Chapter 6

The Syrian Christians and the Church

The saga of the Syrian Christian church up to the arrival of the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society has been dealt with in detail in the first chapter of this work. In the first decade of the nineteenth century the CMS missionaries arrived in Kerala at the request of the British Resident Colonel John Munro. They had the mission of reforming the ancient Syrian church of Kerala. The missionaries played an immense role in changing the social fabric of Kerala by founding the CMS College where the liberal education of the west was offered. The schools attached to the many churches they established gave children basic education and inculcated true values in them. The CMS Press established by the Rev. Benjamin Bailey opened the world of knowledge to all who knew how to read and write. The missionary himself was responsible to a large extent for the making of Malayalam prose. The missionary wives blazed the path of elementary education for women which in itself brought about a sea change in society. All that Kerala is now has can be traced to the work of the missionaries.

The Bible in Malayalam provided by Rev. Benjamin Bailey brought its readers into contact with its eternal truths. The people who read the Bible for themselves began to question many of the practices followed in the conservative Christian churches which were only
traditions without any basis in theology. The first missionaries were sensitive enough not to offend the sensibilities of the Syrian priests and bishops. They remained silent about these practices but took every opportunity to preach the pure and simple truths of the Gospel in their own language of Malayalam to the congregation. More and more people became attracted to the teachings of the missionaries. These reformist teachings were accepted by a group of people who belonged to the conservative Syrian church. This group believed that they should return to the true message of Jesus Christ untrammelled by ancestor worship and similar traditions. They became the Mar Thoma Church, a reformed church owing allegiance to no foreigner but to the Mar Thoma Metropolitan who is chosen from among the bishops of the Mar Thoma Church. When this group broke away from the conservative Syrian church, it came away penniless. Diligent industry and the grace of God have made it a large church spread all over the world with social outreach programmes that embrace every section of society.

There was also a large number among the Syrian Christians who, by their constant association with the missionaries, were attracted to their reformist teachings and wanted to become part of the Anglican tradition followed by the latter. They joined the missionaries and worshipped God according to the Anglican liturgy which was translated into Malayalam. They called themselves the CMS. Though they
followed the Anglican tradition in church they continued to preserve their Syrian Christian identity and belief of being descended from the first Namboodiri converts. After India became independent and the missionaries left Kerala, all the churches following the Anglican Protestant Episcopal traditions banded together under the names of the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of North India (CNI). The Syrian Christians of Kerala who follow the Protestant Anglican Episcopal tradition make up the Church of South India or the CSI. Those who wanted even more reform broke away and established groups which followed the Pentecostal tradition where there are only pastors, no priests or bishops. It must be noted that the church depicted in all the six works studied is of the different variants of the Protestant Episcopal tradition, Syrian or Anglican.

The church and the parish play a very important role in the life of the Syrian Christians. Conservative or reformist, the church was not only a place of worship but also the venue of a social gathering. People renewed their acquaintance and made new ones in the church usually before or after the worship service. This is especially true during weddings and funerals. Marriage and business contracts are made in the precincts of the church. Sometimes these may have to be broken but that is not usually done anywhere near the church.
In the churches there are associations for people who belong to different age groups. These were first started in the Anglican churches on the model of such organizations in the churches in England. While the Sunday School catered to children up to the age of fifteen, the Youth League engaged adolescent boys and girls and the Women’s Fellowship looked after the spiritual needs of women. The men were absorbed in other organizations which took over the running of the church. Though the main thrust in all these associations is the study of the Bible, they also provide a vent for the energy of children and adolescents and also fulfill the need of women to be recognized and given a chance to spread their wings at least in a small way. These associations were adapted by all other churches, even the conservative Syrian churches, with slight modifications of their own. The need fulfilled by these organizations is more social and emotional than spiritual, therefore their influence on the life of the Syrian Christian community is a most profound one. The Annual Reports published by each parish record the activities of each of these associations.

In these times, however, the church has become so much of a social organization that its true purpose of providing spiritual guidance to the flock seems to have taken a back seat. The church and its functionaries are, in more or less degree, no longer able to slake the spiritual thirst of the congregation. The teachings of Jesus Christ
regarding sacrifice and universal love have become distorted in the struggle for power and position within the church. The shepherds of the church have also become the kind of shepherds that are decried by Milton in his *Lycidas*. The rat race of modern society has affected the church too. Hence other spiritual organizations which have nothing to do with the established church have sprouted in their hundreds in order to cater to the needs of those who are disturbed in mind and body. Those who are fed up with the stranglehold of the established church try to rediscover the purity of Christian teaching through these new churches. There is now a host of godmen in the Christian church as there are in other religions as well. While many do provide solace to the spiritually needy there are even more others who are charlatans out to make quick money by playing upon the emotional insecurity of the people. Many of these groups also have foreign funding because the easiest way for the First World to soothe its conscience concerning its cruelties to the Third World is to provide the latter with funds for humanitarian activities. This is not to put down the many persons who act out of true Christian love but all those who firmly believe that God is some kind of fairy godfather who provides one with all material benefits are indeed suspect. These organizations which are able to slake the spiritual thirst of people pose a great threat to the established church. In an attempt to prevent the exodus of the flock to fresh pastures most of the churches are now
resorting to a mixture of threats and persuasion in order to make the church more attractive to the young by introducing new projects and novel ideas.

The church and its various organizations make their appearance in the six works studied. As *The Slayer Slain* and *Take My Hands* were written by missionaries the spiritual and religious aspect is emphasized whereas the other four works written by Syrian Christian women present the social aspect of the church. As Frances Collins and Dorothy Clarke Wilson were missionaries of the Protestant dispensation they try to present the conservative Syrian church in a rather unfavourable light. This is particularly so in the case of the former where a deliberate attempt is made to show the Syrian church as being mercenary and superstitious. Perhaps this is because this novel was written and published in 1866, the heyday of the British colonizer who considered himself superior to the “natives” (Proceedings 1837: 59). Also though the novel was started by Mrs. Collins it was completed by her husband who had a definite purpose in writing this work “for the instruction of the young” (SS 17). Denigrating the old Syrian church was perhaps a way to bring more people into the Protestant fold. A description like the one given below is enough to evince a great dislike for the ancient Syrian church.
Here groups of men in loud and earnest conversation were scattered about. Here was one man driving a hard bargain for some paddy; and as the seller refused to come to terms, it called forth a quarrel, and old and bitter words were again repeated. Others gathered round, and instead of attempting to quiet the disputants, their own voices helped to increase the uproar, till the noise from twenty or thirty voices became a perfect Babel. Clusters of women were talking rapidly, and throwing about their arms, as some bit of pleasant scandal met their ear, with their mouths red with the betel, and every now and then being obliged to get up to empty their filthy contents over the wall. Mariam observed her father in earnest conversation with a man of some importance and respectability. They stood at some distance, and took no notice of the noise and clamour around. George and herself stood alone mute and uncomfortable, seeing painfully the sad state of irreverence which prevailed among these modern Syrians (SS 75).

It is, however, a historical fact that the Syrian Christian priests and bishops were held in great respect by the early missionaries, an admiration that was amply reciprocated. P. Cheriyan in his work The
Malabar Syrians and the Church Missionary Society 1816-1840 quotes a letter written by the Rev. Benjamin Bailey at the death of Mar Philoxenus the Metropolitan of the Malankara Church thus

The Syrian Church has sustained a great loss, and the missionaries have been deprived of a true friend. His memory will ever be dear to us…It is but doing justice to the memory of this deservedly lamented individual to add that the members of our mission have, from their first arrival in Travancore, enjoyed his full confidence and mutual attachment has ever existed between him and the missionaries(110-111)

The Syrian Christians in the novel are depicted as persons who are more interested in material welfare rather than the spiritual. In fact they consider the worth of a person in terms of the landed property he has rather than his education or upbringing. The slayer in the novel, Koshy Curien gets furious with his slave Poulosa and strikes a blow at the old man which kills the latter’s grandson. All the problems in the novel start mainly because he is more interested in obtaining the maximum yield from his land. He does not agree to the request of the slaves to allow them to worship God on Sunday because he feels that there would be loss of many manhours. He goes to the Syrian Christian church because he is more interested in displaying his wealth and in
negotiating a marriage proposal for his daughter Mariam. He is least bothered about the fact that he ought to go to church in order to pray and not in order to exhibit his wealth. Only when his daughter Mariam is rescued from drowning by the old slave Poulosa whose grandson he had inadvertently killed, that Koshy Curien begins to suffer the pangs of conscience. Then it is that he turns back to the pure teachings of Jesus that he had learnt and practised in youth and penury. The Protestant pastor who had been his good friend in youth is once again welcomed back into Koshy Curien’s household and the old practices of family prayers and the study of the Bible are taken up much to the happiness of Mariam and her grandmother. The final break with the Syrian church to which he had returned in his prosperity comes when he breaks off the proposal to give his daughter in marriage to the uncouth son of the rich Syrian whose vast lands lay next to his. Instead Mariam is given in marriage to the evangelist Mathew who does not have vast lands but a good education, deep faith in God and a sensitive heart. Poulosa is located ad brought back by the penitent Koshy Curien himself. Thus the slayer is slain by true Christian love.

The Good News of Christianity is brought to the slaves by the Protestant pastors both white and black. The slaves thus learnt that they too were the children of God and had as much right to the Kingdom of Heaven as their more fortunate brothers. The rough structures that the
slaves constructed as places of worship were destroyed by the Syrian Christians who could not brook the idea of slaves presuming to build churches to God like their betters. Instances like the destruction of places of worship erected by slaves were very common in those days and were very often described by the missionaries in their Annual Reports.

In *The Slayer Slain* also there is a mention of how the rough hall built by the slaves was destroyed thrice by the henchmen of the Syrian Christians. The slaves were not disheartened, instead they rebuilt the hall every time it was destroyed because they had sworn that they would worship God in the same place always. Here they take refuge from the wrath of their master and here they bring the body of the innocent child. The pastor comforts the sorrowing family over the loss of the child and exhorts the slaves to forgive their harsh master and to pray for his redemption. Besides the pastor convinces the people that nobody can take the law in his hands and sees to it that Poulosa is saved from the crude punishment devised for him. The rulers of the land were British Protestants and therefore the word of the pastor was most significant.

One of the greatest ambitions of the missionaries was to bring the educated and cultured Brahmins into the fold of Christianity. The lower castes and the untouchables flocked into the Anglican churches where they were accepted and treated in the same way as the upper class
Christians by the white missionaries. They obtained a long denied sense of self esteem and like Poulosa recognized that they were no longer beasts but men with souls and hearts. They might not be such devoted Christians as Poulosa but the fact remains that they accepted Christianity in large numbers. The Brahmins, however, remained aloof even though they listened to the teachings of the missionaries. Perhaps that is why the Rev. Collins who completed the novel after the death of his wife introduces the character of the old Brahmin who accepts Christianity after being disillusioned with the tenets of his own religion. He tells Mariam that he has studied “the shasters till they have become like a dry piece of wood and (he) can get no sap out of them.” (SS 70). It is this desire to convert the Brahmins to Christianity that causes Rev. Collins to make up a most impossible tale of the old Brahmin’s being the uncle of Mariam’s mother. At the end of the novel the Brahmin and the slave Poulosa hold hands as a mark of their oneness in Christ. This is rather unbelievable at that moment of time in the history of Kerala when the caste laws were religiously observed. The Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for the year 1836 jubilantly reports the conversion of a very respectable Brahmin in Mavelikara. Such conversions were not uncommon though their numbers were very few.

The privileging of the Protestant church over the traditional Syrian Christian church is not so very blatant in Take My Hands. This is
perhaps because this work was written and published nearly a century after *The Slayer Slain*. The old dispensations have changed, India is no longer a colony of the British and most of the missionaries have departed. Only a few remain like Dr. Ida Scudder and Dr. Paul Brand at the Christian Medical College, Vellore. Dorothy Clark Wilson herself had been commissioned to write the biography of Dr. Ida Scudder. It was while she was in Vellore collecting material for this work that she came into contact with another striking personality, Dr. Mary Verghese, who had been struck down by cruel fate and confined to a wheelchair as a paraplegic. Yet she bravely put her hands to work in order to reconstruct fingers and hands for those whose hands had been mutilated by leprosy. The life of Dr. Mary Verghese is a testament of her faith in God and Dorothy Clark Wilson was most enamoured of it. Therefore she took it on herself to try to put into words the sacrifice and resilience of Dr. Mary who achieved world fame as the wheelchair surgeon of Vellore. In her description of the childhood of Dr. Mary Verghese Dorothy Clark Wilson deliberates upon the different influences that were responsible in moulding her character of which the most pervasive reality was the church. Mary belonged to the Orthodox Syrian dispensation and like others of her community was a regular churchgoer. The church service for Mary was a colourful drama in which the chief actor was the officiating priest. In Mary’s home church it was
Joseph Achan with his white curling beard, flowing robes and black cap who was the principal actor. Dorothy Clark Wilson gives a vivid description of the drama enacted in church:

There was much walking to and fro among the three high altars, much swinging of censers and burning of incense. The grand stage containing the central altar with its wooden cross and elaborate carvings even had a curtain, a beautiful embroidered Persian tapestry screen, which was drawn at the climax of the drama, the mysterious partaking of the Holy Qurbana, or Communion by the priest (TMH 25).

The people who attended the church were devout believers who sincerely took part in the drama enacted every Sunday and other church days. Theirs was not a cognitive understanding of the tenets of Christianity and their relevance in the daily lives of everyone. On the other hand it was more in the nature of an affective understanding, an obedient observance of tradition ad custom. It is also to be noted that these rituals of worship continue without much change today even though the liturgy followed in most Syrian churches is mostly in Malayalam.

Mary too was part of this flock of worshippers all through her days at home. It was only when she went to medical school in Vellore
that she came into contact with another and more vibrant form of the Christian religion where God was not a distant emperor watching over his subjects but an ever present, ever accessible, intimate friend who could be entirely depended upon. Mary found to her surprise that many people, particularly Dr. Ida Scudder, talked to God in a most intimate casual manner unlike her own father who, though he departed from the usual practice of using set prayers and practices, used phrases “of dignity and respect as if he were addressing a court official or a maharajah.” (TMH 67). Mary had always found religion a comfort and so she was part of the group of Syrian Christian students who came under the spiritual guidance of Kuriakose Achen who came once a fortnight to look after the spiritual needs of his little flock of Syrian Christian students.

When her friend Annamma took her to attend the Bible study conducted by Dr. Ida, Mary discovered a totally new way of Christian faith. Like all her compeers she was greatly attracted to Dr. Ida and her immense faith in God. Mary wanted to discover the source of that strength. The weekly Bible study classes brought her into ever closer contact with Dr. Ida who continued to be a source of inspiration for Mary as she was for many others. Though Mary took part in the weekly Bible study classes conducted by Dr. Ida she was still assailed by doubts regarding her spiritual position. A transformation took place in her
attitude after she listened to the sermon delivered by the eloquent evangelist Rev. Harrie Scott-Simmonds. His evocative sermons set her doubts at rest and gave her the strength to turn herself entirely to God. After this momentous decision was taken everything around her, animate and inanimate, seemed to be more alive, more vibrant. And yet there were times when she found it difficult to reconcile her faith with her logic, there were times when it was difficult being a doctor and a Christian. In the main, however, Mary’s faith continued to be simple and unquestioning and was a great inspiration to all her friends. She was confident that even in failure God “will help us find some way to use our failure.”(TMH 106)

The greatest test of Mary’s faith came when she suffered the terrible accident that made her a paraplegic and confined her to a wheelchair. It was only natural for her to be plagued by questions and doubts and yet she clung firmly to her faith. As a doctor she knew how debilitating her disease was and yet she refused to succumb to despair. Hope was her motivating force. She had only one creed that she would not yield to defeat but “cling to her faith in the goodness of God even though for the present it meant a blind groping.”(TMH 145) When Dr. Paul Brand suggested to her that she could always use her hands to help other people she could hardly believe it at first. But when she thought and prayed over it she found the idea not so impossible. She set herself
the task of learning and practising rehabilitative surgery on the gnarled hands of persons who had recovered from leprosy. Her very presence at the leprosy clinic put new faith and courage in the patients because from her they also learnt the lessons of cheerful endurance and rejoicing over the blessings that were still theirs. As for Mary, life, as she confided to Dr. Brand, seemed to, “have a pattern after all” (TMH 160) though all the threads were so broken and tangled. Once Mary had made reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation her forte there was no looking back. She studied hard in Vellore, Australia, America in order to master all the known techniques of reconstructive surgery while making innovations and experiments of her own. Mary’s simple faith in God saw her through all the ventures she took up. In an article that she wrote in a magazine in 1976 Mary testified that

There are times of uncertainty, insecurity, pain – when we trust in Him, in an incredible way, God gives an inner peace which passeth human understanding. As the sufferings and death of Christ opened the way to human salvation, in a strange manner God uses what apparently looks like unjust and unfair suffering to achieve greater glory. (TMH 258)

It is not the church as an institution that influenced Mary but the tenets of the Christian faith that sustained her in her life as a paraplegic
When it comes to the four works written by the Syrian Christians the church becomes an organisation that is more social than spiritual. There is no spiritual revelation of the kind that we find in *The Slayer Slain* or in *Take My Hands*. Perhaps that is because these four works are written by secular people whose concerns are more about the physical world they live in. It may also be representative of the fact that they reflect the general attitude of Syrian Christians in today’s post modern world in which money rules the roost. Even priesthood has mostly become a lucrative profession not any more a vocation involving hardship and difficulty. The churches have become centres of wealth and influence and therefore their importance in the spiritual life of every man has become eroded. Differences in dogma still continue to be a bone of contention in most churches. The churches have become places where the believers led by their priests enter into heated arguments about the liturgy. Such arguments about faith were prominent in the sixties and the seventies of the last century. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the focus is mainly on the material wealth of the churches and the desire for wealth and power. True spirituality seems to have been given the go by. Haggling for positions of power in the highest administrative bodies of the Syrian Christian churches has become a reality in present times. Bishoprics and positions in the Church Councils are hotly contested at all levels. There is very little
difference between the way elections are conducted within the Church and those conducted in the secular world. All the lobbying and mudslinging that is done in the secular world have their counterpart in the spiritual world also leaving the ordinary people thoroughly disillusioned. Therefore people tend to move away from the established churches and join groups which are formed by persons who recognize the spiritual need in people. These groups are at first full of zest and fervour but once they become an established church they are not much better than the mother churches. All these characteristics are found in more or less degree in the four works studied.

Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines* reveals some of the practices and controversies in the Mar Thoma church to which her mother’s family belonged. Meena’s maternal grandfather whom she called Ilya, was one of the pillars of the Mar Thoma church. He was the Rev. K.K.Kuruvilla the Principal of the Mar Thoma Seminary, Kottayam and a great scholar and Gandhian. It was in his heyday that the dispute in the dogma of the church took place. The believers ranged themselves into two groups, the Pathyam and the Sathyam groups who sparred with each other about “the precise symbolic nature of the Triune Deity or the status of the Malayalam liturgy as opposed to the ancient Syriac one.” *(FL 38)* Meena Alexander gives a very succinct account of the deliberations and controversies in the Mar Thoma church which were discussed
threadbare in her grandfather’s house by very fervent supporters of either cause. The very formation of the Mar Thoma church, its status as a reformed church and the ongoing discussions for even greater reformation are vividly described.

The Mar Thoma Church, in which Ilya had been ordained as a priest in his younger days, was going through a great crisis. Someone in the Pathyam group had shut the door on a visiting bishop from the Mar Thoma Seminary in Tiruvella. The slammed door reverberated in our house.

There were all night discussions about the finer points of ancient theology inherited from the beginnings of the church, from the days two thousand years ago when St. Thomas the Doubter had come to Kerala, and after him, the church fathers had followed the rough overland trail from Antioch and Babylon, bringing the liturgy, the details of the Syriac sacrament (FL 38).

The child Meena did not like the churches left unadorned and bare. She felt as if she were in a perpetual hangover torn between the strict theological upbringing given her by her beloved Ilya and her own desire for the beautiful and the lovely. The argument that raged in the church was for the child Meena just the subject for a little doggerel:

“Who is the Lord Almighty? /Is He one substance or three? /He is only
One. What about me?”(FL 39). This little rhyme has theology in a nutshell and is acceptable to all because it comes from a little child. And her grandfather readily gives the answer to the question posed by the child namely that she also along with all God’s creation are the children of God, “as far and wide as the eye can see and the heart can hear.” (FL 37)

Meena in later life also feels the pain of this schism which equates purity of the spirit with austerity and considers any external expression of beauty as a sign of decadence. When she grows older she is totally unable to reconcile with the vast difference between the preaching and the practice of the church. Though she is forced to obey her parents and attend church services with them she is unable to believe in God as a loving father and the priests as His true representatives. Her belief in God is totally destroyed when she has to watch her beloved Ilya in constant pain while battling with Death. Meena is unable to find solace in the Bible- which her mother does- while keeping vigil at her father’s bedside. She recounts the recurring dream that she has about being turned out of the church when she tries to step into it. Perhaps this dream is prompted by her own feeling of guilt that she has no belief in God. Besides she has also married a Jew which again denies her entrance into a Christian church.
The importance of the church is to be found in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* also. Here Lissy appears to belong to the Mar Thoma church though at times there seems to be a hint that she belongs to the Anglican church. Nirmala Aravind makes no specific mention of the church to which her heroine belongs. The church has become a place where people meet and exchange news, make new friends and renew old ones. Lissy’s mother carefully observes the dress and the appearance of the girls in the choir. She compares them to her own daughter and criticizes Lissy for not measuring up. As the choir sits in the choir stalls placed nearest to the altar they are open for a lot of such observations as the ones made by Kuttiamma. Often the studied speeches delivered by the pastor have the effect of putting the congregation to sleep. The church services are also an excuse for young men and women to admire each other under the pretext of praying. Lissy’s room mate Renji tells her that she is going to attend the early morning service in the Orthodox church because a large number of eligible young men attend that service. It appears that young men and women prefer to attend the first service of their respective churches and also neighbouring ones if they have a sense of fun and adventure like Renji. When Lissy attends the marriage of her Hindu friend Latha she is disappointed by the actual ceremony which is short and very matter of fact. It seemed such a waste of all the hours that had gone into the decking of the bride because the ceremony
is soon over giving the guests little time to admire the bride and her accoutrements. Lissy could not help recalling the solemn grandeur of church weddings and the marriage vows taken by the bride and groom which promised to love cherish, protect until death parted them.

The CSI and Mar Thoma churches of Kerala have full fledged choirs which play a very important role in the Sunday church services. During the Christmas season the choirs of the various churches conduct carol services. Though there is a Christmas message by a good speaker on the occasion, the focus is mainly on the choir and its performance. The choir undertakes rigorous practice sessions for several of the previous months in order to produce a recital that would earn the appreciation of all especially the people who have heard other such recitals and consider themselves connoisseurs of the art. The acid test of a good choir is the rendering of the famous ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ composed by George Handel. This piece of music is quite a difficult one and therefore worthy of being the touchstone for the choir’s prowess. The fact that the choir in the Pallissery church was able to acquit itself in its rendering of the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ is indicative of its true merit.

The social nature of the church is also seen in the fact that the caste system is prevalent in the church though it is more covert than overt. There is a segregation in the church which, though it preaches equality, does not truly practise it at all. The caste system is so inherent
in the church and so insidious in the behaviour of the upper caste Syrian Christians that in many cases if there are a sufficient number of Dalits, the latter move out of the church and establish a separate church for themselves. If this is not practical, separate services are held for them. If this too is not possible the lower castes shrink into themselves and try to minimise contact with the Syrian Christians. They know their place and keep it, or at least they are made to keep it by the Syrian Christians. In the novel, Jose, in a bout of drunken confession, confides to Lissy of his hatred of the segregation practised in her church of which he too is a member. Marriage with Lissy was his way of taking revenge on the community which had insulted his for centuries. Even though Jesus and his disciples preached and practised the oneness of all mankind as the children of God, the church went along with all the old notions of caste.

The various organizations of the church are also mentioned here, viz. the Sunday School where Lissy is a good teacher, the Bible study classes which are attended by both Lissy and her brother Aby, the Women’s Fellowship which is a gathering of the women of the parish in which Kuttiamma takes active part. These organizations fill a need in the various segments of the congregation. Lissy taught in the Sunday School because there is need for dedicated young people to teach the Word of God to young children from infancy to adolescence. Bible study classes are for all those who feel the need for a closer
acquaintance with the Holy Word. The Women’s Fellowship caters to women who wish to study the Bible and also to bond with other women, sharing hopes and problems, thoughts and ideas. Thus it is that Kuttiamma who is a member of the Women’s Fellowship makes it known that her daughter has reached the age of marriage and that the parents are on the lookout for a suitable groom for her. One of the many suitors that Lissy has to face was brought by one of the ladies who belonged to the Women’s Fellowship.

Cottage prayer meetings held in the home of a parishioner once or twice a year are occasions when the parishioners meet together, share their news and views, renew their acquaintance with each member of the household, file away information about the various members of the house in their memories to be taken out at need. Many a contract, business or marriage, are made by such associations. These cottage prayer meetings are also occasions to display the culinary prowess of the woman of the house in some cases. This feature is rapidly dying out in these days of fast food and caterers.

The old days when priests were revered and accepted as spiritual guides and material judges have for the most part gone by. This is not to deny the fact that there are priests who are interested in the weal and woe of their flock but they are very few in number. It is now the practice for parishioners to critically evaluate the pastor and the content of his
message. The pastor in Lissy’s church in Trivandrum is a careful scholar who takes great care in preparing his weekly sermon. So careful is he in presenting his point that the sermon turns out to be most ineffective and does nothing for the flock except invoke the God of Sleep. However, the parishioners acknowledge that he is more effective in smaller groups as he is in the prayer meeting held in Lissy’s house. At Pallisserry, when the family goes to celebrate Christmas in Cheriachen’s ancestral home, the talk is all about the vicar in the church who is one of those “Communist priests.” (VFB 74) This does not mean that he is a communist, and a member of the Party as Lissy imagines, but rather that he has socialist ideas which preach about universal brotherhood and equality. It would not be wrong to call him a liberation theologian, one of those who were most attracted to this theology of the eighties that considered Jesus as the one who liberated the marginalized and the down trodden. It is a fact that one of the most respected Bishops of the Syrian Jacobite church, Rt. Rev. Dr. Paulose Mar Paulose was popularly regarded as a liberation theologian. The message of the parish priest of Pallissery on Christmas Eve was appreciated by all because though it exhorted all men to think about their less fortunate brothers it did not leave them with such a guilty conscience as to prevent them from enjoying Christmas.
During the holidays the family pays a visit to Kuttiamma’s house as well. Lissy and Aby enjoy the pageantry of the old Jacobite church in Piravanthanam to which their mother had belonged before her marriage. As much of the service is in Syriac they do not understand what is being intoned, but they like watching “the priest chanting and intoning the lines in a singsong voice” (VFB 101). The heavy red curtain that separates the holy of holies from the congregation is drawn and lifted every now and then just as would be done in the staging of a drama. They had to stand through the service, the Eastern Syrian Christians did not hold with pews and benches. When the sermon started the congregation sat down on the floor as one man “you had to be fast, or you would be left standing in the middle with not an inch of space to be seen anywhere.” (VFB 101)

Family prayers is a feature found in all Syrian Christian families. It gives one a sense of continuity to read out from the old family Bible which had been used by the previous generations. The morning and evening ritual of praying together as a family is followed devoutly in Lissy’s family. All the members of the family sing hymns, listen to the reading of the Bible by Cheriachen and then repeat the prayers together with true solemnity. When the whole family gathers together in the ancestral house at Pallissery for Christmas the family prayers become occasions when the hymns are sung and prayers made with great gusto.
As the occasion is Christmas carols are sung for a change. Each member of the family also has private prayers of his own. Lissy reads the Bible and makes her own petitions to God. Many persons keep treasured memorabilia in the pages of the Bible just as Lissy keeps her father’s first gift of money within the pages of her Bible. Reading the Bible and praying to a loving Father God is a great comfort particularly in times of sorrow and trouble.

Aby, Lissy’s brother, takes up a more puritanic position with regard to prayer. He joins a prayer group that believes in practising a spartan kind of Christianity which disregards one’s duty to one’s family. He spends days and nights in prayer and fasting but they do not seem to make him happy because Lissy has often heard him weep in his room. According to him Christianity, when it became institutionalized and established, blocked man’s passage to God. Christmas should not be a time for feasting or merrymaking. It should be spent on one’s knees praying for forgiveness of past sin and guidance for future actions. He even goes on a twenty four hour fast on Christmas Day to prove his point. However, his action of fasting does not bring happiness either to him or to his family. His mother and sister grieve that he does not share in the feast that they have so lovingly prepared, his father and grandmother try to understand his point of view, his elder aunt and uncle feel that he is being a nuisance, his younger aunt and uncle try to
sympathise and his boisterous young cousins feel that it is stupid of him to give up eating all the tasty items that had been prepared for Christmas. They are also able to prove their point because they hand a large hunk of cake to their starving cousin who swallows his pride and gladly eats it. Aby is against everything that is done in the established church and does not want to undergo the conventional theological training that would fit him out to be a priest in the church. He prefers instead to be an evangelist and after he completes his post graduation goes off to Bangarapet to train as an evangelist. This is the natural culmination of the many prayer meetings that he had attended with a particular prayer group that he patronized, quite different from the ones that the established church recognised. His mother’s pleas that he has a duty to his family fall on deaf ears because he believes that his duty to God is much greater.

There seems to be great deal of meaning in what Aby says about wanting to keep the Christian religion pure and untainted when we come across the Rev. Z.Zachariah who is brought as a prospective suitor for Lissy by the broker Joshua. The pastor belonged to the Episcopalian tradition and is in charge of a church in Pennsylvania. Lissy’s parents decide to follow up the proposal because they are assured that the man does not belong to the Jehovah’s Witness or the Seventh Day Adventist groups both of which are anathema to Syrian Christians. When the
pastor’s parents come to see Lissy they charm the whole family and it looks as if the match will take place. Lissy’s parents even make the tiresome trip to Bombay in order to see the pastor the minute he arrived at the airport. They are shocked to see the pastor turn up with his white girl friend. It is quite plain that the pastor takes his pastoral duties as a profession and his eyes are fixed on the main chance. Marriage with a white woman would make him a citizen of America the modern Promised Land. Thoughts of the trouble and tension that he has caused his own parents and three sets of other parents who have eligible daughters do not cause him to lose any sleep. While a layman may be assailed by pangs of conscience such niceties do not bother him at all. As Renjini succinctly puts it to Lissy, this pastor is fishier than all others.

Nirmala Aravind gives a true and vivid picture of the Maramon Convention which is second to none in the matter of the multitudes that gather on the banks of the River Pamba for a space of a week in the dry month of February in order to listen to sermons that exhort man to turn back to God. This century old convention is so much a part of the lives of the Syrian Christians of Central Travancore that it has become another social cum spiritual excursion which is undertaken by men and women of all sects and descriptions. The Maramon Convention though the baby of the Mar Thoma church is a must for all Syrian Christians.
The speakers who come to the Maramon Convention are world renowned evangelists who are very effective communicators. There is a special liking for white evangelists who are tall and burly with loud and resonant voices. Lissy speaks about the speaker Brother David Nicholson who is much appreciated by the crowd for his physical size and effective delivery. The speakers in English are usually provided with translators into Malayalam so that the whole huge assembly could easily understand the speaker’s message. Sometimes the translator, baffled by the speaker’s accent and unfamiliar usages, resorts to a very free translation which may have only a remote resemblance to the original. Each day there are three sermons delivered by different speakers. The whole function is made even more attractive by the choir singing new songs as one man or leading the whole gathering in the singing of old favourites. It is also a custom for old men who are regular in attending the convention every year to make the acquaintance of the speakers on the strength of their venerable age and in a kind of colonial hangover of respect for the white man. At the end of the day when the believers wend their way home they go with a sense of contentment that they had been able to attend the convention yet another year. One is reminded of Chaucer’s pilgrims who look forward to returning home with the satisfaction of having expiated their sins by undertaking the pilgrimage to Canterbury.
The church makes its appearance in *The God of Small Things* also. Rev. John Iype, Ammu’s grandfather is well known in Ayemenem as “Punnyan Kunju” (GST 23) or the Little Blessed One. This title was bestowed on him by the people of the land because as a young boy he had the privilege of being blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch who was then on an Episcopal visit to his domains in Central Kerala as the supreme spiritual authority of the Syrian church. When Punnyan Kunju grew up he became a priest of the Mar Thoma church which did not owe any allegiance to the Patriarch but the people persisted in calling him by the title they had given him long ago. He was married to a meek and submissive wife who humbly followed in his footsteps. He sired two children – a boy who later became an insufferable anglophile, a wife and child beater and an Imperial Entomologist and a girl who grew into an embittered gross woman who fell in love with the wrong man and hated seeing the happiness of others. Even though the family of the Rev. John Iype prospered materially, they fell far short in the matter of spirituality. This lack of a spiritual bulwark may perhaps be the reason why such terrible things had to take place in the family encompassing three succeeding generations.

The only occasion we see the family entering the church is to attend the burial service of Sophiemol who had drowned in the Meenachil river. What remains in Rahel’s mind of that event is the sight
of the priests with long curly beards swinging censers to and fro. The
church offers no comfort or consolation to the bereaved family nor does
it advise people to stick to the right path in order to have a life worth
living. The milk of human kindness seems to have run dry in the priests
and clerics so that they think nothing of refusing to bury Ammu in the
church cemetery for a variety of reasons. Therefore Chacko is forced to
have his sister cremated at the state crematorium. He is insensitive
enough to drag Rahel along and thus provide her with another nightmare
to live with, viz. to remember that her beautiful vibrant mother had been
reduced to a mere pot of ashes, her teeth devoid of her smile.

    Father Mulligan, the Irish priest with whom Baby Kochamma
falls hopelessly in love when she was a young girl, for whom she
becomes a Roman Catholic and even a nun in the hope of seeing and
talking to him. Hers was a love that had sexual undertones which were
firmly repressed though it is foolish to think that the monk was not
aware of her thoughts. When she discovered that life in the nunnery did
not bring her any nearer to her loved one, she cleverly managed to
convey to her father her state of unhappiness which had him promptly at
her side and as quickly releasing her from her nun’s habit. She, however,
refused to give up the Catholic faith that she had chosen but continued to
be faithful to it and to her beloved Father Mulligan. She has a rude
shock when she learns that the monk had given up the Christian religion
and had become a Buddhist Swami. Though the scales fall from her eyes she persists in the sweet memories of Father Mulligan as he had been when she first met him. The church plays no role at all in healing the wounds of these disturbed minds. True Christian love is to be found not among the baptized Syrian Christians but only in the pagan untouchable Velutha.

All the three important churches are named in *Something Barely Remembered* though in some cases there is only a passing reference. As the novel itself is disjointed and fragmentary tracing out relationships becomes quite a difficult task. Lukose Achen with whom the novel begins makes his appearance when the novel ends also. But his is not a sustained presence in the many threads which are entangled in the story. The old practice of members of the same family serving the same church which was built by their forefathers is described in the novel. Lukose Achen was trained to become a priest not in any seminary but after years of being apprenticed to his father’s brother Andreyos Achen. The latter served in the old church that had been built by his father in 1880. It appears that the church is one of the ancient Syrian Jacobite churches. The priest, like all full fledged priests, is a celibate as Andreyos Achen and later Lukose Achen are. Priesthood runs in the family and so it is no surprise that once a young man is ordained as priest even his own mother and father stop calling him by name and instead give him the
honorific title of Father or Achen just like the other parishioners. One is called to the mission by a divine force which makes one eager to accept the vocation of priesthood. But for Lukose Achen the call seems to be a little different:

I don’t know when it was that I received the calling.

Perhaps it was that day when I felt the sun burn into my blood and yet my head was filled with a cold and shattering sense of power… I shivered as Ilay on the banks and felt that God was gray and cold and violent

(SBR 10).

Such a realization of the awesome presence of God seems to be fraught with fear, a feeling entirely different from the feeling of joy that encompasses the heart of Dr. Mary Verghese when she turns herself over to God. Whatever the nature of the feeling engendered by the call of God the family of Lukose has no difficulty in accepting the fact that the eldest son of the family has been set apart by God himself to do His work. He is allowed to pursue his own interests provided that they did not clash with his vocation and so he spent days reading and dreaming while his brother was being trained to be a good householder in the footsteps of his father. When Lukose is thirteen years old he is escorted to the house of his paternal uncle Andreyos Achen so that he could be apprenticed to him in order to learn the arduous tasks and duties of
priesthood so that he could run the parish as the successor of his uncle. His mother even outfits him for the part by stitching a white cloak-like dress very similar to the vestments of a priest. She even provides him with a small round velvet cap which fits snugly on his head similar to that worn by Syrian Jacobite and Orthodox priests. When the boy Lukose is taken to the church in which he would eventually serve, it is to find that his uncle, the priest had gone to the next village in order to attend a marriage. He finds himself alone waiting for his uncle to return. All the fears of a young adolescent assail him and the sight of his ascetic uncle does not do much to reassure him. It is only in the next morning when he awakens to the scent of incense that he realizes the form that his life would take in the next years.

Then I smelt the frankincense. It was bitter and fragrant and came to me from the windows of the church. I heard the priest call out “Kyrie Eleison” Lord have mercy, and I went to join him. He was dressed in robes of gold, his feet shod in red velvet shoes. The church was empty as I kissed the steps and the pillars of the altar. He blessed me with his handcross and I became like him a servant eager to see God (SBR 15).

Lukose after he becomes a priest carries out his priestly duties with devotion and dedication. When his father falls into debt and dies he
leaves the management of the house and the repayment of the debt entirely in the hands of his mother and his brother Behnan thus shirking his responsibilities as eldest son. He withdraws behind the dark habit of his profession leaving such mundane considerations. It is his mother’s business acumen that saves the family honour. At the end of the novel when his niece Mariam, daughter of his brother Behnan returns home a broken hearted divorcee he persuades her to go and stay with her old grandmother who lived alone in a little house by the river.

A priest is a true spiritual guide for his flock. Apart from his duties in the church being the intermediary between God and man, he is also teacher, counsellor and arbitrator. Anna who is taken to Italy by her uncle was taught by Father George who had given her a very enviable education which allows her to hold her own in a strange country. When she leaves he reminds her not to forget to say her prayers and above all, not to forget her native Malayalam. He even gives her a Malayalam-English dictionary so that she could clear whatever doubts she may have. The job of counsellor is also one of the pastoral duties of a priest. Sarah’s parents-in-law call upon the parish priest to come and counsel Sarah after she had fainted in the church during the reading of the gospel. This is considered most inauspicious by the family. The priest arrives in the evening and tries to get at the root of Sarah’s problem. It is quite evident that Sarah is very disturbed about something although her
mother in law attributes it to the fact that she is pregnant with her first baby. The priest does not succeed in counselling Sarah because she is in no mood to listen to his questions or remarks. He puts the usual questions to her, questions which seem to brand women as being hysterical and sinful. She gives him answers which may be considered a little impertinent to people who are very conscious of their place in society. Though Sarah’s husband’s double life is an open secret, the priest does not bother to point out his sinful ways to him. Instead he easily gets out of the whole delicate issue by attributing Sarah’s problems to her delicate condition.

The parishioners too follow certain rituals like having family prayers and so on. Every person right from childhood is taught to read the Bible twice a day and memorise verses from it. Learning some of the Psalms by rote is considered absolutely necessary in a good Syrian Christian family. Some Psalms become personal favourites like Psalm 23 and Psalm 121. These are recited in times of distress and disturbance. When Leah’s father dies, his daughters mourn him by reciting his favourite Psalm 121 and keeping vigil at his deathbed. However, as death is an inevitable fact of life and as life has to go on, one cannot keep mourning. Leah tells her sibling not to be like Mordecai always in sackcloth and ashes. Familiarity with the characters of the Bible causes
their infiltration into the language as well. Mordecai is usually considered a prophet of doom in the Book of Esther in the Bible.

A good liberal education has not only brought Syrian Christians to the forefront among the different communities of India it has also exposed them to various philosophies and systems of thought. This causes some of them to discard the truths and beliefs espoused by the holy books particularly the Bible. A case in point is that of Ivan of the Vazhayil family. He is a well read person and a writer of repute. He has very decided views and responds to the injustices of society in his own way. He dislikes the male chauvinism in his community which considers a girl child as insignificant and a burden. As he does not want to be party to such an attitude he prefers to remain a bachelor all his life. He puts aside the Bible and its truths on the grounds that it has only fostered these wrong attitudes. These very same beliefs make it impossible for his sister to marry her first cousin, so she chooses to remain a spinster all her life. He looks down upon his sister’s preoccupation with the church and the Bible and mocks at her for keeping all the many fasts prescribed by the church. He has no faith at all that there is a God who answers the prayers made by His believers. If there had been such a God the three fingers of his father’s hand which had been chopped off in a family brawl would have grown back – such were the petitions then put forth to God. Though he has come home to die of the disease that was
daily gnawing into him he has no belief that fervent prayers will cure him. He does not bother to clutch at God the last resort of a dying man. He agrees with his sister that Doomsday is looming large but unlike her he believes that it will be brought about by the bomb and not by the second coming of Jesus Christ. He even goes to the extent of instructing his sister that he should be laid to rest in the cheapest coffin available and that no cross should be erected over his tomb. He is clearheaded enough to note that his cousin who was responsible for the loss of his father’s fingers was more sinned against than sinning. It is this knowledge that causes him to be on very friendly terms with his cousin. He has no respect for the priests and does not even think of sharing his problems with these men in black robes who, in his opinion, look like vampires drinking the blood of the helpless parishioners. And yet he chooses to return to his ancestral house and his native land in order to die. All unknown to his conscious mind he seeks and finds consolation in his frayed old Bible and in the golden reed mats on his bed which though old are still fragrant. The familiar sights and sounds of his birth place, the simple and tasty cooking of his sister, her careful and unselfish care combine to create an ambience which make his passage into the unknown hereafter smooth and easy. Perhaps he also takes comfort from his sister’s faith that at the Day of Judgement he too would
be among the blessed dead because in spite of his blasphemy and 
apostasy he was indeed a good man.

Such a close look at all these works presents the picture of the 
Syrian Christian church which has lost the pristine purity of the past. 
The reformed church which came about as a result of the coming of the 
missionaries to Kerala has also lost its apostolic and evangelical fervour. 
It too has become choked up in rites and rituals which are all done with 
a view to enrich the church materially. The physical growth and material 
prosperity of the church has resulted in the proportionate loss of its 
spirituality. The people to whom these churches cater are also labouring 
in the mire of spiritual discontent. Therefore they try to seek peace and 
satisfaction at the feet of several god men and their splinter groups. Such 
groups are mushrooming all over the land, each more popular and more 
frenzied than its predecessor. The established churches are now in such 
a panic that they try to keep their flock from straying by persuasion and 
blandishment. These, however, are not too effective because the offers 
from other groups who are fattened on the conscience money from the 
west are even more tempting and enticing. It will not be too long before 
all the churches of the land experience the same fate as the churches of 
the west where the priest conducts the service for the benefit of one or 
two persons who stray into the church like Sumana does. She has to 
remain there for the entire length of the service because her absence
would be noted as she made up one of the three worshippers who were in church. Religion in all its forms, conservative and progressive, has become a very big and lucrative business. The essential principles of Christianity and God himself seem to take a seat at the very back.