

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

120. Jahrgang

– September 2024 –

Varghese, Baby: Syriac Liturgy in India. Syro-Malabar, Malankara Orthodox and Marthoma Liturgies. – Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2023 (Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca, 66). 84 S., brosch. € 19,00 ISBN: 9-783447-119641

Christianity in India believes that it has an extensive history reaching back in time which matches that of the rest of the Christian era. What can be stated with certainty is that Christians are present on the sub-continent from the first centuries. Possessing such a long history, the Indian churches present a unique and interesting entity which displays a rich tapestry of different Christian traditions intermingled with some indigenous customs and characterized by the local Indian mentality and perspective. Over the centuries the Church in India experienced different epochs: persecutions, liberty, colonization, and existence as a modern independent country.

Among many interesting features of the face of Indian Christianity one can discover liturgies belonging to the Western and Eastern Syriac traditions. Their rites, theol., and outlook have been deeply studied in recent decades through the work of scholars, especially those belonging to the Indian Churches themselves. One of the most prominent representatives of those scholars is without doubt Rev. Prof. Dr. Baby Varghese, the retired prof. of Sacred Liturgy at the Syriac-Malankara Orthodox Seminary in Kottayam. He is also located at St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute in Kottayam and is a priest of the Malankara Orthodox Church. V. is a very well-known specialist, not only within India, but also overseas. His writings, principally dedicated to the theol. of liturgy, have been published both by European and American publishing houses and they provide for western readers and scholars a real treasure of knowledge contained in both the diverse liturgical traditions and also the ones being developed in India. The many years of detailed study undertaken by V. have established him as the unique and outstanding expert in this field of studies. The present book underlines the esteemed value of this author and scholar. Even if the size of the study is relatively small it nevertheless fills a gap in the Indian liturgical field of studies. In the preface, V. gives credit to prof. Sebastian Brock who encouraged him to write this book on this specific subject.

The book comprises seven parts (including an introduction and conclusion) preceded by the foreword by Prof. Dr. Dr. H.c. mult. Martin Tamcke. At the end of the book the author locates a table of abbreviations and a bibliography which he divides into four sections. As I mentioned above, the size of the book is quite small – there are only 84 p.s. However, it is worth noting that in spite of its size, the content and depth of the study is impressive. V. has organized the structure of the book to encompass historical paradigms. The first chap. (5–11)¹ has been dedicated to the presence of the

¹ In this analysis I will consider as the chap.s only the essential parts of the study, omitting the Introduction and the Conclusion.

Eastern Syriac Liturgy among pre-colonial communities of the Indian Christians. Although some authors claim that it was that liturgy which was always celebrated in South India from the very beginning of the Christian era until the arrival of the Portuguese,² V. notes that “documentary evidence is scanty to argue for a continuous relationship between the East Syriac Patriarchate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (later of Baghdad) and the Church of the Malabar Coast” (3). Therefore, the main content and thrust of the chap. describes the relationships and interactions from the end of 15th century onwards. The author introduces here some key figures of the “Persian era of the Indian Church”, presenting some indigenous customs practiced by St. Thomas Christians and briefly indicating a few documents relating to the Syriac Liturgy followed in Malabar in the 16th century. The following chap. (13–20) describes the liturgical reform introduced by the infamous Synod of Diamper (1599), which was nothing but an attempt “of transforming completely the religious, ecclesial, sacramental and socio-cultural life of St. Thomas Christians in accordance with the Latin rite and Western culture”³. V., describing the atmosphere preceding the Synod itself, says that it was marked by a “European chauvinism and typical colonial mentality” (13). In reading the chap. the reader is familiarized with some important questions concerning the reforms introduced by the Synod of Diamper. Special attention is drawn to the Anaphora of the Apostles Adai and Mari. The third chap. (21–28) refers to the Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church. The author leads us through the turbulent periods of strong and continuous Latinization to the movements of restoration of the East-Syriac Rite, including the recent controversies from the Archeparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly.⁴ The chap. number five (29–41), which in fact is the fourth chap., has been dedicated to the Liturgy of the Malankara Orthodox Church, i. e. the West-Syriac Rite. The author presents here the stages of the Antiochianization of the St. Thomas communities in India, starting from the Coonen Cross Oath (1653). That historical act was nothing else but the consequence of the attempts to subjugate the local Christians to their Portuguese rulers and Roman hierarchy,⁵ and it resulted in the arrival of the Syrian Orthodox clergy to India. This part of the book is the survey of the liturgical changes and of the editions of liturgical books of the Syro Malankara Orthodox Church. The last chap. (43–76) is fully dedicated to the Liturgy of the Marthoma Church. As the author notes, the “Marthoma liturgy is a reformed version of the West Syriac liturgy followed by the Marthoma Syrian Church” (43), which is a product of the work of the Anglican Missions from the 19th century. In this chap., V. shows several reforms made within the Syriac Anglican group, he explores the background of these reforms and key figures who were involved. In the last part of the chap., the present ordo of the liturgy is shown.

Generally speaking, I have to underline that this book written by V. provides both a very interesting study of this topic and importantly also overcomes an existing lacuna in the field of Syriac liturgies in India. In a skilful way, the author shows the complexities of the development of the liturgies in the Indian subcontinent, focusing mainly on the period of different stages of colonization.

² Cf. P. PALLATH: *The Catholic Church in India*, Kottayam 2010, 15.

³ P. PALLATH: *The Catholic Church in India*, Kottayam 2010, 93.

⁴ The issue concerns the so called “uniform mode of celebration” of the Holy Qurbana. The main problem lies in the position of the celebrant, who should turn towards the faithful in the initial rites but then towards the altar in the central part. See more: Nirmala CARVALHO: *Syro-Malabars to observe “uniform rite” from 28 November*, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Syro-Malabars-to-observe-%27uniform-rite%27-from-28-November-53931.html> [23.07.2024].

⁵ It was a public oath made by the Thomas Christians, that they would never obey the Jesuits and the Portuguese invaders. Some scholars state that it was a declaration of liberty on their part from Portuguese yoke. Cf. Sylvester KANJIRAMUKALIL: *Ecclesial Identity of the Malankara Catholic Church*, Kottayam 2002, 57.

In my opinion, it can be used as a useful tool especially for the foreign reader who may not be familiar with the history of Christianity in India. Even if the book is small in size, we are both introduced to many key personalities from the past and enabled to understand the richness of the liturgical treasure of India. I suppose that this was the aim of the author and, to be honest, I have to say that this aim has been fully realized.

It should be noted that the bibliography attached to the book is very impressive and well-divided into sources and studies. Moreover, the language is very clear and the terminology chosen by the author shows his proficiency in both the linguistics and theol. of the liturgy.

However, there are some shortcomings of the study which have to be listed. The first one refers to the title of the book itself. In my opinion the title is too generic: it suggests that this is a large and extensive study that includes the detailed story of the Syriac liturgy in India as well as the descriptions of some specific rites, also presenting the treasure of the churches mentioned in the subtitle. Instead, what we are given is an interesting introduction to the history of three Syriac rites present in contemporary India. In my opinion the title could be more specific and more limited. The second remark concerns the length and details of the liturgical traditions that are presented. The chap. on the Syro-Malabar liturgy, which is celebrated by the largest community of Indian Christians, consists of seven p.s; the one dedicated to the West-Syrian Rite consists of twelve p.s; the chap. of the reformed Marthoma Liturgy consists of 33 p.s (sic!). Of course, it is the author who chooses what he regards as his priorities but looking at the essential content of the previous chap. seems to be the most important, what – in fact – is very dubious. The importance of the Marthoma Liturgy in the concept of the author continues in the general conclusions: one could expect here a final word concerning the whole content of the study. Instead, V. refers here only to the chap. on the Marthoma Liturgy.

To sum up, despite the afore-mentioned shortcomings, which can be easily improved in the second edition, the work of V. deserves the full attention of anyone interested in the liturgy of the Indian milieu. I am very thankful to the author as well as to the editor for providing us with this book and I warmly recommend it as a useful historical introduction to the Syriac liturgies in India.

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