

SECTION FOUR
CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Chapter 13
Indian Christianity
and Its Relation
to Persia

"Even in the Island of Taprobane [Ceylon] in inner India, where also the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians, clergy and believers. I do not know whether there are Christians even beyond Taprobane. The same is true in the place called Male, where the pepper grows . . ."

—Cosmas Indicopleustes, about
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TURNING now from developments at the church's center in Persia to its relationships and missionary outreach across the world's largest continent in India and Arabia in the south and farther to the Asian east in China, we begin by picking up again the ancient story of the church in India.¹

The oldest missionary relationships of the Persian church may well have been with the Thomas Christians of India, but it must be remembered that little is known with complete certainty about the first few centuries of the Indian church. Strong traditions affirm the mission of Thomas in the first century, as we have seen. And Egyptian reports of a mission of Pantaenus attest to the probable continuing presence of Christians in India at the end of the second century. But it is only in the fourth century, from about 300, as the Persian church was first organizing itself into a national body under central patriarchal authority, that a series of fragmentary but sustained historical allusions provide fairly satisfying evidence of at least intermittent communication between the Church of the East in Persia and Christians in India.

The first such references are to a mission of Bishop David of Basra about 300, and an enigmatic notice of a "John . . . of Persia and in the great India" who is said to have attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. These both date to before the Great Persecution in Persia of 340 to 380 and have already been described.² In connection with that persecution, a persistent tradition from India relates that in 345 a Nestorian merchant, Thomas of Cana, reached Cranganore on the Malabar Coast in southwest India, bringing with him a group of Christian families, perhaps as many as four hundred people, including deacons, priests, and a bishop. They were welcomed by the Christian community they found there but were dismayed to find that these Indian Christians, who traced their origins back to the apostle Thomas, were without local leadership, had become badly divided by false teachings, and were dwindling in numbers. The new arrivals reinvigorated the church and secured for it recognition and high caste status from the local Indian "king" in Malabar. The most often quoted version of this late and unclear tradition is that of a Jacobite priest of Malabar named Matthew, written in 1730.³

By that late date the oral tradition had become so clouded with inconsistencies and confusion that S. Neill wisely categorizes it as lying somewhere "in the uncertain land between history and fiction."⁴ In its favor is the fact that the traditional date, 345, of the reported arrival of this Thomas (Thomas of Cana) falls in the early years of the great Persian persecution, a period when it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that origins of Christian

refugees would seek safety in emigration, some of them perhaps to India. And however uncertain may be its date and its details, it has been celebrated with many elaborations in songs and plays by Indian Christian communities since at least the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some say there were copper plates, records of royal deeds made out to Thomas of Cana, that were known to the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, but if so they have been long lost though the reported text survives.⁵

The arrival of a less orthodox Christian visitor to India a few years later, about 354, is better known in Western church histories. He was Theophilus "the Indian," a native of islands in the Arabian or Indian Ocean, who was held in Rome as a hostage, converted to Christianity, and sent by Emperor Constantius on an embassy that included visits to Arabia, to his homeland in the islands, and to "other parts of India" (which may or may not have been India proper). There he found Christians whose liturgical practices grated on his sensibilities. The Indians, he said, "listened to the reading of the Gospel in a sitting posture, and did other things which were repugnant to the divine law." He did approve of their doctrine, however, though that is somewhat hard to believe, for Theophilus was an Arian heretic, as was the historian who recorded the visit, his contemporary Philostorgius (ca. 368-439). No other accounts speak of Arians in India.⁶

As A. E. Medlicott points out, 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 church practice.⁷ The Indian Christians as Theophilus described them did not know that they were disobeying the *Apostolic Constitutions* of fourth-century Syria, which prescribed that "When the Gospel is being read, let all the presbyters, the deacons, and all people stand in perfect stillness,"⁸ and though the intruding visitor wrote that he had taught them better before he left, one suspects that custom soon again prevailed.

There was, as yet in the fourth century, no evidence of an independent Indian ecclesiastical structure above the congregational level, though at least one version of the uncertain Thomas of Cana story mentions a bishop among the new arrivals. But early in the fifth century, the ecclesiastical ties between Persia and the Christians of India were regularized and strengthened, and at least from that time on India's Christian communities were hierarchically dependent on the Persian church. The absence of a

authority in India was through the bishopric of Rewardashir, which was strategically located on the direct sea route to India near the head of the Persian Gulf on its eastern side. About 410 or 420 this bishopric was elevated to a metropolitanate (archbishopric) and was given jurisdiction over relations with the churches of the Indian subcontinent.⁹

Their ecclesiastical language became Syriac, though even before that they may have ceased to use local dialects in their services. They sent their priests to Persia for study. The name of one of them about 425 is known from a reference in a commentary on Romans by Isho'dad of Merv: "This Epistle has been translated from Greek into Syriac, by Mar Komai, with the help of Daniel the priest, the Indian." ¹⁰ About 470, mindful of his responsibility for correct Nestorian theological education of the Indian clergy, the metropolitan Ma'na of Rewardashir sent "to the islands of the Sea, and to India, all the books he had translated" from Greek into Syriac. These were the writings of the two great Nestorian fathers, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia,¹¹ and perhaps he included some of his own writings in Pahlavi (i.e., Sassanian Persian).

But it is from the early sixth century, in the famous *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes (Cosmas, the Indian Voyager) that historians find the first completely satisfying documentary evidence of an early church in Indian South Asia.¹² Cosmas was a Nestorian from Monophysite Alexandria, a merchant and an explorer with a thirst for knowledge about the shape of the world. His book about his travels (though apparently he never actually reached India) almost incidentally mentions some extremely interesting bits of information about Christians on the Indian subcontinent. This is what he says in noting that as Christian prophecy had foretold, the church cannot be destroyed, and is filling "the whole world":

Even in the Island of Taprobane [usually taken to refer to Ceylon] in inner India, where also the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians, clergy and believers. I do not know whether there are Christians even beyond Taprobane. The same is true in the place called Male, where the pepper grows, and in the place called Kaliana, and there is a bishop appointed from Persia. The same is true of the island called Dioscorides [Socotra] in the same Indian sea. (Book III, 64)

And again, commenting on the island of Taprobane:

This is the great island in the ocean situated in the Indian sea. By the Indians it is called Sielendipa, among the Greeks Taprobane. There the jacinth stone is found. It lies beyond the country where the pepper grows . . .

This same island has a church of Persian Christians who are resident in that country, and a priest sent from Persia, and a deacon, and all that is requisite for the conduct of the worship of the Church. But the natives and their kings are heathens. (Book XI, 13)¹³

Here at last is brief but specific historical confirmation of three important facts partially suggested by the train of traditions and fragments we have been piecing together in search of the foundations of the Indian church. First, by the middle of the sixth century the Indian church was organized and well established with bishops, clergy, and believers. Second, it was strongly related to and dependent on the Persian church, which by then was Nestorian. Third, it was only a tiny minority community, a separated, distinctive cultural island in a vast non-Christian sea.

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 Syrian Persia, the fourth-century report of Theodosius the Indian is evidence that at least two hundred years before Cosmas it had already begun the indispensable process of accommodating Christian practice to the indispensable process of adaptation to national cultural Indian ways. In its threefold balance of adaptation to national culture, of persistent identification with its own traditional Christian roots, and of connective relations with a wider, international Christian network of authority may well lie the secret of the survival of so small a Christian family against such great odds for so many silent centuries.

The last glimpse history gives us of Persian-Indian relations before the Islamic tidal wave engulfed Persia does not change the picture but gives ground for hope of precisely such a survival. Apparently the churches in India were increasing in such numbers in the early seventh century that sometime in the patriarchate of Yeshuyab II (628-643), or Yeshuyab III (650-660) jurisdiction over Indian affairs was taken from the metropolitan of Rewardashir and given to a metropolitanate newly created for India itself. Where it was located and how many Indian bishoprics were created under it are not known. Mingana quotes a later canonist of the Arab period as saying that between six and twelve suffragan bishops were consecrated for India, that the metropolitan of India outranked that of

Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Persian capital and seat of the patriarch fell to the invaders in 637, and a letter of the patriarch Yeshuyab III (650-ca.660) written in the first years of the occupation confirms that the Nestorian connection with India had barely survived the Muslim conquest and was in danger of disappearing altogether. Mingana quotes from his letter to the rebellious metropolitan of Rewardashur:

"Remember . . . that as you closed the door of the episcopal ordination in the face of many people of India . . . so also did our predecessors close in the face of your spiritual necessities the door of the gift of God [i.e., episcopal ordination]. . . . [T]he episcopal succession has been interrupted in India, and the country has since sat in darkness, far from the light of the divine teaching by means of rightful bishops . . ."¹⁵

This seems to blame a failure of communication between the patriarchate and India on the jealousy of the metropolitan of Rewardashur over the creation of an independent metropolitanate of India.

NOTES

1. For the early history see chap. 2.
2. See chap. 7.
3. Published in Syriac original with Latin translation in S. Giamil, *Genuine Relations inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyrium seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam* (Rome, 1902), 552-64. See A. M. Mundadan, "Indian Church and the East Syrian Church," Part 2, "Relations Before the Sixteenth Century," in *Indian Church History Review* 6, no. 1 (June 1972); and G. M. Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1 (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1964), 61-70. Another version is in W. J. Richards, *The Indian Churches of St. Thomas* (London, 1908), 72-77. Also A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India*, reprint from the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 10, no. 2 (July 1926): 42-45.
4. S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1, *The Beginnings to A.D. 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 42. Many historians, while accepting the possibility of a fourth-century emigration, note the alternative possibility that this has been confused with a later ninth-century arrival of Syrian Christians from Persia. Mingana, for example (*Christianity in India*, 44n) dismisses the whole Thomas of Cana story as a "stupid chronological mistake of about four centuries and a half."
5. A. M. Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1970), 115, 132-35; S. G. Potluri, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (Bombay and London: Leaders Press, 1963), 22-24; and L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1956), 74f., 85-90.
6. K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The First Five Centuries* (New York: Harper, 1937), 720, 724.
7. See A. E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London: Nutt, 1905), 188-202. Medlycott names the Maldives as the birthplace of Theophilus. Others speculate that it was Socotra.
8. *Apostolic Constitutions*, bk. 2, chap. 57, cited by Mingana, *Christianity in India*, 27.
9. Mingana, *Christianity in India*, 64. On the dependence of the Indian church on Persia, see below, chap. 22, p. 501.
10. Quoted by Mingana, *Christianity in India*, 27, citing M. D. Gibson, ed., *in Horae Semiticae. The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv*, 5, 34.
11. *Chronicle of Seert*, ed. A. Scher, PO, t. 7, f.2, 116f.
12. The best edition is by W. Wolska-Conus, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, nos. 141, 159, 197 (Paris, 1968, 1970, 1973). See also J. W. McCindale, *Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1897). Cosmas, differing with St. Basil who wasted no time debating theologically on the shape of the earth, argued literally from Scripture that the world was flat, since, for example, we could not "tread on serpents and scorpions" (Luke 10:19) while walking upside down! (bk. 2, 23ff.).
13. I take the translation from Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 1:36, 37, but I am not convinced by his rejection of Ceylon as the equivalent of Cosmas's Taprobane. He argues for its location in the estuary of the Tamraparni River in South India. C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1961), 23, identifies Kalana as probably either Quilon in Travancore or Kalyan, northeast of Bombay.
14. Mingana, *Christianity in India*, 64. The canonist he refers to was Ibn at-Tayb, whose full text on this point can be found in another of Mingana's works, "Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia, and the Far East," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 10, no. 2 (July 1925): 297-371; reprint (1925), 75f.
15. Mingana, "Christianity in Central Asia," 31ff. See also E. Tisserant, "L'Eglise Nestorienne," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 11:197.