

# **CHAPTER VII**

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During 1900 - 2000 the Assyrian Church of the East suffered heavily under persecutions. They were attacked often by the Kurds until the First World War (1914 - 1918). They lived in their own land with fear of Kurds.

They were expecting protection from Britain. For the missionaries of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian mission were working in Kurdistan in Turkey and Urmia in Persia. The political protection that the Assyrians were expecting never came. The British missionaries explained to the Assyrians that the purpose of their mission was only ecclesiastical and not political.

The relation with the Anglican Mission ended with the end of the First World War in 1918 A.D. The British accommodated the Assyrian refugees in Baquba Refugee Camp near Bagdad when they had to flee for their life from Turkey in 1918.

The assassination of the Patriarch (Mar Benyamin Shimun) in March 1918 at Salamus and the death of his successor and younger brother Mar



Poulose Shimun at a young age of 27 on May 9, 1920<sup>1</sup> which necessitated the consecration of their 12-year-old nephew as Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun added to the problem of the Assyrians.

The massacre of the Assyrians at Simel in August 1933 was another tragedy. The Assyrians lost all hopes of a bright future when their young Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun<sup>2</sup> was exiled to Cyprus. When Mar Eshai Shimun moved from Cyprus to England and then to settle in America in 1940 the picture of the Assyrian church was changing.

From 1933 to 1975 the Assyrian Church did not have much progress. The Metropolitan in India, Mar Abimalek Timotheus died in Trichur on 30 April 1945. Although the Indian Church got a Metropolitan (Mar Thoma Darmo from Khabour, Syria) in 1952 the church in India went into many problems after a period of about ten years.<sup>3</sup>

The rift between Mar Thoma Darmo Metropolitan and his consecrator Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun spread into Syria, Iraq, America,

<sup>1</sup> Poulose was born in 1893, along with his twin brother Zaya (d. 1947), as a younger brother of Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun.

<sup>2</sup> Mar Eshai Shimun was born in 1908 and was assassinated on 6 November, 1975. He was only 25 years old when he was exiled from Iraq to Cyprus in August 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Mar Thoma Darmo (1904-1969) arrived in India in June 1952. He had to face problems during his last six years in India (1962-1968).



Australia, etc. The adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1964 made the "suspension" of Mar Thoma Darmo even worse.

The unity in India that took place in November 1995 gives a hope for the progress of this Church at least in India. Even in other parts of the world it created a longing for a peaceful settlement of this unfortunate "calendar" issue.

The Chaldean - Assyrian dialogue is an attempt to return to the *status quo* of 1552 A.D. when John Sulaqa decided to go to Vatican to be consecrated Patriarch of the Chaldeans. Now many in both Churches feel that the Church of the East is an adequate expression to include both the Chaldeans and the Assyrians.

The name used in India is the "Chaldean Syrian Church" because Mar Rocos<sup>4</sup> and Mar Elia Mellus<sup>5</sup> served as Metropolitans in Trichur during 1861- 62 and 1874 -82 respectively. Both these prelates returned to Iraq and served the Chaldean Church. Could "Chaldean Assyrian Church of the East" be an adequate expression, if these two factions created in 1552 A.D. could reunite in the 21st century?

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<sup>4</sup> Mar Thoma Rocos Metropolitan came to India in 1861 and was forced to return to Iraq in 1862.

<sup>5</sup> Mar Yohannan Elia Mellus Metropolitan came to India in 1874 and returned to Iraq in 1882.



The Assyrian Church that was larger than the Chaldean (Catholic) Church till the beginning of the 20th century has been reduced to minority status in comparison to the Chaldean community sometime in the beginning of this century. Possibilities of higher education in Rome for the Chaldean clergy, assistance from the French Lazarist mission etc. helped the Chaldean Church to grow.

The Church of the East in India (locally known as Chaldean Syrian Church) does not have any special official dialogue with the Syro Malabar Church. But these Churches work in close co-operation with each other in India.

The Archbishop of Chengannassery of the Syro Malabar Church in India, Mar Joseph Powathil is a member of the Pro Oriente Commission of Syriac Churches. Thus Pro Oriente, Vienna has provided various opportunities for inter action between these Churches.

The Mixed Committee for Theological Dialogue (MCTD) includes Fr. Mathew Vellanikal, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Chengannassery of Syro Malabar Church, as its member appointed by the Pontifical Commission for Christian Unity, Vatican in the Committee. In that capacity he works with the Metropolitan of the Church of the East in



India, who is the co-Chairman of the Mixed Committee for Theological Dialogue.

Although such opportunities help further co-operation and understanding between the Syro Malabar Church and the Church of the East in India, it does not lead to any unilateral action on the part of the Church of the East in India. Because the Church of the East in India considers it an integral part of the Assyrian Church of the East universal under the headship of His Holiness Mar Khanania Dinkha IV, Catholicos Patriarch at present residing in Morton Grove near Chicago, USA. As the Church of the East in India based in Thrissur does not have any special entity, there is no possibility of this Church attempting for unity with the Syro Malabar Church. At the same time as the relation between the universal Assyrian Church and Roman Catholic Church improves further and if it can lead to full communion between these two ancient Churches, the co-operation between Syro Malabar Church and the Assyrian Church of the East in India can become a reality.

Geographically and linguistically there will be a natural consequence. The Seminarians of the Church of the East in India can be trained in the Seminaries in Kerala belonging to the Syro Malabar Church.

If there were no Mar Narsai Press, in Trichur, India, not only the Church of the East but also the use of the Syriac language would have suffered.



Now the books printed in the Mar Narsai Press in India such as Liturgy of Qurbana, Baptism, Marriage, Burial, and blessing of the home etc. are in use all over the world.

Assyrian people used the Julian calendar printed in India since 1926 until 1995 wherever the Assyrians live. Even in Russia where there was no worshipping Assyrian community till recently, the Assyrians looked at the Assyrian calendar to know the dates of the religious festivals which their forefathers used in the "old" countries which meant Syria, Iraq or Iran. After Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun changed the calendar to the Gregorian reckoning in 1964 his followers did not use the calendar printed at the Mar Narsai Press.

An observation made by John Joseph in the end of his book *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbours* is worth repeating here after nearly half a century. He is writing about the strength of the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

With its worldwide organisation and political prestige, with its educational institutions and educated priests, the Catholic Church, already strong in the Middle East, continues to attract Orthodox Christians into its fold. Most probably it will entirely absorb the

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<sup>6</sup> John Joseph., op. cit., p.236.



remnants of the Nestorian Church which to its faithful few is known by its proud but once-fitting name "The Old Church of the East".

In India, this Church has only 30,000 members out of the seven million known as Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians. Ethnically they are Indians and not Assyrians. In Turkey, it is not found. The churches are deserted. The believers moved down to Bagdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, etc.

Even in Iran the Assyrians left their traditional homes and moved down to cities like Teheran. There are several Churches near Urmia (Rizaieh), which are today monuments of the past. Some of the relatives in America help to renovate some of these old churches. But no priest is living in the neighbourhood. The priest has to come from Urmia to conduct some memorial service once a year in such old Churches.

But the number of the Assyrians is increasing in USA and Canada. There is considerable growth in the strength of the Assyrian community in Australia and New Zealand. In Europe too the numbers are going up. In Greece there are 2,500 Assyrians and a resident priest is appointed in April 2000.



The Church of the East in 1900 AD was a pro-Anglican Church and was opposed to the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Vatican. Now in 2000 AD the Church of the East is a pro-Vatican Church. The millennium celebrations jointly observed by the Assyrian Church and the Catholic Chaldean Church in October 2000 AD in Seleucia–Ctesiphon near Bagdad and at Rabban Hurmizd Monastery at Alkosh near Mosul, under the leadership of His Holiness Mar Khanania Dinkha IV, Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East and His Beatitude Mar Raphael Bidawid, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church is a clear indication of a closer walk between these two Churches which were one and the same prior to 1553 AD.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Assyrian territory was a corner of eastern Turkey and northwest in Persia. Now at the beginning of the 21st century the Assyrians are scattered all over the world such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Greece, Sweden, England, Germany, U.S.A., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

