

# A Reformation in the Malankara Orthodox Church

The Mission of Help and The Mavelikkara Synod

— PAULOS MAR GREGORIOS

Our brothers and sisters in the Mar Thoma Church are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Reformation in the Malankara Church. Dr. Emilio Castro the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and His Grace Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury are taking part in these celebrations.

As a member of what my reformed brothers and sisters must regard as the unreformed Malankara Church, I may be permitted to make some clarifications of what actually happened in, before, and after 1836, from our perspective. For the historical account, I have tried to rely almost entirely on British, Anglican and Mar Thoma sources. And where my facts are inaccurate, I shall gladly accept correction from friends who have evidence to the contrary.

Three simple facts lie in the background of the 1836 events - (a) the emergence of a new crop of missionary societies in Britain, (b) the consolidation of British colonial power in Kerala, and (c) a concerted effort on the part of the colonial rulers and the C.M.S. missionaries, assisted by some Malankara Christians, to unite the Malankara Syrian Church with the Anglican Church.

## (a) The New Missionary Societies

British missions of "High Church" orientation first came here at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The S. P. C. K. (founded in 1698) and the S. P. G. (founded in 1701) had been in India for almost a hundred years before the C. M. S. missionaries came. The beginning of the nineteenth century was the time when British missionary societies of other than High Church Orientation began pouring into India. In Britain, the Baptist Missionary Society (associated with Carey, Marshman and Ward in India) had been founded in 1792, the

London Missionary Society in 1795, the Church Missionary Society in 1799 and the Wesleyan Missionary Society in 1813. Behind the emergence of these societies was a consciousness of the burden of Empire in the minds of British Christians, a sense of responsibility for the "heathen" whom the British had been called upon to rule in various parts of the World. This burden was shared by many European Christians. Wherever the European nations conquered, the missions followed the flag. Thus Danish Lutheran missions followed the Danish flag into India at Tarangambadi (Tranquebar) and Srirampur (Serampore) in 1706, about the same time as the SPCK and the S.P.G. had followed the British flag into Calcutta and elsewhere in India. Before that Portuguese missions had followed the Portuguese flag into Goa in 1496.

The British East India Company however was unfriendly to missionaries in general. They probably feared that the missionaries would question the ethical and political standards of the Company in dealing with Indian trade and civil rule. Even William Carey, the British Baptist, had difficulty to get permission to operate in Company territory and preferred to operate from the Danish settlement of Serampore. As late as 1806, the Company had forbidden street preaching in Calcutta and sent back new missionaries from Britain who tried to land in their territory.

It was Governor General Lord Wellesley, who finally sent his Chaplain, Claudius Buchanan to England to persuade the Company authorities there to change their policy. But before sending him to England, Wellesley sent him down to Kerala in 1806 to visit our Metropolitan Mar Dionysius who lived in Kandanad at that time. The Madras Chaplain Richard Kerr also came down to see us in the same year. He reported back to the British authorities that there were some 70 to 80 thousand Syrian Christians in Malabar, and that though steeped in superstitions, they were not unfriendly to the British. Claudius Buchanan agreed with Richard Kerr's view: "To unite them to the Church of England would in my opinion be a most noble work".<sup>1</sup>

After Buchanan had reported to Wellesley, he was sent to England and was successful in changing the view of the Company officials.

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1. Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 9th Edition p. 150

In 1813, the new charter of the Company was approved. This not only permitted British and other missions into India, but also established the Anglican Church of India, with headquarters in Calcutta, with a bishop (later Metropolitan), and Archdeacons in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

1813 was the watershed for British missions in India. The BMS, CMS, LMS and WMS came and began work. Of these, the C.M.S. was unique in two respects — its focus on the Syrians and its special patronage from the British colonial power. It does not seem that the BMS, LMS or WMS received this kind of support from the colonial power, neither did they focus on the Syrians.

#### b) The Consolidation of British Power

The connection between the consolidation of British power in India and the work of the newly introduced missionary societies is stressed by C.B. Firth, formerly of L.M.S., one of the architects of the Church of South India, and later Secretary of the Conference of British Missionary Societies in London.<sup>2</sup>

In 1789, Tipu Sultan, the Muslim ruler of Mysore invaded the State of Travancore. The Rajah of Travancore sought the help of the British to ward off Tipu, and entered into an alliance with them. The British made an attack on Mysore's Srirangapatnam, which made Tipu withdraw his forces from Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, and the fortresses of Palghat and Cannanore were captured by British officers in 1790. The Rajahs of Cochin and Travancore became British vassals. All the Rajahs and rulers of Malabar except these two were decommissioned, the British giving only some pocket money to them. By 1800 Cochin State was placed under the "protection" of the British Government in Madras. In 1805 the Rajah of Travancore signed a treaty with the British agreeing to be a vassal and to pay a tribute of Rs. 800,000 per annum. The British got also the right to intervene in the internal administration of Travancore.

The Rajah of Puzhassi in Malabar revolted against the British, first in 1793-97, and second in 1800. Sir Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) himself marched into Malabar. (1800) but the Rajah

2. C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, CLS, Madras 1961. Revised edition, 1983, p. 145ff

took to the jungle and offered resistance for at least four years. On 30th November 1805 the Rajah was shot dead; the fear of the British was instilled in all the people of Kerala. The other rebels in Malabar committed suicide or were shot down.

In 1805, the prime ministers of Travancore and Cochin (Veluthampi Dalawa and Paliath Achen) together revolted against the British, despite the suppression of the Pazhassi revolt. They had contacts with the French at Mauritius, and misunderstood the vague promises of the French as an assurance of support against the British. This revolt was on when Claudius Buchanan first visited Cochin and Kandanad in 1806. On December 18, 1808 the revolt broke into the open. 600 Indians, commanded by Cochin's Paliath Achen and two of Velu Tampi's officers, stormed the Resident's house in Cochin, but the Resident Colonel Macaulay escaped in a British ship which had arrived from Malabar. The rebels broke open the jail in Cochin and set the political prisoners free. But ultimately the superior force of the British troops crushed the Cochin revolt.

Meanwhile the Travancore Dalawa, Velu Thumpi, set up his headquarters at Kundura, and from there issued his historic declaration of revolt against the British, dated January 11, 1809. The British troops replied with a massive attack and almost crushed the Dalawa's resistance. But the revolt continued. Fresh British troops advanced on Travancore, and the Rajah himself surrendered. Velu Tampi committed suicide.

The Rajah of Travancore died soon, and the throne of Travancore went to Rani (Queen) Gouri Lakshmi Bai-whose authority was exercised entirely by the Resident and Dewan Colonel Munro, who introduced an efficient civil service and administrative system in Travancore. He abolished slavery in Travancore in 1812, reformed the judiciary, enlarged the Police administered directly by him, took over the management of the property of Hindu temples (Devaswoms), and was feared and respected by the people. He appointed several Christians to high office in the State: improved agriculture and trade; reformed tax laws, promoted social equality.

It was with Munro's help that English education was introduced at the Syrian College (now Old Seminary) at Kottayam in 1816. Outside Kottayam, it was only in 1834 that an English school was started in Trivandrum.

Munro reformed also the administration in Cochin and brought things under centralized control. A Christian Judge — foreign or native — was appointed to each of the courts and to high administrative offices.

The events that led to the 1836 development in the Church in Kerala should be seen in the light of the British efforts to consolidate their power in Travancore and Cochin, and to use the Christians as loyal and faithful allies in the process. Christians were also in leading positions in the spice trade which was central in the economy of Travancore and Cochin, and their support would help the process of more legitimate - looking exploitation of the people.

(c) **The colonial rulers and the missionaries.**

Claudius Buchanan came to Kandanad in 1806. The C. M. S. Mission of Help came in 1816. During these ten years, British power had been fairly solidly consolidated in Travancore and Cochin. One has to see things both from the point of view of Colonel Munro, and from that of the non-Roman Malabar Christians, to understand 1836 and all that.

For Munro (British Resident in Travancore and Cochin 1810-1819) a man of unusual tact, ability, far-sightedness and humanity, there was only one concern - British rule was to be made a good thing for both the British and the Indians. He was a man of strong will, but fortunately for him, the two Travancore rulers with whom he had to work, offered no resistance to him - Rani (queen) Lakshmi Bai (1810-1815) and Rani Parvati Bai (1815-1829).

Munro was a devout Christian - the "sturdy evangelical type"<sup>3</sup> as P. Cheriyan, the Anglican judge characterizes him. He was also convinced that Protestant Christianity was the only "true Christianity".<sup>4</sup> That is Justice Cheriyan's assessment, based on Munro's

3 P. Cheriyan, *The Malabar Syrians and The Church Missionary Society* (1816-1840), Kottayam, C. M. S. Press, 1935. p. 83

4 *ibid*

letters. For Munro, the Syrians who had joined the Romans after the Portuguese conquest were not of much interest. The Orthodox he called "real Syrians" or "proper Syrians". He loved the Syrians with genuine Christian love and with pity for their many divisions. They were according to him, not only divided, but also grossly superstitious. The source of the superstitions was to be sought mainly in the Hindu culture and corrupt Roman practice brought by the Portuguese. He genuinely wanted the Syrians to be united and purged of these superstitions. He sincerely believed that they were good "true Christians" (meaning more or less good evangelical Protestants) before the Romans came, and he wanted to restore that purity.

He was sufficiently liberal, as well as being sturdily evangelical, to believe that education was the best way to purge the Syrians from their superstitions. Hence his great interest in the Syrian College and the 'mission of help' whose purpose was to educate the Syrians. The circulation of the Malayalam Bible would also be one way of driving out superstition. He was glad that Mar Dionysius had accepted the Buchanan proposal, and got the Four Gospels translated and printed in Malayalam. It was Munro who persuaded the CMS to take the Syrians as their special interest. He got the first set of missionaries to come, by appealing to Revd. Marmaduke Thompson, the first Secretary of the corresponding society of the CMS formed in Madras in November 1814.

This Committee sent Thomas Norton to Travancore, though he was originally intended for Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Norton was supposed to reside at the New Syrian College. But he did not hit it off so well with the Metropolitan Principal, when he arrived in 1816. The way Norton talked, he gave the impression that he wanted to take over the Seminary and the Syrian Church. Anyway, Norton stayed in Alleppey, and came occasionally to the Syrian College, to teach.

Norton was advised by Bishop Middleton, the first Anglican Bishop in India (1814) to be more diplomatic with the Syrians. Bishop Middleton came to Travancore in April 1816. After a visit to Bombay Bishop Middleton came back to Cochin and Travancore, visited churches, and assessed the situation.

Mr. and Mrs. Bailey arrived in Alleppey on 19th December 1816 and joined Norton there. At that time CMS policy seems to have been, at least on the surface, to seek to "revive" the Syrian Church, in order to secure missionaries for evangelistic work among non-Christians. This view, the present writer does not believe, was fully shared by the Syrians themselves. They were not fired by the same missionary zeal as the foreign missionaries, and this was, it seems to this writer, the basic lack of unity of perception between the Syrians and the missionaries.

But up to 1830, the Syrian bishops and the missionaries got along fairly well, despite strong theological differences in conviction-about the virginity of the Blessed Theotokos, about invocation of the saints, about prayer for the departed and so on. Justice Cheriyan calls three of our bishops the greatest we ever had, for this reason as well, that they were fully co-operating with the CMS missionaries whose advocate and apologist Cheriyan certainly is. Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius, Mar Philoxenos of Thozhiyur and Punnathra Mar Dionysius III are the three that Cheriyan so praises.

1816-1830, several reforms were effected in the Syrian Church. The foundations of education were laid; a printing press was established; the gospels had already been translated, and further progress was made in translating the rest of the New Testament. Bible reading in Malayalam was introduced in some of the churches at least. The compulsory celibacy of the priests introduced by the Romans was abolished.

With 1830 the picture changed. Mar Philoxenos of Thozhiyur died on 6th February 1830. He was succeeded by Cheppad Mar Dionysius or Dionysius IV.

And at this point, it is good to shift our perspective and see things from the Syrian side. These Indians, who should not be called Syrians, had gone through a rough history. The Synod of Diamper (1599) and The Coonen Cross Revolt (1653) were the two points from which they saw things. In 1653, when they wanted to liberate themselves from the two generations old Roman yoke, the Syrians in Syria stood by the Indians. Now they saw a new yoke. Holding on to the

Syrian connection was very necessary to avoid the Roman yoke and the Anglican yoke at the same time. At least the Syrians had no civil power, and little financial and organisational power to harrass us with. But the Indians knew from experience that the Syrian Patriarch had the kind of spiritual authority over our people which neither the Bishop of Rome nor the Archbishop of Canterbury could wield.

Cheppard Mar Dionysius was perhaps less adroit than his predecessors in using Antioch to ward off the British. But Antioch became a nuisance before the time of Cheppard Mar Dionysius. In 1825 a certain Mar Athanasius had come from Syria and wanted to re-consecrate the Two Indian Bishops Mar Philoxenos and Mar Dionysius. He had been deported with the help of the British.

The Indians (I shall use this word in place of Syrians) did not trust either the Patriarch of Antioch or Colonel Munro, who wanted the Syrian Church to be eventually united with the Anglican Church, and to use the Book of Common Prayer.

Cheriyian cites the letter from Munro to Bailey dated 23rd May 1818. The text in full is given in appendix A-letter No. 25 in Cheriyian's book. I quote here a few key sentences:

"I hope that you (i. e., Bailey) continue your endeavours to introduce the English language among the branches of study at the College. This is an object of great importance and, claims your serious consideration. The translation of the English liturgy (i.e. B. C. P.) is another object of primary importance, for I think if it were well translated it might, without any difficulty, *be substituted in all the churches for their present forms of worship.* You will of course gradually prepare the minds of the Syrians by a reference to the scriptures to abandon the seven sacraments, the Mass, and other remnants of Roman Catholic usage".<sup>5</sup>

As early as 1818, Colonel Munro thus instructed the British missionaries to prepare the way for introducing the Book of Common Prayer as the standard form of worship in the Orthodox churches.

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5. Cheriyian, *Op. cit.* p. 365. brackets and emphasis added.



Cherian also gives the text of a sermon by Joseph Fenn at an Assembly in Mavelikkara on 3rd December 1818 :

"In every act of worship, regard must be had to Him, who is the alone object of adoration and confidence..... There is but One God, and... one only Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus... Any Prayer, vow, act of adoration, praise or confidence in matters purely spiritual, directed to any other, is idolatry in the sight of God. In matters of this kind, every creature stands on the same level; and it is equally displeasing to God, whether we worship the Virgin Mary, or any beast, or creeping thing, or idol of wood or stone".\*

That was said to an Orthodox audience long before the rejection in 1836 of the Wilson proposals. The Sermon was based on a total lack of understanding on the part of Fenn about the nature and basis of the respect rendered by the Orthodox to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Fenn also was wrong in thinking that these were practices which the Orthodox had recently picked up from the Roman Catholics.

It is clear that the three missionaries, Benjamin Bailey, Joseph Fenn and Henry Baker, had neither any understanding of nor any sympathy for the Orthodox tradition. They were Protestants, who did not believe in the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints in the worship of the Church; they did not believe in prayers for the departed, or in the eucharistic sacrifice.

They differed from later missionaries like Joseph Peet, only in that they were more mature as persons and more courteous. Their intention from the beginning was to make Protestants out of the Orthodox. The Mar Thoma Church today is the fulfilment of what they desired. And it is this possibility that the Orthodox Church rejected in 1836. The Orthodox, if they had not rejected the Wilson Proposals, would not have remained Orthodox.

#### **The Meaning of the Rejection of the Wilson Proposals**

I must pay a tribute to Munro. He wanted to anglicanize the Orthodox Church in India, but he also cared for the welfare of the

people. The missionaries Bailey, Fenn and Baker were respectful and obedient to Munro, because of the latter's Christian character and wisdom. In 1819 Colonel Munro retired, and was replaced as British Resident by Col. M'Douall, who had no special interest either in the Syrians or in the missionaries. He died of Cholera in 1820, and was replaced by Col. Newall who served till 1826. Newall was interested in the missionaries and their educational effort in starting schools. The missionaries' report to him, dated March 13, 1822, gives a summary of their activities and lists their financial needs. They also give a description of the Syrian Church then-88 parishes, of which only 33 have joined the Romans. The remaining 55 parishes have, at the lowest, 13,000 families. The majority of these are poor. Very few have property worth Rs. 5000/-. They have 144 priests, which is about an average of 3 per parish. A priest seldom gets more than Rs. 5/- a month, though they are from the best families.

The Missionaries summarize to the Resident, what the Metropolitan, the head of the Orthodox, wants: "1st the circulation of the Holy Scriptures, in the Syriac and Vernacular tongues, with other works of religious and general information; 2nd, the general (School) instruction of youth 3rd, the special instruction of the clergy, 4th, the erection and enlargement of the churches".<sup>7</sup>

Now if the missionaries and the Metropolitan were in complete agreement on these four programmes, they could have continued to co-operate for much longer beyond 1836. Even in the work of the Seminary the Missionaries could have continue to co-operate.

At that time (1822) we had two Syriac Malpans, who also officiated at the Seminary worship; a Jewish teacher of Hebrew from Cochin, two Brahmin teachers of Sanskrit, two English teachers. There were 51 students, 18 of whom are sub-deacons. The Seminary had an annual income of Rs. 2500, or slightly more; its expenses, including a 70 rupee salary for the bishop was Rs. 4500. The C.M.S. subsidized the Rs. 2000/- which was needed. At this time the salary of a single English chaplain is Rs. 6000/- or more. It cost about Rs. 5000 to build a church in those days.

Col. Newall was inclined to raise some money for the Syrian church needs. The three missionaries who signed the report to him

7. Oberian, *op. cit.* p. 380

would have continued to co-operate with the Orthodox. Fenn, Bailey and Baker had however sown the seeds of discord by translating the Anglican Prayer Book (BCP) into Malayalam and making Orthodox priests use it for their church worship. This was against the advice the CMS had given them<sup>4</sup>. They removed also images and icons from the churches. This was a sort of response to the Mavelikkara Synod of 1818 refusing the proposal that the missionaries with some malpans chosen by them revise the Syrian liturgy in order to make it more scriptural. Norton began Anglican services in Alleppey in 1818. By 1821 Anglican services began in Kottayam and elsewhere.

1825 was a pandemonium year for Cheppad Mar Dionysius IV (1825-1855). He had just become Metropolitan, with the approval of the missionaries. A Syrian prelate, Mar Athanasius, accompanied by a Ramban, arrived in Cochin in November 1825 claiming to be envoys of the Syrian Patriarch. Athanasius proceeded to take over the Indian Church and to depose the ruling Metropolitan and his co-adjutor bishop. In April 1826, Athanasius was expelled by the British Resident. But before he left, a new rift had formed in the Indian Church, between those who supported Athanasius in the hope that he would drive the missionaries out, and others who supported the compromise made with the missionaries in running an Orthodox Church controlled by Anglicans.

The priests who supported Athanasius were reprimanded or punished by the British. Mr. Fenn, who controlled the Seminary, had by this time left for England on furlough. Mr. Bailey also went home soon due to ill health. Henry Baker was the only missionary since 1830, and looked after the Seminary (Syrian College), the grammar school, the parochial schools, the Printing press and the supervision of the work in the parishes. By 1833 Baker had also to take leave and go home. A Cholera scare had driven most of the students also from the seminary.

It was in this situation that Joseph Peet arrived. Less than 35 years of age, brash and brazen, for about one year he was the only missionary in Kottayam until Revd. Woodcock, 25 years of age joined him in the middle of 1834.

<sup>4</sup> See Cherlyan p. 193 ff

Peet came into immediate conflict with Cheppard Mar Dionysius. There was no rapport between them. Woodcock and Peet, though young, were constantly sick. Besides they came from an England shaken by the Oxford Movement (Newman, Pusey, Keble), and the youngsters were fiercely evangelical and anti-high-Church. According to Peet what the Orthodox were doing here was "Tractarian Papist nonsense".<sup>9</sup> Woodcock loved arguing against anything that struck him as unevangelical, and he used every contact for doctrinal argument, as his own journal shows.

There was already a division of opinion among the Malpans in the Seminary. One group was led by the famous Abraham Malpan, the prophet of the Reformation in the Indian Church. He was the acknowledged friend of the missionaries, the enthusiastic advocate of the reform of the Orthodox liturgy along protestant lines.

The other Malpan, less famous in the annals of western writers was more traditional in his commitment to Orthodoxy. It was he who decided to counter-attack Mr. Peet, but in his absence, after he had made in class some denunciatory and insulting comment on the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some of the students must have complained to the Malpan, and the Malpan gave arguments to the students against what Mr. Peet had said. He was still talking to the students when Mr. Peet came back. There were unfriendly words, spoken by the young missionary to the Senior Malpan. The Malpan was fired by the young missionary.

Mr. Peet took the controversy to the public, when at a feast in honour of the Blessed Virgin, he "preached a violent sermon against superstition"<sup>10</sup>. The people were offended.

A third incident "occurred when Peet, having heard that the Metran wanted to get hold of the title deeds of the Seminary properties, had the lock of the treasury room forced, and carried them off to his own house".<sup>11</sup>

A fourth event was Mr. Peet forcing the Orthodox bishop to sign an undertaking addressed to him, not to ordain anyone unless certified

9. Peet's letter to the Madras Committee, cited by Chariyan p. 211

10. C. B. Firth, *op. cit.* p. 171

11. Firth, *op. cit.* p. 171

by Mr. Peet and Abraham Malpan, the Reformer, the only Malpan who remained after the Orthodox one had been fired.<sup>12</sup>

Of the older missionaries, Fenn never returned: Bailey came back in 1833 after a three year absence. Henry Baker was absent from 1833 to 1835. The younger missionaries, whom C. B. Firth characterizes as "young, arrogant and ultra-Protestant"<sup>13</sup> disagreed with the soft line of the older missionaries and were taking matters in hand. Mr. Tucker who had taken over the Madras Corresponding Committee of the C. M. S. was of the same persuasion as Peet and Woodcock. Tucker was convinced that the senior missionaries' policy had been completely fruitless, since it had not succeeded in converting a single one among the 153 Syrian Priests, according to him. Tucker visited Travancore-Cochin in January 1835, toured for several weeks in the churches and produced a fairly exhaustive report. He assesses the result of 18 years (1816-1834) of mission work as follows:

"Of the one hundred and fifty three Kattanars educated more or less by the Missionaries, there is not one who does not continue every Sunday performing services which are plainly contrary to the Word of God, nor could I find one who appears really willing to put them away. Neither has one corrupt practice been laid aside by the Church, nor is there any trace of an increased desire for real reformation, as far as I can learn, throughout the Syrian Community..... Reviewing all these circumstances, and reflecting upon the promise of God, the usual blessing that attends the persevering labours of His faithful servants, I conceive that a case is made out sufficiently strong to justify a thorough investigation of the system itself".<sup>14</sup>

Tucker's assessment was that the 18 years' work of the earlier missionaries had produced no tangible signs of reformation in the Indian Church, and therefore that a new strategy had to be devised. "A thorough investigation of the system itself" could not mean anything else. The soft sell had not worked. Now the only thing to try was direct prophetic confrontation, and that was the job of the younger missionaries Peet and Woodcock. That explains the tactics of the duo.

12 The text of the undertaking is in Cherryan, p. 403

13 Firth, *op. cit.* p. 171

14 Cherryan, *op. cit.* pp. 281-282

From the missionary point of view it was a moment of crisis - a clash of two strategies, the choice fraught with momentous consequences. It was a matter of concern, not only to the CMS, but to the whole Anglican Communion. So the Metropolitan of Calcutta Daniel Wilson decided to come and settle the matter in person.

### The Wilson Proposals and their Significance

It will be useful for us as Orthodox to consider two questions :

- (a) The Wilson proposals seem reasonable and balanced. Why then did the Mavelikkara Synod of 1836 reject them?
- (b) What would the course of Christian history in Kerala have been if these proposals, in some modified form had been accepted by the Orthodox ?

The answers to the two questions are closely inter-related and it will be unwise to try to answer them separately. Besides, the answer to the second question would be largely speculative. What are important here, however, are the perceptions of the Orthodox, then as now.

Behind the Wilson proposals are the following facts, alluded to earlier:

- (a) Letters were sent by Cheppad Mar Dionysius, the Syrian bishop to the British Resident complaining against Joseph Peet's high-handed and criminal activities (breaking the safe and removing documents and copper plates). Complaints were also lodged with the British Government in Madras. (See Cheriyan, pp 217 ff). Meanwhile the missionaries had also obviously written to Bishop Wilson, stating that Mar Dionysius was unscrupulous and inimical to British interests. Wilson's biographer, Bateman, (*Life of Bishop Wilson*) refers to the 'more than doubtful' character of the Orthodox bishop.
- (b) Meanwhile Mr. Tucker, the Secretary of CMS Madras corresponding committee, had come to Kerala and got Mar

Dionysius to sign a document constituting Tucker as a co-trustee of the trust properties of the Orthodox Church.<sup>15</sup> (Cheriyān, P. 217-218, the trust deed is in his appendix N, p. 398). People in the Orthodox Church were already accusing their Bishop of having been tricked by Tucker.

Even Cheriyān admits that Tucker's visit did not improve matters much<sup>16</sup>. Tucker also got a new under-taking from Mar Dionysius, dated 27th January 1835, stating:

"I agree not to ordain any Deacons or Priests within two years from this day without the consent of the missionaries".<sup>17</sup>

The Orthodox people, as they got to know of it felt that the Bishop had handed over control over his ecclesiastical and sacramental power of ordination to Messrs Peet and Woodcock, albeit for two years.

(c) Once Tucker had come and gone with the agreements, Peet became increasingly polemic. Using the general permission given to missionaries to preach in our churches, he used our pulpits for attacks on the Blessed Virgin Mary, the invocation of Saints, prayer for the departed, as Peet's own journal shows.<sup>18</sup> He began desecrating our altars (eg. in Manarcad and Nirānam) by himself and his tracts, bearing assistants walking up to the Thronos and preaching from there. Our people felt religiously oppressed by the missionaries, and accused Mar Dionysius of collaborating with the missionaries for personal gain. Justice Cheriyān, ardent justifier of the activities of the missionaries, admits that "in several places, the people showed their positive disinclination to allow Mr. Peet to preach in their churches. But Peet insisted upon preaching even in such churches. This gave rise to many unpleasant scenes". That is Cheriyān's assessment. I tend to agree more with the judgment of non-Orthodox observers like C.B. Birch, Eugene Ten Brink and C.P. Mathew that it was only the white skin of the missionaries that saved them from being manhandled. If I were to pay a tribute to the Syrian Orthodox, I am not sure whether

15 Cheriyān, P. 217-218, the trust deed is in his appendix N, P. 398

16 Cheriyān, *Op. cit.* p. 218

17 Text of Agreement in Cheriyān p. 403

18 *Ibid.* Appendix U, pp 403 ff

it should be to their fear of the consequences of opposing someone whom they considered to be in league with the imperial master, or to their natural sense of respect for white foreigners. The people knew that Peet had the support of the Mission and the British government.

(d) The fourth fact was the news that spread among the Syrians about the C.M.S. Conference on Reform, held on 21st March 1835. The Minutes of this meeting is given in full in the appendix to Eugene Ten Brink's dissertation<sup>19</sup>. The general impression was that the missionaries were going to impose the Anglican faith and worship on the Orthodox Church. The minutes confirm this impression. The missionaries had a plan of action to impose reform on us. The plan of action would first try a lawful Synod of the bishops, priests and people in which the reform proposals would be accepted by majority vote. If this did not work, the British Resident would use financial and civil persuasion to make Mar Dionysius impose the reform. If he refused, the missionaries would use those who supported them like Abraham Malpan, to appeal directly to the people and break open the structure of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox people did not know all the details of this plan of action, but they already knew that the first step was to seek a majority action in a Synod. That is the light in which they saw the Mavelikkara Synod of 1836 and that explains the action there of the priests and the people.

It is in this context that Bishop Daniel Wilson, head of the Anglican Church of India came to Kottayam and preached in our churches "calculated to soften even the stoniest heart"<sup>20</sup>. Wilson was a refined soul, a consummate preacher, a seasoned diplomat. But Cheppad Mar Dionysius was under pressure from his people. Most of them did not want their bishop to make any more compromises with the Anglicans, bishop or missionary. Mar Dionysius was cold in his approach to Wilson as they met in Bailey's home in Kottayam at the end of the year 1835. Bishop Wilson, on his part, had been sufficiently prejudiced against Dionysius before he came, to

19 E.L. Ten Brink, *The C.M.S. Mission of Help to the Syrian Church in Malabar 1818-1840: A study in Protestant-Eastern Orthodox Encounter* (Unpublished ?) See refce in C. P. Mathew & M. M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of St. Thomas* Delhi, S. P. C. K., 1967, pp. 60 ff

20 These are the words of an Orthodox writer, Ittoop, cited by Cherlysu, p. 219



take the latter's cold attitude as an expression of incivility arising from weakness of character.

### The Wilson Proposals

I quote here the Wilson proposals, as they were handed out to Mar Dionysius in December 1835. The version is from C. P. Mathew and M. M. Thomas:

- 1) "The Metropolitan should as a general rule only ordain those who had passed through the College at Kottayam and obtained certificates of proficiency and good conduct".
- 2) "Accounts showing the produce of the land and other property belonging to the Church should be submitted annually to the British Resident, so that there might be no misappropriation or loss".
- 3) "A permanent endowment should, if possible, be instituted for the uncertain dues realized on the occasion of the various ceremonies such as marriages and baptisms and funerals for the needs of the clergy".
- 4) "Schools should be established in connection with every parish church".
- 5) "The clergy should expound the Gospel each Sunday during Divine Service.
- 6) "Prayers should be in Malayalam and not in Syriac".

On the surface these seem fair and equitable proposals. C. P. Mathew and M. M. Thomas show considerable lack of understanding when they state:

"It would seem that the proposals did not receive full and fair consideration. They were almost unanimously rejected *in toto*".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *op. cit.* p. 62. They go on on page 63 to analyze the motives of the Orthodox with some sympathy and understanding.

What the Orthodox Church was rejecting was the C.M.S. Mission of Help, and the Anglican yoke which was already getting tighter around our necks. What we were rejecting was the plan of Action agreed upon by the missionaries to impose reform on our Church against our will.

If we had accepted the Wilson proposals, we would have either become an Anglican Church, or something like the Mar Thoma Church. Our Anglican and Mar Thoma brothers and sisters will forgive us if we say that neither of these options were acceptable to us then, nor are they acceptable now.

What would have happened if we had accepted the Wilson proposals? Messrs Peet and Woodcock, whose convictions were clearly against the invocation of the Saints, against intercession for the departed and against the Eucharist as Christ's sacrifice, would have been responsible for training and shaping our priests and deacons, and indirectly our people. Once we accept the first proposal of Wilson, we would cease to be Orthodox.

If we accepted the second proposal of Wilson, the British Resident, the civil authorities and the Missionaries would have control over our properties. We were not prepared to accept that limitation then, and if someone outside our Church like the present Kerala government made such a demand today, we would accept that only in so far as it is within the law of the land and not in violation of our autonomy. If the Indian or Kerala government seeks to interfere with our autonomy today, we would offer resistance.

As for the third proposal, if we accept the proposal, who would provide the money? Would the missionaries put forward the money for the endowment and then disburse the salaries of our priests? We cannot tolerate that today, and we could not accept it then.

As for the three other proposals, about schools, preaching and Malayalam services, we did not need these to be imposed upon us by the Wilson proposals. Eventually we have done whatever good was intended by the six proposals.

(1) Our constitution provides that only candidates trained and certified by the Seminary can be ordained.

(2) Our accounts are audited, published, and debated in the Managing Committee of the Church.

(3) We have gradually improved the salaries of the priests, and many parishes had land endowments from which they paid their priests. We do not think there should be a central endowment for this purpose. Even the land endowments of parishes have turned out to be counter-productive.

(4) We did establish some schools but not in every parish. Establishing schools should have been the function of the government. The Orthodox Church has scores of schools and colleges run by it, but whether they play any positive role in the life of the Church can be debated.

(5) Our clergy do preach each Sunday, and we are training the Seminarians to do so.

(6) We use Malayalam as the principal language in our churches today.

It is therefore not true to say that we rejected the Wilson proposals in toto. We have accepted them in measure and at our pace. What our priests and people rejected at Mavelikkara was the Anglican faith being imposed on us.

The text of the Mavelikkara Padiyola makes that infinitely clear<sup>22</sup>. The document acknowledges the good work done by the Missionaries.

"The Reverend the Missionaries who have come down to Kottayam, in their profuse benevolence taught the youths at the Seminary English and other languages, protected our children like loving fathers, caused books to be printed for the benefit of all classes, rendered all necessary help in maintaining the prevailing

<sup>22</sup> The full text is in Chertyan, *Appendix H*, pp. 390-391

discipline of the Syrian Church, caused the annual interest due to be drawn on the receipt of the Metropolitan, had superintendence over the affairs of the Seminary, and caused ordinations to be made agreeable to the request of the people and the authority of the prelates".

It is after that long positive catalogue that the document says a polite word with "much sorrow and vexation": missionaries taking to managing the Seminary without consulting the Metropolitan, conducting affairs contrary to the discipline of our church, and creating dissensions amongst us.

And the last word in the Padiyola is our charter of freedom—freedom from all external intervention, from Roman Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox.

"For this reason, we would not follow any faith or teaching other than the Orthodox faith of the Jacobite Syrian Christians, to the end that we may obtain salvation through the prayers of the ever happy, holy, and ever blessed Mother of God, the redresser of all complaints, and through the prayers of all saints. Witness Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Amen".

We admit now, and we admitted in the 19th century, that we stood in need of reform. We accepted the CMS mission of help, only because we thought it would help us where we were weak and in need.

We have not rejected reform. We have rejected some of the reforms proposed by the missionaries, which touched the central aspects of our faith. We rejected them then, we reject them still. We have rejected external domination. We still reject it.

We are committed to a continuing reformation in the life of the Church. But we do not accept all demands coming from a mistaken (according to us) western rationality. We still need the help of all our sister churches, both in this country as well as abroad. We need not, however, need any jurisdiction or control from any other Church

or body, either in India or abroad. We need their fellowship and prayer both in the World Council of Churches and bilaterally, or multilaterally.

We are committed to be faithful to our Lord, to the teaching of the Apostles, to the Tradition and Faith of the one undivided Church of the First Three Ecumenical Councils. We are committed to reform only in so far as such reform makes us more faithful to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to the faith and trust and obedience in the One Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, who has kept us and led us through these centuries. His name be praised.

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