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THE HISTORY OF THE SEVENTH DAY SABBATH IN INDIA UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

Gordon E. Christo



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Introduction

Though post-Millerite Sabbatarian Adventists pointed to India as one of the places where the seventh-day Sabbath had been preserved,¹ the historicity of the seventh-day Sabbath among Christians in India has been considered unsubstantiated by more recent Seventh-day Adventist scholarship.² Nevertheless, several Adventist authors continue to proclaim that church groups in India, especially the Thomas Christians of Kerala, had observed the seventh-day Sabbath from practically the apostolic period onwards.³

Interestingly, the case for the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath by the Thomas Christians before the arrival of the Portuguese has received support from a number of non-Adventists, the most prominent of them being Prof. M. M. Ninan, brother of the eminent M. M. Thomas, one-time chairman of the World Council of Churches and chairman of the Christian Institute for the Study of Society and Religion. The brothers are members of the Malankara Mar Thoma Church.⁴ Ninan dates the change from Sabbath to Sunday to the Synod of Diamper and links the rare admission by the Catholic Church of Latinization of an Eastern rite to the change from Sabbath to Sunday in India.⁵

Additionally, a prominent non-Adventist evangelist of Kerala, editor of the journal *Dharmadeepti*, includes “observance of Sunday” as one of the goods imported by the Roman Catholic Church through

¹ To his student Kunjukunjukutty Yohannan the author owes the idea for this research. See also n. 50 in this publication. J. N. Andrews, *Bible Record of the Sabbath and the Manner in Which It Has Been Supplanted by the Heathen Festival of the Sun* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1859), 91–92, mentions the Armenians in India as described by Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia: With Notices of the Translation of the Scriptures Into the Oriental Languages* (Boston, MA: Samuel Armstrong, 1811). J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, 2nd ed. (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1873), 427–431, refers to the Armenians again and also cites Thomas Yeates, *East Indian Church History* (London: Maxwell, Bell Yard, 1818), referring to Sabbath observance among the Thomas Christians.

² Werner Vyhmeister, “The Sabbath in Asia,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 160, states, “There are no known references to Sabbath observance by the church in India before the arrival of the Portuguese.”

³ H. H. Meyers, *The Inquisitive Christians* (Morisset: New Millennium, 1992) and Benjamin George Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness* (Rapidan, VA: Hartland, 1997).

⁴ See the profile of M. M. Ninan and M. M. Thomas in “About M. M. Ninan,” Smashwords, <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/mmninan> (accessed January 30, 2020).

⁵ M. M. Ninan, *History of Christianity in India* (San Jose, CA: Talent Share, 2012), 109, citing J. Monteiro D’Aguiar, “Diocese of Cochin,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), s.v.

the Portuguese in the sixteenth century AD.⁶ The popular online *New World Encyclopedia* repeatedly mentions the ritual observance of the Jewish Sabbath on Saturdays by the Saint Thomas Christians.⁷ It would seem that these non-Sabbath keepers would have had no reason to defend the observance of the Saturday Sabbath in India unless it was at least a probability, if not a reality.

It must be noted that the reason the historicity of the Sabbath cannot be substantiated is simply because there are no written records that specifically document the observance of the seventh day as a Sabbath. However, for that matter, neither is there any known record of Sunday being observed as a Sabbath before the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century AD. When “Sabbath” is mentioned in their old documents, some assume it refers to Saturday while others presume it refers to Sunday.⁸

Members of the ancient Christian church of India either failed to record specifically which day was Sabbath or, if such documents did exist at one time, they were destroyed as a result of the Synod of Diamper.⁹ There are a few documents that survived that carnage,¹⁰ but so far they have not been seen to shed any light on the observance of any holy day. Therefore, most of the references to be noted are by the Portuguese themselves or by travelers who visited India. These records understandably have their own objectives, and references to the Sabbath are oblique.

⁶ Thiruvattar Krishnankutty, *Yesu Kristhu Sampoorana Viplavarkari* (Eraviperoor: Noble, 1988), 7, lists “pope, priests, cardinals, nuns, worship of saints, bowing to the cross, purgatory, mass, and the veneration of the Virgin Mary.”

⁷ *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Saint Thomas Christians,” https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saint_Thomas_Christians (accessed January 30, 2020).

⁸ Vyhmeister, 160, suggests that the absence of documentary evidence gives some the “freedom to speculate,” citing Stephen Neill, *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 19, and John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 123, who assume that the Thomas Christians observed Sunday even before the Portuguese arrived. Neill mentions “Sabbath” but understands that to refer to Sunday. Stewart believes the mention of the “Lord’s Day” in an ancient Sanskrit fable to have been influenced by Sunday observance as the Sabbath (ibid., 94).

⁹ The correction and burning of condemned books is mentioned in Action I, Decree 2; Action II, Decree 2; Action III, Decrees 2, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19; and Action V, Decree 2. See Michael Geddes, *The History of the Church of Malabar [. . .] with some Remarks upon the Faith and Doctrine of the Christians of St. Thomas in the Indies, agreeing with the Church of England, in opposition to that of Rome* (London: Sam Smith and Benj. Walford, 1694), <https://ia802901.us.archive.org/9/items/historyofchurcho00gedd/historyofchurcho00gedd.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2020). The burning of the books and manuscripts is recorded on pp. 426–428.

¹⁰ Istvan Perczel, “Have the Flames of Diamper Destroyed All the Old Manuscripts of the St Thomas Christians?” *The Harp: A Review of Syriac and Oriental Ecumenical Studies* 20 (2006): 87–104.

However, besides Thomas Christians, Armenians have also lived in India for centuries and their observance of a holy day is perhaps better recorded, and will be reviewed in this study. Finally, the discovery in the nineteenth century of a group of Hindu Christians observing the seventh-day Sabbath will be examined.

Early Presence of Jews in India

India is said to have the fourth largest community of Jews in Asia.¹¹ The early presence of Jews in India increases the likelihood for the early presence of Christians because where the Jews went, Christians could follow. The earliest Christian missionaries generally witnessed first to the Jews of the land, if any were present.¹² At least three major communities of Jews have thrived in India for centuries,¹³ of which the oldest two are of interest to this study.

Bene Israel

The largest Jewish community in India is the Bene Israel, who settled in the Colaba area of Mumbai. The Jews of this group appear to be like their native Indian neighbors, a clear result of intermarriage over a long period of time. This group celebrated the Jewish holidays, observed the weekly Sabbath, practiced circumcision of males on the eighth day, followed Jewish dietary laws, and recited the first verse of the Shema.¹⁴ Their own tradition is that they descended from seven couples who came from a vague “country to the north,” landing in India after a shipwreck. One interpretation of the “country to the north” is that they are remnants of the “northern kingdom” of Israel. Elijah is prominent in their traditions, supporting the theory that they left Palestine in the eighth century BC. Other theories have them tarrying along the way and reaching India any time up to the sixth century AD.¹⁵ Sabbath observance appeared as their most prominent characteristic and they were labelled by their local neighbors as

¹¹ Daniel J. Elazar, “The Jewish Community of India,” Jewish Community Studies, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/india.htm> (accessed April 1, 2020). The countries in Asia with the largest Jewish population are Israel, the Asian part of Russia, and Iran.

¹² See Acts 11:19; 19:10; Romans 1:16. The apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* 8 describes the first convert of Thomas as a Jewish flautist.

¹³ Two additional communities are the Bnei Menashe of Manipur and Mizoram, and the Bene Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh, who have been accepted as the descendants of the so-called “lost tribes” of Manasseh and Ephraim. They would therefore be not strictly descended from Jews, but from the Israelites.

¹⁴ Shirley Berry Isenberg, “The Bene Israel,” in *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, ed. Orpa Slapak (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1995), 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

shaniwar teli, “Saturday oil (pressers),” ostensibly because they abstained from this work on their Sabbath.¹⁶

Though Israel’s chief rabbi Yitzchak Nissim was initially skeptical of their lineage, the Bene Israel received a rabbinical ruling in 1964 that they were “full Jews in every respect.”¹⁷ Recently, DNA testing has substantiated their claims, showing that while they resembled other Indians, they had unique features that showed they shared considerable genetic ancestry with other Jewish populations.¹⁸

Cochin Jews

Native Indians classify the Jews of Cochin as *kala* (black) and *gora* (white) Jews. The black Jews are the ones who have lived the longest in India and have mixed with the local population sufficiently that they resemble the natives. The white Jews are a mix of Middle Eastern and European Jews who arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth century AD.¹⁹

The black Jews claim that their connections with Israel go back to the time of King Solomon, who imported gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks (1 Kgs 10:22). The Bible does not mention where these goods came from, but one of the oldest traditions is that they were from India.²⁰ Prof. Max Muller theorizes that the items mentioned are Hebrew corruptions of loan words from Sanskrit, and Dr. Robert Caldwell argues that these were really Dravidian (South Indian) words brought into Sanskrit.²¹

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Bene Israel,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bene-Israel> (accessed April 1, 2020).

¹⁷ Adam Eliyahu Berkowitz, “With DNA Tests, Mystery of the ‘Lost Tribe’ of Indian Jews Finally Solved,” *Breaking Israel News*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/65744/lost-tribe-found-new-dna-tests-prove-bnei-israel-india-share-jewish-genes/> (accessed April 1, 2020).

¹⁸ Yedael Y. Waldman et al., “The Genetics of Bene Israel from India Reveals Both Substantial Jewish and Indian Ancestry I,” *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0152056> (accessed August 2, 2019). The study concluded that the admixture took place between nineteen and thirty-three generations ago—approximately six hundred to one thousand years ago. This is not indicative of when they entered India, but when intermarriage commenced.

¹⁹ Many of the white Jews came to India to escape the Spanish Inquisition and the Portuguese Inquisition that followed in 1541. They, too, settled in Cochin. See Anant K. Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition* (Bombay: Bombay University Press, 1961), 19–22.

²⁰ Josephus identifies Ophir with India (*Jewish Antiquities* 8.164) and the river Pison with the river Ganges (*ibid.* 1.38).

²¹ See K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1984), 1:298, and K. K. Pilai, *South Indian History* (Trichur: Current Books, 1960), 38. According to Esther 8:9 and 9:30, the Persian Empire extended to India and the edicts of Ahasuerus were sent to all the provinces. The Jews appear to have been that widely scattered by that time. For historical confirmation of this, see Joseph S. Exell, *Biblical Illustrator*

There are proposals for other countries as sources for these items, but the three years mentioned for the round trip and the idea that this was understood as an uncommon voyage suggest that these items were imported from a distant land. The Jewish synagogue at Mattamchery has a series of ancient pictorial plaques recounting the history of the Jewish settlement in India. The first one illustrates trade between Solomon and India.²² While those plates are not much older than a thousand years, yet they reflect the stoutly held tradition of the Cochin Jews.

Genetic study has also been conducted for this group. It cannot pinpoint when the first of them entered India, but it can establish whether they have a Jewish heritage and, if so, whether there has been any admixture with the local population and when it began. An ancient genetic connection with Jews has been established and more recent infusion has also been documented.²³

Other traditions have the Cochin Jews arriving during the Babylonian exile, at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, or as late as the fourth-century migration from Spain.²⁴ There were probably several waves of arrivals. While it cannot be established exactly when Jews first came to India, the general consensus among historians seems to be that the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews must have arrived at least by the second century BC. The routes seem to have been considerably well traveled by then.²⁵

In support of that theory, Philo makes several references to India—not only to its elephants and tigers,²⁶ but also to its philosophers. He relates how Alexander the Great sought to fetch Calanus, a Gymnosophist from India, to prove to the West the wisdom and virtues of the East.²⁷ Josephus refers to the toparchs of India at the time of Darius and Zerubbabel.²⁸

Many of the Jews who came at this time are thought to have been Essenes who disappeared from the Dead Sea area around AD 70.²⁹

(Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.), s.v. “Esther.”

²² Barbara C. Johnson, “The Cochin Jews of Kerala,” in Slapak, 27.

²³ Yedaël Y. Waldman et al., “The Genetic History of Cochin Jews From India,” *Human Genetics* 135 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00439-016-1698-y> (accessed February 20, 2020).

²⁴ Johnson, 27.

²⁵ T. V. Philip, *East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia* (Mumbai: ISPCK, 1998), 110–151; cf. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 51.

²⁶ Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 89. See also J. H. A. Hart, “Philo of Alexandria,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 17, no. 4 (1905): 731–737.

²⁷ Philo, *That Every Good Person Is Free* 93–96.

²⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.33.

²⁹ P. V. Mathew, *Acta Indica* (Cochin, 1986), 66–67.

The Essenes were noted for their piety³⁰ and were strict observers of the Sabbath.³¹ Some of the Essenes are thought to have gone to Damascus and Antioch, but many were scattered to different parts of the world.³² This Essene theory lays a foundation for a possible connection between the Syrian Church and the Indian Church. The Tamil epic *Manimekalai*, written in the third century AD, refers to the Jews as *Issanis* (Essenes).³³

The first Christian missionaries would naturally have started calling upon the Jews who shared the same Scriptures and who were looking for the Messiah. Indeed, according to early Christian tradition, Thomas began evangelizing the Jewish colonies of Kerala and establishing churches, though it includes the conversion of Hindus as well as Jews.³⁴

Early Christianity in India

The ministry of the apostle Thomas in India is founded upon traditions and legends whose historical validity cannot be verified because there are no written records. The Jesuits, despite supporting that tradition, maintain that there were never any records.³⁵ That may be, but what documents were destroyed as a result of the decisions at the Synod of Diamper will never be known.

Yet the traditions of the Thomas Christians are so strong and persistent that the lack of standard historical documentation cannot be used as proof that the Thomas tradition is mythology or fantasy. Practically every family among the Syrian Christians of Kerala has a son named Thomas. The pride in their connection to an apostle is akin to those in Bible times who hailed connections to Paul, Apollos,

³⁰ Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Essenes," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 5:164.

³¹ Jean Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity* (London: Omega, 1958), 123.

³² *Ibid.*, 90, 102, suggests that the church Paul founded in Damascus was of converted Essenes.

³³ Cattamar Citalai, *Manimekalai* (Madras: Parinilayam, 1963), 106, 311–312.

³⁴ For a description of the Jews in North India, see Thomas A. Timberg, *Jews in India* (Sabidabad: Vikas, 1986), 128.

³⁵ According to A. Medlycott, "St. Thomas Christians," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14678a.htm#VI> (accessed January 30, 2020), among the manuscripts in the British Museum left by Jesuit missionaries is a "Report" on the "Serra," the name by which the Portuguese referred to Malabar, written in Portuguese, dated 1604, with no name attached, which is yet unpublished. The writer states that these Christians had no written records of their history, but relied on traditions which they clung to tenaciously.

and Peter (1 Cor 1:10).³⁶ Significantly, no other country has laid any rival claim to Thomas having carried the gospel to their land.

The Report of Pantaneus

Pantaneus is said to have visited India circa AD 180–190 and met with a Christian community in the south of India who possessed a gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, left to them by the apostle Bartholomew. The visit is mentioned by Jerome,³⁷ who reports that a delegation from India had visited Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria, to depute Pantaneus to India. The visit is elaborated on further by Eusebius thus:

Pantaneus also was one of these, and is mentioned as having gone to India; and the story goes that there he found, in the hands of some persons who had come to know Christ in that land, the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his arrival; for that Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left behind the writing of Matthew in the actual Hebrew characters, and that it was preserved up to the said time.³⁸

Despite the mention of the purpose of the journey being “to evangelize Brahmins,” the visit of Pantaneus to India, as it is known today, is rejected by the Syriac scholar Alphonse Mingana, who believed beyond doubt that the India mentioned by Jerome and Eusebius had been “established” as Arabia Felix or Ethiopia, and hence he was convinced that no serious historian would associate Pantaneus with India proper.³⁹ Nevertheless, Mingana addresses the matter because two recent historians had accepted it.⁴⁰ Stephen Neill disputes Mingana’s conviction, claiming that with hundreds of ships sailing between Egypt and India, it was “very unlikely that anyone in Alexandria could be the victim of such confusion.”⁴¹

³⁶ See Crista Nalani Anderson, “The Origins of Christian Society in Ancient India” (Honors Scholar thesis, University of Connecticut, 2012).

³⁷ Jerome, *Epistulae* 70, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4 (1886–1889; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 150. Jerome writes that a delegation from India came to Alexandria to request that Clement, a pupil of Pantaneus, be sent to India.

³⁸ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.10.

³⁹ Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), shows that “India,” as a generic term, did include portions of Africa and Arabia.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 449, mentions Milne-Rae and G. Smith.

⁴¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40.

The significance of Pantaneus' visit is considerable: 1) It corroborates the tradition of a first-century Christian community in India associated with an apostle, albeit Bartholomew.⁴² 2) It witnesses that the Indian Christians were in communication with the church at Alexandria. 3) The mention of a gospel "in Hebrew characters" (which was possibly Aramaic)⁴³ suggests that the community had a Jewish background. 4) This indicates that the missionaries who brought the gospel were not the Greek-speaking missionary group from Antioch, but Aramaic speakers.⁴⁴

"The Doctrine of the Apostles"

Mingana states that the undisputed association of Thomas with India begins with an unknown author of "The Doctrine of the Apostles," in the Edessene Canons, dated to around AD 250. The writer, who could not be influenced by the later *Acts of Thomas*, states,

India and all its countries, and those bordering on it, even to the farthest sea, received the apostle's hand of priesthood from Judas Thomas who was guide and ruler in the church which he built there, and ministered there.⁴⁵

Mingana deduces from this that a Christian community must have existed in India during the time of the author, or else he would have had to explain how the Christian community had vanished.⁴⁶

The Acts of Thomas

The apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*⁴⁷ begins with the story of how India fell by lot to Thomas. The reluctant Thomas ended up in the court of King Gudnaphar and converted both the king and his brother. Like

⁴² While some suggest that Kalyan near Mumbai is to be identified with Bartholomew, others opine that Pantaneus confused *Mar Thoma* with *Bar Tolmai* when the native Christians reported their possession to him. See "Mission of Saint Bartholomew, The Apostle in India," NSC Network, October 10, 2014, <https://www.nasrani.net/2007/02/13/saint-bartholomew-mission-in-india/> (accessed February 19, 2020).

⁴³ Philip, *East of the Euphrates*, allows for the gospel to be a copy of the gospel in Aramaic, which was earlier in the possession of the Jewish Christian community in Edessa.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mingana, 448, quoting from W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), 33 (a manuscript dating from the fifth century).

⁴⁶ Mingana, 448, allows for the Edessene author to be in error about what took place 180 years earlier, but acknowledges the presence of an established Christian community during his day.

⁴⁷ A Gnostic document written in Syriac at the turn of the third century AD. See A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

other apocryphal books, the story includes some strange, miraculous events. Further, for centuries nothing was known of any such king and he was considered mythical. However, coins have been found at the Indus Valley bearing the name “Gondophares,” a king of the Parthian dynasty that ruled the area of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North India from 95 BC to 50 AD.⁴⁸ An inscribed stone tablet unearthed in Pakistan provides chronological data for the reign of Gudnaphar, which has been calculated to AD 19–50.⁴⁹ These discoveries lend renewed support for the tradition of the apostle’s ministry in India.

Traditions of the Thomas Christians⁵⁰

According to traditions of the Thomas Christians in India, the apostle came by sea to Cranganore about AD 52, converted several high-caste Hindu families, and established seven churches. The general consensus is that Thomas came twice to India—first to the north around AD 45, and then to the south around AD 52.⁵¹ Songs in Kerala (South India) that had been passed down orally till they were written down a few hundred years ago refer to the coming of Thomas and his building a palace. Priestly families claim a numerical succession that goes back to Thomas, counting from the first priest ordained by him. A Kerala wedding song, the “Song of Thomas,” dates the coming of the apostle to AD 50. It was written at least as early as AD 1601 and, before that, it is claimed to have been passed down orally for forty-eight generations.⁵²

The apostle is said to have established churches at Cranganore, Kollam, Chayal, Quilon, Niranam, Kotta Kayal, and Palayur. According to a local tradition, Thomas was killed by a priest of King

⁴⁸ See Neill, *Story of the Christian Church*, 17. See also the coins at “50 Coins in 2,500 Years: A Numismatic Walk Through Indian History,” CoinIndia, <http://coinindia.com/fifty-coins2.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).

⁴⁹ Saifur Rahman Dar, “Dating the Monuments of Taxila,” *Studies in the History of Art* 31 (1993): 103–122. For more information on the chronology of the dynasty, see D. Babu Paul, *The Syrian Orthodox Christians of St. Thomas* (Trivandrum: T. P. Mathew, 1995), 25.

⁵⁰ The author of the present study is indebted for most of this section on Thomas Christians to his student Kunjukunjukutty Yohannan, *Using the Heritage of the St Thomas Christians to Develop an Outreach Strategy* (D.Min. diss., Andrews University, 2000). It is a Christian community that he himself has roots in.

⁵¹ A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1 (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 24, includes in support J. N. Farquhar, Adolf Medlycott, Eugene Card, and Tisserant.

⁵² Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 34, also refers to A. Mathias Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1970), 60–63.

Mahadevan at Mylapore around AD 72.⁵³ The mountain is today known as St. Thomas Mount and a basilica marks the spot.

What lends some credibility to these traditions of the Thomas Christians are the facts that several routes to India were known and used, extensive trade was conducted between India and the Mediterranean, and several Jewish communities existed in India.

Thomas Christians and the Sabbath

In the absence of any direct statement as to the observance of a particular day of the week as the Sabbath, various conclusions from the available references have been drawn. It is possible to assume that the Thomas Christians kept Saturday or Sunday or even both days.

Absence of Anti-Judaism in India

A major factor that led to the rise of Sunday worship in the West, as Samuele Bacchiocchi points out, were anti-Semitic attitudes and measures.⁵⁴ After the death of Nero, practice of the Jewish religion was repressed, making observance of the Sabbath risky. Werner Vyhmeister lists additional factors that contributed to the rise of Sunday observance in Asian countries:

1. The prestige of a day commanded by Roman imperial law since the time of Constantine
2. The connection made by Christian writers between Sunday and Christ's resurrection, at the expense of the Sabbath as a memorial of creation
3. Persistent anti-Semitism
4. To a lesser degree, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church⁵⁵

Vyhmeister elaborates on the important role of antisemitism as expressed through church canons and Byzantine legislation. He refers to Canon 29 of the Synod of Laodicea, which reads,

Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honouring the Lord's Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any

⁵³ M. O. Joseph, *Kerala Kristhi Yanikal* ["History of Christians in Kerala"] (Cochin: LFI, 1972), 54–61.

⁵⁴ Samuele Bacchiocchi, "The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity," in Strand, 136–137.

⁵⁵ Vyhmeister, 153.

shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ.⁵⁶

Several other canons of the Synod also refer to unlawful participation in Jewish practice and services:

Canon 37. It is not lawful to receive portions sent from the feasts of Jews or heretics, nor to feast together with them.

Canon 38. It is not lawful to receive unleavened bread from the Jews, nor to be partakers of their impiety.⁵⁷

Vyhmeister also refers to a few *Apostolic Canons* dating slightly later, which add to the prohibitions regarding associations with Jews: entering a synagogue to pray (Canon 65), fasting with Jews or keeping their festivals (Canon 70), and carrying oil into a synagogue or lighting the lamps at their festivals (Canon 71). Significantly, the penalty for most of these infractions is “suspension,” whereas the penalty for Judaizing is anathematization, making the punishment for Sabbath observance far more serious.⁵⁸

The situation was generally very different in the congregations of the East, including India, where the influence of Roman law and the Roman Catholic Church was negligible⁵⁹ and anti-Semitism was absent. In fact, India is one country where there has never been any anti-Jewish sentiment.⁶⁰ The Jews were welcomed by the local kings, granted land to settle in, and given trading privileges. When Christianity arrived in Asia it was Judaistic Christianity, and it spread first among the Jewish settlers.⁶¹

Therefore, even if one were to allow for the possibility of Sunday worship creeping in, it would still be challenging to explain the total cessation of worship on Saturday as the Sabbath apart from foreign interference.

The good relations between Jews and Christians in India can be illustrated through the copper plates that record the grants, rights, and privileges given in perpetuity to both Jews and Christians in the Cochin area by the local king.⁶² Another set of copper plates is

⁵⁶ Vyhmeister, 153, citing Schaff and Wace, 14:148.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Vyhmeister, 153.

⁵⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 459.

⁶⁰ “Jews of India,” World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Groups, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/jews-of-india/> (accessed February 19, 2020).

⁶¹ Philip, *East of the Euphrates*.

⁶² S. N. Rao, “Encounters of Hindus with the Ancient Thomas Christians in Kerala,” *Journal*

interesting for their description of a bond between Christians and Jews. The following is taken from a description of the copper plates from the website of the Nasrani:

King Ayyanadigal also granted another set of privileges through the Copper plates issued around 880 AD, slightly after the first plate. These also refer to the Church of Kollam, the leaders of the Jews at Kollam and the authorized leaders of Manigramam or indigenous Christians of Kollam, who were there even before the arrival of Sabriso. The King granted one family of carpenters, four families of Vellalas and two of another caste and extensive land within the specified limits. The Church obtained the right to try the case of the people living in the area granted to the Church. The Church and its lands were to be protected by the six hundred (probably Vendau Militia) and the leaders of the Jews and the Manigramam.⁶³

It would be reasonable to expect that an older Christian community would be interested in protecting the new community of Christians. Assigning an army contingent to be responsible for the safety of the group is also understandable. What is surprising, however, is that Jews were also asked to join in protecting the Christians. Furthermore, some of the witnesses signed the grant to Christians with Hebrew characters. All this suggests that the Jews and Christians in India through the centuries were on very good terms.⁶⁴

In fact, it is this very close association between Jews and Christians that is considered to be “an immediate cause for the introduction of the Inquisition in Goa.” Anant Priolkar quotes one whom he refers to as an eminent Jesuit historian, Francisco de Souza:

of Dharma: Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies 19, no. 2 (1994): 141, states, “These plates deal with the recognition of privileges granted by the Hindu chieftains to the leaders of the Syrian groups in Cranganore and Quilon—The earliest document is a grant to Thomas Cana in 372 A.D. The second, dated 774 A.D., relates to Iravan Kortan, Chief of the Christians of Cranganore. The third and fourth, both dated, 849 A.D., are addressed to the local Church established by Maravan Sapir Iso at Quilon. These plates have been analysed by Houtart and Lemerclinier.”

⁶³ “The Edicts, Copper Plates and Privileges—Quilon (Tarisapalli) Plates, Thazhekad Edict, Iravi Kortan Plate and Cana Thomman Plate,” NSC Network, last modified October 12, 2014, <https://www.nasrani.net/2007/02/16/the-plates-and-the-privileges/> (accessed February 20, 2020). See also T. K. Joseph, *Malabar Christians and Their Ancient Documents* (Trivandrum: Popular Press, 1929), 35.

⁶⁴ Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 44–46.

Whilst in the island of Goa, heated efforts were made to destroy Hinduism, Father Provincial Gonsalvo da Silveira [sic] and Bishop Belchior Carneiro were moving about in Cochin persecuting the insidious Judaism. These priests came to know how in that city were living some descendants of the Israelite people rich and possessing much, but infected with Judaism as a consequence of their proximity with communication with the Jews of Cochin who had been converted from Hinduism many centuries ago.⁶⁵

This observation reveals that as late as the middle of the seventeenth century, Jews and Christians were living together harmoniously in Cochin and there appear to have been some common areas of faith and practice.

Significance of the Nestorian Connection

As mentioned before, very little is known about Christianity in India before the sixteenth century. There are several reasons for this. Paper and ink was not available and writing was done with nails on palm leaves. Also, as noted earlier, nearly all of the old records, especially those in Syriac, were destroyed by the Portuguese.

While the Roman Catholics declare that the churches in India generally flourished in isolation,⁶⁶ Mingana claims that no church could flourish for any length of time without bishops, priests, deacons, and sacred books. He describes the strong connection between Indian Christians and the Syrian Church as follows:

Any attempt to speak of early Christianity in India as different from the East Syrian church is bound to fail. Christianity in India constituted an integral part of the church that began to develop vigorously towards the end of the first century in the Tigris Valley. . . . Thomas may have gone to India and made some converts there, but these converts have never had an independent existence of their own as a church.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Francisco de Sousa, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Cristo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Examiner Press, 1881), 82, quoted in Priolkar, 24–25.

⁶⁶ See Alex J. D. D'Orsay, *Portuguese Discoveries, Dependencies and Missions in Asia and Africa* (London: W. H. Allen, 1893), 64.

⁶⁷ Mingana, 40–41.

T. V. Philip quotes Robyn Boyd as stating that although almost nothing is known regarding the theology of the Indian Church during the early period, we can understand something about the beliefs and practices based on the Nestorian connection.⁶⁸

It is recognized that up to the middle of the fifth century, Christians around the world were still observing the Jewish Sabbath.⁶⁹ When Nestor, Bishop of Constantinople, was deposed in the Arian controversy, he was supported by the churches of Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Armenia, Ethiopia, and Coptic Egypt, all of which were thereafter referred to as the churches of the East.

Syrian Christians, as observed by the traveler Samuel Purchas in the sixteenth century AD, had eight outstanding characteristics, two of which interest us here:

1. That they celebrate Divine Service as solemnly on the Sabbath, as on the Lords day.
2. That they keepe that day festivall, eating therein flesh, and fast no Saturday in the yeere but Easter Eve.⁷⁰

Purchas also summarized the account by George Sandys, who wrote in 1610 that the Patriarchs of Constantinople hold that “the Holy Ghost proceeds only from the Father; . . . on Saturdays they feast, in regard it was the old Sabbath; . . . they yield no supremacy to the Roman Papacy but hold that church for schismatical.”⁷¹ The *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* includes in its description of the Nestorians that “they eat no pork, and keep both the Sabbath and Sunday.”⁷²

The observance of the Sabbath by the Syrian Church, and the connection between the Sabbath as a holy day with the absence of fasting on that day by the eating of flesh food, makes it quite possible that similar practices of Sabbath observance pertained among the Christians in India where the eating of flesh food is emphasized.

⁶⁸ Philip, *East of the Euphrates*.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, vol. 1 of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 305.

⁷⁰ Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 353.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167–169.

⁷² Konrad Kessler, “Nestorians,” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 122.

Significance of Fasting or Feasting on the Sabbath

The matter of fasting or feasting on Saturday was a long, drawn-out controversy between the churches of the East and the West. Most Christians from a Jewish background fasted like the Jews on Monday and Thursday. According to Radiša Antić, toward the end of the first century Christians replaced those days with Wednesday and Friday. In the fifth century, the Latin churches replaced Wednesday with Saturday as a day for fasting. However, the Eastern Churches refused to fall in line.⁷³ At the Council of Trullo in AD 691, which, in the absence of Emperor Justinian who called it, was presided over by Paul III, the Patriarch of Constantinople, five canons addressed the matter of fasting on Saturday, rejecting the changes made by Rome.⁷⁴ In 867 the Patriarch of Constantinople wrote an encyclical to all the patriarchs of the Eastern Churches accusing Rome of five abuses. The first of these was “observing Saturday as a fast day.”⁷⁵ This matter of fasting contributed toward the schism between the East and the West in AD 1054, when the Metropolitan Archbishop Leo of Achrida and Michael Cerularius wrote an open letter to Bishop John of the church in Trani in southern Italy, but intended for all bishops of the West as well as the pope, condemning the Roman practice of making the Sabbath a fast day. In response, Pope Leo X excommunicated the Eastern Church and has since considered it heretical.⁷⁶

While feasting may not by itself indicate the sacred observance of a day, it does signify opposition to the Roman Church, which was striving to replace Saturday worship with Sunday worship. In any case, based on Purchas’ description of the observance of the Saturday Sabbath and the eating of flesh among the Syrian Christians, there seems to be a connection between the two.

The Arrival of the Portuguese

When Vasco da Gama landed in Cranganore from Africa in 1498, two Thomas Christians piloted his fleet to Calicut (now Kozhikode).⁷⁷

⁷³ Radiša Antić, “The Controversy over Fasting on Saturday Between Constantinople and Rome,” *Biblijski Pogledi* 20, nos. 1–2 (2012): 51–52.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 52–58 (Canons 29, 52, 55, 56, and 89). The pope claims not to have been represented at this council.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59. The four other abuses were: giving permission to eat meat, cheese, milk, and eggs in the first week of Easter; condemning the marriage of priests in the East; disallowing priests and bishops from conducting the sacrament of confirmation; and teaching that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Thomas Christians,” by Robert Eric Frykenberg, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Thomas-Christians> (accessed February 20, 2020).

With the Portuguese discovery of the Thomas Christians, both groups were initially delighted to find what they considered important allies. However, the Thomas Christians were soon suspicious of the images in the Catholic churches—something they had scrupulously avoided adopting from their Hindu surroundings. The Portuguese, on their part, couldn't imagine any group of Christians not acknowledging the authority of the pope (whom these Christians had not even heard of). Soon more and more differences became evident. The Portuguese later extended their territory to Cochin and Goa, making the latter their archbishopric in 1557. The archbishop was the representative of the pope with power all over India, and backed by the Portuguese army. There is no record of trouble between the Franciscans who came first and the Thomas Christians. Conflict arose when the Jesuits arrived.⁷⁸

The Goa Inquisition

The Inquisition, which started in Portugal in 1541, was established in India in 1560. But even before that, as early as 1543, a physician by the name of Jeronimo Dias, who was of the “caste of New Christians,” was arrested and tried for speaking against the Roman Catholic faith. Jeronimo's affirmation of his faith indicated clearly to the authorities that he was a Jew. Considered a heretic, he was condemned to be burned. Eventually, however, a teacher persuaded him to confess, which he did, whereupon he was strangled (as an act of mercy) and then burned. The following Sunday, the bishop read the appropriate part of the bull of the Holy Inquisition, on heresy, from the pulpit.⁷⁹

The Purpose of the Inquisition

In 1545 Francis Xavier wrote to Joao III, king of Portugal, on the necessity of an inquisition. His second point by way of justification was that

there are many who live according to the Jewish Law, and according to the Mohammedan sect, without any fear of God or shame of the world. And since there are many who are spread all over the fortresses, there is the need of the Holy Inquisition and of many preachers.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ M. A. Ancy, “Circumstances That Led to the Synod of Diamper,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012): 481.

⁷⁹ Priolkar, 23.

⁸⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 24.

It appears that Xavier's burden was the backsliding of converts from these religions, evidenced in their reverting to former customs and practices. He ignored the fact that most of them had been forcibly converted to Christianity.

Joao III never responded. But after his death in 1587, things started moving again. Don Sebastian, heir to the throne, was only three years old, and Cardinal Henrique, who succeeded Queen Catalina as regent of the infant king, was only too happy to cooperate in the matter of the inquisition.⁸¹

Priolkar cites the Jesuit historian Francisco de Souza as describing an incident that contributed directly to the establishment of the Inquisition. He tells how Father Provencal Gonsalvo de Silveira and Bishop Carneiro traveled to Cochin. There they observed rich descendants of "Israelites," who were infected with Judaism as a result of living in proximity to and communicating with the Jews of Cochin, who many centuries previously had been converted from Hinduism to Judaism.

The Report of Dellon

M. Dellon's description of the Inquisition is often quoted as a reference to Sabbath observance during this period. Two passages are relevant here:

But when the period of the Auto da Fe approaches, the Proctor waits upon him, and declares that he is charged by a great number of witnesses, of having Judaized; which means, having conformed to the ceremonies of the Mosaic law; such as not eating pork, hare, fish without scales, &c. of having attended the solemnization of the sabbath.⁸²

In the above passage, Dellon describes the offense as Judaizing, which he defines as one following the Jewish proscriptions regarding unclean food and keeping the Sabbath. In the next passage he describes the final moments before the execution of a Christian who refused to admit to being a Jew. Dellon explains that if a person confessed to being a Christian, they would be strangled first so that they might not feel the pain of being burnt. But if they professed to be a Jew, they were burnt. Dellon reports that such cases were very rare. A complication occurred when Christians confessed to being Jews in hopes of saving their lives. To demonstrate the sincerity of

⁸¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 21.

⁸² M. Dellon, *An Account of the Inquisition at Goa*, trans. M. Dellon (Pittsburg, PA: Patterson and Lambdin, 1819), 71.

their confession they were obliged to reveal the names of accomplices. This was impossible, because they were not really Jews at all, and so they broke down and admitted to telling a falsehood to save their lives. Dellon refers to this group as “pretended” Jews.⁸³ Dellon also reports that “ancient Christians are never apprehended or suspected of Judaism.”⁸⁴ Those who refused to confess to Judaizing were burnt as *convicto negative* (convicted but not confessing).⁸⁵

In the section on the acts of injustice committed by the Inquisition, Dellon describes how the inquisitors failed to properly verify the truth of a victim’s claim:

The Judges of the Holy Office might readily ascertain the truth or falsehood of the charge of Judaism, would they take the trouble to investigate the matter without prejudice; and to consider that, of an hundred persons condemned to be burnt as Jews, there are scarcely four who profess that faith at their death; the rest exclaiming and protesting to their last gasp that they are Christians, and have been so during their whole lives; that they worship our Saviour as their only true God; and that on his mercy, and the merits of his adorable sacrifice, alone, they repose their hope; but the cries and declarations of these unfortunates (if one may so call those who suffer for not avowing a falsehood) fail to touch these gentlemen, who imagine that this authentic confession of their faith, which so many make at the very moment of death, deserves not the smallest consideration; and who believe that a certain number of witnesses, when the fear of being burnt only obliges them to accuse the innocent, are sufficient to screen them from the vengeance of God.⁸⁶

It may be proper to observe here, that those who have thus escaped death by their extorted confessions are strictly enjoined, when they leave the prisons of the Holy Office, to declare that they have been treated with great tenderness and clemency, in as much as their lives, which they justly merited to lose, have been spared. Should anyone, who has acknowledged that he is guilty, attempt to vindicate himself on his release, he would be immediately denounced and

⁸³ Dellon, 73–75.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

arrested, and burnt at the next Act of Faith, without hope of pardon.⁸⁷

From the preceding quotations we can understand that: 1) a very small fraction of those accused of Judaism confessed to being Jews, the vast majority denying the charge in order to escape being burnt; and 2) the vast majority of those accused of being Jews refused to acknowledge having been Jews at any time and preferred to be burnt rather than to do so.

Vyhmeister, believing there is no known Sabbath keeping before the nineteenth century in India, thinks that Dellon himself provides a solution. Dellon refers to a category of *Christam Novo* (new Christians)—Jews in Spain and Portugal who converted to Christianity because of the inquisitions there, some of whom immigrated to India. Many of these had not really converted, and secretly practiced Jewish ceremonies including Sabbath observance.⁸⁸ Yet, Dellon opines, ninety-six out of a hundred of those who were burnt *convicto negativo* were innocent, preferring death to the use of falsehood to save their lives.⁸⁹

Priolkar, in his book on the Inquisition at Goa, refers to the new Christians more than forty times. He refers to the new Christians in Cochin who practiced Judaism, had separate synagogues, and were found guilty and burnt. He states that it was impossible to determine the number of new Christians burnt at the stake.⁹⁰ Priolkar appears to suggest that these new Christians were the prime target of the Inquisition. Indeed, he writes that Indian Gentiles and Moors, whatever religion they practiced, were not subjected to the Inquisition unless they had become Christians, and even then they were not so rigorously dealt with as the new Christians.⁹¹ Dellon also, however, seems to refer to a class of people who were not new Christians but who were still accused of Judaizing:

The practice observed towards persons suspected of Judaism, and what has been said in respect to them, is to be understood of persons charged with Sorcery, from having attended the superstitious assemblies I have mentioned; and here the difficulty of naming the witnesses is increased, because they have not, like the new Christians, to look

⁸⁷ Dellon, 79.

⁸⁸ Vyhmeister, 161.

⁸⁹ Dellon, 80–81.

⁹⁰ Priolkar, 27, 58. It was impossible to determine the number because the records had been destroyed.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

for their accusers and accomplices in a certain class; but must find them indiscriminately and fortuitously amongst their acquaintance, friends, kindred, enemies, and persons connected with no sect whatever.⁹²

Dellon seems to be describing not Jews who were masquerading as Christians, but Christians who appeared like Jews. The Inquisition with all its horrors could not extract the confession that they were Jews because, in reality, they were not.

The Synod of Diamper

Aleixo de Menezes, who came to Cochin in 1599, felt that the Christians there had been wrongly instructed but found it difficult to bring the Syrian Christians into subjugation. He forced the archdeacon Geevarghese to acknowledge the authority of the archbishop of Goa, and summoned a synod at Udiyamperur (Diamper), fourteen miles from Cochin. Present were the Portuguese governor, representatives of the papal church, merchants, and the captains of ships. Forced to attend were 153 priests and 660 lay members. Those churches not represented had their properties confiscated by the king of Cochin, who is said to have been paid thirty thousand ducats by the Portuguese.

The Synod was held June 20–26, 1599. During its nine sessions, 267 carefully prepared decrees were read and “discussed.” Every imaginable point of difference was addressed. All synod members were required to sign the 267 decrees. One priest attempted to protest: putting his trousers on his shoulders and his shirt on his legs, he announced that everything had been turned upside down. He was forcibly removed.

Many works on the history of the Sabbath refer to the decrees of the Synod of Diamper. Some deal with the Sunday mass and some with Saturday fasting. These are reproduced here in their entirety.⁹³

Decree XII.

Whereas the Christians of this Diocess have not hitherto heard *Mass* as upon obligation, having never imagined that the not hearing thereof upon some particular days was a mortal sin; for which reason, some have without any scruple neglected going to hear it, and others have not stayed to hear it out; therefore the Synod doth declare, That it is the Precept of the Universal Church, and that upon penalty of a mortal Sin, that all Christians, Men and

⁹² Dellon, 77–78.

⁹³ Geddes, 253–255, 357–358, 367 (all italics, spellings, and capitalizations original).

Women, having no lawful impediment, do hear an entire Mass upon every *Sunday* and Holy-day that is commanded to be kept, if they have the opportunity of a Priest to say it to them. As also, that all Masters of Families are obliged by the said Precept, to make their Children, and such of their Servants and Slaves as are Christians, and all other Persons living in their Families, to go every *Sunday* and Holy-day to hear *Mass*, which everyone shall endeavour to hear at his own Parish-Church, or at the place where he then happens to be; and as for those who with just reason are afraid to leave their Houses alone without any body in them, and especially such as live in *Heaths*, and are a great way from any Church, they shall so order the matter, that all in their Families shall take their turns of going to *Mass* and staying at home on *Sundays*; and the Vicars of the Churches must be careful to mark all such as are negligent herein, and reprove, admonish, and punish them, so as they shall judge necessary: and where there is any number of *Clergy*, they shall sing the *Mass* on *Sundays* and Holy-days: and when there is not a competent number, there the *Mass* shall be said at a convenient hour, the whole Parish being present, and he shall at the same time Preach, publish their Admonitions, the Banes of Matrimony, and whatsoever else is necessary in the Church.

From this decree it is clear that attendance at mass was poor. However, it is not clear on which day they attended, though it could be presumed to be Sunday since there is no blanket denunciation of all Thomas Christians of breaking the Sabbath as the Catholics understood it. What is clear is that the Roman Catholics were saying that, from now on, regular attendance at Sunday mass would be compulsory.

Decree XIII.

The Synod being informed that most of all the Christians that live out of Towns and Villages in the *Heaths*, being a great way from Church, do go to Church but once a Year, on the three days before *Lent*, which they call *Monorbo*, and then rather to fill their Bellies with what is given by Christians at that time, than to hear *Mass*; and that there are others who content themselves with going to hear *Mass* twice or thrice in the Year, and so have no opportunity of being instructed in matters of Faith and Religion as they ought to be, nor of complying with their Obligations, doth

command all Christians living within two Leagues of the Church to go to *Mass* at least once a Month, and on the principal *Festivities* of our *Lord* and *Lady*, commanding the Vicars also to constrain them to do it; and all such as are but one League, to hear *Mass* once a Fortnight, and such as are less than a League, to hear it every *Sunday* and Holy-day; commanding all that shall transgress herein, being obstinate, after the third Admonition, to be thrown out of the Church when they come thither; neither shall the Priest go to their Houses, or give them the *Casture*, or Blessing, until they shall come to hear *Mass*, more or less, in the Form aforesaid; and besides, they shall be punished by the Prelate as he shall think good.

This decree also condemns the general neglect of going to church, especially by those who lived at some distance from a church, but also among those who live closer. Clearly, Sunday church attendance was not a habit.

Decree XXIV.

The Synod being informed, that in the remote parts of this Bishoprick, as well towards the *South*, as towards the *North*, the Christians that dwell in the *Heaths* are guilty of Working and Merchandizing on *Sundays* and Holy-days, especially in the Evenings, doth command the Vicars to be very vigilant in this Matter, and to admonish and reprehend all that they shall find so doing; and if after three particular Admonitions, they shall not reform, they shall after that be thrown out of the Church, and have the *Casture* denied them; neither shall any Priest go into their Houses until they have yielded Obedience.

In the rural areas, as well as in parts of the north and the south that were not rural, working on Sunday was common. From this we may assume that Sunday was not considered to be a day of rest. It could also be argued that in some areas Thomas Christians were abstaining from work, but that is not specifically mentioned.

Decree XV.

That this bishoprick may in all things be conformable to the customs of the Catholick church, the Synod doth command all the Members thereof upon pain of *Mortal* sin, not to eat Flesh upon *Saturdays*, in memory of our Lord's Burial, but Eggs, Milk, Butter or Cheese they may lawfully eat upon

Saturdays, as also upon all Fish days that are not Fasts, and since the custom of not eating Flesh on *Wednesdays* is not observed over the whole diocess, but only in some parts thereof, and that but by a few; the Synod doth declare, that albeit that custom is Holy and Laudable, and it were to be wished that it were universally observed by all Christians, it doth not think fit to oblige People thereunto upon pain of Sin, so that all that list may eat Flesh upon *Wednesdays*.

Thomas Christians followed the custom of first-century Christians in fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. There was no problem with the Friday fast, but the Roman Catholic Church had replaced the Wednesday fast with a Saturday fast in the fifth century. Nevertheless, Thomas Christians were still feasting on Saturday like the Jews. Nothing is said about their considering Saturday holy, but several authors, both Adventist and non-Adventist, have drawn that conclusion from this practice. In light of the observation of Purchas on the Syrian Christians, this conclusion is probable.

Decree XVI.

The Synod doth declare, That the obligation of not eating Flesh on prohibited days, lasts from midnight to midnight, beginning at the midnight of the prohibited day, and ending at the midnight of the day following, so that the Obligation of not eating Flesh upon *Frydays* and *Saturdays*, begins at the midnight of *Fryday*, and ends on the midnight of *Sunday*, and the Obligation of ceasing from labour begins at the midnight of the said day, and ends at the midnight of Monday: being to understand that in beginning the Fasts and Festivities on the Evening of the former, and continuing them to the Evening of the latter day, they do conform themselves to the Customs and Rites of the *Jews* condemned by Holy Mother Church, in which days and their observances are not reckoned from Evening to Evening, but from midnight to midnight.

Thomas Christians were following the Jewish and Orthodox custom of observing Sabbath from evening to evening, increasing the possibility that Saturday was being observed as Sabbath. Meanwhile, the Manual of Rules and Regulations pertaining to the Goa Inquisition were to be published in Cochin as well as in Goa. To this manual was appended the Edict of Faith, which enumerated offenses against the Inquisition of Portugal. The section pertaining to the Sabbath is as follows:

That any person after receiving baptism has had belief in the Mosaic law, subsequent to the last general pardon which was published on the 5th of January 160, not acknowledging Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, as true God and Messiah, promised to the Patriarchs and prophesied by the Prophets, performing Jewish rites and ceremonies, namely not working on Saturday but remaining dressed on that day as on a feast day, commencing the service on Friday evening.⁹⁴

This passage of the Edict quite clearly addresses new Christians, who in reality were Jews since they are described as not acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. However, the description of Sabbath observance is demonstrated merely by abstaining from work and dressing as on a feast day.

Recalling what was imposed on the Thomas Christians at the Synod of Diamper, Thiruvattar Krishnankutty notes the “imported goods of the Roman Catholic church.” He lists the pope, priests, bishops, cardinals, nuns, worship of saints, bowing to the cross, purgatory, mass, the Virgin Mary, and the observance of Sunday.⁹⁵

The department of anthropology of the government of Kerala, writing the history of the Syrian Christians of the Malabar region, describes them as converts from among the Jews who were accustomed to worshipping in the synagogue and who no doubt continued that for a while, making changes as the years went by. However, the survey also maintains that they continued to observe Mosaic laws, including worship on the seventh-day Sabbath.⁹⁶

Note this admission in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, in describing the change of Sabbath to Sunday:

The only case in which an ancient Eastern rite has been wilfully romanized is that of the Uniat Malabar Christians, where it was not Roman authority but the misguided zeal of Alexius de Menezes, Archbishop of Goa, and his Portuguese advisers at the Synod of Diamper (1599) which spoiled the old Malabar Rite.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ See Priolkar, 87, 90–92.

⁹⁵ Krishnankutty, 77.

⁹⁶ Rao Bahadur L. K. Ananta Krishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians* (Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1926), 157.

⁹⁷ Adrian Fortescue, “Rites” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (New York: Appleton, 1912), 66.

Koonan Cross and Its Aftermath

After the Synod of Diamper, the worship service of the Thomas Christians was Latinized and seminaries were set up to train priests in the new way. The Patriarch of Babylon made an attempt to reconnect with the Syrian Christians of Malabar. He sent Bishop Ahatalla, who was intercepted by the Catholics, arrested on arrival, taken to Goa, tried in the Inquisition, and burnt at the stake. Hearing of this, the Syrian Christians of Malabar assembled at Mattancherry Church on January 3, 1653, tied a long rope on a “standing cross,” and took an oath not to submit to the authority of Rome. Nevertheless, a small faction decided to remain with Rome and the splitting of the Malabar Christians began.⁹⁸ However, a hundred and fifty years had done its damage. The language of liturgy by now had been changed to Malayalam, and the Sabbath was forgotten.

Call to Restore the Sabbath

Sadhu Kochoonju Upadesi (1883–1945), a famous Malayali Christian preacher, poet, and songwriter, published *Aasawaasa Geethangal* (“Songs of Consolations”), a book containing 210 of his songs.⁹⁹ There is no record of him observing any day other than Sunday as holy. Yet four of his songs pertain to the Sabbath, and are included in the Seventh-day Adventist songbook in Kerala. One song reads:

The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord
Do not change it in vain into the first day
Seventh day is the Saturday of the week
All must know, not Sunday of the week.¹⁰⁰

The next hymn appeals to Sabbath breakers to return:

The holy day is for the service of the King supreme
and not for us.

⁹⁸ “Coonan Cross Oath (Koonan Kurishu Sathyam),” Christianity in Kerala, Kerala Tourism, <https://www.keralatourism.org/christianity/koonan-kurishu-sathyam/14> (accessed February 21, 2020).

⁹⁹ Nitin Varghese, “Sadhu Kochoonju Upadesi,” <https://www.facebook.com/notes/jesus-generation-/sadhu-kochoonju-upadesi/172161516230186/> (accessed March 18, 2020). It is recorded that he organized Sunday prayer groups and addressed congregations from Thursday to Sunday. The other days were devoted to meditation and reading. See also “Sadhu Kochukunju Upadesi,” Kristheeya Gaanavali, http://www.kristheeyagaanavali.com/en/Lyricist/Sadhu_Kochukunju_Upadeshi (accessed March 18, 2020), noting that he taught Sunday School for many years.

¹⁰⁰ *Sathya Pradeepa Ganangal* [“Truth in Song”], 5th ed. (Thiruvanthapuram: South Kerala Section of Seventh-day Adventists, n.d.), no. 298.

This is the day for us to come together and worship Him.
Whoever spends the holy day in vain
Surely God will punish him though He is merciful,
Many people stay at home
Many go shopping
Many do work. Very few in the house of God.
God Himself caused ways for the Sabbath breakers
to lead the life of bondage for seventy years.
Oh, Sabbath breaker, come back and worship
Lest you should be affected by the fiery flames of His
dreadful wrath.¹⁰¹

Also inscribed by the preacher on a still-extant stone pillar are the words, "Observe the Sabbath."¹⁰²

The Armenians

There has been considerable interaction between India and Armenia through the centuries. An Indian community thrived in Armenia as early as 149 BC, though it disappeared by the fourth century AD.¹⁰³

The Armenians are another group who have lived in India for centuries and maintained their identity. Practically every major city in India has an Armenian church.¹⁰⁴ Claudius Buchanan, who carried out extensive research in Asia in the early part of the nineteenth century, describes the Armenian people of India thus:

They have preserved the Bible in its purity; and their doctrines are, as far as the Author knows, the doctrines of the Bible. Besides, they maintain the solemn observance of Christian worship, throughout our Empire, on the seventh

¹⁰¹ *Sathya Pradeepa Ganangal*, no. 299.

¹⁰² The stone pillar may still be seen in Edyaramula, Kozhancherry, Kerala, and has been photographed by K. Yohannan.

¹⁰³ Mesrovb Jacob Seth, "Hindoos [*sic*] in Armenia 150 Years Before Christ: An Unknown Chapter in the History of India," in *Armenians in India: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day—A Work of Original Research* (Calcutta, 1937), 621–622, describes in an appendix the account of the Syrian Zenob who witnessed the destruction of two Hindu temples, built in the Taron district in the fourth century AD, as part of the Christianization of Armenia. Seth, who is a member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Royal Asiatic Society of England and Ireland, the Indian Historical Records Commission, the American Numismatic Society, and Examiner in Classical and Modern Armenian for the University of Calcutta, having thoroughly examined old graveyards and ancient documents, has come up with as comprehensive a history as possible.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

day; and they have as many spires pointing to heaven among the Hindoos [*sic*], as we ourselves. Are such a people then entitled to no acknowledgement on our part, as fellow Christians? Are they forever to be ranked by us with Jews, Mahomedans, and Hindoos?¹⁰⁵

If indeed there were Sabbath keepers, Sabbath keeping seems to have died out by the end of that century for the first Seventh-day Adventists, arriving in 1895 to Calcutta where most of the Armenians had settled, and having colporteurs roaming throughout the country, did not report encountering any Sabbath-keeping Armenians.

Thomas of Cana

Tradition informs us that a wave of nearly four hundred Syriac-speaking migrants arrived on the Malabar coast of India from Uruhu near Babylon in AD 345. They made such an impression on the local ruler of Cranganore that he granted them land and special trade favors. Led by Thomas *Kinayi* (“a merchant”), the locals referred to them as *Nazarani* (“Nazarenes”), indicating they were Christians. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* refers to them as Jewish Christians and includes them in the article on Thomas Christians.¹⁰⁶ The Portuguese also mention a Thomas Cana who came in the eighth century and identify him as an Armenian.¹⁰⁷ While James Hough mentions the later date, John Stewart allows for two persons named Thomas of Cana.¹⁰⁸

In the Court of Akbar

Several Armenians distinguished themselves in the court of Akbar, leading him to invite Armenian merchants to settle in the capital city of Agra. The most prominent of these is Mirza Dul Qarnayn, who was raised in Akbar’s harem and later became a high-ranking Mughal official and was appointed governor of Bengal.¹⁰⁹ The Armenian Cemetery of Agra houses seven graves of Armenian priests buried between 1614 and 1675, the first four of whom were contemporaries of Mirza but who wrote nothing about him. However, a summary of his life and career was assembled from Jesuit and other sources by Father H. Holsten and preserved in the *Memoirs of the*

¹⁰⁵ Buchanan, 208–209.

¹⁰⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Thomas Christians.”

¹⁰⁷ Seth, 612.

¹⁰⁸ James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christian Era*, vol. 1 (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1839), 94; cf. Stewart, 108.

¹⁰⁹ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Julfa v. Armenians in India,” by Sebouh Aslanian, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/julfa-v-armenians-in-india> (accessed March 18, 2020).

Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Catholics had assigned three priests to be near Mirza, whom they praised for his piety, saying,

Not only does he by his edifying example excite all his people to every kind of good work, but he assists them liberally and lavishly with frequent and copious alms. He does not allow that those of the Sodality should miss the Saturday and Sunday meetings. He is never absent himself from the Sodality meeting, or from the exercise of the discipline, which he takes with the rest every Friday in honour of Our Lord's Passion.¹¹⁰

It is not possible to determine whether these Saturday meetings refer to Sabbath worship or to the Saturday evening vespers before worship on Sunday but, in the light of Buchanan's observation, it is possible that he kept the seventh day as the Sabbath. The Armenian historian Mesrovb Jacob Seth mentions the existence of Armenian communities in Agra, Gwalior, Lahore, Surat, Bombay, Fattihabad, Chinsurah, Saidabad, Masulipatam, Calcutta, Lucknow, Dacca, Cawnpore, Hyderabad, and Madras. Across the empire there were Armenian communities in Rangoon, Moulmein, Mandalay, Penang, Singapore, Malacca, Batavia, Semarang, Sourabaya, Thegal, Jeparah, and more.¹¹¹ One traveler observes,

It is marvelous how the Armenian Christians have preserved their faith, equally against the vexatious oppression of the Mahomedans their Sovereigns, and against the persuasions of the Romish Church, which for more than two centuries has endeavored, by Missionaries, Priests, and Monks, to attach them to her Communion. It is impossible to describe the artifices and expenses of the Court of Rome, to effect this object; but all in vain.¹¹²

The Sabbath Among the Hindu Christians

In 1894, Fairley Masters, an Adventist missionary from New Zealand, was traveling in South India when a railway clerk promised to inform a friend of his about Masters and his work. A few days later

¹¹⁰ Seth, 631–632.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 614. These are the names of cities addressed in a papal bull from the Holy See at Etchmiadzin on December 31, 1850.

¹¹² Buchanan, 207–208, quoting Jean Chevalier Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711), 232.

a man called on Masters and introduced himself as having been sent by the railway clerk. He described himself as a pastor and leader of a community of native Christians who kept the seventh-day Sabbath. He purchased two copies of *Daniel and Revelation*—one for himself and the other for his church.¹¹³ He expressed great joy at discovering that there were Christians in other parts of the world who loyally kept the Sabbath. Although Fairley Masters does not name him or the group, it must have been Arumainayagam Sattampillai, leader of the Hindu Christians. Whether he represented the Hindu Christians or whether he belonged to the community of Thomas Christians, it is interesting to note that the gentleman linked his Sabbath keeping to the apostle Thomas. Fairley states: “He told me how he came to be keeping the Bible Sabbath. It had come down to him from his ancestors through many centuries, and there was a tradition that they had learned it from Thomas, the Lord’s disciple.”¹¹⁴

Missionaries brought Christianity to the Tirunelveli district of South India at the end of the eighteenth century. When about thirty-five families of the village Shanbathu became Christians in 1803, they built a church and renamed their village “Nazareth.” About a mile away, the residents of Shanbathu Puddoor became Christians in 1827, renaming their village Prakasapuram. These people were by profession Shanars, tapping palmyra trees for their sap, from which they made jaggery (brown sugar). The Shanars (also spelled Chanars) trace their connections to the palmyra tappers described by Herodotus (ca. 400 BC). Hence, they were very sensitive about being labeled *sudras* under the Aryan caste system¹¹⁵ and insisted on being called Nadars, a term that earlier was used exclusively by the aristocrats of the community.¹¹⁶

The missionaries in that area were initially supported by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), but when they ran into financial problems they turned over their schools and churches to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). In 1838, the SPG sent A. F. Caemmerer to replace David Rosen in

¹¹³ Fairley Masters, “He Left His Blacksmithing. Part Two: Australasia Sends Out Its First Foreign Missionary” (as told to Stella Parker Peterson), *Youth’s Instructor*, November 21, 1950, 7.

¹¹⁴ Fairley Masters, 7. “He Left His Blacksmithing. Part Two: Australasia Sends Out Its First Foreign Missionary” (as told to Stella Parker Peterson), *Youth’s Instructor*, November 21, 1950, 7.

¹¹⁵ M. Immanuel, “Nadar Community—Who Are They?,” December 14, 2016, Nadar.org, <http://www.nadar.org/nadars-who-are-they/> (accessed March 18, 2020).

¹¹⁶ Margaret Selvi Solomon and Samuel Raj, *Sustained by God’s Grace: A Brief History of the SDA Church in Prakasapuram* (self-pub., CreateSpace, 2016), 22.

Nazareth. The churches and schools there, and in the neighboring village of Mukuperi, prospered under his leadership.¹¹⁷

A. F. Caemmerer incurred the ire of Arumainayagam, a young catechist and teacher at the school in Nazareth at the time who reported another teacher as responsible for a woman's suicide. Caemmerer chastised Arumainayagam and demanded he apologize. About the same time, Caemmerer had advised Arumainayagam to marry a certain well-educated Christian girl of another caste, which he rejected, and instead settled for a less-educated girl of the same caste. This did not go down well with Caemmerer, who summarily dismissed the young man from SPG employment. Arumainayagam went to the diocesan office in Madras to appeal his dismissal but was instructed to direct his appeal through Caemmerer.¹¹⁸

Arumainayagam spent the next few years studying the Bible and biblical languages, as well as Sanskrit and Hindi. He returned to Nazareth around 1857 but was thrown out of the church by Caemmerer, who also dismissed Arumainayagam's brother-in-law from the church in Mukuperi, accusing him of practicing witchcraft.¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, Robert Caldwell had published a book intended to garner support in England for the community in South India.¹²⁰ But, inevitably, it found its way to South India, where the Nadars took exception to its use of the name "Shanars," which they disliked.¹²¹ They also identified several other statements that they considered disparaging.¹²² Their irritation provided an opening for Arumainayagam Sattampillai to exploit, and he led a considerable group away from the organized churches. Freeing the group from European domination, he established an independent "Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus" in an effort to Indianize Christianity.¹²³ He used "Hindu" as a geographic rather than a religious term, and adopted Hindu (Indian) customs in worship, noting that they were similar to

¹¹⁷ Solomon and Raj, 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ R. Caldwell, *The Tinnevely Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion, And Their Moral Condition and Characteristics, as a Caste; With Special Reference to The Facilities and Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity Amongst Them* (Madras: Christian Knowledge Society's Press, 1849).

¹²¹ Solomon and Raj, 29

¹²² In general, the missionaries of the era described the religions of India as grossly pagan and heathen. According to *Wikipedia*, s.v. "A. N. Sattampillai," last modified September 28, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._N._Sattampillai (accessed March 18, 2020), Caldwell referred to the Shanars as the "least intellectual people" in India, "marked by apathy, indifference, ignorance, and vice," and described their original religion as a "school of immorality."

¹²³ *Ibid.*

what he found in the Old Testament. These included sitting on the floor for worship and prostrating in prayer. The year 1857 also witnessed a mutiny in the Indian army and Arumainayagam contributed to the freedom struggle by turning from the New Testament of the foreigners to the Old Testament.¹²⁴

Arumainayagam, also called Sattampillai (“teacher”), first held his services outdoors on Sundays. A few months later he began to implement various services and ceremonies of the Old Testament, starting with the seventh-day Sabbath. This group still observes the Sabbath on Saturdays. Members abstain from work on Saturdays and all food for Sabbath is prepared before 6:00 p.m. on Friday.¹²⁵

Conclusion

The historicity of the seventh-day Sabbath among the Thomas Christians cannot be substantiated through documentation because their existing records rely on oral traditions. At the Synod of Diamper, the Roman Catholics destroyed all ancient books and manuscripts that contradicted their faith and practice. Therefore, the faith and practices of the Thomas Christians can be learned mainly through the rare references of visitors to India and by reading between the lines of the records of the Portuguese themselves.

The writings of Dellon, himself a victim of the Goa Inquisition for two years, inform us that there were Sabbath keepers in the sixteenth century. The main targets of the Inquisition were Jews masquerading as Christians, but there were also Sabbath-keeping Christians who were burnt at the stake.

The decrees of the Synod of Diamper reveal that the Portuguese were striving to enforce the observance of Sunday mass. They mention very poor attendance at mass, as seldom as once a year, but there is no clarity as to whether weekly services were on Saturday or Sunday. Working on Sunday is mentioned as fairly common, especially in rural areas.

One decree shows that the Thomas Christians were following the custom of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, from evening to evening, and feasting on flesh from Friday evening to Saturday evening as the Jews did. While there is no elaboration or association with feasting on Saturday in connection with it as a holy day, this conclusion is drawn by a number of non-Adventist historians and scholars. The Thomas Christians most likely observed the Sabbath, just like the Jews, by resting and eating flesh food, but there is no clear

¹²⁴ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “A. N. Sattampillai.”

¹²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._N._Sattampillai (accessed August 25, 2020).

reference that they assembled for worship on Saturday. Many were prone to work on Sundays and there seems to have been no urge to keep that day as a holy day.

Sabbath observance among the Armenians of India could have begun with their arrival in the third or fourth century AD, but it is only mentioned clearly in the nineteenth century. It is not possible to date how that observance ended.

The group led by Sattampillai began worshipping on Saturday in the middle of the nineteenth century through independent study of the Bible. They have churches in several cities in Tamil Nadu and observe the seventh-day Sabbath to this day.

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