

“ONE CIVILITY, BUT MULTIPLE RELIGIONS”:  
JESUIT MISSION AMONG ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS  
IN INDIA (16TH-17TH CENTURIES)<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT

The encounter between the Jesuit missionaries and the St. Thomas Christians or Syrian Christians in Kerala in the second part of the sixteenth century was for both sides a significant opening to different cultural beliefs and routines. An important and understudied outcome of this encounter, documented here on the Jesuit side, was the possibility of accepting religious plurality, at least within Christianity. The answers to the questions of how to deal with religious diversity in Christianity and globally, oscillated between demands for violent annihilation of the opponents and cultural relativism. The principal argument in this paper is that it was the encounter with these “ancient” Indian Christians that made the missionaries aware of the importance of the *accommodationist* method of conversion. This controversial method employed in the Jesuit overseas missions among the “heathens”, has therefore been first thought out and tested in their mission among the St. Thomas Christians in the late sixteenth century.

The preeminent role of the Jesuit missionaries as the Catholic task force throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is well known. Posted in their missions, residences and colleges on four continents between 1542 and 1773, they were no simple administrators of the holy rituals and agents of indoctrination. Depending on the missionary context, the local geography of the sacred, and the political environment, the Jesuits creatively re-interpreted Christianity in order to accommodate it to non-Christian peoples and cultures. This active spirituality, at the heart of the Jesuit being in the world, combined with the acute sense and experience of human diversity encountered *in partibus infidelium*, produced a plethora of accommodationist missionary techniques.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This article was completed while I was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2003-2004). An earlier version was presented at the University of Antwerp—UFSIA in 2002. I am grateful to Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, Nicolas Standaert and the editor and the anonymous reader of the JEMH for comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> It was, however, the disputed and difficult accommodationist missions in Asia that acquired a fame or notoriety in the early modern world.

The concept of accommodation has a long history and comes under different names at different times in both Jewish and Christian theological tradition.<sup>3</sup> It is well known as a hermeneutical method for reading and understanding the Scriptures. The question of the divine meaning and plan for the humanity had been posed in the Middle Ages as a question of the correct translation of the divine idiom. "The Scriptures speak the language of man (*Scriptura humane loquitur*)", but not everybody was able to understand it right away or at all. Therefore, theologians' primary task was to accommodate the perfect divine speech to the points of view of the multitude.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, accommodation connoted the attribution of a new meaning to a passage in the Scripture, unintended by the author.<sup>5</sup> In fact, accommodation was perceived as an organic principle inherent in the divine speech. Explaining this principle, as Amos Funkenstein remarked, enabled "historical speculations, which saw in the whole of history an articulation of the adjustment of divine manifestations to the process of intellectual, moral, and even political advancement of mankind".<sup>6</sup>

It is no wonder that the European theologians felt a sort of *déjà vu* when confronted with the non-European peoples in the 16th century. A Jesuit, José de Acosta faced a similar dilemma in his mission field in Peru. How to explain concepts and practices of the Amerindian gentiles and converts of which the "scriptural author could not have known about"?<sup>7</sup> His conclusion was that, after all consideration done, accommodation to Andean religion was inappropriate because of the backward state of Amerindian culture and society that possessed very little previous knowledge on which to build on a Christian edifice. In a word the Scripture could not be accommodated to the experiences of the Amerindians.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, he suggested that among the highly civilized "barbarians" of Asia, a different missionary method, similar to that used by the early apostles for the Jews, Greeks and Romans could

<sup>3</sup> The origins of accommodation go back to classical antiquity. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986) 11; Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes; Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, 1991) 261 (n. 60).

<sup>4</sup> Funkenstein, *Theology*, 216.

<sup>5</sup> Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission, Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India* (New Delhi, 1999), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Funkenstein, *Theology*, 213.

<sup>7</sup> MacCormack, *Religion*, 262.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

be employed. Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) did not presume that they were, in fact, inventing any new method of conversion, but rather proceeding in the steps of their famous predecessor Francis Xavier.<sup>9</sup> It became clear early on in India that the problem of multiplicity of languages to which the missionaries had to translate their catechetical texts was closely entangled in questions of culture, sociability and authority.

*A Glossary of Jesuit Terms and Phrases*, understating, defines accommodation in the following way: “Originally a device of humanistic rhetoric, the ability to adapt oneself and one’s speech in order to be in touch with the feelings and needs of the audience, this became a device of all Jesuit ministries which spanned many cultures and contexts”.<sup>10</sup> For some languages and cultures, accommodation was less important than for others. Goa, Macao and Melaka are such examples. For some others, both “civilized” and out of reach of the Portuguese ecclesiastical and military apparatus in Japan, China and India, accommodation became a complicated social and cultural game of mimesis and palimpsest. Moreover, while Acosta also propounded violence against the recalcitrant Chinese, unwilling to convert and thus supported the idea of the conquest of the South China by the Spanish crown, the Italian Jesuits were not thinking along these “imperial” lines.<sup>11</sup> Peaceful, persuasive and strategic entrance into the minds and hearts of the gentiles and converts demanded a long and sustained effort at learning and understanding indigenous cultural frameworks and performances. There was no need for conquest, only knowledge. And this knowledge and the method of accommodation became controversial as different European orders, Franciscans and Dominicans, entered the mission in China from the Philippines. In India the dispute broke between the Jesuit missionaries themselves, especially between Portuguese and Italian “nations”.<sup>12</sup>

The famous rites controversy in China and India was, however, only the tip of an iceberg under which there lay a whole continent of small

<sup>9</sup> See Josef Franz Schütte, S.J., *Valignano’s Mission Principles for Japan*, 2 vols. (St. Louis, 1980); J. F. Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in sixteenth-century Japan* (London and New York: 1993); Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Jones Ross S.J., “Jesuit Speak—A glossary of Jesuit terms and phrases” <<http://loyola.jesuit.org.au/ifm/jspeak.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> Helga Gemegah, *Die Theorie des spanischen Jesuiten José de Acosta über den Ursprung der indianischen Völker aus Asien* (PhD. Diss., Frankfurt, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See Županov, *Disputed Mission*.

adaptationist initiatives and gestures, successes and failures.<sup>13</sup> The linchpin that held all these mobile cognitive postures and missionary constructs together was the Jesuits' shared perception that they themselves stood at the threshold of a "new" origin of Christianity. What they witnessed in their mission territories encircled with non-Christian kings was the rise of a "primitive" Church. Thus the new converts in India, Africa or East Asia often assumed the atemporal garb of the first ideal converts, divided into Jews and Gentiles, described in detail in the neotestamentary texts and validated by the Fathers of the Church of the Late Antiquity. Caught in this scenario of "retrospective" utopia the Jesuit missionaries also acquired legendary apostolic features and athletic saintly qualities. At the same time in Rome, the walls of Jesuit churches—Santo Stefano Rotondo being the most stunning example—were painted with late antique Christian martyrs. The first Christians, the first martyrs, the first confessors, they all participated in this late 16th century Palaeochristian Revival movement.<sup>14</sup> It was by turning to the past that future looked more certain and predictable under the motto of "*Sanguis Martyrum Semen Christianorum*".<sup>15</sup>

Beyond and underneath this heroic dreamwork, the missionaries, not only Jesuits, of course, fought their small battles in "fixing" the reality to match their wishful thinking. One of the consequences of allowing the fiction of authentic origin of Christianity to be grafted onto the contemporary fabric of time was a permissive and flexible attitude towards the diversity of pre-Christian social customs. Roberto Nobili forcefully argued this point—that is, that non-Christians be allowed to practice their "old" social customs—at the height of his controversy over the methods used by the missionaries in the famous city of Madurai in South India in the early seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup> Difference in social customs, defined with a very wide brush stroke, would have permitted, according to this accommodationist formula, various newly incorporated peoples to join the Catholic Christian fold under the same religious head, the Pope, but at the same time to pledge allegiance to different political institutions, kings and chieftains. While politics were to remain

<sup>13</sup> David E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque; Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610* (Toronto, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Christians.

<sup>16</sup> Županov, *Disputed Mission*.

local, possibly even exclusionary, as may happen during a war, on the other hand, religion would become global and inclusive.

Cultural relativism and social ecumenism appear to be written in the small print in the accommodationist experiments. Not always clearly stated, nor self-consciously brought into effect, Jesuit subversive propositions geared at separating the social from the religious produced endless controversies all the way until the suppression of the Society in 1773. Especially, in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*—a string of loosely connected coastal towns and territories in Asia, where various religious orders competed in the missionary field and the royal patronage (*padroado*) of ecclesiastical institutions only precariously kept its head above the water financially and politically—the method of accommodation was a source of uneasiness from the very beginning.

By looking into two Jesuit enterprises on the West coast of India in the second half of the sixteenth century, I will argue that it was the encounter with the “ancient” Indian Christians, also called St. Thomas or Syrian Christians, that made the missionaries aware of the importance of the accommodationist method of conversion. Confronted with people who were often branded as “heretic” and non-Catholic, but who were undisputedly Christian, and who claimed a direct descent from St. Thomas the Apostle, the Jesuit missionaries were forced to rethink their apostolic methods. It became clear to them that the conversion should not be conceptualized (nor practiced) as an imposed rupture with the past and with the social world. Moreover, since St. Thomas Christians were already aware of the Christian message, in spite of espousing what the Jesuits perceived as “some erroneous ideas”, bringing them back to the Catholic fold was perceived as a re-conversion and purification from within the community.

The accommodationist method was, therefore, first tested and partly developed in the missionary field among Christians in India, not among “gentiles” or “infidels. It is this experience of closeness, familiarity and common heritage with European Christians, combined with perplexing differences and uncertain analogies that mobilized Jesuit theological and ethnographic inquiries. In the process of studying and trying to understand the way in which Christianity practiced by St. Thomas Christians had been refashioned in India during a millenium and a half in order to survive side by side with “Heathenism”, Islam and Judaism, the Jesuits started to formulate their own accommodationist credo.

*The King of Tanur*

When the first Jesuits came to Goa in the 1540s, they witnessed and personally lent their help to a rapid Christianization of the territories conquered or acquired by the Portuguese in India. Thus ended what the historians of the Portuguese presence in India usually defined as an early period of religious and social permissiveness or even tolerance.<sup>17</sup> What came next is variously described as either religious rigor or fanaticism; as either civilizing process or cultural and economic destruction of indigenous institutions. Whatever the case, the Jesuit role in it is singled out as decisive.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Jesuits did meddle, unlike other religious orders and priests, into just about every aspect of the colonial Portuguese life and communicated with all actors in the colonial game, they did have from the start a particular penchant for converting indigenous elite. The rich merchants, kings and learned Brahmans were the first and foremost targets for the Jesuit missionaries. Preference for converting elite groups was described and prescribed in the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus. It was a part and parcel of the late medieval chivalric conceptions and imaginary smuggled into the Jesuit ideals and tenets by their founding fathers, most of whom were members of Iberian lesser nobility. In their worldview, Christian culture that they fervently intended to disseminate throughout the world was to be shot through the non-Christian conduits in a trickle down manner.

The first Jesuit missionaries in Goa were mostly, though not exclusively, inspired by heroic, knightly ideas of converting the "pagan" kingdoms headed by their pagan kings. António Gomes—born into one of the aristocratic families in Portugal and with a reputation of high learning and somewhat overzealous Catholic temperament—arrived in Goa in October 1548 with just that in mind.<sup>19</sup> Not only did he hobnob in Goa

<sup>17</sup> M. N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge, 1987), 116; Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, "Goa; Uma sociedade Lusó-Indiana," in *De Ceuta a Timor* (Lisboa, 1994), 248-52.

<sup>18</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion 1440-1770* (Baltimore, 1978); *A Companhia de Jesus e a Missão no Oriente (Actas do colóquio internacional)* (Lisbon, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> A. L. Farinha, "Dr. António Gomes", *Das Artes e da História da Madeira*, vol. III, no. 4 (1955), 1-10; F. Hilt, S.J., "Paul de Camerino et Antoine Gomes", *Compagnons d'Apostolat de Saint François Xavier* (Ho-kien-fou, 1917), 1-23; Francisco Rodrigues, S.J., *História da Companhia de Jesus na Assistência de Portugal*, tom 1, vol. 1 (Pôrto, 1931), 367-68, 647-52. Rodrigues does not cover Gomes' stay in India. Georg Schurhammer, S.J., *Francis Xavier, His Life, His Times* vol. III (trans from German) [henceforth, Schurhammer, *Life*] (Rome, 1980), 529.

with the local noble expatriates, but he also sought to impress and convert those who appeared as equally respectable persons among the indigenous population. Thus, it was to him that Loku, “the chief of the Brahmans in this land [. . .] and one of the principal heads (*cabeças*) of the pagans” turned for spiritual help.<sup>20</sup> Both Gomes and Loku profited from this widely publicized conversion.<sup>21</sup> For Gomes, this case was a way of testing and proving his political weight and capital. Loku, on the other hand, was released from prison and acquired a new status of an important convert and a partner in Portuguese colonial enterprise.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Gaspar Barzaeus, a famous Belgian Jesuit, recommended Loku’s case to Gomes. At that time, Barzaeus was ministering to the prisoners in the Goan jail where Loku had been taken to custody by the Portuguese authorities under charges of failure to pay his leaseholder obligations and other financial malpractice such as corruption and bribery. Gaspar Barzaeus to the members in Coimbra, Goa, Dec. 13, 1548; J. Wicki, S.I., *Documenta Indica* [henceforth, DI], 18 vols (Rome, 1945-1988) 1.399-401. See also Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia* [henceforth, Correa, *Lendas*] (Lisbon, 1864), 4:436-43. According to a heroic Jesuit narrative of conversion underlining missionary exemplary lives and deeds, Barzaeus inspired Loku with his preaching in jail while other visitors such as Dadaji, the son of another (rival) headman, the *tanador-mor* Crisna (Krishna), laughed at his words. Conveniently, a few days later Loku called for António Gomes and asked to be baptized.

<sup>21</sup> Loku quite correctly assessed that the situation in Goa had irreversibly changed for the local headmen. At the dawn of the second half of the 16th century, one after another various privileges and concessions accorded to the local non-Christian elites and communities were being rescinded. Loku, whom the Portuguese also called *o Comprido*, the tall, seemed to have seen ahead and made the right, long-term, strategic choice of embracing Christianity for the sake of preserving his own status and that of his family. Thus, with this unexpected political wager, he turned the tables on his local rivals such as Krishna and Gopu and their allies. Christovão Fernandes to João III, Goa, Nov. 21, 1548, Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais/Torre do Tombo [henceforth, ANTT] Lisbon, *Corpo Cronológico*, 2-241-89, f. 1r. According to the bishop, Juan de Albuquerque, the “whip” of “poverty and want” was sent by God in order to move Loku’s heart. Juan de Albuquerque, the bishop of Goa to João III, the king of Portugal, Goa, Nov. 28, 1548, in DI 1:326. For an excellent analysis of the strategies employed by the Goan elite social groups under Portuguese empire, see Ângela Barreto Xavier, “David contra Golias na Goa seiscentista e setecentista; Conflitos entre aspirantes a colonizadores”, (unpublished).

<sup>22</sup> Gomes not only managed to secure Loku’s release from prison, but also appointed García de Sá, the Governor of Goa at the time, as Loku’s godfather. Loku and his family were baptized with fanfare and an ostentatious public celebration and display. A weeklong celebration included a procession with the neophytes paraded on horses in company of Portuguese *fidalgos* and Goan Brahmans. On October 21 of 1548, Loku became Lucas de Sá, his wife Dona Isabel and his nephew Dom António. For the exact date of baptism see Schurhammer, *Life*, vol. 3, 539. Gaspar Barzaeus to the members in Coimbra, Goa, Dec. 13, 1548, DI 1:400. According to Tomé Lobo, Loku’s children were also converted. Christovão Rodrigues added to the group of converts one more *gançar*, Tahim. All in all about a dozen people were baptized on that day. Tomé Lobo to João III, king of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 13, 1548. DI 1:272; also Juan de Albuquerque,

From the time of his arrival on October 9, Gomes's apostolic calendar could not have been busier. Besides daily hearing confessions, preaching and visiting his charges for consolation, prayer or advice, his Sundays were all marked out for special programs.<sup>23</sup> According to the contemporary reports, his talent for organizing and leading public spectacles of baptism impressed both the Portuguese settlers or "married men" (*casados*) and soldiers in addition to the "natives" of the *Ilhas*, the islands of Goa.<sup>24</sup> The new converts, as if confirming the "trickle down" theory of conversion, eagerly took up the task of proselytizing among their own relatives, clients and neighbors. Once baptized, Loku was reputed to have said that he would convert more people than he had hairs on his body.<sup>25</sup>

As usual, some parts of the Jesuit heroic narrative of conversion fit better an ideal scenario than others. In spite or because of his excessive zeal, as his superior and the future saint, Francis Xavier opined, Gomes was unfit to work in the Indian missionary vineyard.<sup>26</sup> His rumbustious taste for showmanship and certain social naivete is nowhere as clear as in his "mission" at the court of the king of Tanur. At the time, the choice to convert this kingly realm whose tiny realm was jammed between the kingdom of Calicut to the north, mostly hostile to Portuguese, and the fortress of Chale (Chalyam) guarded by a Portuguese Captain and a handful of soldiers appeared both practical and providential. On the one hand, the king himself begged to be instructed in the doctrine and asked for a priest to reside in Tanur. On the other hand, by 1549 Gomes's various projects in Goa were disavowed by Francis Xavier and, to calm the overheated situation among the Jesuits, his best bet was a complete change of air. Moreover, a conversion of a pagan king, who showed all the signs of friendship to Portuguese administration and rule, would have been the most elegant face saving strategy for this ambitious soldier of Christ, and an excellent political coup.

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the Bishop of Goa to João III, Goa, Nov. 28, 1548, DI 1:327, and Gaspar Barzaeus to the members in Coïmbra, Goa, Dec. 13, 1548, DI 1:400.

<sup>23</sup> On Sunday, October 14—the translation of the holy relic-head of St. Gercina, one of the Eleven Thousand Virgins from Cologne; October 21—Loku's baptism; October 28—Balthasare Gago's first Mass; November 11—All Saint's Day and so on.

<sup>24</sup> Schurhammer, *Life*, 3:540.

<sup>25</sup> Gaspar Barzaeus to the members in Coïmbra, Goa, Dec. 13, 1548, DI, vol. 1, p. 401.

<sup>26</sup> See chapter 3 in my *Missionary Tropics, The Catholic Frontier in India (16th-17th centuries)* (Ann Arbor, forthcoming).

Roughly from April until September (of 1549), Gomes partly resided in Tanur, and partly traveled southwards along the Malabar Coast. He had been officially sent by the bishop, Juan de Albuquerque, to instruct the king reputed to have been secretly converted to Christianity the previous year. The king of Tanur was, in Gomes's words, "a man of good prudence and knowledge and, in what he shows, he does not aspire to anything more than his salvation".<sup>27</sup> In fact, more than his spiritual salvation, the King of Tanur banked on Portuguese temporal, that is, military, support.<sup>28</sup> Just like Loku alias Lucas de Sá, the king of Tanur who assumed the name of Dom João of Tanur after baptism had practical reasons for seeking rapprochement with the Portuguese. For both of them conversion proved to be at that particular point in their "careers" the most expedient strategy for political survival.<sup>29</sup> From 1545, the king of Tanur banked on the Portuguese to help him solidify his position vis-à-vis the Zamorin (the king) of Calicut. In his experience in dealing with the Portuguese, he presumed that converting to Christianity was the way to express his political alliance and client relationship. The way he saw it, the Christian god, the god of his patrons, was to be added to his usual pantheon of gods who all connected his person and his realm with other kings, relations and kingdoms. It was Portuguese exclusiveness about their deity that was quite puzzling in the beginning, but he managed to devise a way out of this religious impasse. He announced to the Portuguese religious specialists that his conversion had to remain secret in order not to lose his "honor" or his "caste". In fact, it was his close political (and religious ties) to the Portuguese that may have brought him certain disadvantages on the complicated checkerboard of power relations on the Malabar Coast.

The king of Tanur thus played his own double game with the Portuguese and with the other rival little (and bigger) kings in the region. António Gomes, first to his delight and then dismay, was one of the actors to be caught in this and similar local political tugs-of-war. What is important for our purpose is that it was in addressing the issue of the King of Tanur's conversion that the concept of *accommodation*, although not mentioned *expressis verbis*, was invoked for the first time. The king had, namely, demanded in 1545 to preserve after conversion certain

<sup>27</sup> António Gomes to João III, Goa, around Oct. 25, 1549, DI, vol. 1, pp. 528-529.

<sup>28</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, Bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1.540.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Wicki, S.J., "Die Heidenbekehrung in den Jesuiten-Niederlassungen von Portugiesisch Indien", *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, vol. III (1947): 43.

"external" signs of his caste, such as the "(Brahmanical) thread", as well as other "pagan" customs. The unanimous opinion of the ecclesiastics in Goa was that such dissimulation went against the decisions of the Church Fathers.<sup>30</sup> By 1549, the situation had somewhat changed, the king was secretly converted by the vicar in Chale, João Soares, and the Franciscan Frey Vicente de Lagos, who gave the neophyte a metal crucifix to hang onto his thread, "hidden on his chest".<sup>31</sup> The "deep" indoctrination of the noble convert was left to António Gomes sent by the bishop of Goa.<sup>32</sup> And while all went just fine for the missionary who was allowed to build the church in the town, to baptize the king's wife as Dona Maria, and to perform Christian marriage rites for the kingly couple—all this was done in secret, "*ocultamente*".

The theologians in Goa were puzzled and undecided about the question as to whether or not to permit the king of Tanur to continue wearing, "the external signs of a Brahman, [in spite of] having a heart firm in faith and believing in Jesus Christ".<sup>33</sup> An urgent *ad hoc* Consultation headed by the Governor, Jorge Cabral, debated this issue and drafted some of the first typically accommodationist propositions. It was the Bishop, Juan de Albuquerque, who furnished Biblical examples on behalf of such accommodating practices. "Joseph of Arimathaea [*ab Arimatia*] was a disciple of Our Lord, not an apostle, and this he was in secret and in concealment [. . . but], was a good man; Nicodemus and Guamaliel [*Gamaliel*] kept it inside their hearts, that is, the belief in O.L., and concealed it outside for fear of Jews." The insistence on the split between inside (soul) and outside (society), private and public, combined with the conscious strategic maintenance of a certain illusion for the sake of later triumph, marks a new thinking, if not yet a policy, in the conversion of the "gentiles". Perhaps unwittingly at this particular moment, Juan de Albuquerque projected the early apostolic era, and thus the early apostolic methods, onto the contemporary Christianization of India.

The straightforwardly "military", coercive conversion enforced in Goa proved to be impossible in other regions in which the secular arm did not lend full support to the religious enterprise. Thus, a new imagery of the "martyred church" that fought for its territory by strategic

<sup>30</sup> D. Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar* (Bangalore, 1939), 1:133-37 and 1:257-266.

<sup>31</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1:538

<sup>32</sup> Correa, *Lendas*, 4:684.

<sup>33</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1:542-43; Correa, *Lendas* 4:681-99.

concealment of “external” signs, prudence, patience and, in case of a violent breach in the successful impression management, by death, seeped into the discursive space, especially via Jesuit missionary experience. In fact, a few months earlier, Antonio Crimalini, an Italian Jesuit missionary, was decapitated by a Badaga soldier in Vēdālai on the Fishery Coast.<sup>34</sup> This event might have given a decisive fillip to considering adaptationist practices that were to be implemented, not without opposition, in the next two centuries.

Back in Goa, Juan de Albuquerque likened the King of Tanur to another “St. Sebastian, the knight who served the emperors, [but] was Christian in heart, while for the outside he was dressed in chlamys, which was the garb worn by the knights of that time. [. . .] All the gentiles presumed that he were a gentile knight, because he wore exterior garments (*vestidura exterior*) just like them [. . .] until the time came to show himself Christian on the outside, having torn away the military garb and remaining in Christian clothes [. . .].”<sup>35</sup> The doubling of identity provided a necessary secret space for the convert to come to terms with his own new persona and from which he would, shortly thereafter, start a whole set of seductions and manipulations in order to convert others. Hence, Albuquerque continued with his comparison: “It is the same in our case of Dom João of Tanur, who on the outside is dressed like others, and in his heart wears the Catholic faith (*en seu coração traz vestida a fê catoliqua*), for the goal of converting many grandees and Nayars in his kingdom. [. . .] And when the time comes, [. . .] he will break the Brahman thread, and will tear his old clothes and will be dressed in Christian clothes, which are Portuguese, just as the knight St. Sebastian did.”<sup>36</sup> By condensing the temporal frames of his two protagonists—St. Sebastian and Dom João of Tanur—, they could neatly be fitted one into another, with the former turning, through a narrative ellipsis, into a Portuguese and the latter into a saint and martyr in anticipation.

<sup>34</sup> Although Crimalini’s “martyrdom” echoed for a few years in many missionary letters from India, especially from his southern mission among the Paravas, the higher Jesuit authorities had their suspicions about the way in which this martyrdom occurred. Without having lent enough support to the voices demanding his canonization, his “martyrdom” fell into oblivion. Indirectly, some “internal” Jesuit documents regarding the manner of procedure for the Company branded his death as lacking prudence and unnecessary.

<sup>35</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1:243.

<sup>36</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1:243.

The persona Dom João of Tanur was allowed to have (or impersonate) in his own kingdom was not permitted in Goa. The accommodation *avant la lettre* was unfeasible in the capital of the Estado da Índia. When after various spectacular or secret negotiations, confinements and escapes, the king of Tanur finally visited Goa in October of 1549, all the pretense of cultural tolerance was dropped. He did receive a sumptuous and ostentatious reception. Paraded in procession through the city, accompanied by various musical instruments such as *trombetas*, *atabales* [kettledrums] and *charamellas* [shawms], artillery discharges, from church bells, Dom João was dressed up by the Portuguese as they felt fitting for the "native" king. That is, as a Portuguese fidalgo, "in honorable and rich clothes, with a very rich sword fastened [around the waist], with a rich dagger, one golden chain, black velvet slippers, a black velvet hat with a printed design (*com uma estampa*)".<sup>37</sup> Finally, as Juan de Albuquerque bluntly concluded, to be a "real" Catholic, one had to be dressed as a Portuguese.

Once he regained his kingdom loaded with Portuguese gifts, Dom João of Tanur doffed his Portuguese clothes and in the long run disappointed the Governor, Jorge Cabral and the Jesuits.<sup>38</sup> It was the politics of pepper that undid his friendship with the Portuguese. On February 21, 1550, Cabral wrote to the king of Portugal Dom João III doubting that Dom João of Tanur converted sincerely, "the [Jesuit] fathers who had so much confidence in it [conversion] confess that they were deceived, but by caution, I have to dissemble with him".<sup>39</sup> In addition, he cautioned that the conversion to Christianity might produce "discord" between the kings of Calicut and Kochi and endanger the regular procurement of pepper in the Malabar area.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the Fourth Pepper War broke out sometime before June (1550) over a disputed territory—the island of Bardela [Varutela]—between the King of Kochi and the Pepper king of Vadakkumkur (*el-rey do Pimenta*).<sup>41</sup> A series of

<sup>37</sup> Juan de Albuquerque, bishop of Goa to the Queen of Portugal, Goa, Oct. 20, 1549, DI 1:544.

<sup>38</sup> However, on the question of assuming or removing Portuguese clothes taken by Albuquerque as a sign of Catholic religion, the Jesuits will have a different answer.

<sup>39</sup> Jorge Cabral to the King (João III), Kochi, Feb. 21, 1550 António da Silva Rego (ed.), *Documentação para a História das Missões do Padroado Português do Oriente* [henceforth, *Documentação*] (Lisbon, 1940), 4:490.

<sup>40</sup> On the history of pepper trade in the sixteenth century see Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, *A questão da pimenta em meados do século XVI: Um debate político do governo de D. João de Castro* (Lisbon, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala* (1924; reprint, New Delhi, 1989), 502-04.

bloody encounters ensued and the Zamorin allied with the King of Tanur on the side of the Pepper king were opposed to the King of Kochi and the Portuguese.<sup>42</sup> After negotiations, rendered even more complicated by the appointment of the new Portuguese Viceroy, Dom Affonso de Noronha, the conflict remained unsettled and the *amuck* runners of the deceased King of Vadakkumkur wreaked havoc in the town of Kochi.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, the cargo of pepper was not sent to Lisbon until the late February of 1551.<sup>44</sup> In brief, the Portuguese had learnt the hard way that conversion of the non-Christians and the pepper trade were not always compatible activities in the region.

*Converting Very Special Christians; St. Thomas Christians of Malabar*

Another important Portuguese partner in the pepper collection and trade were St. Thomas or Syrian Christians. These were the Christians that, according to one of the stories, gave the rod of authority to Vasco da Gama during his second stay in India.<sup>45</sup> They were also much-desired allies of the Portuguese king Dom Manuel in his extravagant project of conquering Mecca and liberating Jerusalem with the help of the lost (and recovered) eastern Christians of the Prester John.<sup>46</sup> When the mist

<sup>42</sup> According to Gaspar Correa, whose *Lendas da Índia* ends with the Pepper War of 1551, it became obvious to everybody that the conversion of the King of Tanur was a fraud. His only reason for conversion was to renegotiate with the Zamorin certain territorial possessions along the river Ponnani. Correa, *Lendas* 4:684-685. In the early 1552, the King of Tanur was involved in another warmongering action against Kochi and the Portuguese, as Dom Affonso de Noronha discovered after his return from Sri Lanka at Christmas, 1551. See also Dom João of Tanur's letter to João III, AN/TT, Gavetas 15-21-6. Summary of the letter in G. Schurhammer, *Die Zeitgenössischen Quellen zur Geschichte Portugiesisch-Asiens und seiner Nachbarländer, [...] zur Zeit des Hl. Franz Xaver (1538-1552)*, no. 4874, 342. See also, Schurhammer, *Life*, 4:422.

<sup>43</sup> To run *amuck* means to charge furiously at one's enemy in an ultimately suicidal attack. The word is possibly of Malay origin, but it referred here to the soldiers of the Malabar kings who vowed to die for their employers. Sebastião Rodolfo Dalgado, *Glossário Luso-Asiático* (Coimbra, 1919) 1:33-36.

<sup>44</sup> D. Affonso de Noronha to D. João III, Cochim, 16 Jan., 1551, G. Schurhammer and E. A. Voretzsch, eds., *Ceylon zur Zeit des Königs Bhuvaneka Bāhu un Franz Xavers 1539-1552* (Leipzig, 1928), 547-557; Correa, *Lendas*, 4:723-724.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas; An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (Cambridge 1982), 13.

<sup>46</sup> Luís F. F. R. Thomaz, "L'idée impériale manueline", in J. Aubin, ed., *La Découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe*, Paris, 1990). Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia" in *Modern Asian Studies*, (Cambridge, 1997), 735-762. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Du Tage au Gange au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: une conjoncture millénariste à l'échelle eurasiatique", *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Année 56, no. 1 (jan.-fév. 2001): 51-84.

of wishful thinking and misinformation got cleared away, the Christians of St. Thomas turned out to be somewhat disappointing. The problem identified early on with this otherwise rich and thriving grouping of lineages spread out along the Malabar Coast was their ancient ties with the west Asian patriarchates. Divided among themselves along visible and invisible lines of blood, common history, status and wealth, these Christians were nevertheless, united in their fierce devotion to their imported west Asian bishops and monks who were sent to India with wavering regularity.<sup>47</sup>

The influx of the "foreign" priests, from Portuguese point of view, went against the principle of *padroado*, patronage, accorded to the Portuguese king by the pope in a series of bulls following the overseas "discoveries" and conquest.<sup>48</sup> In addition, these clerics were rapidly identified as "vile Nestorian heretics" and thus provided another argument against letting them reach their traditional charges in Kerala. A few Franciscans who were sent to minister to these Christian communities in the early sixteenth century denounced almost instantly their rites, liturgies and religious dogmas and demanded that they be reformed with the help of competent clerics and priests. Some of these early reforming "crusaders" such as Alvaro Penteado acquired ill-fame and provoked suspicion and distrust among the Christians and their indigenous priests (*kattanars*), and downright loath and fear among the resident Syrian bishops.<sup>49</sup> One of the Portuguese strategies was to capture and expel (and possibly kill) these foreign prelates in spite of the fact that some of them came from the line of west Asian patriarchs who made their union with Rome after 1550s. Some of the bishops even went to Rome to plead their case and returned with official papal approval to their Malabar bishoprics. But, to no avail. In Goa, as far as Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities were concerned, their credentials were false or invalid without the permission of the Portuguese royal *padroado*.

As rich pepper merchants and politically well connected with local Malabar kings, St. Thomas Christians were considered important Portuguese allies. Hence, something had to be done with their orthodoxy and the Jesuits were invited to devise a method for "reducing"

<sup>47</sup> Mathias A. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, vol. 1 (Bangalore, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> C. M. de Witte, "Les bulles pontificales et l'expansion portugaise au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 48 (1953); 49 (1954); 51 (1956); 53 (1958).

<sup>49</sup> João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, "Os Portugueses e a cristandade siro-malabar (1498-1530)," *Studia*, Lisboa, no. 52 (1994): 121-78.

them to the true faith and to obedience to the Holy Mother Church and the pope.<sup>50</sup> The trickle down principle of conversion was quite logically on Jesuits' minds when thinking about how to re-convert the St. Thomas Christians. According to Alessandro Valignano, the principal architect of the Company's accommodationist method in Asia, in the pagan lands beyond Portuguese control where Christians and missionaries were subjected to the pagan kings, the rules of the game changed.<sup>51</sup> There was no special urgency to think through a particular method of conversion either in Goa where Portuguese settled in as colonial and settler power, or among scattered Christian convert communities along the coasts, mostly recruited from fishermen who were socially less integrated into the larger society of the region.<sup>52</sup> Certain strategic permissions and low scale adaptations were of course always in order, but not much ado was made about them. It was only with Jesuits entering the missionary field that the question of converting kings, such as Dom João of Tanur, and the most "noble" groups came to be debated and couched in theological and political terms.

Valignano's famous reflections on how to organize the mission in Japan, as well as his disdain for India, occluded the fact that the first accommodationist propositions were forged in the mission among the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. Assessing the situation in 1575, not long after his arrival in India, Valignano announced that the "*castas*", that is, separate lineage groupings arranged in hierarchical order, should be allowed "for some time (*per alcun tempo*)" among the newly converted. It was early on that the Portuguese discovered social divisions running through the society in India. The term "*casta*" had different meanings in the early 16th century among the Portuguese in India.<sup>53</sup> By the end of the century, the first generic meaning of an ethnic-racial group (race) slipped into designating a "sectarian-professional endogamous group" in a modern sense of a caste.<sup>54</sup> From then on caste became a blanket

<sup>50</sup> Along the way, in their disciplining efforts the Jesuits failed to properly underline the obedience to the Portuguese. This is what other religious orders and the Portuguese suspected about all Jesuit missions away from the major Portuguese enclaves in India.

<sup>51</sup> Valignano, 1575, DI 10:184.

<sup>52</sup> See Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community* (Sydney, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> See Sebastião Rodolfo Dalgado, *Glossário Luso-Asiático* (Coimbra, 1919), 1:225-229 and Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London, 1903; reprint New Delhi, 1979), 17-172.

<sup>54</sup> Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625* (Cambridge, 2000), 210-211.

descriptive (and prescriptive) term encapsulating a special way in which social groups in India position themselves in a hierarchical ranking system ranging from the untouchables to the Brahmins, from the lowest to the highest. The Portuguese were the first to point to the reality and importance of social distinctions in India. These were, obviously, rather similar to the distinctions among the Portuguese as well and among the Muslims and the St. Thomas Christians. However, the identification of a precise and unchangeable Indian social order would remain elusive to the Portuguese as it would to the British two centuries later. Indian literati were, of course, responsible for a further elaboration of the system of differences and of "fitting" them into the European preconceived ideas and expectations.<sup>55</sup>

Given that the converts in India observed purity and pollution rules (endogamous marriage rules and restricted commensality), Valignano decided to preserve these distinction after conversion. Instead of forcing low and noble castes to communion together, the missionaries were to "leave them divided" and separate from each other just as St. Thomas Christians kept their social distance and preserved their high status.<sup>56</sup> On the regional scale, St. Thomas Christians defined themselves as equal to Nayars, the martial castes. Another strand in their blood line, according to their orally transmitted genealogies, was their Brahmin ancestry. Some of them claimed that they were descendants from a Brahmin lineage converted by St. Thomas the Apostle in the first century AD.<sup>57</sup>

These ancient Indian Christians could serve, according to Valignano, as a perfect fifth column among the Malabar pagans. He, somewhat naively, thought that the high caste converts, such as Nayars, would easily join the caste of the "Christiani di San Tomè" if properly taught the doctrine. The local kings, Valignano was sure, would not oppose this religious mobility because St. Thomas Christians were their faithful vassals (*vassalli*) and did not obey Portuguese like "our [low caste] Christians". In addition, St. Thomas Christians were rich and socially

<sup>55</sup> Scholarly books on caste in India are legion. Theories of its origin and its function in the society are too many to be discussed in this paper. For further reading see Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (New Delhi, 1999); Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from The Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1999); C. J. Fuller, ed., *Caste Today* (New Delhi, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Valignano, 1575, DI 10:184.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba* (New Delhi, 1999), 2.

aloof, and did not need Portuguese favors, and their priests were in high esteem among the Malabar kings.

St. Thomas Christians were, thus, taken as an ideal model for convert communities thriving under pagan kings that the Jesuit missionaries would gradually apply elsewhere in Asia. Valignano repeated the same argument almost *verbatim* in his various treatises and letters in the years to come. However, what used to be consequence, turned into a cause. Thus, certain kind of “dissimulation” in the matters of rites was to be allowed to the Christian subjects of the gentile kings in India and elsewhere because this has been permitted to the St. Thomas Christians.<sup>58</sup> It was a temporary “remedy” until the time ripened to eradicate all superstition, one of which was the division between low and high castes. In the long run, allowing divisions between Christians was, of course, a dangerous territory. How one enforces religious unity in a segmented social and political situation was as much a mind-boggling question in Europe as it was overseas.

Obviously, Valignano’s opinion (*parecer*) was not unconditionally accepted among the Jesuits themselves let alone among Portuguese ecclesiastical hierarchy in Goa. If no big deal was made out of “caste” issue among St. Thomas Christians, it was because it was overshadowed with the question of their “Nestorian” heritage. Of two ills, the latter was considered more threatening because the church had branded it a “heresy”, while the causes and origins of caste were not yet fully understood or legislated upon by the Church.

From 1575 until the end of the century, the Jesuits studied and learnt about this almost alarmingly ancient brand of Christianity. In a similar way, St. Thomas Christians, closely integrated with their non-Christian neighbors and often holding high offices or military ranks at the courts of the Malabar Hindu kingdoms, were forced to change, modify and re-articulate their local allegiances under Portuguese and missionary pressure. Under the segmentary political regime in what is today the state of Kerala, St. Thomas Christian lineages were far from united and harmonious religious communities.<sup>59</sup> In fact, they were either martial

<sup>58</sup> Valignano, *Summarium*, Melaka, 1577, DI 13:110; Valignano, Shimo, 1580, DI 13: 282-83.

<sup>59</sup> Burton Stein was the first to apply the notion of the segmentary political system to Indian medieval polity in his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Oxford and New York, 1980). A term borrowed from African Anthropologist Aidan Southall, the defining characteristic of a segmentary state is that it is not yet “a state”, but a “proto state”. Although historians have recently showed that Indian medieval and early

groups proud of their ancient tradition of the *panikkars* (warrior preceptor lineages) or/and land-holding-cum-merchant groups tied by reciprocal relations to particular Nayar or kingly courts.

As the Jesuits found out, the division between, for example, the northern branch and the southern branch entailed a sustained hostility that no universalizing Catholic glazing would ever be able to cover and abolish. Moreover, there were many families living in the Hills (*Serra*) dotted with spice gardens and these were only nominally Christian as they resembled in almost everything the heathens amongst whom they lived. From the structure of their ecclesiastical institution, with hereditary priestly families providing local ritual specialists, to architecture of their churches, the Jesuits clearly understood that the St. Thomas Christians accommodated themselves to the local social and religious environment over a long period of time.

Their task was, therefore, to restore the pristine faith out of the fragments of their shredded Christian memory and by clearing the sediments of pagan accretions and of Nestorian ideas that continued to aliment their theological sphere. Thus, the history of St. Thomas Christians is portrayed in Jesuit accounts as a partial religious amnesia. Lost memory is an important ingredient in the concept of accommodation, as elaboration of this method amply showed. The major actor in this story is the Apostle St. Thomas himself who acquired a status equivalent to St. Peter in the Roman Church.<sup>60</sup> The Portuguese exploited the presence of the Apostle early on in the 16th century in order to ground their own alleged sovereignty in the East. Thus, they shouldered enthusiastically the promotion and amendment of the sacred geography and miraculous networks established by St. Thomas's presence in India.<sup>61</sup> Mylapore, one of the Christian pilgrimage places on the Coromandel Coast, attested by Marco Polo and some other medieval travelers as the burial place of the Apostle, became a famous, if somewhat unruly and disobedient, colonial town of the Estado da Índia.

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modern states were no more proto states than, say, a French medieval kingdom, the notion is still somewhat useful for the 16th century Kerala. Without espousing the whole Steinian theory of how various segments fit into the larger unit under the ritual sovereignty of the "sacred" ruler, I am using the notion of segmentarity in its literal meaning—a space divided into smaller units, all of which have to negotiate their survival within the larger political structure of the region.

<sup>60</sup> Annual Letter, Francisco Cabral, Goa, Nov. 7, 1594, DI 16:739.

<sup>61</sup> Ines G. Županov, "A Reliquary Town—São Tomé de Meliapor: The Political and the Sacred in Portuguese India," in *Missionary Tropics, Missionary Tropics, The Catholic Frontier in India (16th-17th centuries)* (Ann Arbor, forthcoming).

However, hiding behind the saintly name of São Thomé de Meliapor, the inhabitants of this town, mostly Portuguese *casados*, i.e. merchant-settlers, directed their efforts at gaining profit, often at the expense of and against the official Portuguese administration and royal intentions. St. Thomas, whose relics were “invented” and “protected” by the Portuguese, became the bone of contention for at least a century and a half between the rival factions, Portuguese state officials and the clerics on the one hand and the free Portuguese merchants (*casados*) on the other. Even if, according to Susan Bayly, the newly beefed up pilgrimage center was intended to displace the locus of sacred authority connected with the Apostle away from Kerala and from the Nestorian primates, in the long run it does not seem to have had an important impact on the community of St. Thomas Christians.<sup>62</sup> Portuguese “archeological” excavations in and around the alleged tomb of St. Thomas in Mylapore combined with textual discoveries gave food for thought and for speculation to curious Europeans in India about the origin of St. Thomas Christians.

*St. Thomas Christians “in hands” of the Jesuit missionaries*

One of the first Jesuit missionaries posted by Valignano in the mission among St. Thomas Christians near Cochin was Francisco Dionysio. In two reports from 1578, he gave one of the first extensive and quite accurate accounts of their institutional history and proposed a theory of decline, or of the loss of memory as the explanation of the contemporary geographical dispersal, and theological and cultural errors of the community. The information, he claimed, came “from old and reliable people (*peçoas antigas e de credito*)” and from stories “written in their books and sung in their songs”.<sup>63</sup> A particular architecture of time that Francisco Dionysio built into his historical account was borrowed and reiterated over and over by other Jesuit writers. It consists of three-tier structure. The first two sequences belong to past and can be marked by the adverb “*antiguamente*”, the last part is a long and permanent present, indicated in the text by the adverb “*agora*”. The major dividing line between the past and the present was quite clearly the year 1578 when the Jesuits established their residence in Vaipikotta.<sup>64</sup> Father

<sup>62</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings; Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge, 1989), 259.

<sup>63</sup> Dionysio, Relation of St. Thomas Christians, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:133.

<sup>64</sup> The residence of Vaipikotta was situated in today's Paliport on the northern tip of

Dionysio himself was among the first Jesuit missionaries assigned to the place in order to "understand the manner in which to behave in order to enter among the Christians of St. Thomas (*entender en el modo que se avia de tener para entrada com los christianos de Sancto Thomé*)".<sup>65</sup> The other two Jesuits were an Italian, Padre Bernardino Ferrario, and a Malabar, Padre Pero Luís [Bramane], who immediately started teaching the doctrine in Malavar [Malayalam].

Before St. Thomas Christians were placed "in the hands" of the Company of Jesus by their Syrian bishop Mar Abraham, as Dionysio jubilantly wrote in 1578, the other two tiers of their history appeared as a dress rehearsal for the present. Just like Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, "foreigners" were sent to Malabar to spread the "glad tidings" from the beginning of the Christian era. The first was St. Thomas the Apostle, sent by Jesus Christ; next came two saintly monks from Babylon, Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh, descendants of the first Apostle's converts in Mesopotamia; then finally came "Quinai Thomé" [Thomas of Cana], a Babylonian merchant who settled in Kodungallur and who, with his two wives, engendered two rival Christian lineages. Although Dionysio's chronology is somewhat bungled (he placed Thomas of Cana in the ninth century though it is accepted today that he arrived around 345 and the two west Asian clerics in the ninth century), he clearly divided this early period into two stages: 1) the apostolic stage in which St. Thomas traveled to the East and on his way converted community after community; 2) the Babylonian stage when the bishops, monks and merchants from west Asia visited or settled in Malabar.

Dionysio does not go into details about the apostolic stage, which is short in chronological, but long in hagiographical time. What he found important was to emphasize the fact that the sacred traces of the Apostle were imprinted in the landscape, but remained only superficially present in human consciousness. As the memory of his visit faded away, without additional pastoral care of the early converts, de-Christianization was imminent. The island of Socotra, where the Apostle first stopped on his way to the Orient,<sup>66</sup> was Dionysio's case in point. Interestingly,

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the Vaipin island, in between the important sixteenth-century St. Thomas Christian town of Kodungallur to the north and the Portuguese city of Kochi (Cochin) to the south.

<sup>65</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 1:61. This is an Ignatian method of interior conversion—*entrar con el otro e salir consigo*. A missionary has to enter into the world of the other in order to make the other come out of itself by its own will.

<sup>66</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:132.

another saint to be, a Jesuit Francis Xavier, also intended to set up a mission on this island before reaching India, but was persuaded against it by the Portuguese. Touched by these saintly men, but never cultivated properly by the priestly foot soldiers, this island became a memory stone to lost Christianity, especially in Portuguese accounts. As if in some kind of paleological showcase, the Christianity in Socotra remained frozen in the past so that only exterior customs such as adoring the cross and giving children Christian names remained Christian, while the inhabitants “continued to live like brutes”.<sup>67</sup>

Socotra thus became both a good and a bad example for the missionaries.<sup>68</sup> On the one hand, the presence of Christian relics was encouraging; on the other hand, the way in which Christianity could be lost to “paganism” was disconcerting. In fact, when two Jesuits, João Lopes and Gaspar Coelho were sent to Socotra around 1562 to set up a residence and to try to “reduce to obedience [of the Roman church] those people (*reduzir aquella gente*)”, it turned out to be a mission impossible.<sup>69</sup>

What St. Thomas Christians in India needed was precisely the doctrine, according to Dionysio, since it was so “corrupt” that to straighten their disorderly behavior and spirituality would take at least a generation. The children were to be Jesuits’ main concern because “with the old people there was no profit to be made”. The reasons for such disorders were their hereditary priests “*cataneres* [kattananar; Mal.]” who lived dissolute lives and practiced usury. The lack of the principle of celibacy of the indigenous priests was a thorn in the side of any Catholic cleric as it smacked of heresy, both old and new (Protestant). As for usury, “since they are avaricious (*codiciosos*)”, it helped them enrich themselves and become masters of the pepper production.<sup>70</sup> The good side of it, Dionysio pragmatically emphasized, was that unlike other low-cast converts, they would not depend on the Jesuits for subsistence.

The biggest problem, as he saw it was the fact that they lived under various gentile kings; the most important of whom were the king of Vadakkumkur, or as the Portuguese called him, the Pepper King (*Rey de Pimenta*), the king of Kodungallur (Cranganore), of Kollam (Quilon)

<sup>67</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:134.

<sup>68</sup> On Portuguese interest in and presence on Socotra during the sixteenth-century see Zoltán Biedermann, “Nas pegadas do Apóstolo: Socotorá nas fontes europeias dos séculos XVI e XVII”, *Anais de história de além-mar*, no. 1 (2000): 287-386.

<sup>69</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:134.

<sup>70</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:68.

and of Kochi (Cochin). What made them "disobedient", "willful" and difficult to control was the fact that they were under jurisdiction of the heathen kings who, in their turn, "tyrannize them and make them move from one place to another". "There is no *vis coactiva* among them", that is, they "always come out with their own [will]" because of ever divided, muddled, even contradictory jurisdiction between a secular (heathen kings) and a Christian (priest, bishops, missionaries) authority.<sup>71</sup> This was one of the lessons well taken by the Jesuits reflecting on the problem of accommodation, or on how to control converts' will in a situation of divided jurisdictions or allegiances. The answer was, of course, through indoctrination, confession, spiritual exercises, but in vernacular language and in vernacular gestures. The latter, much more than the first, proved to be a fast line into syncretism, eclecticism and, ultimately to adaptation. But, also, and that was not obvious at the time, into a series of schisms and splintering of the community.

The legacy of the Apostle St. Thomas in India was fading in certain places. One senses from Dionysio's account that in many places in southern India, especially the hills [the Western Ghats] and the region of Travancore at the extreme South harbor early converts had lost partially or completely their Christian memory among the pagans. In the same way, certain geographical sites contained underground layers of miraculous energy, such as the whole region around the Apostle's tomb in Mylapore. Hence, the excavations done by the Portuguese revealed a prodigious number of sacred objects (such as the bleeding cross) and located important sacred/healing spots (the source of water on the Small Hill). But all this was not enough to preserve Christian community from ignorance of its own origins. Rather, these miraculous signs and objects were left dormant below the crust of the earth, or were covered by sea water until those who were "worthy" to uncover them arrived. According to the legends collected by the Portuguese concerning the life of St. Thomas, he had even predicted that when the sea reaches close enough to his tomb, the "white people" would come to preach the Gospel and to take over.<sup>72</sup>

All this was common knowledge by the time Dionysio wrote his report and so he did not have to go into details. His aim was elsewhere. It was to show that conversion is not enough without proper pastoral care.

<sup>71</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:68.

<sup>72</sup> See Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, "A lenda de S. Tomé Apóstolo e a expansão portuguesa", *Lusitania Sacra*, 2a série, tomo III, Lisbon, 1991.

Thus, the second, Babylonian stage was the most decisive for the re-foundation of the Indian Christian community. “They [the Christians] had to be converted again (*de novo*)” by the west Asian bishops. With Quinai Thomé [Thomas of Cana], they solved the demographic question and the number of Christians grew. One of the reasons, therefore, for St. Thomas Christians to possess such “great affection for their bishops from Babylon” was, in Dionysio’s opinion, that they considered that “it was the originary place of their Christianity (*sua cristandade laa teve principio*)”.<sup>73</sup> The problem was that these Mesopotamian prelates brought with them heresy and in the 16th century they proved to be a nuisance to Portuguese and Jesuit efforts at “reducing (*reduzir*)” St. Thomas Christians to the obedience of the Roman Church.

Dionysio recommended—what the Portuguese did throughout the 16th century under the pretext of their *padroado* rights—preventing those “stealing wolfs (*lobos robadores*)”, i.e. Syrian bishops, from reaching Malabar. Against the logic of the *padroado*, he argued that Rome should provide some Syrian clerics, that is, those who had command of Chaldean (the ancient west Syrian language) and who were “worthy (*digni*)” of this ministry.<sup>74</sup> The linguistic question in the missionary field was something that the Jesuits encountered in all their missions. While the Portuguese official *padroado* policy in India had favored its national language, in addition to Latin, as a medium of proselytism and conversion, a complex linguistic configuration of the mission territories made such an effort not only impractical, but also downright impossible.

Further south, among the Christian Parava pearl-fishing lineages in the Gulf of Mannar, Jesuit missionaries working there had already mastered Tamil well enough to preach and confess. The first printed books in Tamil language and characters were to appear from 1578 to 1586 from the Jesuit printing press in Kochi, Kollam and Punnaikayal.<sup>75</sup> By the 1570s when the Jesuits took over the mission field among St. Thomas Christians, their experience amply confirmed the supreme importance of vernacular languages for conversion of the heathens and infidels and

<sup>73</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:136-7.

<sup>74</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:69.

<sup>75</sup> Ines G. Županov, “Twisting a Pagan Tongue: Tamil Grammars, Catechisms, Confession Manuals and Lives of Saints (16th-17th century)” in *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester, N.Y., 2003). The only Indian Jesuit priest, Pedro Luís Bramane, posted as a Malayalam teacher in Vaipikotta college for St. Thomas Christians, was also charged with overlooking the printing of the Tamil catechism in Kochi.

for successfully keeping them in the new faith. In this scheme of things, Latin preserved its lofty status of a sacred language of liturgy and prayers. The language that was discarded, at least partially, was Portuguese. Things were not so straightforward with St. Thomas Christians who spoke Malayalam among themselves, but for whom Chaldean (or ancient Syrian) had been liturgical language for centuries. The mastery over this ancient tongue which was also, and as they proudly underlined, the mother tongue of Jesus Christ, was the source of the sacred authority of their Syrian bishops and of their native priests, the *kattanars*.

In spite of their efforts to introduce Latin Mass and Romanize their liturgical customs, the resistance to overall replacement of Chaldean proved to be impossible. From Jesuit accounts, the people "enjoyed" hearing Mass in Latin but only as a supplement to their customary Eucharistic celebration, not as its replacement. The hereditary priests, *kattanars*, and Syrian bishops were aware of the Portuguese ecclesiastical menace and did all in their might to prevent the missionaries from entering their parishes and communicating with the faithful. The sudden success of the Jesuits in establishing a residence and then a college in Vaipikotta was less a result of the Jesuit persuasive prowess, than of an internal fracture within the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the St. Thomas Christians. Portuguese policy of preventing Syrian bishops from entering the "Serra", the name given to the hilly inland territory inhabited by these Christians, created penury of the foreign bishops who were the only ecclesiastical agents vested with power to ordain local priests.

It was the lack of sacred substances (consecrated oil from Babylon, etc.) peddled by the west Asian clerics that forced St. Thomas Christians to act. Thus, various communities in Malabar, not always in concord with each other on other issues, continued to send their representatives with demand for a new Syrian prelate or their own priests to be ordained in West Asia. To add to the confusion, from 1552, the Church of the East cleaved into two rival lines, both claiming the title of *Catholicos* of Babylon. One group headed by John Simon Sulaqa went to Rome to be consecrated and, at least, nominally professed the allegiance to the Pope.<sup>76</sup> Before getting himself killed by the Turks, Mar Sulaqa consecrated his brother Mar Joseph as metropolitan of India whom the Portuguese intercepted as an intruder and sent to Lisbon. Eventually he found his way to Rome where he died. The rival Patriarch, Simon

<sup>76</sup> William F. Macomber, "A History of Chaldean Mass" <<http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v1ln2/macomber.pdf>> 70-81.

VIII Bar Mama, on the other hand, sent another bishop, Mar Abraham, who fell into the hands of the Portuguese and was deported from Goa. Via Ormuz, he managed to get back home where he joined the pro-Roman Catholics, Mar Abdixoh (ʿAbdʿišū) the successor of Mar Sulaqa (d. 1553). Not only did Mar Abraham switch camps but he also went to Rome, obtained Papal bulls confirming his appointment as Archbishop of Angamale (a place in the heart of the “Serra”), and was consecrated by the Patriarch of Venice. Even with proper Roman credentials, once he reached Goa in 1558, the Viceroy D. Luís de Ataíde had him put under house arrest under pretext of failing to provide the permission of the Portuguese king (*cartas dell Rei de Portugal*) and thus breaking the principle of the *padroado*.<sup>77</sup> This time, taught by his former experience with the Portuguese in these matters, Mar Abraham simply escaped without waiting for confirmation from Lisbon, settled in his archbishopric in Angamale, and avoided all contact with the Portuguese.

The low intensity conflict between the Portuguese royal *padroado* and the Roman Church was part of the non-stop background noise in the Jesuit Asian mission field. The missionaries must have often felt like they were dragging heavy papal baggage through Portuguese colonial quicksand. Thus, when Mar Abraham made clear overtures to the Jesuits in Kochi, promising to let them visit his charges and to help them establish a residence and a seminary for the boys, the Jesuits had to do a good bit of discursive hyperventilating in order to please both sides. On the one hand, they had to browbeat the Portuguese Captain and the Bishop of Kochi with various baits into allowing Mar Abraham to visit the town and bestowing on him appropriate public honors. Dionysio’s intended message to the Portuguese Captain might be crudely summed up as—These Christians are rich and control all the pepper production and thus would enhance profit for the Estado—.<sup>78</sup> Following the same mercantile line of reasoning for the Bishop, D. Henrique de Távora (a future archbishop of Goa), he underlined the fact that they would not depend on Jesuits for their existence, as the poor converts usually did.<sup>79</sup>

The reason Mar Abraham cottoned to the Jesuits and placed himself and his Christians in the “hands of (*en las manos*)” the Society of Jesus was a menace from within the community.<sup>80</sup> A local kattannar found his way to the Nestorian patriarch, Elias VI (1558-1591) who

<sup>77</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:65.

<sup>78</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:67.

<sup>79</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Belchior Diaz, Cochin, 23 Jan., 1577, DI 10:334-335.

<sup>80</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Belchior Diaz, Cochin, 23 Jan., 1577, DI 10:334.

succeeded Simon VIII Bar-Māmā, in the village of Alquoš near Mosul and was consecrated as Mar Simon. Upon the return to Malabar he settled down among the southern branch of St. Thomas Christians (near Kollam).<sup>81</sup> Mar Abraham clearly considered that the Nestorian bishop was more dangerous to his own status and position among his Christian folk than the Portuguese and the Jesuits. The new alliance between Mar Abraham and the Portuguese was mediated by the Jesuits. However, Mar Simon and other Nestorian bishops would find allies, when they needed to, among the rival European religious, the Franciscans. Some of them would also make the journey to Rome in order to return with papal credentials.<sup>82</sup> Switching from one side to another did not appear a special problem for the Syrian bishops. They also easily promised and even held their promises, as long as it was necessary, to introduce doctrinal and liturgical changes into their practice and books. In fact, given that the Eastern Christians developed and even thrived as religious minorities for centuries under "pagan" empires, they were forced to continually "adapt" to local situations in order to survive. Moreover, the bishops who were sent from the time of the Persian Sassanid Empire onwards were most probably not selected on the basis of special theological expertise but on the basis of their "missionary" and, perhaps, linguistic abilities. The Christians they tended to in South India were closely integrated into local political structures, which entailed ritual and "religious" reciprocity of a kind and intensity unknown in Mesopotamia. How exactly the Syrian bishops coped with this situation may not be entirely known or reconstructed, but it was certainly based on a great deal of adaptation and tolerance. Thus what the Jesuits "discovered" in the 16th century in India was an old strategy used in various ways by religious minorities probably everywhere and at all times.

In the genealogy of Jesuit accommodationist strategies in India, the encounter with St. Thomas Christians was decisive to a much greater extent than the historians ever acknowledged. The reason for this neglect was probably due to a "technical" detail: it was not a conversion of heathens but a "reduction" to obedience of the ancient but "misguided" Christians. There is a good bit of evidence of the centrality of the Jesuit

<sup>81</sup> He was favored by the king of Vadakkumkur or the Pepper King (Rey de Pimenta). Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:68.

<sup>82</sup> Mar Simon was caught and detained by the Portuguese. He was sent to Rome, but died in Lisbon in 1599. Jacob, appointed by him as vicar general continued to menace the Jesuits and Mar Abraham. Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas; An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malaba* (Cambridge, 1982 orig. 1956) 24.

experience among the St. Thomas Christians for thinking out accommodation in Madurai and elsewhere in South India. In particular, the Syrian bishops provided the living models of how solitary missionaries were to act and thrive surrounded by the heathen Indian environment and subjected to heathen kings. When the arrival of the Portuguese and the padroado missionaries threatened to undermine their status and authority, they showed skills in adapting to the demands of the newcomers as well.

As the life stories of Mar Joseph and Mar Abraham, bitter rivals at one point, amply confirm, they both knew how and when to switch sides and easily ceded to theological and liturgical changes pressed by the Roman Catholics. Dionysio wrote in 1578 that they all relinquished old beliefs and accepted the article of the “Symbolo Niceno”, the equality of the divine persons, the two natures of Christ in one person, the pope in Rome as the vicar of Christ on earth. These were crucial points of the doctrine and the *sine qua non* for the adherence to the Roman Catholic fold. But this was not all and, as the Jesuits discovered more about religious beliefs and practices of St. Thomas Christians, more and more corrections were in order. The missionaries found to their horror that all the sacraments were neglected, distorted, or lacking. Since all these changes were inaugurated after the Council of Trent, the enthronement of sacraments and sacramentals at the center of Christian sociability was vigilantly enforced.

These “lost” and “forgetful” Christians did not practice Confirmation, Confession (Penitence), or Extreme Unction. As for Baptism, Ordination, Eucharist and Matrimony, too many “disorders” adulterated the pristine values (and effects) of these sacraments. The early reports by Dionysio in the late 1570s were somewhat amorphous and patchy reconstructions of St. Thomas Christian religious habits. Although, after his brief mission in and around Vaipikotta, Dionysio provoked a minor scandal among the Jesuits in Cochin and all but dropped out of the Society of Jesus, and was thus regarded as somewhat unreliable, his basic intuitions were confirmed by Antonio Monseratte in 1579. They both portrayed this kind of Christianity as excessively mechanical, a social machine rather than a fully-fledged religious system. This is the reason why they both underscore ritual repetition and habits of manipulating sacred objects devoid of understanding spiritual causes or inherent divine motives as one of the characteristics of St. Thomas Christian orthopraxy.

Moreover, the central stage of the ritual action was the individual body on which fasts, long vigils and prayers, as well as funerary and

anniversary feasts engraved religious and social memory. Fasting lasted for days or weeks and its rigor stunned and impressed the missionaries. Dionysio admiringly wrote that "they do not eat fish, nor milk, nor vine and abstain from sex".<sup>83</sup> When he briefly left the Society of Jesus by the end of 1578, he was accused or slandered by his brethren, of whom Monserrate was his most virulent critic, that he ate meat on Friday and during all fast-days, under pretext of ill health.<sup>84</sup> If Dionysio was frowned at for not being able to control his flesh, St. Thomas Christians took fasting to its extreme, in Monserrate's view. They fasted for Easter and Advent, but also fifteen days before the Assumption of Our Lady, all the Fridays between "*Navidad*" and "*Coresma*", for certain holidays of apostles, martyrs and our Lady and for some particular occasions celebrating various events in Syrian history. Thus they rigorously observed a three-day fast called "*Jonas profeta*" during which the priests locked themselves in the church for three days and prayed in gratitude for the divine help given to the people of Syria during the time of a particularly deadly epidemic. As commendable as this ritual starving was, as Monserrate put it, the energy spent on it was unnecessary and more importantly the fasts did not always coincide with "our calendar".<sup>85</sup> The suspicion was, and it grew in the course of time, that these fast days had more to do with the Syrian and with the local Nayar ritual calendar. Even the form and the duration of the event resembled pagan customs.

Even today, after a few centuries of colonial sedimentation, anthropologists find that Hindu-Christian relations in Kerala are expressed through metaphors of "sibling resemblance".<sup>86</sup> For example, St. Thomas enthroned in his church in Kodungallur is often conceptualized on a folk level as a brother of the Goddess Kali presiding over her own temple in the same town. It is no wonder that in the 16th century, the local churches were like "houses of idols (*casas de los ídolos*)", until Mar Abraham advised his Christians to build them "our way (*a nuestro modo*)".<sup>87</sup> It was, nevertheless, difficult to decide whether the "open cross (*una cruz abierta*)" in the middle of the church and the absence of candles was to be considered aberration. Finally, pope Pius IV gave permission to Mar

<sup>83</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 4 Jan., 1578, DI 11:141.

<sup>84</sup> Monserrate, *Resposta ao que alega por sy o P.e Dionysio* [Kochi, ca. 8 Sept. 1578], DI 11:230.

<sup>85</sup> Monserrate to Mercurian, Cochin, 12 Jan., 1579, DI 11:519.

<sup>86</sup> Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (New Delhi, 2001).

<sup>87</sup> Monserrate to Mercurian, Cochin, 12 Jan., 1579, DI 11:518.

Abraham to preserve “some particular customs of that church which are not so important”.<sup>88</sup>

The Mass and the Eucharistic objects, ornaments, and rites could not be compromised with. Thus, the “*hostias*” and “*vino de Portugal*” replaced “a tart made of rice flour in the middle of which there was a round lump (*bola*) made out of rice or wheat flour” and the wine made of dry grapes diluted in water. As for the priestly vestments they only had “*amito grande e una stola*”. Even worse was the fact that they followed the rites of the Greek Church and in Ave Maria called Virgin Mary, Mater Christi in stead of Mater Dei. Her virginity was also denied since in Malayalam they called Our Lady as “*Maria dueña santa o muger santa*” or “*Marta Mariatuma*”. Ever since the Jesuits started preaching, a new name was adopted: Marta Canni Mariam or in Portuguese Sancta Virgem Maria.<sup>89</sup> The renaming and refurbishing of the cult objects and practices was considered essential in order to render Christian sacraments and sacrifices valid and efficient. If one looks more deeply into Monserrate’s long list of proscribed cult objects and rites, one wonders to what extent one is allowed to call them Christian. It appears that due to failure to baptize children and grown-ups, many people died as only “catechumens”, that they did not use proper holy oil (*chrisma*), and that the communion they were getting was false as well. In a word, they were nothing more than pagan Christians or Christian pagans. Their Christianity was some sort of surface glazing of some forgotten grace brought to by a famous doubting Apostle.

What was, nevertheless, disturbing was the play of resemblance between Christianity of those Oriental Christians and the paganism around them, on one side, and Roman Catholicism, on the other. Could it be that Brahmanism itself (or Hinduism as it came to be called much later) was some sort of lost Christianity? Dionysio and Monserrate both mentioned the existence of completely separate communities of Christians further south who neither possessed churches nor were in contact with Syrian bishops. It might have been this particular feeling of working through some sort of hodge-podge of erroneous Christianity that inspired Jesuit missionaries in developing their accommodationist strategies in the South.

Strict observance of rules of purity and pollution by St. Thomas Christians vis-à-vis their neighbors became a proof against various the-

<sup>88</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:65.

<sup>89</sup> Monserrate to Mercurian, Cochin, 12 Jan., 1579, DI 11:518.

ological opinions in Goa that considered caste division as condemnable superstition caused by a diabolical agency. As all Jesuit reports noted, St. Thomas Christians refused to allow new low caste converts to enter their churches or to celebrate Mass with them. By the end of the 16th century, clear distinction was made between churches for fishermen or other low castes, and those of St. Thomas Christians. The same type of division would be applied in the famous Madurai Mission in the early 17th century and elsewhere in South India.<sup>90</sup> In fact, some of the Jesuits who became the pillars of the accommodation did their first apprenticeship of Indian paganism and Indian Christianity in Kochi not far from Vaipikotta. Matteo Ricci, who was a complete beginner in 1580 and went on to become the most famous Chinese missionary, wrote to Estevão de Góis his first impression of this particular field. He was much intrigued by these Christians, whom he considered as in the process of adapting progressively to Roman rites and customs.<sup>91</sup> Thus, their clerics were "already" dressed like Portuguese clerics, "except for the beard". They were dressed for the Mass "like us" and they use "hostia" instead of "cake lump (*bolo*)" like before.<sup>92</sup> The only difference with the Church of Rome, in opinion of St. Thomas Christians themselves, Ricci wrote, was the "language". For that reason they wrote to the pope to send them the printing press in order to translate [either into Syrian or Malayalam] and to print the Missal and the New Roman Breviary.

For Ricci and Valignano accommodation was a dynamic, two-way process in which both sides added and/or exchanged cultural material following their own social strategies. The ultimate goal of global Christian unification was, therefore, suspended temporarily for the sake of the gradual leveling off of cultural differences.<sup>93</sup> Although, Monserrate and the Jesuits recommended that the gradual Catholicizing be achieved through "indigenous bishops and clerics", the task of translation was too important to be left to anybody except the most learned members of the Society. From 1587, Francesco Ros, a Jesuit proficient in Chaldean, took charge of teaching young boys in the Vaipikotta seminary and studying the old and new holy books and manuscripts in Syrian and

<sup>90</sup> Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission, Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi, 1999).

<sup>91</sup> Matteo Ricci to E. do Góis, Cochin, 18 Jan. 1580, DI 11:838-45.

<sup>92</sup> Matteo Ricci to E. do Góis, Cochin, 18 Jan. 1580, DI 11:845.

<sup>93</sup> Valignano, *Summarium*, Shimo, August 1580, DI 13:282.

Malayalam.<sup>94</sup> In his Latin work, *De erroribus Nestorianum*, Ros's verdict is clear: In spite of Mar Abraham's apparently friendly face and acceptance of the Roman rites, in principle the dogma he preached and practiced were nothing less than Nestorian heresy.<sup>95</sup>

From the Second Ecclesiastical Council of Goa (1575) which Mar Abraham did not attend in person (for fear of being deported) but where instead he was represented by the Jesuits, his self-appointed protectors, and the Third Council in 1585, the wonderful friendship seemed to have been on the wane. The Third Council reiterated the decree imposing reforms of the Syrian rites, and gave strict orders to the Jesuits to correct the holy books.<sup>96</sup> What becomes clear from the Jesuit letters between 1585 and 1595 was Mar Abraham's jealousy at their success among the Christian fold.<sup>97</sup> And successful they were. One more reason for Mar Abraham's sudden assertion of autonomy might have been the fact that the Franciscans who supported his rival Mar Simeon had sent their protégé to Portugal in 1584. With him out of the way, Mar Abraham might have felt that the time was ripe to drop his burdensome friendship. The situation, however, had changed and many Christians were already lured to the Jesuit side.

#### *Education and Demons: Jesuit College in Vaipikotta*

The key institution from which a handful of Jesuits, who were never more than six at the time, launched their campaign among St. Thomas Christians was Vaipikotta College. It was a veritable nursery of "reformed" Christians, and more importantly of future Catholic priests and kattanars. Back in 1578, Dionysio was of opinion that the religious sensibility of St. Thomas Christians was so deprived, presumably because of paganism, that "no profit could be hoped for with the old, but only

<sup>94</sup> Valignano to Manuel Rodrigues, Goa, 27 Nov., 1587, DI 14:661.

<sup>95</sup> Francesco Ros (Roz), "De Erroribus Nestorianorum", 1586, ed. in *Orientalia Christiana*, vol. 11, 1928.

<sup>96</sup> The integral text of conclusions for all five Provincial Councils in Goa was printed by J. H. da Cunha Rivara, *Arquivo Portuguez Oriental*, 6 fasciculos em 10 partes, fasciculo 4 (Nova-Goa, 1862; reprint New Delhi, 1992).

<sup>97</sup> Another, perhaps central problem for Mar Abraham was financial. Payment for various religious ceremonies was important church revenue for the Syrian bishops. The Jesuits heard confessions and gave communion during the Easter of 1590 and these sacraments were free of charge. This made Mar Abraham very angry. The same year, Mar Abraham refused to ordain new priests from Vaipikotta seminary. Pedro Martins, annual letter, end of 1590, DI 15:558, 15:564-65.

with children".<sup>98</sup> By 1585, the first generation of well-educated Jesuit disciples graduated and was sent into their own community as missionaries/catechists. Besides studying major liturgical languages, Chaldean and Latin, they also received a thorough instruction in Malayalam, a vernacular language used for confession, indoctrination, moral cases (*casos de consciencia*), spiritual exercises, basic catechism, preaching sermons and other type of religious propaganda.<sup>99</sup> The residence and college of Vera Cruz de Vaipikotta was also a think-tank and intelligence center from which the Jesuits and their students were sent on particular missions in the neighboring states or other St. Thomas Christian settlements. Sump-tuous celebrations of various church holidays and saint's days, especially Roman and Marian, such as the *Festa da Transfiguração* (August 6) or the Assumption (August 15), were planned and rehearsed there.

Jesuit theatrical staging of martyrdom and double Masses—in Chaldean and Latin—were much in fashion and sought after. Rich kattanars insisted on celebrating their sons' first Mass (in Chaldean) with Jesuits performing their *missa-cantada*, followed by gun salutes and loud music. "Certainly, our Lord was consoled and rejoiced to see his Holy Church speaking various languages", noted Manoel Teixeira while describing various festivities in which Jesuits jointly celebrated certain holy days with "*caçanares*".<sup>100</sup> To what extent these celebrations resembled a typical baroque religious drama, and to what extent they were cultural hybrids with Hindu and Christian practices inextricably woven together may not be easily reconstructed. What can be sensed in the ripples of the Jesuit hagiographic narrative, through a direct address or like a ghost within a sheet, is a local world of supernatural beings that continued to have a grip over Christian, Hindu and Jesuit minds. While reforming and suppressing certain facets of St. Thomas Christians' popular religious sociability, the missionaries gave a fillip to some other modes of devotional and existential expression.

Christian demonology, transplanted into the world of South Indian popular religion, infested with innumerable forms of spirit possession, and governed by principle of immanent energy-source, the *shakti*, grew into an important field of action for the Jesuit missionaries and their disciples in Vaipikotta. From the late 1580s onwards, spectacular exorcisms, if one is to believe Jesuit annual reports and individual letters,

<sup>98</sup> Dionysio, Rector to Mercurian, Cochin, 2 Jan., 1578, DI 11:68.

<sup>99</sup> Pedro Martins, annual letter, Goa, Nov. 30, 1591, DI 15:666-7.

<sup>100</sup> Manoel Teixeira to Mercurian, Cochin, 30 Jan., 1580 DI 11:798-99.

became events highly visible and much appreciated by the St. Thomas Christian community. Therefore, seminarians from Vaipikotta were sent regularly to various places in order to heal and help tormented souls. In 1588, Fr. Bartolomeu dos Santos reported a few of these miraculous cases were accomplished successfully by one particularly talented seminarian whose name was never given in the text.<sup>101</sup> He seemed to have had a special touch for exorcising women. Female “demonic” possession—both spontaneous and willingly induced for the sake of communicating with the dead or solving some psychological or communal problem—is one of the distinctive features of South Indian emotional devotionism.<sup>102</sup> There is a wide variety of possessing agents such as *pēy* (malevolent spirit), *āvi* (ghosts of the persons who died a violent death), *nāga* (snakes), *yakshi* (tree and water spirits). Likewise, the goddess Kālī and god Murugan and their various local substitutes are all potentially powerful and dangerous divinities who mediate between supernatural, natural and social spheres.<sup>103</sup> These ubiquitous spirits easily crossed religious boundaries and attacked Muslims and Christians. A frenzied dance or violent shaking and hollering were the hallmark of the event. Early on, the Jesuits identified the phenomena as demonic effects and introduced a plethora of instruments to expurgate it.

The seminarian from Vaipikotta thus recited 7 Psalms before the daughter of a local Christian notable. When he arrived at *Miserere*, noted Bartolomeu dos Santos, the girl started thrashing her head and screaming. He then put the Breviary in her hands and she shouted that it was burning her hand until she relaxed and stopped. This was the sign that the demon left her body. He cured another woman by reading St. John’s Gospel over her head.<sup>104</sup> The narratives of exorcism among St. Thomas Christians and other newly converted communities in India, and particularly among women, dominate annual letters all through the 17th century and belong to a Jesuit literary sub-genre that deserves to

<sup>101</sup> Bartolomeu dos Santos to the Jesuits in Portugal, Cochin, end 1588, DI 15:164-6.

<sup>102</sup> Possession in India has been amply studied. For the most recent research see Isabelle Nabokov, *Religion against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*, (New York, 2000), and a controversial work by Sarah Caldwell: *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of Goddess Kālī* (New Delhi, 1999).

<sup>103</sup> Possession rituals, like *sarppam tullal* (snake possession), *mutiyattam* (dance drama and possession ritual), according to Sarah Caldwell, are the remnants of an ancient ecstatic female cult that no longer exists in Kerala (Malabar).

<sup>104</sup> Bartolomeu dos Santos to the Jesuits in Portugal, Cochin, end 1588, DI 15:165.

be better studied.<sup>105</sup> In comparison with growing contemporary anthropological literature on female possession, Jesuit accounts appear flat and missing the point. However, if the ritual of possession is healing or venting hidden, unconscious pent-up emotions, the Jesuit were also successful for better or for worse in resolving some of the social or psychological conflicts involved.

What the Jesuits did not care to discover was who those spirits really were, what were their names and their life stories—the information anthropologists would die to know—which would have revealed to them the neuralgic points built into the edifice of traumatized and troubled identities. By refusing to accord independent personhood to possessing spirits and to local deities, the Jesuits in fact slowly threw them out of the game. They became simple heathen demons, pure evil, which is not exactly how they were conceptualized in South India where they inflicted pain but also solved problems for all communities regardless of religious affiliation. But the story does not end here. Certain powers associated with these supernatural agents reappeared elsewhere, surreptitiously but permanently. And where else than in the newly reconstituted cult of saints and models of Christian holiness? It was in the miraculous and devotional revival that the reformed (henceforth Catholic) St. Thomas Christians recovered their own religious nerve. Newly empowered hybrid saints, such as St. George [Verghese]—who made his debut at this point but became a major saint during the British colonial era and is, incidentally, considered a brother of the goddess Kali—St. Sebastian, St. Gregorius, St. Thomas, the Virgin Mary and other lesser saints turned into powerful holy persons associated with excess of sacred power.<sup>106</sup> Thus St. George is a protector against snakebites, but in his rage might also send snakes to the offender of the divine. St. Gregorius protects against yakshi—the female vampire dwelling in sweet smelling pālā trees. St. Sebastian is considered efficient against smallpox and chickenpox usually associated with the Goddess (Mariamma).<sup>107</sup> In a

<sup>105</sup> For the sixteenth century, some of the letters are worth looking at, such as Francisco Cabral, Annual letter, Goa, Nov. 7, 1594, DI 16:698-756; Francisco Cabral, Annual, Goa, 29 Nov. 1595, DI 17:357-422, Francisco Cabral, Annual, 16 Dec. 1596, DI 18:646-84, Simão de Sá, Annual, Goa, 1 Jan. 1598, DI 18:867-932.

<sup>106</sup> A doctoral thesis focusing on possession and healing in a Catholic thaumaturgical sanctuary of Puliampati in Tamil Nadu has been recently defended by Brigitte Sebastia. It is the non-Catholics who come to use the powers of a Catholic saint in order to be exorcised from "Hindu" possessing agents. Brigitte Sebastia, *Les rondes de saint Antoine; Culte, affliction et possession à Puliampati (Inde du Sud)* Toulouse, 2004 (unpublished).

<sup>107</sup> The Goddess has various names: Kali, Durga, etc. In Europe, St. Sebastian was

word, with the suppression of “animistic” or “Hindu” spirits as one may call them today with a touch of anachronism, the St. Thomas Christians’ saints were infused with some of the sacred ambivalence characteristic of the non-Christian religious environment. Thus, they became excellent “managers of calamity” whose primary function was to solve human earthly problems.<sup>108</sup>

It would be farfetched to claim that the Jesuits stimulated unwittingly or “by mistake” the re-invention of Christian saints as Hindu gods and spirits. St. Thomas Christians were already a hybrid minority community in the region, tuned to the supernatural beings and events of their neighbors. What the Jesuits did was a simple redirection of the sacred energy into some new and some old channels. For example, to the cross and the tombs of their holy men (bishops and monks from Syria) that used to be the most venerated sacred places scattered through St. Thomas Christian religious landscape, the missionaries added sacred statues, icons, Latin books and Catholic relics. Without entering into a controversy as to whether or not, before the arrival of the Portuguese, the replication of holy figures was considered idolatrous and completely omitted from St. Thomas Christian churches, with the Catholic missionaries the statues and portraits of saints became conspicuous.

In a way, with the missionary help St. Thomas Christian community became aware of its particular position within the old regime of the Malabar (Kerala) system of kingship and kinship. Some historians defined this process that came to its apogee two centuries later under the onslaught of the Protestant missionary groups as “the collapse of Syrian Christian ‘integration’”.<sup>109</sup> Jesuit and other missionaries who came in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such as Discalced Carmelites, sent by the Propaganda Fide and the pope, and not by Portugal, all strove quite logically to make St. Thomas Christian church in *partibus infidelium* a sort of a miniature replica of a Roman church. As such it was also supposed to produce missionaries and send them further towards those dark areas of paganism.

When one reads Jesuit letters from the end of the 16th century, it appears as if under Jesuit pastoral care, an immense religious fervor was being created among St. Thomas Christians. Surely, Jesuits were masters of dramatic narratives and self-congratulating reports, but not

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associated with plague. The arrows sticking out of his body were metaphorically associated with the rays of God’s wrath.

<sup>108</sup> See Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood*.

<sup>109</sup> See Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*.

all can be a simple flicker of Jesuit imagination. By cultivating both Chaldean for the priestly class and Malayalam for the rest of the faithful, the Jesuits were able to use techniques that made good results elsewhere, among Tamil and Malayali fishermen, for example. In particular, by teaching them spiritual exercises, devotional introspection and the meaning of confession, all of which was novel to St. Thomas Christians, a new type of religious climate was brought into being. A climate of miraculous dramas and spectacular exorcism, but also one of endless conflicts between rival factions often supported by competing missionary orders such as Franciscans, Dominicans and later on Discalced Carmelites.

*The Success and Failure of the Synod of Diamper*

The culmination and in many ways an anti-climax of the Portuguese involvement with St. Thomas Christian community was the controversial Synod of Diamper (Udayamperur) in 1599. A *tour de force* of an ambitious prelate, Aleixo de Meneses, Archbishop of Goa, it took by surprise just about everybody.<sup>110</sup> He simply traveled down to Kerala and went to Udayamperur in spite of a growing hostility to Portuguese ecclesiastical institutions by various local factions. Although Mar Abraham made his peace with the Jesuits two years before he died in 1597, a successor whom he appointed during his lifetime and who was for years a very devoted follower of the Jesuits, a native St. Thomas Christian, Jorge de Cristo, became in his turn all but friendly to Portuguese interventions. Nevertheless, Aleixo de Meneses managed to surprise and bully into submission even his former enemies. They all signed the decree with which St. Thomas Christians were finally completely "reduced" to obedience to the Roman Church. He ordained many new priests who studied at the Vaipikotta seminary and who were recruited from traditionally non-priestly lineages. Since priesthood was hereditary, with this gesture the Archbishop of Goa shook the foundations of the old Christian social order. And yet, as if to confirm a famous adage *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, the Synod of Diamper happened to be the beginning of the end of the Catholic and Portuguese rule over St. Thomas Christians.

<sup>110</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Dom Frei Aleixo de Meneses (1559-1617) et l'échec des tentatives d'indigénisation du christianisme en Inde", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 43 année, no. 103 (juillet-septembre, 1998), 21-42.

The elaborate decrees of the Synod, which exist in Malayalam and in translation with quite a few addenda in Portuguese and Latin, show clearly the detailed knowledge of St. Thomas Christian religious and social beliefs and practices. Although Frey Aleixo de Meneses was an Augustinian and his *socius* and the first editor of the Decrees was his co-religionist, António de Gouvea, the knowledge collected about St. Thomas Christians was generated mostly by the Jesuits and their seminarians in Vaipikotta, some of whom were already priests when they entered the school.<sup>111</sup> At the face of it, the Synod decrees read like a discursive straitjacket with no accommodation whatsoever. Questions and resolutions (*decretos*) on faith, church, liturgy, rites, Nestorian and “pagan” errors were all addressed in nine Acts (*ações*). In particular, the *Ação Nona, Da reformação dos costumes*, an assault was made on “bad customs that have to be torn away from faithful people”.<sup>112</sup> The dangers of superstition and the “bad habits [or taste] of gentility that fill the whole Bishopric should be thrown out, and Christian people [would] stay in purity and cleanliness of Christianity”. Prior social forms of purity (*pureza*) such as ritual ablutions and the preservation of caste or occasional (menstrual, funeral, etc.) pollution rules were to be completely abolished. All substances used by the Christians in various life cycle ceremonies, such as drawing circles made out of rice around the newly wed, taking a thread out of a cloth before cutting it, and many other were to be forbidden as “superstitious customs” (*costumes supersticiosos*). Use of indigenous astrologers and “wizards” and participation in non-Christian major festivals such as Ona was also proscribed.

At the same time, while abolishing “superstitions”, the Synod of Diamper re-enforced the belief in spirit and demon possession.<sup>113</sup> These spirits and demons were then more clearly associated with their non-Christian neighbors and thus rendered religious and “caste” boundaries more visible. By emphasizing differences and particularities, and by investing ordained “native” priests with special powers to handle sacred objects, unwittingly, the Portuguese paved the way for further splintering of the St. Thomas Christians into smaller, independent churches. After a century of efforts at delegitimizing Syrian bishops, finally the sacred (the *muron* or the holy oil of ordination) did not have to be imported

<sup>111</sup> First published in 1606 in Coimbra.

<sup>112</sup> *Synodo Diocesano da Igreja e Bispo de Angamale dos antigos Christãos de S. Thome das Serras do Malavar das partes da India Oriental, Archivo Portuguez Oriental*, J. H. da Cunha Rivara, Nova Goa, 1862; reprint 1992), 488.

<sup>113</sup> *Synodo*, 427 and 475.

from Syria any more. But neither was it imported from Portugal. It was generated on the spot, and the Jesuits and the Portuguese in fact taught St. Thomas Christians how to rely on their own sacred powers all the while invoking their allegiance to some foreign and distant authority, such as the pope or the oriental patriarch. In 1652, it was enough for a group of disgruntled priests (kattanars) to lay their hand on the miraculous Koonen cross in Mattanceri to draw in the powers of consecration of a rebel *metran*.<sup>114</sup> A forged papal letter backing this Episcopal ordination was enough for the faithful to believe and obey the Archdeacon Thomas who became Mar Thoma I. Forgeries of this kind became a standard way of legitimating rival claims. Since it took years, financial resources and energy to disclaim or confirm any false or true official letter coming from some unpronounceably distant places, with some skill and vested with appropriate local authority, these forgeries worked miracles.<sup>115</sup> In addition, in a segmentary political system of the Kerala old regime where St. Thomas Christian church authority depended on support of local kings and kinglets, the splintering off of various Christian sects was all but inevitable. The capture of Cochin and most of the Portuguese holdings on the Malabar Coast from 1663 onwards by the Dutch, sealed the fate of any further Portugalization and left the Christians of St. Thomas divided for centuries to come.

The Synod of Diamper was surely a watershed event for St. Thomas Christians, but it was important for the Jesuit missionaries as well. Without anyone ever openly saying as much, the Synod of Diamper was considered something of a failure. Francisco Ros, a Jesuit who was appointed bishop of Angamali by Menezes, had to convoke another Synod in 1603 in order to tone down some of the laws introduced by the tempestuous Archbishop.<sup>116</sup> Finally, in 1606, Ros wrote a diocesan statute book in order to stabilize the situation among distressed and increasingly disgruntled lay and ecclesiastical elite. The latter, to make things more complicated, were often supported in their struggle against the Jesuits by Franciscans and the bishop of Cochin.<sup>117</sup> Since any

<sup>114</sup> In 1665, the Patriarch of Antioch legitimized their claims to independence from the Catholics by sending them a Jacobite primate. Brown, *The Indian Christians*, 111.

<sup>115</sup> Joseph Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India, vol. II, From the Middle of the Sixteenth to the End of the Seventeenth Century (1542-1700)* (Bangalore, 1982), 101.

<sup>116</sup> Ros to the Jesuit General, 26 Dec. 1603, Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesus [henceforth ARSI], Goa 15, ff. 155-6v. See also Giovanni Maria Campori to the Jesuit General, 9 Jan., 1604, ARSI, Goa, ff. 199.

<sup>117</sup> One of the results of the constant bickering between Ros and the Archdeacon

highhanded measure *à la* Menezes was a sure loser card, the Jesuits used a different technique that can be summarized as—what you cannot suppress, reinterpret. After Valignano and Matteo Ricci in China, this strategy acquired a name—accommodation.

*Accommodation and religious plurality*

Hence, no such name was used when dealing with St. Thomas Christians, though it was just that. In fact, Francesco Ros, was considered in his time one of the founding fathers of the Madurai Mission in the heart of the Tamil Nadu. Historians often neglect his role in the controversy between Roberto Nobili and his accommodationist supporters, and Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso and his diehard Portuguese “nationalists”.<sup>118</sup> He signed the famous treatise, *Narratio*, written by Nobili in order to give it greater legitimacy and he fully supported the idea that social and religious customs among the pagans were completely separate. Those that were proven purely social, therefore, should be allowed.<sup>119</sup>

By 1606 when Nobili arrived in Madurai and started his New Residence and mission among the high caste Tamils, the Jesuit missionaries among St. Thomas Christians had already learnt to tolerate a plethora of otherwise suspicious and superstitious customs that were not allowed to those converts that lived under Portuguese secular administration. When writing a letter to Claudio Aquaviva, the general of the Society of Jesus in Rome, on November 19, 1613, Ros insisted that, if Nobili’s high caste converts and St. Thomas Christians use certain ablutions in a manner of pagans it was not due to superstition but in order to preserve their high social rank.<sup>120</sup> According to Nobili’s elegant exposition, “these

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Jorge de Cristo—the coadjutor of the former Syrian archbishop Mar Abraham whose hopes to become Archbishop himself were trampled underfoot first by Menezes and then by Ros—was that the Jesuits were forced to soften their stance on “superstitious” customs which would have alienated further the popular support they badly needed among St. Thomas Christians.

<sup>118</sup> In my work I am equally guilty of this omission. Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuits Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India* (New Delhi, 1999).

<sup>119</sup> Thus he approved in 1615, Nobili’s *Narratio de quibus Moribus Nationis Indicae* because, as he put it, “to go easy on the subject of these customs, to be accommodating and conciliating is undoubtedly licit and necessary in these parts, as experience has taught us; whereas to repudiate this adaptation and a concession in cultural matters, would inevitably (morally speaking) result in the impossibility for any one out here to approach a preacher of the Gospel for instruction or to be converted to the faith.” S. Rajamanickam, ed., *Roberto de Nobili on Indian Customs (Narratio)* (Palayamkottai, 1972), 155.

<sup>120</sup> Ros, Francesco to Aquaviva, Cranganore, 19 Nov. 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 195-7.

people have one civil way of life (*civilem cultum*), but multiple "religion" (*religione vero multiplem*).<sup>121</sup> Although there is some doubt about what *religio* in this passage exactly means, since Nobili and most of his contemporaries commonly employ it in a sense of religious order or religious sect. However, judging from the context, Nobili comes closest in using the term in a modern sense of a single and unified religious system.

His was, therefore, a sweeping generalization in a manner uncannily similar to contemporary anthropological procedures from Luis Dumont onwards.<sup>122</sup> Like Dumont, Nobili thought that the Brahmans stood at the top of the caste hierarchy due to their social "purity". Hence, he constructed the hierarchical architecture with each place assigned to a particular lineage by using a top down, Brahmanical perspective. Unlike Dumont, Nobili did not have a ready made globe-encompassing theory, but had the same penchant for "ideal" types. The parallels between a seventeenth-century missionary and a twentieth-century anthropologist are, however, undermined by the fact that the former came to Tamil Nadu to change social relations and the latter to describe them.

A missionary also starts with description. According to Nobili all "Indians", pagan and Christian, such as St. Thomas Christians, follow the same ritual and social rules. This does not mean that they follow the same religion. Nobili, therefore, represented St. Thomas Christians—in spite of their complicated history of conversion and oblivion—as ancient and authentic Christians and in some respect closer to the originary moment of Christianity itself. Because of this closeness to paganism and Judaism, for that matter, they were tainted with the relics of the ancient "pagan" civil customs. And thus, the argument comes to a finale, it seemed logical enough that all that was permitted to St. Thomas Christians be also permitted to the converted "pagans" in Madurai or, if needs be, elsewhere in India.<sup>123</sup>

The encounter between the Jesuits and the St. Thomas Christians in the second part of the sixteenth century was for both sides a significant, if somewhat traumatic, opening to different cultural beliefs and routines. An important and understudied outcome of this encounter, documented here on the Jesuit side, was the possibility of accepting religious plurality, at least within Christianity. Obviously, the parallel events taking place in Europe such as the Protestant reformation, religious wars and

<sup>121</sup> Rajamanickam, *Narratio*, 112-113.

<sup>122</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago, 1980; orig. 1966).

<sup>123</sup> Rajamanickam, *Narratio*, 172-173.

the Council of Trent (1563) intersected in many indirect and direct ways with this local Indo-Portuguese affair. The answers to the questions of how to deal with religious diversity, in Christianity and globally, oscillated between demands for violent annihilation of the opponents and cultural relativism and political consensus. In a similar way, the controversial and notorious method of conversion called “accommodation”—employed in the Jesuit overseas missions among the “heathens”, has been first thought out and tested in their mission among the St. Thomas Christians in the late sixteenth century.

It was by looking at the antique Christians, a strange kind of Christians who closely resembled their Hindu and Muslim neighbors in India (in customs, rituals, skin color, etc.), that the Portuguese and especially the Jesuit missionaries developed the idea that Christianity could accommodate non-European “social customs” without getting intrinsically corrupt as a religion. Obviously, not everybody agreed with this kind of cultural alchemy. It comes as no surprise that the mission among the St. Thomas Christians (as well as all accommodationist missions in Asia) ultimately ended in failure. What remained, however, was a sharply defined dichotomy between the religion and civility. When the Jesuits first encountered the St. Thomas Christians this distinction has not yet been invented.

During the troubled sixteenth century, when the religious discontent in Europe spilled into all social landscapes at home and overseas, Catholic thinkers and their adversaries were haunted by the fundamental question of origins. As an ideal and ultimate referent, the origin of Christianity had to be located with precision within its temporal, spatial, and spiritual coordinates. For the Catholic Church dogmas, on the home ground, the most serious institutional challenge came from the Protestants and other Reformation sects. In the overseas missions the non-Christian religious specialists, who already possessed their own narratives of origin or would elaborate them as a response to the missionaries, presented an additional threat. What did not immediately become clear, was the fact that the missionaries’ defense of the Biblical periodization and their intellectual engagement with non-Christian religions created a fertile field of ideas that were to be used in the long run by the enemies of Christianity within Europe itself.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988). See also Sylvia Murr, “Les conditions d’émergence du discours sur l’Inde au siècle des Lumières”, *Purusartha* 7 (1983): 233-284.

The "disenchantment of the world", as Max Weber famously baptized the phenomenon of secularization from the 16th to 18th century is, therefore, engendered in a cultural dialogue.<sup>125</sup> Real, imaginary or emplotted as missionary ventriloquism, this dialogue was widely circulated, transmitted, built into and shot through other communication conduits. The result was that while defending Catholic dogmas from the attacks of the non-Christians and non-Catholics, the most efficient arguments, the best epistemological and rhetorical strategies happened to be the most damaging to the Catholic theological and teleological foundations.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>125</sup> On the complicated genealogy of the terms "secular" and "secularism", see Talal Asad, *Formation of the Secular, Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), 1-66.

<sup>126</sup> Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India* (New Delhi, 1999).