

# CHRISTIANITY AND NATIVE CULTURES



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**Perspectives from Different Regions of the World**

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# INTERFACE BETWEEN HISTORY AND MUSIC IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT OF SOUTH INDIA

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Christianity in South India is a complex socio-religious phenomenon encompassing an array of sects and practices. The diversity of the Christian experience in this geographical area that consists of five states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Goa) is the result of multiple missionary enterprises, dating probably as far back as the middle of the first century. According to the information available in the *Indian Christian Directory*, published by Rashtra Deepika in 2000, there are more than thirty-three Churches active in South India. These Churches may be divided into seven broad categories: the Syrian Church, whose members are also known as St. Thomas Christians; the Latin (Roman) rite Church; the Lutheran Church; the Anglican Church; the Methodist Church; the Baptist Church; and the Pentecostal Church. The membership varies from a few thousand up to several million. In the absence of exact statistical data, we may estimate that out of the thirty million Christians in India, about twenty million live in the South. They constitute a diverse set of communities shaped by language, culture, and even caste.

Although the early history of these churches is inevitably linked to the history of individuals and their places of origin (the Middle East, Europe, and America), each Church has developed its own character in India over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> The interaction between divergent religious and theological perspectives, proselytization policies, and attitudes toward indigenous and foreign cultures are among the many factors that contributed to the formation of their particular histories which, in turn,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. I, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (Up to 1542)*, (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1989; First published in 1984).



are embedded in the larger history of South India.

Music has been an integral part of the Christian experience, and musicological discourse can be an effective tool in historiography. The music history of these churches can enhance our understanding of their general history and vice versa. The formation and transformation of musical styles in any given culture are often closely associated with events of historical significance mediated by individuals and communities. A community's awareness of its mission and identity can affect its musical choices regarding what is retained by one generation and what is transmitted to the next. Musical memories preserved and transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition can be a valuable source of information, especially when there is a dearth of written documents.

My focus here is the musical history of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala to show how musical and historical inquiries can be interdependent. As we shall see later, sometimes a single chant can tell us the story of interactions at multiple levels between distant regions and diverse peoples within a span of several centuries.

The vast musical repertory of the Syro-Malabar Church consists of a wide variety of genres ranging from the ancient Syriac chants of St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) to the most modern compositions intended for multimedia consumption. For practical purposes, I shall limit my inquiry to the liturgical music genre, and within the liturgical music genre to the history of the Syriac chant tradition from what may be called the Portuguese period, dating from the early sixteenth century.

The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the seven Syrian Churches, or more appropriately, 'Syriac Churches' of South India that use Syriac language and music in their liturgy. Syriac is a form of Aramaic, which developed as an independent dialect in the first century AD, and became the literary language of the Aramaic-speaking Christians. By the fifth century, Syriac differentiated itself into East Syriac and West Syriac on the basis of the method of writing and the manner of pronunciation. Edessa, which was outside the boundary of the Roman Empire, became the center for the East Syriac (also known as Chaldean) liturgical tradition, and Antioch, which was within the boundary of the Roman Empire, became the center for the West Syriac (also known as Antiochean) tradition. The Syro-Malabar Church follows the Chaldean liturgical tradition with a few elements adopted from the Latin liturgy. The name 'Syro-Malabar Church' is the official designation given by Rome in 1896 to the section of the St. Thomas Christians which is in communion with the



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