, that not one of the scores of dialects spoken by India in the first century has been found fit to be raised to the dignity of a sacred language in which the message of the Gospel could be expressed with dignity and aptitude; it proves also that the Indian Christians were satisfied for the upkeep of their spiritual life with the use of a language which their esteemed migrants had made familiar to them." (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p. 295.) Mingana's suggestion that any of the Indian languages was not fit to convey the Christian gospel is made out of his ignorance of the Indian languages. Moreover, Christianity in India before the 16th century was very widespread and our knowledge of different Christian groups is very scanty. It is very difficult to say that the worship of the Christians was not held in their native tongues. But as we have noted earlier, from the fourth century onwards the Persian influence was felt more and more in the liturgical life of St. Thomas Christians.

The East Syrians had a love for Aramaic or Syriac. Aramaic was the language spoken in Palestine around the first century, and the Jews wrote it in Hebrew characters. The Assyrians wrote it in cuneiform, from which developed the Kharishti script of India and the Pehlavi script of Iran. According to Arthur Christensen, Aramaic was the lingua franca from eastern Persia to western India until the seventh century. "Aramaic with a christianized vocabulary is known as Syriac. (See Katz and Goldberg, *op.cit.*, pp. 301-302.) Their love for Syriac was not

because of nationalism or cultural insensitivity to other cultures. If it were because of nationalism, the Persian Christians would have insisted on the use of Persian or Pehlavi. In China, at the request of the Nestorian Christians the Chinese government in AD 745 changed their name Persian to Syrian religion. No official reason was given except that "the Persian scriptural religion began in Syria." For the Nestorian Christians, Syrian Christianity meant one which is nearer to the source of Christianity. Jesus Christ spoke and taught in Aramaic. The Nestorian Christians had a special love for the Syriac (Aramaic) because it was the language of Jesus Christ and Syrian Christianity meant original Christianity. Among the Jews there was a prejudice against committing the Scriptures to writing in any other than the sacred tongue. The day on which the Old Testament was translated into Greek was said to be as evil as that on which the golden calf was made. The early Syrian Christians, being converts from Jews, might also have had a similar love for Aramaic (Syriac). This could also be said of the St. Thomas Christians in India. Moreover, Syriac was not an unknown language in India in the early centuries. As has been stated, Aramaic was the lingua franca for eastern Persia to western India till the seventh century. Katz and Goldberg point out that according to Cochin Jewish tradition, the Jews in Cranganore spoke Aramaic. (*Ibid.*, p. 302.)

Christian Theology in India

We know very little about the theology in the Indian Church during the early period. As to the times of Nestorian contact, Robin Boyd writes "We shall leave aside the question of the theology of the Indian Church in Nestorian times, as no recordings are available, noting merely that there is still a small Nestorian church in South India and that India has never ceased to be conscious of the ancient Nestorian associations." (R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* Madras, CLS, 1969, p. 9.) Whatever records were available were destroyed by the Roman Catholic missionaries during the Portuguese period. About this Mundadan says:

Today there is no written pre-16th century record of the doctrinal theological position of St. Thomas Christians prior to their contact with the West in the 16th century. Even those books which the Portuguese writers of the 16th century examined and used for drawing their conclusions are not available today. Since the Portuguese suspected the presence of errors in the books, they all

became casualties in the auto-da-fe programme launched by the Portuguese padroado authorities at the close of the 16th century and later. This leaves us without sufficient data to verify whether the Indian Christians had evolved a theology of their own. Recourse then has to be made to other sources of information, namely, 'the life, experience and tradition', to form some idea of the pre-16th century views on Christianity in India. In other words, we have to find out what theology is reflected in the general outlook and religious mentality of the community, in their life, customs and traditions. (A. M. Mundadan, *op.cit.*, pp. 492-93.)

According to Antony Mookenthottam, it is probable that the ancient church in India had developed some theology of its own and this theology is not written down in books but it is implicit in the life, experience and traditions of the community. (*Ibid.*, p. 492.) Though no written records are available, yet, we might be able to infer something of the theological thinking in the Indian Church from other sources and circumstantial evidences.

The first Christian converts in India were Jews and it was with the Jewish Christian community in East Syria that the Indian church entered into an ecclesiastical relationship in the subsequent period. So it is not wrong for us to assume that the church in India in the first few centuries shared in the general characteristics of Judeo-Christianity. The first Gospel they possessed was the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* believed to have been brought to India by St. Bartholomew. The language of Judeo Christians in Jerusalem was Aramaic (Syriac) and wherever Judeo Christianity spread, Syriac had a permanent place in the liturgy of the church.

The Indian church because of its ecclesiastical relationship with the East Syrian church was also influenced by the theology of that church. Ephrem and Aphrahat were great theologians of that church in the fifth century. From the fifth century onwards, the writings of the Antiochene theologians, especially that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (392-428) became the chief resources for the study of theology in the East Syrian church. Narsai, the great teacher of Nisibis was a follower of Theodore. Theodore, for the East Syrian church, was the doctor of doctors and the great exegete and interpreter of the Bible, whose sober and literal interpretation was always the Nestorian model. The works of

Antiochene theologians were translated into Syriac. It is only logical for us to infer that the theological thinking in the East Syriac church, namely of Ephrem and Aphrahat and later Theodore of Mopsuestia, had some influence on the Indian church. After noting that the epistle to the Romans was translated from Greek into Syriac by Mar Komai with the help of Daniel the priest, the Indian, Mingana says:

This union of the Church of India with that of Mesopotamia and Persia is rendered more evident by another scholar of the school of Edessa, Ma'na, bishop of Riwardhashir, who, in about AD 470, wrote in Persian (i.e., Pahlawi) religious discourses, canticles and hymns, and translated from Greek into Syriac the works of Diodore and Theodore of Mopsuestia, and sent them all to India. And he dispatched to the islands of the sea (Baharin), and to India, all the books he had translated. (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p. 314.)

This is a very strong evidence to show that from the fifth century onwards, the works of Antiochene theologians, especially those of Diodore and Theodore were known in India and had some influence on the theological thinking of the Indian church. By AD 470, the Indian church was under the episcopal supervision of the bishop of Riwardashir and it was only natural on the part of the bishop to feel strongly about his episcopal responsibility for the theological education of the Indian church. Not only the theology of Diodore and Theodore, but also of Ephrem and Aphrahat might have had some influence on the Indian church. As we stated earlier, Theodore and his colleagues had a real appreciation for the human life of Jesus without minimizing his divinity. Jesus Christ represented humanity at its highest and fullest. Salvation is not divinization but the life of a community with God. The Christian life for them is the imitation of Christ and to be in the service of Christ. That means leading the life of unrelenting warfare against the forces of evil. The doctrine of free will of human beings, by which he or she controls all passions and guides his/her actions, is an essential aspect of the East Syrian theology. The East Syrian theologians did not locate sin in human nature. In their theology they preserved the freedom of the human being to make choices and a certain degree of self-reliance, though they accepted the need for Grace. Theirs was a theology which was a strong critic of the Augustinian position on Sin and Grace, and on human nature, which was imposed on the Indian Church later by the Latin missionaries. Arising out of their Christology and anthropology

was also the East Syrian Church's theology of universal mission.

There are Indian writers who maintain that the Indian church was not aware of the theological developments in the Persian church and was thus not influenced by it. They point out that the Indian church had a relationship with the Persian church before it became Nestorian and maintained that relationship ever after the Persian church became Nestorian without really realizing the difference. Such a view cannot be accepted as it implies that the Indian church in the early centuries was theologically ignorant or indifferent. In fact, the church was fully aware of its theological position as it came to realize the sharp distinction between the Law of Peter and the Law of Thomas. The conflict at the Udayamperoor Synod in AD 1599 was between the Church of St. Thomas and the Church of St. Peter. Act III, Decree 7 of the synod reads:

The Synod is painfully aware of the heresy and perverse error which is being disseminated in this diocese by the schismatics to the great detriment of souls: There is one Law of St. Thomas and another of St. Peter; the Church founded by the one is distinct and different from the Church founded by the other; each is immediately from Christ; one has nothing to do with the other; neither the prelate of one owes obedience to the prelate of the other; those who belong to the law of Peter endeavoured to destroy the law of St. Thomas; for this they had been punished by him... (Quoted in Mundadan *op.cit.*, pp. 494-495. Mundadan says that the words used by the synodical decree are too sharp to be taken literally. He seems to suggest that the conflict was only on the 'form of Christianity' and on different forms and customs. It was much more than that. It was about the identity and independence of the Indian church. The Indian church repudiated the juridical claims of the Roman Catholic church.)

This is a very valuable evidence. It shows that the pre-16th century Indian church was fully aware of its identity and independence. It is founded by St. Thomas and they follow the Law of Thomas. For the Indian Christians the church founded by Peter and the Law of Peter are distinct and different from theirs. They have nothing to do with the Roman Church and their bishops do not owe obedience to Roman

bishops. They strongly repudiated the papal claims to universal supremacy as the authority of each bishop is immediately from Christ. They vehemently protested against the interference of the Roman church in their affairs and the attempts of the Roman church to destroy the law of Thomas. The Indian Christians knew the distinction and difference between the Church of St. Thomas and the Church of St. Peter, both ecclesiastically and theologically. The St. Thomas Christians used to stage a drama in their churches telling the story of a fight between St. Peter and St. Thomas where Thomas defeated Peter at the end of the fight.

While the Indian church was aware of and influenced by the theological developments in the East Syrian church, it was not a whole sale acceptance. There were also indigenous theological developments within the Indian church. The Nestorian church wherever it went encouraged the growth of indigenous theology. In the case of China, the Nestorian church there took seriously the Chinese classics. As we said earlier about Adam, a Nestorian missionary in China, that he knew Chinese classics and had studied the writings of Taoist mystics, and he was skilful in choosing illustrations from them. He was able to talk with the Buddhists in terms of their philosophy and was accustomed to borrow from them both background and terms to expound his Christian themes. Not only he endeavoured to make China Christian but also tried to make Christianity, in a worthy sense, 'Chinese'. Buddhists regarded Adam as a dangerous man, not because he was making Christianity too Buddhist but he was trying to make Buddhism too Christian. There existed a Christian literature in Chinese.

In India, the Christian community, from the beginning, was an indigenous community with social and cultural roots in Indian tradition, sharing a social and community life with the Hindus. Anthony Mookenthottam is right when he writes "their identification with their socio-cultural milieu was so thorough ... This oneness with their socio-cultural milieu implies an implicit incarnational theology lived, an awareness that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values." (A. Mookenthottam, "Indian Theological Tendencies", 1978. p. 23 quoted by Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p. 493.)

In the second century. when the Indian Christians invited Pantaneus to preach to the Hindu philosophers and religious leaders, they were aware of their missionary responsibility to Indian culture as a whole. The

Alexandrian theologians, especially Clement and Origen in the second and third centuries, had a positive attitude to Greek culture. Clement, a distinguished student and successor of Pantaneus believed that the idea of God is implanted in all people at creation. There is a spark of nobility in every soul, an upward inclination which is kindled by the divine logos. Philosophy is of divine origin. For Clement, all wisdom is summed up in Christ. All history is one, because all truth is one. "There is one river of truth, but many streams fall into it from this side and that." (*Stromata*. 1:5) Perhaps the Indian church had developed a positive attitude to Indian philosophy and culture through their contacts with Pantaneus and other Alexandrian Christians.

In the Synod of Udayamperoor in AD 1599, the Latin missionaries condemned the Indian Church's opinion that each one can be saved in one's own law and all laws are right and forbade a number of customs and practices to continue in the Indian church because they were pagan (Hindu). In Act III, Decree 4 of the Synod it reads:

Each one can be saved in his own law, all laws are right: This is fully erroneous and a most shameful heresy: There is no law in which we may be saved except the law of Christ our Saviour... [and the footnote says]: This is a perverse dogma of politicians and those tolerant...Consequently being indifferent they wander very far away from the truth". (Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p. 493.)

Commenting on the decisions of the Synod, Mundadan observes, "These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between the Christians and the Hindus. This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision." (*Ibid.*)

The Hindus and the Christians lived as one community for many centuries in South India. They accepted each other and there was co-operation between the two communities not only in social matters but also in religious. This communal harmony was undergirded by a theological perception which the Udayamperoor Synod condemned as heresy. According to Mundadan, the Latin missionaries had no life experience of non-Christian religions and they narrowly interpreted the dictum, "Outside the Church there is no salvation".

It is to be noted that the synod attributes this 'error' to contact with pagans. What is really involved here is the understanding of the doctrine 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus' (outside the Church there is no salvation) by the Portuguese and St. Thomas Christians, respectively. The Portuguese came from the West where a rigid interpretation of the dictum had prevailed for a long time and had become acute in the 16th century in the context of the anti-Protestant Counter Reformation spirit. They sensed danger in the more liberal attitude of the Indian Christians towards Hindus and Hindu religion.... It would be centuries before the Europeans would acquire a life-experience of non-Christian religions, before a theology of the religions of the world would emerge which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had already been living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal. (Mundadan. *op.cit.*, pp. 493-494.)

The Latin church had a very narrow view of the church, and the Latins interpreted Christ and salvation in Christ, in the light of their doctrine of the church; so much so that pope Boniface VIII in the Middle Ages could assert that outside the church there is no salvation nor remission of sins and that submission to the Roman pontiff, for every human being is an utter necessity for salvation. This was the law of Peter which the Latin missionaries tried to propagate in India. It was contrary to the law of Thomas and hence the clash at Udayamperoor Synod. St. Thomas Christians were able to have a positive view of Hinduism not only because of their life-experience of living among the Hindus, but also because of their theology. At the heart of Antiochene theology which influenced the St. Thomas Christians in the pre-sixteenth century period was the emphasis on the full humanity of Jesus Christ. The reality of Jesus' humanity and its kinship with the rest of humankind is of utmost importance in their theology. Contrary to the Augustinian teaching on original sin, and human nature, they emphasized human freedom and the responsibilities and obligations of Christian faith. They did not locate sin in human nature and thus preserved human freedom and a certain degree of self-reliance. It is possible for such a theology to develop a positive attitude to other religions and cultures. An emphasis on the full

humanity of Jesus Christ, an appreciation of human freedom and responsibility, a positive attitude to other religions and cultures and a strong affirmation of the independence and freedom of the Indian church were some of the salient features of the Indian Christian theology and ecclesiology in the early period. This is what the Latin missionaries found to be heretical and what the present day historians of Indian Christian theology failed to notice.

Christianity in India at the End of the Fifteenth Century

Christianity which came to India with the apostolic activity of St. Thomas had established contacts with the churches in Alexandria and Persia. When Pantaneus from Alexandria came to India by about AD 180, he found a *Gospel of the Nazarenes* with the Christians there, brought to them by St. Bartholomew. The Indian church entered into an ecclesiastical relationship with the church in Basra probably by the beginning of the fourth century. There were at least two immigrations of Persian Christians to India, one in the fourth and the other in the ninth century which influenced the liturgical and religious life of the Christians.

The Indian Christians were socially and culturally very much integrated into the wider Hindu community; and they kept on many of the Hindu social customs and practices. From the grants given by the local rulers to the immigrant Christians, we can infer that the Christians in South India had a position of privilege in Indian society.

The St. Thomas Christians were engaged in missionary work both inside and outside the country and there were communities of Christians scattered throughout the country.

We have very little information about the state of affairs of Christians from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. From the thirteenth century onwards, there were European travelers -- especially Marco Polo and a number of Roman Catholic missionaries -- who visited India and wrote of their visits. One thing which came to be known from the writings of these medieval travelers is that there was a considerable Nestorian dispersion all over India in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The rise of Muslim political power in north India seems to have been the beginning of the decline of Christianity in the north. The Christians suffered several disadvantages under the Muslim rule and many of them

were converted to Islam.

The medieval Roman Catholic travelers in India were a source of tension within the Indian Christian community and some of them tried to latinize the St. Thomas Christians. It was only the beginning of what was to come later under the Portuguese Padroado.

The majority of the St. Thomas Christians were in South India. The Christians in the south were living in the territory of Hindu rulers and were not very much affected by the rise of Muslim political power in the north. From the Syriac sources mentioned by Mingana, we learn that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Indian church did not have enough bishops and priests for the spiritual ministrations in the church. We do not know the reason for the development of such situations. In AD 1490, a deputation of two Indian Christians, George and Joseph, came to the Patriarch of the East asking him to send bishops to India, which had been without bishops for a long time." (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p. 469.) The Patriarch ordained George and Joseph as priests and consecrated two monks from the monastery of St. Eugenius as bishops and sent them to India. In AD 1503, Patriarch Elias consecrated three more bishops -- Mar Yahb Alaha, Mar Jacob and Mar Dinha, -- for India.

All Christians of this side were greatly pleased with us. ... There are here about thirty thousand families of Christians, our co-religionists, and they implore the Lord to grant thee a long life. They have begun to build churches, and are prosperous in every respect, and living in peace and security As to the monastery of the St. Thomas the Apostle, some Christian men have gone into it, and are now busy restoring it. ... The countries of India are very numerous and powerful, and their distance is about six months journey. Each country has a special name by which it is known, and our country in which Christians are found is called Malabar. It has about twenty towns out of which three are renowned and powerful: Karangol, Pallur and Kullam, with others which are near them. They contain Christians and churches, and are in the vicinity of the large and powerful city of Calicut, the inhabitants of which are idol-worshipping pagans. (Mingana, *op.cit.*, pp. 470-71.)

As to the general state of St. Thomas Christians at the close of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century as the Portuguese found it, we have the following description.

The authority of the Syrian bishop extends to all temporal and spiritual matters. They are natural judges of all civil and ecclesiastical cases within their diocese. The pagan princes and judges have no concern with them, excepting only in criminal cases. ... Men walk armed, some with fuses of which they know perfectly the use, others with spears; but the greatest numbers carry only a naked sword in the right hand and a shield in the left. They are carefully instructed in the use of arms from their eighth to their twenty-fifth years, and are excellent hunters and warriors. The more Christians a pagan prince has in his dominion, the more he is feared and esteemed. It is on this account as well as on that of their fidelity and strict attachment to truth in everything, that the princes cherish and countenance them so much. They are second in rank only to Brahmins. The Christians, pursuant to the laws of the country, are the protectors of silversmiths, brassfounders, carpenters and smiths. The pagans who cultivate the palm trees form a militia under the Christians. If a pagan of any of these classes should receive an insult, he has immediate recourse to the Christians, who procure a suitable satisfaction. The Christians depend directly on the prince or his minister and not on the provincial governors. If anything is demanded from them contrary to their privileges, the whole unite immediately for general defense. If a pagan strikes one of the Christians, he is put to death on the spot or forced himself to bear to the church of the place an offering of a gold or silver hand according to the quality of the person affronted. In order to preserve their nobility, the Christians never touch a person of inferior caste, not even a Nair. They are authorized to ride and travel on elephants. They sit in the presence of the king and his ministers, even on the same carpet -- a privilege granted to ambassadors only. The king of Paroor having wished during the last century to extend this privilege to the Nairs, the Christians declared war against him and obliged him to restore affairs to their former state. (C. B. Firth

comments that this is a remarkable picture quoted from E. M. Philip, *The Indian Church of St. Thomas*,. Nagercoil, L.M.S. Press, 1950, pp 421-23, by C. B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 47.)

C.B. Firth comments that this is a remarkable picture of a strong and well organized community, commanding respect among its Hindu neighbours, managing its own affairs and able to assert its rights.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

T. V. Philip, born in India and a lay member of the Mar Thoma Church, has worked and taught in India, Europe, USA and Australia. He is a church historian, and a former Professor at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by CSS & ISPCK, India, 1998. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

Chapter 8: Christianity In Other Places In Asia

Christian history in Asia has not only been neglected or ignored but also distorted for a long time. This is specially so with regard to the beginnings of Christianity in South East and East Asia (except China). For the majority of the western historians, the beginnings of Christianity in this area belong to a period after AD 1500; it was the result of the work of the Roman Catholic missionaries since the sixteenth century and of the Protestant missionaries from Europe and America since the nineteenth century. For them the history of the churches in Asia belongs to the history of the western missionary movement and is not an independent story of their own. K.S. Latourette, the well known American historian of the missionary movement says that it was the European expansion of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which carried Christianity to the various states and regions of south-eastern Asia -- Burma, Malay Peninsula, Siam and parts of what are known collectively as Indo-China. According to him, the first missionaries in Burma were Franciscans who reached Pegu in the fifteen fifties. In Siam, Roman Catholicism was the only form of Christianity which attempted missions before the nineteenth century. Christianity came to the Malay Peninsula after the Portuguese conquered Malacca in AD 1511. In AD 1615, Jesuits, driven out from Japan by a persecution, established a mission in Cohin China which met with considerable success. The Portuguese landed in Japan in AD 1542 and the Christian mission there began with the arrival of Francis Xavier in AD 1549.

Spain conquered the Philippine islands in the third quarters of the sixteenth century and in AD 1570 efforts were made for the conversion of the islands. With regard to Tibet and Korea, Latourette says that though European missionaries penetrated Tibet in the sixteenth century, Christianity gained only slight footholds in Korea and Tibet before AD 1800. (K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, vol. 3, pp. 293-335.)

However, contrary to what has been said by western historians, there is evidence to show that Christianity found its way into South East and East Asian countries even before the coming of western missionaries, through the efforts of Nestorian merchants and missionaries from Persia or India or China or from all the three places. After speaking of many technical and critical problems involved in the study of Asian history, John England writes:

Taking account of these and similar issues, and drawing upon the range of evidence now available to us, it is possible to outline the presence of Christian communities from Syria in the west to Japan in the north-east and as far as Java in the south-east by the first half of the eighth century. (John England., *op.cit.*, p. 133.)

John England mentions some of the places in Asia where inscriptions, crosses, frescoes, paintings and manuscripts and other such evidence of Christian history are found.

By the sixth century, we have crosses and inscriptions from Sri Lanka and Turkestan (where some early manuscripts were also found); and by the eighth century, Sian-fu-stele, documents from Gobi sites, inscriptions from central Japan and Russian Turkestan (which has frescoes and church remains also), along with large bodies of the writing of the golden age of Syriac literature from west Asia. With local writings, these have been found across the region, especially in South India and West China. In the next three centuries would be added the large collections of crosses and tombstones from Kirghizstan (ninth to fourteenth centuries), others from central and north China; relics in Burma and Malaya; crosses, inscriptions and documents in Tibet and South China; along with contemporary manuscript evidence for

Christian activity in Syria, Iran, Turkestan, Indo-China, Sumatra, and China (north and south). (*Ibid.*)

According to him the above evidence has been assembled by scholars and travelers over many centuries and subjected to careful study especially since the work of Assemani in the eighteenth century. Much of the new evidence now available are in the work of Syriac and Arabic scholars, specialists in medieval church history or of historians studying the early trade routes linking west Asia and east Asia by land or sea. (*Ibid.*, pp. 133-134)

Historians differ as to the extent of Christianity in Asia before the sixteenth century According to S.H. Moffett, the references to early Christianity in South East Asia -Burma, Thailand, the kingdoms of Cambodia\Vietnam Peninsula, Java and the Philippines -are very difficult to verify historically. He says that some of the references are due to misunderstandings on the part of the European travelers in Asia or questionable claims made by them of seeing Christians in Asia. It is possible that some travelers might have misunderstood the situation or made questionable claims and we need to examine the evidence carefully. But it does not mean that all the evidence with regard to an early spread of Christianity in Asia cannot be trusted. There are a number of writers including Mingana who acknowledge that Christianity was widespread in Asia before AD 1500. According to John England, "There is now some agreement that amongst the episcopal and metropolitan sees recorded for the churches of the East from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries, those for India and China include in their jurisdiction a number of South East Asian episcopates. Some manuscript evidence in early chronicles and correspondence confirms this for such places as Ceylon, Malaya, Indo-China and Indonesia." (*Ibid.*, p. 145.) One of the earliest accounts of the Christian communities in South east Asia comes from Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century. He speaks of Christian communities in Socotora, India, Ceylon, Pegu (Burma), Cochin-China (southern Vietnam), Siam and Tonquin (northern Vietnam). (*Ibid.*, p. 145.)

With regard to Ceylon, the testimony of Cosmas is very clear that there were Christians on the island in the sixth century. About Ceylon (Taprobane) he writes:

This is a large oceanic island lying in the Indian sea. By the Indians it is called Sieledibe, but by the Greeks

Taprobane, and there in found the hyacinth stone. It lies on the other side of the pepper country. It is a great mart for the people in those parts. The island has also a Church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a Presbyter who is appointed from Persia, and a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual. But the natives and the kings are heathens. In this island they have many temples. The island, as it is, in central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia, and it likewise sends out many of its own. (Cosmas. *op.cit.*, p. 365.)

In another passage, Cosmas says, "Even in Taprobane, an island in Further India, where the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians, with clergy and a body of believers, but I know not whether there be any Christians in the parts beyond it." (*Ibid.*, p. 118)

From the above observations of Cosmas it is often assumed that in Ceylon in the sixth century there were only Persian Christians who settled there and there were no indigenous Christians. We need to remember that Cosmas was a Persian and a Nestorian and it is understandable if his main interest was in the Persian Christian communities in places which he mentioned in his book. Moreover, he did not personally visit all the places he mentions and did not claim to have made a complete survey of Christianity in those places. Is this not what he meant when he wrote, "I do not know whether there be any Christians in the parts beyond it." We do not know when Christianity came to Ceylon, probably earlier than the sixth century as there were Christian communities in South India from the first century onwards. It is also probable that there were indigenous Christians in Ceylon (other than the Persian Christians who settled there) from the beginnings of Christianity in Ceylon. Just as it happened in South India the East Syrian influence might have been felt in Ceylon through Persian merchants and missionaries, and/or perhaps through the St. Thomas Christians in South India at least from the fifth century onwards. A series of stone inscriptions and coins record the 'presence of foreign Christian high officers at the service of Sinhala kings' from AD 473 to 508, and the conversion of one of these kings." (*Ibid.*, p. 118) Nestorian crosses have been found in several places such as Anuradhapura, the capital of the north-central kingdom between the second and the tenth centuries, in Kotte (east Colombo) and Gintumpitya (St. Thomas town, Colombo). The crosses found at Anuradhapura are very similar in style to those in

Persia (7th century), China at Sian-fu-stele (8th century) and to those in Tibet and Armenia. (John England. *op.cit.*, p. 146.)

Pegu in Burma was a trading centre on Arab trade routes until the fifteenth century and according to Cosmas there were Christians there in the sixth century. Marco Polo in AD 1278 found Nestorian Christians in the Chinese province of Yun-an which borders on Burma. According to Marco Polo, Burma was temporarily conquered by Kublai Khan in AD 1277 and 1283. It is difficult to know whether any Christian missionaries came to Burma from China at this time and any Christian influence was felt. Marco Polo tells the story of Ludovico di Varthema, a Bolognese, who traveled in South East Asia in AD 1503 or 1504 and tells of meeting in Bengal (India) Nestorian merchants from Siam. The latter conducted him to Pegu in Burma where they saw some hundreds of Christians in the king's service. (Henry Yule (tr.) and edited by H. Cordier, *Cathy and the Way Thither*, vol. x referred to by S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 146.) Accepting the truth of the story, John England adds, "We know from other sources that there were west Asians in Tenasserim from as early as the fourth century, in Champa and Tonking in the eleventh century and in Siam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the evidence points to Christians being among them." (John England., *op.cit.*, 146.) S.H. Moffett thinks that the claim made by Varthema is questionable. "He may well have mistaken chanting Buddhists for Nestorians," he writes. "But if, as he says, he was travelling in the company of Nestorian merchants, surely they should have known the difference between Nestorians and Buddhists." (S.H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 461.)

Early presence of Christians in Tibet is well attested. Towards the end of the eighth century the Nestorian patriarch Mar Timothy I (AD 779-823) in his letter to the monks of Mar Maron concerning the addition of the formula Crucifixus es pro nobis [Crucified for us] to the trisagion wrote, "And also in the countries of Babylon, of Persia, and Assyria, and in all the Countries of the sun rise, that is to say, -- among the Indians, the Chinese, the Tibetans, the Turks, and in all the provinces under the jurisdiction of this patriarchal see, there is no addition of Crucifixus es pronobis." (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p. 466.) In another of his letters, Timothy mentioned that he was about to consecrate a metropolitan for Tibet. (Lawrence Browne, *op.cit.*, p.95.)

According to Aziz S. Atiya, one relic of Nestorianism in Tibet is the survival of its ritual in a debased form in the Lamaism of Tibet. The

striking resemblances with Lamaist Monasticism, the use of holy water, incense and vestments of a similar character to Nestorian practices, must be traced to the days of the Nestorian missionary in the high middle ages. (Aziz S. Atiya, *A history of Eastern Christianity*, London, Methuen & Co. 1968, p. 263.)

Cosmas mentions the presence of Christians in Siam in the sixth century. About Siam Moffett writes

His [Varthema's] traveling companions, the Nestorian merchants, were from the capital of Siam (Sornau), he says. Two northern Thai kingdoms, Changmai and Sukhotai, had become dependencies of the Mongol empire in 1294. About 1350 a powerful new kingdom was founded further south at Ahudaya just north of present day Bangkok. It welcomed traders from China and Persia, some of them perhaps Nestorian, like those whom Varthema met a hundred and fifty years later. But there is no record of Christian churches there. (S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 461.)

The traders from Persia, China and India were very active in South East Asia during this period and we cannot rule out the possibilities of some Christians present among them. Moffett asks: Were there Christians in Sumatra or Java before the coming of the Western explorers? "That is even more doubtful, but not impossible," he says.

The island was briefly subdued by Kublai's naval forces in 1293, but there is no mention of Nestorians there in any account of the venture. The only reference to a possible Christian community that early in Indonesia is a tantalizing remark by John Marignolli, who says that on his way home from China, after he had stopped in India to see St. Thomas's tomb near Madras, he sailed in 1349 to a great island called Sabah, "where there were few Christians." A number of writers identify this with Java, as does H. Yule, but only after giving up hope of a better situation 'in something like despair,' for there is still no convincing evidence available for anything but a guess. (S. H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 461. Yle, *op.cit.*, 3:191-196.)

In the case of Indonesia, though Kublai's naval forces landed in

Indonesia in AD 1293 for a brief period, we need to look for Christian influence much earlier through Persian and Indian merchants and missionaries.

From the beginning of the Christian era, there were commercial and cultural contacts between Indonesian islands and India. The Sailendra kingdom of Central Java which rose to power in the eighth century is very famous in Indonesian history. They were a great naval power. The Sailendras brought a great part of the Malay Archipelago under one central authority. Their empire extended as far as Champa and Kambuja.

The Sailendra period is one of the most important eras in the history of Southeast Asia. Buddhist art, inspired by the Mahayanism and Tantrism of the Palas, reached a new peak. Indonesian civilization during the Sailendra period became a model for Southeast Asian countries. The Sailendras introduced a new kind of script, Devanagari, from northern India. built world famous monuments such as Lara Jonggrang and Borobudur, and gave Malaysia a new name, Kalinga. Whilst Mahayana Buddhism had its votaries at the court and amongst the governing classes, Saivism was prevalent amongst the common people. Whilst Borobudur represents the peak of Buddhist art in Indonesia, the temple of Lara Jonggrang at Prambanan is Saiva. (DR Singhal, *India and World Civilization*. Michigan State University Press, 1969, vol. II, p.142.)

Trade and cultural influences between India and Indonesia and between other countries in Southeast Asia were at their peak during the Sailendra period (8th-11th). The Sailendrans maintained good relations with the Chola rulers of South India. Perhaps it was to this period we should look for the beginnings of Christianity in Indonesia. In this context, the observations made by John England are important.

Sources so far available suggest that the churches of Sumatra and Java, like those of Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Malay Peninsula at that time grew from the work and witness of residential foreign traders -Persian, Arab, and Indian -- sometimes assisted at times by visiting missionaries but often having their own clergy. They were often closely associated with, and always dependent upon the favour of the rulers of each territory, yet maintained at

least occasional correspondence with the Patriarch at Selucia-ctsiphon" (John England, *op.cit.*, p. 147.)

There is nothing improbable about John of Marignolli visiting Java in the 14th century on his way from China and finding Christians there. (Most probably Marignolli visited Java on his way to India from China rather than after his visit to India.) Abu Saliah, a Persian traveler in the seventh century mentions in his book, *Descriptions of Chronicles and Monasteries of Egypt and some neighbouring countries*, that he found several churches at Fansur, which some writers identify with Barns in West Sumatra. (John England, *op.cit.*, p.147.) It is very doubtful whether this identification is correct. In an important Syriac document it is mentioned that Mar Elijah, the Catholicos and Patriarch of the East Syrian church, at the request of a delegation from the church in India, ordained three monks from the monastery of St. Eugenius as bishops in AD 1503 and " he sent them to the country of India, to the islands of the sea which are inside Java, and to China." (Mingana, *op.cit.*, p.469. In the original document the name is Dabag which Mingana and several others read as Java.)

Early Roman Catholics in the Philippines found old images that might have been Christian images of the pre-Catholic period. Some have argued that an earlier Nestorian presence must have been the reason for the rapid growth and widespread acceptance of Roman Catholic Christianity that followed it. But it is very difficult to verify historically these claims. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 461.)

There are several historians, the chief among them being P.Y. Saeki, who claim that Christianity first came to Japan and Korea from China during the T'ang period. According to Saeki the Nestorians had no small share in the creation of the golden age of China and through China these same western influences passed on to Japan. "Whether the Nestorians were heterodox or orthodox it is certain that their ethical and practical theology and their medical knowledge were the true sources of their success in China." He argues that the Japanese were consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, much influenced by the Nestorians and received Christian thought in Chinese garb during T'ang period. There was scarcely anything good in Hsi-an-fu, the great T'ang capital, that was not introduced into Japan or copied sooner or later by the Japanese at their capital at Nara. It was not until the invasion of Japan by Kublai Khan (AD 1268-1281) that Japan began to assert her spiritual and material independence. (P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*,

S.R.C.K. 1916, pp. 112 tt.) John England seems to suggest that Christianity came to Japan by the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century. "Regarding Japan," he writes, "the Seventeen Articles of injunction of the Regent Prince Shotoku (574-622) apparently include a grant to Nestorians of" full liberty and personal rights." Festivals which have persisted over the centuries are also cited for their Christian references, and incised crosses and tombs have been found in north west Japan from the Nara or early Heian periods (seventh to eleventh centuries).

There are others who reject the Christian presence in Japan before the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Richard H. Drummond begins his *History of Christianity in Japan* with the arrival of Francis Xavier. S.H. Moffett dismisses the arguments of Soeki and others as pure speculation. He writes

In recent years, some have revived apocryphal stories of even less credible and mysterious traces of Nestorianism in Japan. One such story declares that after his resurrection Jesus was seen in Japan. ... Another tells of the coming of the Nestorian physician and some missionaries to Japan during the reign of Emperor Shomu (724-728) and of apparently Syriac inscription found on the beams of the ancient Horyuji temple, the oldest Buddhist temple in Japan, near seventh-century Nara. The whole city of Nara was built after the model of the T'ang dynasty capital, Chang'an. Since there were Nestorian missionaries in Chang'an in that period, a possible connection has been conjectured. But all this is pure speculation. (S. H. Moffett. *op.cit.*, p. 460.)

Though the evidence suggested by Soeki and others for the Christian presence in Japan before the coming of the western missionaries are fragmentary and in several cases not convincing, the possibility of the Christian influence in Japan through China needs to be seriously considered. The same could also be true of Korea.

With regard to Korea also, there are differences of opinion among the historians as to the time when Christianity came to Korea. Yoon Tae, John England and others find evidences in Korean Chronicles for the presence of Nestorian Christianity during the Silla and Koryo dynasties. "This is not unexpected in the light of the known presence of Koreans in the T'ang capital -- Chang'an in the seventh to the ninth centuries." (John England, *op.cit.*, p. 148.) Here again Moffett is more cautious.

As for Korea, the evidence of at least one possible ancient Nestorian community at its northern border is more convincing, but as in the case of Indonesia, it depends on a question of location. In 1927 a Japanese team excavated an old tomb near Anshan in what is now southern Manchuria about a hundred miles from the present Korean border, on the railroad line up the Liaotung Peninsula to Shenyang (Mukden). They found the remains of seven bodies and at the head of each a clay cross, only one of which was in perfect condition. They were able to date the grave at between 998 and 1006 by Chinese coins of the Sung dynasty left with the bodies. As Soeki points out this is striking evidence of the existence of a strong Nestorian family in the Liaoyang area.

The question remains, was Anshan in Korea or Manchuria at the beginning of the tenth century? In the seventh century the Liaotung Peninsula was Korean But by about 1000, the apparent date of the burial, the Korean border had been pushed south to the Yalu, and a Manchurian tribe, the Liao (or Chitan Liao), had taken that part of the north east from the Chinese Sung emperor. All we can say with certainty, therefore, is that as early as 1000 there were Nestorian Christians in what had not long before been Korean territory. (S. N. Moffett, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-162.)

In the Korean territory at Kyungju, the ancient capital of unified Korea, the historian Kim Yang -Sun discovered what appears to be a stone cross being used by Buddhist monks at Pusoksa, Korea's most famous temple, as a charm to aid in child birth. It is now kept in the Christian museum of Soomgsil university in Seoul. Moffett says that there is no way to date it or even to determine whether it is indeed an ancient Christian cross. (*Ibid.*) It is possible that Christianity existed in Korea at least from the tenth century.

The evidence for South East and East Asia are very scanty and fragmentary and some have drawn questionable conclusions from it. But there are sufficient evidences to show that Christianity was present in a number of countries in South East and East Asia. There is no doubt about Christian presence in Ceylon, Burma, Tibet, Indonesia and Korea before the arrival of the western missionaries. We do not know the

number of Christians in these various countries, it was probably very small. Assemani says that in the 13th century, there were twenty-five Nestorian metropolitan provinces with an average of eight to ten episcopal sees for each province, thus totally about 200 to 250 bishoprics. (Assemani, *Bibl. Orient.* III, 2, p.630.) Some of these bishoprics were in South East and East Asia.

The coincidence of the opening of trade routes into further Asia with the ascendancy of the Nestorian church offered a ready outlet for missionary effort. The Nestorians, who were strongly influenced by missionary motivation seized this opportunity. In Marco Polo's day, the trade routes from Baghdad to Peking were lined with Nestorian churches; the Muslim persecutions of AD 699 and 813 did not check the zeal of these earliest missionaries. The mission was carried out by Persian, Indian and Chinese missionaries and traders. Before the arrival of western powers, the commercial and cultural influences of China and India were very widespread in other Asian countries. While Korea, Japan, Philippines and Vietnam remained under the Chinese influence, Laos, Cambodia, Siam, Burma, Malayasia and Indonesia came within the Indian sphere. China and India met in Indo-China. By far, South India exercised the greatest influence in South East Asia. For centuries, St. Thomas Christians carried out missionary work both inside and outside India. E. R. Hambye speaks of Christian monks from India going to the Far East, if not to China and Central Asia, for missionary work.

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East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia by T.V. Philip

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Chapter 9: In the Shadows of History

By AD 1500, the story of Asian Christianity, after a millennium and a half of heroic efforts and phenomenal expansion almost came to an end in several countries; so much so, the historians speak of the eclipse of Christianity in Asia. (See L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity*, 1967.) "Like a sun in eclipse, Christianity in Asia moved so abruptly, yet so imperceptibly, from its peak of expansion down into the shadows of history, that it is difficult to pin point any precise moment at which progress turned into decline. (S.H. Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 471.) According to Moffett the definitive turning point was AD 1294 in East Asia and AD 1295 in West Asia. "In the space of one year the emperor Kublai Khan, protector of the church in China died, and in Persia the Ilkhan Ghazan announced his conversion to Islam. ... In the next one hundred years the religious tolerance of Mongol imperial rule gave way to a new destructive wave of widespread Mongolian ferocities fueled by conquering Muslim zeal, and the shattered remnants of Asian Christianity were left isolated in ever smaller pockets of desperation. (*Ibid.*) The decline of Christianity in Asia was not an isolated event which happened all of a sudden. The grounds were being prepared for it and the reasons were complex.

Various historians have suggested various reasons for the 'eclipse of Christianity' in Asia. According to K.S. Latourette the invaders who emerged from Central Asia in successive waves became Moslems rather than Christians, the break up of the Mongol Empire which showed religious tolerance, the religious persecution under Timur or Tamerlane

(1336-1405), the rise of Ottoman Turks, and the condition in western Europe were some of them. "Beset by an advancing Islam in the East, having lost the larger proportion of its wide-flung communities in Asia, and suffering from corruption and indifference in the church which represented it in the west, in AD 1500 Christianity did not seem to face a promising future. The coming centuries might well have appeared to belong to Islam. (K. S. Latourette, *op.cit.*, vol. 2., pp. 341-342.)

Moffett suggests eight reasons: Geographical isolation, chronic numerical weakness, persecution, the encounter with formidable Asian religions, ethnic introversion, dependence upon the state, the church's own internal divisions, and the theological factor. (Moffett. *op.cit.*, p. 503 ff.) The reasons suggested by Moffett are of varying importance. While some reasons such as geographical isolation, numerical weakness and persecution were important reasons, some others were of less importance. The disappearance of St. Thomas Christian communities in North India in the face of Muslim or Roman Catholic pressures were to some extent due to their numerical smallness and geographical isolation from one another.

It is true that Asian religions created strong social, intellectual and religious barriers against conversion to Christianity. In fact, with the exception of Japan, the majority of the Christians in Asia have come from among the tribal or depressed classes in Asian society. Christianity was not able to make any serious inroad into Hinduism or Buddhism or Confucianism. It is also true that some of the Asian religions, at times, for example, Zoroastrianism in Persia, were instrumental in the persecution of Christians. But these religions on the whole were tolerant of Christianity and were not the main obstacle for the survival of Christianity. Only when Christianity sided with the foreign political powers Asian religions became hostile.

Moffett points out that Asia never produced a Constantine. Then he asks: Was that the pivotal difference between Asian and European history? It never emerged from politically dependent minority status under absolute non-Christian monarchies. In Asia, Christianity never won more than a temporary touch of imperial favour. "Instead, for most of their first fifteen hundred years the Asian churches were compelled to rely on the fitful tolerance of non-Christian rulers whose power of life or death over their subjects was unlimited. Dependence upon political power is always perilous to religious integrity and it is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Western church history. But in Asia, where dependence

was extreme, the damage was extreme." (*Ibid.*, pp. 505-506.)

It is true that one of the serious reasons for the decline of Christianity in Asia was the religious minority status of the Christians under non-Christian rulers. The *melet* system of the Sassanids and the socially harassed and separated ghettos (*dhimmas*) of the Muslim caliphates were a serious threat to the survival of Christianity. But does the answer to the problem lie in creating a Christian state under 'Constantine'? In Europe, Christianity depended upon the political power both for its expansion and protection. In the sixteenth century, when the Roman Catholic missionaries came to Asia, they tried very hard to convert the political rulers first, though they did not succeed.

Moffett further states that in the opinion of some western scholars, another reason for the weakness and final disappearance of Asian Christianity was the inferior intellectual character of its theologians. Asians did not produce theologians of the stature of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian or Augustine.

History does not prove that under Christian rulers, Christians will not be persecuted, or a Christian state will guarantee the presence of Christianity. History also does not show that the intellectual quality of its theologians will guarantee the survival of Christianity. The history of the Church in North Africa illustrates these points.

North Africa, before the eighth century, was part of the Roman empire, guarded and guided by Christian emperors since the beginning of the fourth century. There was an alliance between Church and State, and Church and Latin culture. In the fourth century, under Christian emperors, the position which the Catholic church occupied in society was enviable. The church gained numerous benefits from the state and the church in turn supported the state. Yet, during the Donatist controversy, the Christian emperors persecuted the Donatist Christians. The persecuted Christians were forced to ask: What has the emperor to do with the church?

North Africa was one of the territories under the Roman Empire where Christianity took its deepest roots in the third and the fourth centuries. It was a province of the Roman Empire and was ruled by Christian emperors. The church in North Africa was the church of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine. Their works embody the teachings and traditions of the western church. Tertullian was an original theologian

and a prolific writer. He was the first church father to inaugurate writing in Latin. "Though never canonized, he must be regarded as one of the most illustrious ante-Nicene Fathers of the church. Subsequent generations continued to build on his illuminating trinitarianism and Christology after his death about AD 220. (Aziz. S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, p. 430.) Cyprian followed the foot steps of Tertullian. His writings on the church and its unity influenced the development of western ecclesiology. For him, the church is the indispensable ark of salvation and there is no salvation outside the church. The church is a single whole and its unity is expressed through the authority of the bishops. African Christianity reached its peak in the emergence of Augustine of Hippo (340-430). His life and work became one of the greatest landmarks in the development of western theology. It is often said that the reading of Augustine belongs to the discovery of western intellectual and spiritual ancestry. It was he who in the fourth century gave western civilization the formative ideas which guided it for centuries. Again it has been said that just as western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, western theology is a series of foot notes to Augustine. In the medieval period Anselm and Thomas Aquinas acknowledged their dependence on Augustine. In the period of the Protestant Reformation Luther and Calvin reaffirmed Augustinian conceptions of God and human nature and the utter dependence of human beings on the Grace of God.

North Africa had a long history of Christian tradition and had Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine as their theological fathers. It was a church protected and supported by Christian emperors in a Christian state. In spite of all these, from the eighth century, North Africa has been lost to Latinity and Christendom alike. All efforts to win back from the Muslims, either by crusades or by missionary efforts, have been unsuccessful. It is true that the Asians have not produced a Constantine nor an Augustine. But the very church of Constantine and Augustine in North Africa could not survive the Muslim invasion.

The reasons, for the decline of Christianity in Asia, are very complex and it varies from country to country. Among a number of interrelated causes, we mention four which had immediate bearings on the decline of Christianity in Asia by the end of the fifteenth century; -- the political situation under which the churches in Asia found themselves; the foreignness of the church; the decline in spiritual life in the church; and the Latinizing activities of the Roman Catholic missionaries.

Political Situation: Christianity Under Islam

Christianity in Asia had a different history from that in Europe. In Europe once Christianity became the state religion, paganism lost its secular support and the tendency was for people to become adherents of Christianity. In the Justinian code, compiled a century before the time of Prophet Mohammad, it was enacted that the heathens were to be baptized if they wanted to enjoy the common rights of citizens. It is said that the law was so administered that seventy thousand people were added to the church in Asia Minor. In Asia, the course of Christianity had been completely different. Christianity never enjoyed the status of a state religion. It was always a minority community living under the various disabilities and often isolated from one another by vast distances. From time to time it was persecuted.

In the third century, when the Sassanians came to power, Zoroastrianism became the official religion of the Persian empire and this led, from time to time, to the persecution of minorities including Christians. The violent persecution under Sapor II lasted for forty years. There were also periodic persecutions in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Christians in the Persian empire were organized as a separate minority community called *melet* within the larger community as a state within a state. In the *melet* system Christians were allowed to manage their own affairs, subject to the laws of the state. But they had no political power outside their community. They were subjected to special taxation such as land tax and poll tax. Yet Christianity survived these disabilities and persecution under the Persian rule and made considerable progress. But the advent of the Arabs opened a new chapter in the history of Persian Christians.

The long and indecisive war between Rome and Persia weakened both empires and prepared the way for the relatively easy Arab conquest and the expansion of Islam. The Muslim invaders seized Seleucia-Ctesiphon in AD 637 and subsequently the whole empire succumbed to their armies. By AD 652 the Arabs became the sole rulers of Persia. Their empire extended from the shores of the Mediterranean and Red seas to Oxus and the Indus, and from the Indian Ocean to the Caucasus and the Caspian. The empire is usually described as Caliphate. The first four Caliphs, the immediate successors of Mohammed are known as Perfect or Orthodox Caliphs (632-661). They were followed by thirteen Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty (661-749) with their capital at Damascus. After that, there were thirty seven Caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258)

and their capital was at Baghdad (the city of peace) on the bank of the river Tigris.

The Arab conquest of Persia brought about great upheaval in the empire but it did not adversely affect the Christians much; they were not persecuted or massacred. In fact, there is evidence to show that the Christians welcomed the Arabs as liberators from Zoroastrian oppression. This does not mean that the Christians had no political disputes under the Muslim rule. But the Christians under Islamic protection were far more better off than they had been under the Byzantine or Persian rule. No attempt was made in the early decades of Islam to convert Christians to Islam. The Arabs levied a land tax and a poll tax in the same way as the Persians. On the other hand, the Christians as a whole seemed to enjoy more favour with the Muslims than other conquered communities. They shared with the Jews and Zoroastrians as *dhimmi*s or protected subjects. But the Christians were treated more favorably as they were the people of the Book. It is said that Mohammed himself had given certain privileges to the Nestorians which the Caliphs affirmed.

The Arabs were very appreciative of the intellectual attainments of the Christians and used them in the administration of the empire. Christians furnished the state with accountants and clerks; physicians, teachers and interpreters. The great teachers of the early Abbasid period were Nestorians. The great Academy of learning called the House of Wisdom founded in AD 830 was staffed essentially by the Nestorians. Scholars who mastered Syriac, Greek and Arabic, and who were commissioned to translate the scientific and philosophical works of Greece were Nestorian Christians. During the first three centuries of Arab rule, the Nestorian church was at the peak of its growth and expansion.

The favored position of the Christians began to decline by the end of the seventh century. *Melet* or *dhimmi* was a system that separated minority religious groups from the social, political and military mainstream of the empire's life. As the Arabs consolidated their control over conquered people and as the number of Muslims increased, the disabilities under *dhimmi* began to increase. Non-Muslims paid special taxes, and as time went on, the taxes grew heavier, the social discrimination became more oppressive, and a system of Christian disabilities developed in the official and legal circles. *The Covenant of Omar* describes the disabilities as it developed in the ninth century. A *dhimmi* was bound by the contract of his position to revere the Muslim's Holy scripture,

refrain from uttering a falsehood against the Prophet Mohammed, and never to speak against Islam. Furthermore, he was forbidden to approach a Muslim woman for marriage or illicit intent; to try to apostate a Muslim or harm his property or person, and to assist an enemy of Islam or harbor a spy. All these obligations were to be kept. There were others which were commendable and included the use of a distinctive dress, prohibition from erecting buildings higher than those of the Muslims, from using church bells, from drinking wine and displaying a cross or a pig in public, from pomp and lamentation in burial offices, and from horse riding. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, pp. 269-272.)

By the middle of the eighth century the Christian communities and their leaders had come to recognize that the official Muslim toleration which had seemed so attractive a century earlier was in fact a rigid prison from which there is no escape other than apostasy or flight. The *dhimmi* system, while allowing the Christians to keep their religion, churches and property, and live according to the common law of their religion, condemned them, in effect, to a slow but almost inevitable decline and death. They were not allowed to build new churches. As the succeeding Caliphs became less tolerant, many of the old churches were converted to mosques, the most famous example being the conversion of the Basilica of St. John the Baptist in Damascus into a mosque. (Robert Benton Bretts, *Christians in the Arab East*, London, SPCK, 1972 pp. 7-10.) The Christians were prevented from seeking new members from even among non-Muslims, and apostasy from Islam was punishable by death. Tax pressures became more and more severe on the Christians. Such social, economic, political and religious disabilities made conversion to Islam very attractive. When the newly converted non-Arabs were allowed to enlist in the army and therefore become eligible for pension and support, it was an added attraction for the Christians to become Muslims. Christians and Jews were further crippled in any defence of themselves before the law by a Muslim judicial ruling that their testimony could not be received in the court against the Muslims since the Koran says that the Christians had corrupted their scripture and are therefore unworthy. In such circumstances of discrimination and disabilities, ordinary Christians found it expedient to convert to Islam. It was through pressures, not necessarily by active persecution, Islam mainly found converts among the Christians in the days of the Caliphate. A large number of Nestorian Christians in Persia, Arabia, Central Asia and North India turned Muslims. The smallness of the Christian groups in many places, and their geographical isolation from

one another helped the process of conversion to Islam. However, persecution also played a major role in later centuries.

From the middle of the ninth century the Caliphate began to decline and several countries which were under Caliphate rule became independent. The weakening of the Caliphate rule helped the rise to power of the Seljuk Turks, who were also Muslims, in the tenth century. They took Baghdad in AD 1050. Though they recognized Abbasid caliphs as nominal heads of state, the real power was in their hands. The military victories of Seljuk Turks alarmed the Byzantine emperors for the safety of Constantinople which eventually led to the Crusades. The crusades began with the call of Pope Urban II in AD 1095, which led to a senseless episode in the history of the church. As Browne observes, "Turks and Franks met as enemies, and two centuries later parted as enemies; and the enmity extended from them to the indigenous Muslims and Christians, who from this time onwards showed a mutual hostility far more marked than before. (Browne, *op.cit.*, p. 146.) This was the state of affairs when, in the thirteenth century, the Mongols began to extend their power. Mongol Hulegu captured Baghdad in AD 1258. The Mongols were tolerant of Christians and Buddhists, and Christianity spread rapidly in Central Asia and China. The history of the church in Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was very much tied up with the rise of the Mongol power under Hulegu, Kublai and Timur the Great (Tamerlane). The first two were brothers, sons of the Nestorian princes Sorkaktani. Tamerlane was an outsider and not of Mongol blood. Hulegu and Kublai protected the Christians, but Tamerlane destroyed them. (Moffett, *op.cit.* p. 276.)

The Mongol ruler of Persia (Ilkhan), Ghazan (1295-1304) became a Muslim and under him, Christians, Jews and Buddhists were persecuted and their places of worship were destroyed. During the early period of Mongol rule, Christians were favored in the empire, but now after a lapse of seventy years, Islam again became the state religion in Persia. Bar Hebraeus, in his chronography describes the conditions of the Christians thus:

No Christian dared to appear in the streets (or market), but the women went out and came in and bought and sold, because they could not be distinguished from the Arab women, and could not be identified as Christians, though those who were recognized as Christians were disgraced, and slapped, and beaten and mocked. (Quoted by Moffett.

Ibid., p. 476.)

Persecutions of Christians continued under the succeeding Ilkhans. By the 1340s the power of the Mongols began to decline. Then Timur the Great (1336-1405) captured power. Born in Central Asia near Samarkhand, he was to revive an Islamic Caliphate and boasted that he would make Samarkhand the capital of Asia. He was a great and brutal conqueror. Between AD 1380 and 1393, he captured Central Asia, Persia, Egypt and Northern India. He seized Baghdad with the whole of Mesopotamia in AD 1393. In some places he wiped out the whole cities he conquered. It is recorded that in Persia he left a pyramid of seventy thousand human skulls on the ruins of Isfahan and another ninety thousand on the ruins of Baghdad. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, p. 276.) In India he ordered a hundred thousand prisoners killed to free his soldiers for the advance to Delhi. Amidst these misfortunes both Muslims and Christians suffered. Christians were no longer in favour; on the contrary they were persecuted on account of their religion.

Thus with the rise of Islam as a political power in the Middle East and Central Asia, the whole history of Christianity in Asia began to take a different turn. By the end of the ninth century, during the Caliphate period, all vestiges of Nestorian Christianity were stamped out of Arabia. Similarly the decline of Christianity which began with the early Caliphate in Persia was greatly accelerated with the ruthless persecution of Christians by Tamerlane. By the end of his life, Christianity in Persia, Central Asia and North India was greatly reduced in number and vitality and the once great Nestorian church, lay in ruins.

By the end of the fifteenth century, in the Mediterranean world, Islam was dominant in all the ancient centres of civilization except Italy, Spain and Southern France. It controlled Mesopotamia and Persia. It was strong in Central Asia and was represented by communities in India and China. Muslim merchants were in possession of most of the trade between the Far East and the West, and Islam was spreading along the sea routes to the Malay Peninsula and the islands of the east. (K. S. Latourette, *op.cit.*, p. 340.)

Foreignness of the Church

When the Ming dynasty took control of China in AD 1369 from the tolerant Mongols, a wave of merciless persecution of 'alien' religions began. It ended in the total extinction of Christianity in China by the

turn of the century, while Tamerlane simultaneously carried out the same destructive mission in Central Asia. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, p.265.)

A number of historians speak of the foreignness of the Nestorian church in China and point out that it was because of this that the church in China was persecuted and thus disappeared. Speaking of the persecution of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity in the ninth century China, L.E. Browne strongly asserts that the major reason for the failure of Christianity in China must be placed in the fact that it was predominantly a foreign church. "Now if a church is felt to be foreign it has not really entered the hearts of the people and made itself at home in the land. (L.E. Browne, *op.cit.*, pp. 99-100.) It is true that the Chinese considered Buddhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism as foreign religions.

The persecutions in the ninth century were primarily against Buddhism and not against Christianity as such. But Christianity and Zoroastrianism were also persecuted and their monasteries suppressed because they were regarded as heretical forms of Buddhism and therefore came under the edict of the emperor against foreign religions. The Buddhists were persecuted in the ninth century primarily because of economic reasons and not simply for cultural reasons. By the ninth century, Buddhism in China had changed much and adapted very much to Chinese society. They had modified their ideas and remolded their institutions to better fit Chinese society. It was the economic reasons which were upper most in the persecution.

The rich holdings of the great Buddhist monasteries presented the Chinese with the only true church problem it ever faced. Monasteries were built by rulers or prosperous individuals and tended to accumulate more riches through further gifts of land or treasure from pious believers. They also expanded their holdings through usury and the various other legal or illegal methods by which the great families amassed their holdings. Thus they constituted in the eyes of the rulers a fiscal menace to the state, removing land and men from the tax registers. The idea therefore developed that the number of monasteries and monks and the size of the holdings should be limited. This was paralleled by the concept that, if Buddhism were indeed of value to society, it should not only be regulated by the state but also supported by it as a

sort of spiritual branch of the administration. Nothing could have been further from the original role of Indian Buddhism. (John K. Fairbank *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, pp. 108-109.)

Occasionally the effort to regulate the Buddhist church resulted in persecution. Many Chinese resented Buddhism as a foreign religion and detested some of its social practice such as self-mutilation and cremation as well as celibacy of the monks which were felt to threaten the family continuity and violate ancestral traditions. The jealousy of the Taoist priests was also sometimes a contributory factor. "But the chief reason for Buddhist persecution was the financial need of the government. Persecutions were chiefly efforts to return the land and the monks of the monasteries to the tax registers and seize their gilt-bronze images and other wealth for the imperial treasury. Individual believers were not seriously bothered." (*Ibid.*, p. 109.)

The situation in the time of the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century was different but at that time also Christianity was considered foreign. It was persecuted specifically because it was a foreign religion. In what sense was it foreign? Moffett is right when he says that the early Christian communities of Asia, though they were themselves Asian and for centuries were planted by Asian missionaries, nevertheless found it difficult to break through the barriers of their own ethnic differences and take root in the other social fabric of other Asian peoples. (Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 508.) In China, Christians tried to accommodate themselves to Chinese culture and develop a Chinese literature and theology. It also tried to develop indigenous leadership in the church. Yet they were considered foreign.

Christianity was favored under the Mongols and it was under them that Christianity spread in China a second time. Mongols were aliens who seized power in China. For the Chinese, they were barbarians. The Mongols differed from their subjects in very striking ways -- culturally and socially. Later Chinese chronicles described the Mongols as primitive savages capable only of destruction. In the face of Chinese hostility, the Mongols employed many foreigners, particularly Muslims and Nestorian Christians in the administration of government. "You see the Great Khan had not succeeded to the domain of Cathay by hereditary right, but held it by conquest; and thus, having no confidence in the natives, he put all authority into the hands of Tartars, Saracens or Christians, who were attached to his household and devoted to his service, and were foreigners in Cathay." (Marco Polo quoted by John K.

Fairbank & others, *op.cit.*, p.168.) The 'Scholar class' in China was antagonized by Mongol patronage of foreign religions. Mongols exempted from taxation, the religious establishments, like the Confucian temples, of the Buddhist, Taoist and Nestorian faiths. The Mongols did not specially favour the scholar class and their interests. Instead they maintained a cosmopolitan regime under which the Chinese bureaucratic class was given little scope. (*Ibid.*, p. 169)

At the demise of Mongolian empire, the Ming dynasty came to power (1368-1444). From then on, till the beginning of the twentieth century, China followed traditional ways. During the Ming period, the leaders of Chinese society were devoted to tradition. They turned back for inspiration to the great ages of Han, T'ang and Sung. This turning back was also accompanied by a hostility to Mongols. Alien rule had inspired hostility toward alien things in general. Gradually this view hardened into a lack of interest in anything beyond the pale of Chinese civilization. This turning away from the outside world was accompanied by a growing introspection within Chinese life. (*Ibid.*, p.178.)

The Ming rule was a revival of Chinese rule, the animating spirit had been to return to the pre-Mongol institutions of the Tang and Sung. It was a revival of Confucianism. This revival of everything Chinese resulted in hatred for the Mongols who were foreign rulers and persecution of them and their supporters namely Muslims and the Nestorian Christians. During the Ting period, 'foreign' meant not simply alien culture, but it also meant 'alien rule' over China. Foreigners were those who unlawfully usurped political power and their allies. Christians were persecuted and were practically exterminated from China by the end of the fourteenth century, not only because they were not in the mainstream of Chinese culture, but mainly because the Christians were supported by an alien political power and they in turn supported that political power. The history of the Chinese church during the Ch'ing period shows that the Chinese were always suspicious of religions which were supported by foreign powers within or outside China.

The Proselytizing Activities of the Roman Catholic Missionaries

A third reason for the demise of Nestorian Christianity was the proselytizing activities of the Roman Catholic missionaries. The Crusades (1095-1291) formed one of the most striking features of European history. As originally conceived, the Crusades were not

intended as instruments for spreading Christianity or regaining the population lost to Islam. Pope Urban II declared the objective of the Crusades to be the rescue of the holy places in Palestine, the defense of the Christians of the East against the Muslims, and the rolling back of the tide of Muhammedan conquest. But in reality the different Crusades had different objectives. The fourth Crusade was directed against Constantinople. Instead of defending Eastern Christians it destroyed them. Crusades were preached against the Slavs, against the Muslims in Spain, against the Albigenses, and against the various enemies of the Pope. The Crusades accentuated the bitterness between Muslims and Christians. A number of places in Palestine and Syria came under the domain of the Latin church.

Franciscans and Dominicans were the chief missionary agents of the Roman church at this time and one of the main objectives of the Roman Catholic missions in the Orient was the union of the various Christian bodies of these regions under the authority of the Pope.

The success of the efforts of the Latin Christians to draw the churches of the East into communion with Rome varied both with the time and with the particular church. More than once the Greek and the Roman churches seemed to have been brought together. More than once in the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries progress appeared to be made toward ending the schism between the Armenians and Rome. From practically all the Eastern churches groups were won. Usually these became Uniates, bodies which preserved their ancient rites and customs but which recognized the primacy of the Pope and in creed conformed with Rome. Only in the case of the Maronites, however, did an entire church come over. From the other churches only minorities were gained. (K. S Latourette, *op.cit.*, vol.II, p.327.)

Among the Nestorians, the Patriarchate became a hereditary institution, the office being passed on from uncle to nephew. During the course of the fifteenth century, there developed, among the people, opposition to this method of succession. When the Patriarch Shim'un bar Mama died in AD 1551. some of the bishops supported by a section of the Nestorian community wished to elect a candidate other than his own nephew Shim'un Denha. They elected one John Sulaka Patriarch which resulted in a schism. With the instigation and help of Franciscan missionaries,

Sulaka went to Rome and Pope Julius m (1550-1555) ordained him as the patriarch which divided the Nestorian community even to this day. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, p. 397.)

During the Crusades, there were a number of diplomatic contacts between Western Christendom, the Mongols, and Islam, seeking each other's help. After AD 1241, the papacy sent a series of Franciscan monks on diplomatic and evangelical missions to Persia, Mongolia, and China, evidently to explore the possibility of obtaining Mongol help against the Muslims. One of those envoys was John of Montecorvino who succeeded in establishing a Roman Catholic mission in Peking at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

John of Montecorvino, on his way to China, stopped in India in AD 1291 and stayed there thirteen months. He visited the tomb of St. Thomas near Madras, where he wrote, he baptized about a hundred people. But a later visitor to the tomb, Odoric of Pordenone in AD 1324, found no Roman Catholics there but only the Nestorian Christians. When John wrote that he baptized about hundred people, he might have meant that he tried to make the Nestorian Christians Roman Catholics; they might have gone back to Nestorianism by AD 1324.

John of Montecorvino was the first Roman Catholic missionary to reach China. By the year AD 1305 he could report that he had made as many as six thousand converts, and if not for the opposition of the Nestorians, he would have baptized more than thirty thousand. This is an amazing success story. How did he achieve this? In one of his letters he wrote thus:

A certain king of that region, of the school of Nestorian Christians, who was of the race of that great king who was called Prester John of India, attached himself to me the first year of my coming hither and, being converted by me to the truth of the true Catholic faith, took the lesser orders and wearing the sacred vestments served me as I celebrated; so that the other Nestorians accused him of apostasy. Nevertheless he brought over a great part of his people to the true Catholic faith, and built a beautiful church on a scale of magnificence to the honour of our God, of the Holy Trinity. and of the Lord Pope, and of my name, calling it the Roman church. And this king departed to the Lord six years ago, a true Christian, leaving a son

and heir in the cradle who is now nine years old. But the brothers of the same king George, since they were perfidious persons in the errors of Nestorius, subverted after the king's death all whom he had converted, leading them back to their former schism. (A. C. Moule, *op.cit.*, p. 173 ff.)

The above letter of John makes very clear the Romanizing activity of John and why the Nestorians were furious with him. When the news of John's success in China was heard in Europe, Pope Clement V was very pleased and appointed John as the first Archbishop of Peking in AD 1303.

After John Montecorvino's visit to India at the end of the thirteenth century, the next Roman Catholic visitor was a French Dominican, Jordanus. Just before his arrival, four Dominicans who stopped in Thana, near Bombay, were murdered by Muslims. It shows how difficult it was to preach to and convert the Muslims and Hindus. Jordanus went about the region of Gujarat preaching and baptizing - ninety were baptized in one town, twenty in another, and thirty-five in the third. In his *Mirabilia Descripta* he wrote that since his arrival in India about ten thousand persons had been won over to the Catholic faith. He was very appreciative of the quality of the Christians.

There is no better land or fairer nor people so honest, no victuals so good and savory, dress so handsome or manners so noble as here in our own Christendom; and above all, we have the true faith, though ill it be kept. For as God is my witness, ten times better (Christians) and more charitable with all are those who are converted by the Preaching and Minor Friars to our faith than our own folk here, an experience has taught me. (Quoted by Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p. 134.)

Jordanus does not tell us how he was able to communicate with the people without knowing their language and the previous religious affiliation of the people whom he converted, whom he found very exemplary. But he tells the difficulty he encountered among the people with whom he worked.

To whom shall I speak of my sufferings? The pirates have seized me on the high seas; the Muslims have cast me into

prison. I was accused, and was maligned. And behold it is a long time since, like a criminal, I have been prohibited from wearing the habit of my order. I have endured hunger and thirst, heat and cold, wrath and curses, illness and destitution, accusations by false brethren; ... I suffered more than what I can describe. (*Ibid.*, p. 133.)

Stephen Neill suggests that the people whom he converted might have been St. Thomas Christians. (Stephen Neill *op.cit.*, p.73.) Gujarat was one of those places in North India where St. Thomas Christians were found. It is also probable that some of his troubles came because of the opposition of the St. Thomas Christians. The 'false accusers' might have been the St. Thomas Christians. In a letter to Europe Jordanus mentions that he was deeply troubled by a 'horrible schism among the people in reference to me.' "'This veiled report of disagreement in the Christian community over his ministry suggests a possible rift between the older St. Thomas Christians and the incoming Roman Catholics, much as it occurred in Peking when Montecorvino, about the same time, found Nestorians already well established there under Kublai Khan.'" (Moffett, *op.cit.* p. 500.)

After thirteen months in India, Jordanus returned to Italy. when in AD 1328, Pope John XXII consecrated him as bishop of Quilon (Kerala, India) with a double mission. He was to convert the Muslims and reunite the Nestorians (Nazarenes) with the 'true church'. Pope sent with him a letter to the head of the Nazrani Christians, commending him to them and inviting them to abjure their schisms and enter the unity of the Catholic Church.

It was the official policy of Rome to proselytize the St. Thomas Christians. It was not the pastoral concern which attracted the medieval Latin missionaries to St. Thomas Christians, (Mundadan. *op.cit.* p. 143.) but a deliberate policy of bringing the St. Thomas Christians under Rome. While Tamerlane was persecuting the Asian Christians ruthlessly, at the same time and in a parallel movement, the Latin missionaries were proselytizing the ancient Asian Christians and both were destroying them.

Decay of Spiritual Life in the Church

A fourth reason for the rapid demise of the Nestorian church, especially in Persia, on the onslaught of Islam was the element of decay within the

church itself. During the period of the Caliphate the church in Persia was growing in wealth and worldliness with disastrous consequences. When the Caliphs built their capital at Baghdad, the church also moved the Patriarchate to Baghdad. As to its effect on the life of the church Atiya observes:

As head of one of the richest and most influential communities in the Islamic empire, his [Patriarch's] position in the central administration became one of relative importance, sometimes through favour with the caliphs themselves and sometimes through bribery and gifts. Spiritually, however, the patriarchal leadership was on the decline at a time when the church had reached the furthest limits of its extension in Asia. The patriarchs were beginning to look like civil servants as much as ecclesiastical dignitaries and were occasionally dispatched on diplomatic missions to Constantinople and Rome. The patriarchal throne was coveted by ambitious candidates who were ready to buy episcopal votes for large sums. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit*, p. 272.)

It is interesting to note that the situation of the church in Persia was very similar to that in North Africa before the Islamic invasion. The North African Catholic church expressed its catholicity in keeping its relation with Rome and its policies. In the fourth century, under Christian emperors, the position which the Catholic church occupied in society was enviable. The church gained numerous benefits from the state. W.H.C. Frend observes:

As the church expanded in wealth and numbers, offices and auxiliary duties multiplied. Clerics in a variety of minor orders were needed. The bishop of a large see was now a great officer of the state, paid 720 solidi a year like a provincial governor and expected as Gregory of Nazianus complained during his short tenure of the see of Constantinople (380-381) to rival the consuls, the generals, the governors, the most illustrious commanders, to eat well and dress splendidly. (W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*,, p. 250.)

As the church grew in wealth and power, the Nestorian patriarchal office in Persia was coveted by many. There is a story about the election

of Timothy I as Nestorian patriarch in the eighth century. He laid out at the disposal of his electors heavy sacks to be opened after his success, presumably full of money. Timothy won the election, and when his supporters opened the sacks they found them full of stones. He defended himself by saying, "The priesthood is not to be purchased for money." They could not replace him by his rival since his election was already ratified by the Persian state. (Aziz S. Atiya, *op.cit.*, p. 272.) The church became a prey to rivalry for the patriarchal throne, and this led to prolonged vacancies. Often it was won in the end by the highest bidder.

Nestorians were after political power and influence. When the Mongols under Hulegu captured Baghdad in AD 1258, he was welcomed by the Christians. In the brutal massacre of the population that followed, only the Christians were spared, as they were a favored group. Their privileged position turned them arrogant toward Muslims. About this Magrizi, a Muslim historian of the fifteenth century wrote,

They produced a diploma of [Hulegu] guaranteeing express protection and free exercise of their religion. They drank wine freely in the month of Ramazan and spilt it in the open streets, on the clothes of the Mussulmans and the doors of the Mosques. When they traversed the streets, they compelled the merchants to rise and ill-treated those who refused. . .; When the Mussulmans complained they were treated with indignity by the governor appointed by [Hulegu] and several of them were by his orders bastinated. He [Hulegu] visited the Christian church and paid deference to their clergy. (Howorth, *History of Mongols*, quoted by Moffett, *op.cit.*, p. 424.)

The political advantage enjoyed by the church because of their support of the Mongol rule was short lived and the situation very soon turned against them. The Mongols were defeated in their battle against the Egyptians in AD 1260. Browne suggests that Perhaps' because of this defeat the Mongols first began to think seriously of accepting Islam. "The Christians of Damascus now suffered the fruits of the arrogant behaviour they had shown to Muslims during the few months of Mongol occupation of the city. Many Christians were slain, and others were enslaved." (L. E. Browne, *op.cit.*, p. 154.)

The enemies of the church are often inside and not outside the church.

