CHAPTER I

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This study entitled *Gender and Spirituality: Archaeology of Religious life in Kerala* is an attempt to write the history of women’s spirituality within the Christian Church system in Kerala. The term ‘Gender’ as usual presupposes women studies perspective. The expression ‘Archaeology of Religious life’ is used in this study to indicate a comprehensive history of the related ideas and institutions. The term ‘Archaeology’ is used more as a metaphor than as the usual word in its technical sense. ‘Spirituality’ comes up here as women’s spirituality, as a powerful form of women’s spiritual expression, finding its voice by founding various Women Religious Congregations. The study on women spirituality here refers primarily to the womanhood religiously endowed, i.e., life of a nun.

Though there are many differences between the Indian and European types of women’s spirituality, the urge for a higher form of freedom of womanhood is universal. The Christian women spirituality in India has replicated its European model but by a process of adapting to the traits of local tradition. This study is specifically an attempt to find out the reasons for the origin of the various indigenous Women Religious Congregations in Kerala and the part played by Mother Mariam Thresia, the foundress of the Congregation of the Holy Family, in this process.
The present study on women spirituality largely belongs to the epistemological category of "Women Studies" that has recently captivated the attention of modern academicians. The study delves into the issues of gender inequalities, analyzed with the perspectives of the critique of patriarchal dominance and power. It articulates a space of freedom that womanhood had always been denied by the patriarchal system in the secular society. As a result of the male bias, "Women’s Studies" were neglected all over the world till recent times. Currently in Kerala, gender studies have increasingly become important with great involvement of women in different aspects of social life, following which there appeared a lot of literature as well, both historical and sociological, highlighting the various aspects and issues of Kerala women. However, no work has appeared so far regarding the spiritual and religious aspects of Kerala women, although a great many Malayali women resorted to spiritual life as the best form of expressing their womanhood. This work, therefore, tries to bring the Women Religious, who are often known as nuns, from invisibility to visibility and seeks to argue that women experiences in the spiritual and religious realm too are worthy of research.

In view of the holistic approach to female spirituality, the study moves to the interface of disciplines like History and Sociology and becomes one with interdisciplinary areas like Women Studies, Feminist Theology etc. In that sense, this is not the conventional type of religious history. At the same time, the study does proceed empirically recounting history of events in the chronological sequential order. Though the study is done within the general frame of gender studies, the scholar does not claim to have made the study theoretical in the pure sense of the term. Its methodology is primarily descriptive and marginally interpretative.

Women are gaining access to many professions, educational disciplines and politics. They are increasingly entering the realm of social service. Indian Christian women are all the more so by being very active on the educational and social fronts. Dedicated to social service, nuns of Kerala are reputed for ministry of prayer, inter-faith dialogue, family counselling, house visits, helping the sick and dying, medical care, ministry to the poor, building homes for the orphans, destitutes and aged, helping the mentally retarded and physically handicapped, in addition to socio-economic upliftment, skilled welfare programmes etc. Their ministry is whole-heartedly acceptable at the local as well as global level and at various levels of decision-making. Though various authors and feminist scholars have done systematic and critical study of women’s
issues, the religious or spiritual aspect is neglected or forgotten. The present study is an exploration into this much neglected area of research.

Traditionally women were rather compelled to marry and confine themselves within the four walls of their houses. Their space was very much limited, with a few exceptions indeed. Any other life style for women was unimaginable in those days (Nineteenth century). Taking the above fact into consideration this study focuses mainly on how some women abandoned their traditional way of married life and entered into the challenging life style of nuns.

In a male-centred society, it is hard for women to enforce their ideas single-handed. This was all the more so in the past. So socially inclined women sought the help of ecclesiastical authorities to get sanction for their new way of life. The present study seeks to provide a case illustration of it in the background of the emergence of nunneries in Kerala.

**Period of Study**

This study is confined to the period between A.D. 1866 – 1926. This period has been chosen for a variety of reasons. Mother Mariam Thresia, the foundress of the Congregation of Holy Family was born in Puthenchira in the year 1876. The significance of the year 1926 is that, Mother Mariam Thresia expired in that year. Moreover, during the period under study, A.D. 1866 – 1926, six Women Religious Congregations
originated in Kerala which were initiated by women. They are Congregation of the Mount Carmel 1866 (CMC), Franciscan Clarist Congregation 1888 (FCC), Sisters of Blessed Virgin Mary 1892 (SVM), Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament 1906 (SABS), Sisters of Sacred Heart 1911 (SH) and Congregation of Holy Family 1914 (CHF). The focal area of study is Congregation of Holy Family founded by Mother Mariam Thresia. Special emphasis is laid on Mother Mariam Thresia’s Spirituality and Family Apostolate. The specific role played by this ‘Servant of God’, Mother Mariam Thresia, is narrated historically and recorded by making use of the extant primary as well as secondary sources.

**Aims and Objectives**

The life and mission of Mother Mariam Thresia (1876 – 1926) is interwoven with the history of Kerala by the historic foundation of the Congregation of Holy Family, the Order of Nuns on 14 May 1914. The Congregation of Holy Family is the first indigenous Congregation, which took up the challenging mission of liberation focusing on the families – the basic unit of the society – thereby achieving the integrated development of the human person in the context of family and society through ‘Family Apostolate’. The conspicuous aspect of Mother Mariam Thresia’s life of public service was its unusual novelty; she volunteered to visit the neighbouring houses to nurse the sick and attend upon the
needy. What she chose to do was something that was not expected from the youthful marriageable girl in the social setup of Kerala at that time.

The founding of the Congregation of Holy Family and the special Charism of Mother Mariam Thresia — Family Apostolate — was a revolutionary break in the socio-cultural set up of Kerala of that time. The nuns remained either within the four walls of the convent or those of the institutions of their apostolate. They never came down to the people around. But the Congregation of Holy Family sprouted in the midst of the people and for the people. The foundress threw herself right into the heart of the society, i.e., families, where she found the field for the new apostolate. The secret of Mother Mariam Thresia’s marvellous success lies in her wholehearted dedication to the cause of the poor and the neglected, at the family level. It was a refreshingly original idea at the time when she tried to put her idea into practice a century before, in the remote village of Puthenchira, where she was born.

Mother Mariam Thresia is still an ‘unknown saint’ for many. Only a few, especially those who are in Kerala have known and heard about her virtuous life. The emergence of women studies and the subsequent space it created in the academic realm, inspired this scholar to take up the topic of Mother Mariam Thresia for the research study. An answer to this riddle is proposed by studying the genesis of women religious congregations in Kerala. The central purpose of this study is to see how Mother Mariam
Thresia can be placed in the historical context of Kerala as well as to analyze her spiritual heritage, which culminated in the service of humanity, especially service to the family. This work also tries to show the context, within which the young ladies of St. Thomas Christians resorted to spiritual and religious life as the best expression of their womanhood.

**Conceptual Frame**

“Women Studies” has originated from a series of critical thoughts against gender discrimination that prevails in society and the unfounded belief that women are inferior to men. They sought to reject conventional studies and conventional methodologies along with conventional knowledge. It is a fact that conventional knowledge is based on the experience of men. The ‘knower’ is invariably ‘man’ and the known is declared ‘human’; hence the hegemony of the male-centred knowledge. “Women Studies” has been growing, increasingly critical of this knowledge-system and social order. The standard intellectual and scientific paradigm in such a social order is androcentric, i.e., male-centred and patriarchal. It generates and perpetuates scholarship that takes man as the central being and women are presented as insignificant or peripheral. Far from being objective, androcentric texts and knowledge produce the *historical silence* and *invisibility* of women. The main problem that “Women Studies” faces on all fronts is the male bias or
androcentricism that prevails in all disciplines. Women's contributions to history and their experiences are hardly recorded in books. So “Women Studies” makes a departure from this, by exploring consciously and deliberately deep into the lived experiences of women and try to record it for posterity.

Although women are neglected in history, the effects of their lives and actions form an integral part of historical reality. Androcentric scholarship defines woman as the ‘other’ and as the ‘object’ of male scholarship. “Feminist Studies” insists on the reconceptualisation of language as well as intellectual frameworks in such a way that women as well as men equally become the subjects of human culture and scholarly pursuits. In the past decade, feminist writers have, therefore, tried to articulate the theoretical means to move out from the male-centred text to the historical context that enables them to bring women back into history. They have stated that the goal of women's history is two


pronged: ‘to restore women to history and to restore history of women’. “Women’s Studies” starts with the premise that there is greater discrimination against women and women’s status, subordinate and subject to exploitation. Hence the framework for “Women’s Studies” is redefined to accommodate women’s perception and experience in a deeper understanding of social issues. The question of women’s history arose with the rise of ‘feminism’. Today there is a reasonably well-theorized feminist historiography. This has developed with the declared agenda of making women not only visible in history, but also historical by recording their contributions to social and historical processes.


Neera Desai and Vibhuti Patel, Indian Women, Change and Challenge in the International Decade 1975-‘85, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1985. Vina Majumdar, Emergence of Women’s Question in India and Role of Women’s Studies, New Delhi, Centre for Women’s Studies, 1986. Vina Majumdar, Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000, New Delhi, Centre for Women’s Studies, 1986.

Feminism literally means the ‘ideologies of females’. In 1960’s this term began to be used in the West. The titles of the major books of that period show that a great emphasis has been given to the ‘visibility’ element. Titles like Becoming visible and Hidden from History reveal this preoccupation. “Breaking the Silence-Becoming Visible”, in Elizabeth Fiorenza, ed. In Concilium: Religion in the Eighties, T&T Clerk Ltd, 1985.

For details see Bibliographical reprint titled Women, New Delhi, ICSSR (no year of publication). This is a compilation of 55 bibliographies on various subjects related to women viz., education, dowry, delinquent women, prostitution, and women leadership in Indian National Congress etc., prepared by NASS Documents periodically. And see also Women at Work in India; An up to Date, 1985-1986, compiled by S. Anant, S.Ghosh and S.V.Ramani Rao, New Delhi, ISST, 1987. And see also Meera Velayudhan, Women and development in India, Delhi, CWDS, 1981. Usha Bala and Anshu Sharma, Indian Women Freedom Fighters 1857-1947, Delhi, Manohar publishers, 1986.
purpose of their historiographical exercise was to integrate women’s experience into the dialectics of history.

One of the important developments that generated interest in women’s issues in India is UNO’s declaration of the ‘International Women’s Year’ (1975) and ‘International Women’s Decade’ (1975 – 1985). The investigation carried out by the Governmental Committee ‘On the Status of Women in India and its Findings’ published in 1975 also accelerated the process of generating interest in gender studies.

“Women’s Studies” is gaining more and more importance both at the national and international levels. Today many people and centres are interested in collecting and preserving historical documents related to women.

7 UNO declared 1975 as ‘International Women’s Year’ and the period from 1975 to 1985 as ‘International Women’s Decade’.
9 At the National level, the SNDT Women’s University established in 1916 was the first Women’s University in the country. The Research Centre on Women’s Studies, SNDT Women’s University was established in 1974 as a unit and became a centre in 1985. The ‘ICSSR’ through its various programmes of sponsored researches on women in 1976 encouraged studies on women. ‘The First National Conference on Women’s Studies’ (NCWS) was held in Bombay in 1981. Another national agency for the promotion of gender studies is ‘Indian Association for Women’s Studies’ (IAWS), which was born in Bombay in 1982. Similarly the ‘Mother Theresa Women’s University’, Kodaikanal, established in 1984, devotes its energy and money entirely for women’s studies.
10 At the International level UNO declared International Women’s Year in 1975. UNO declared International Women’s Decade, 1975-85. UNESCO organised the meeting of experts on Women’s Studies and Social Science in 1982.
Review of Literature

A review of knowledge production in “Women’s Studies” is relevant here. A wonderful access to the information regarding “Women’s Studies” is made available in 1993 by the work of Anju Vyas and Sumitha Singh. A few publishing companies emerged here solely to publish books on women and women-related issues. According to 1986 survey, there are more than hundred research organisations in India where research and teaching on women are going on. A number of biographies

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12 Anju Vyas and Sumitha Singh, ed. Women studies in India: Information Sources, Services and Programmes, New Delhi, Sage publications, 1993. Ramani Rao, ed. Women’s Studies in India: A Directory of Research Institutes, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, Ashish Publishing House, 1993. This book is an attempt to cover a wide range of organizations and also to group them according to their characteristics. The purpose of this directory is to provide handy source information to all agencies and individuals who may be in need of the “Women’s Studies” scheme in the country or more detailed and precise information about institutions involved in research and studies produced by them.

13 Vikas Publishing House (Private Ltd), Sahidabad, U.P., was the first major publisher to start a separate women’s publishers programme under the imprint of ‘Shakti’ way back in 1982. India’s first women’s publishing house, ‘Kali for Women’, Golanohar Park, Delhi, was set up in 1984 and was concerned primarily with publishing studies on the Third World Women. ‘Streelekha’, Bluemoon Complex, M G Road, Bangalore, is women’s book place started in 1985 and it combined, in particular, the activity of feminist book selling. “The Streelekha Publications India” is started in 1989 by a group of young women. This publishing house aims ‘to highlight the cases and problems of the women of India’ through their publishing programmes. Another one is ‘Womens’ Institute for New Awakening’ (WINA), whose newsletter is Wina Vani from Bangalore. Manushi is another forum for women from different social strata to speak out and share their personal experiences and plan of action programmes. Manushi was started by the initiatives of the women groups based on Delhi University in 1977-78.

on women and autobiographies by women have also been published. Some historians and sociologists have written specifically on women's history. All these have provided an impetus to the growth of Social Science literature on women. Unlike in the past, more and more people, especially women are making critical study of history in feminist perspectives with the help of authentic documents.

In pre-independent India, a few writers on women discussed the educational backwardness of women. The earlier writings on women, portrayed women as soft persons meant to help men and having no individuality of their own. Some writers gave women only a dependent status. Others who wrote on women just highlighted the evil customs like sati, prohibition of widow remarriage etc. There are a few modern writings on women, which deal mainly with the upper class and not concerned about the lower class.

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19 *Manu, Manusmriti* IX: 2-3.

The impact of International Women's Decade on the lives, status and struggles of women in India is discussed by other writers.\textsuperscript{21} *A Decade of Women's Movement in India* by Neera Desai is an attempt to delineate the tremendous response of women in different parts of India to the growing women's issues. Her work is a live record of the efforts made by women to awaken their consciousness and organise themselves in their struggle against subordination.\textsuperscript{22} Books that highlight the aspects of self-reliance of women through economic and social independence,\textsuperscript{23} colonial India from women's perspective,\textsuperscript{24} women's oppressions and subordination during the last 10 to 15 years\textsuperscript{25} etc., have enabled women to have an increased awareness of their changing roles in society. John P. Pool depicts the role played by Indian women in the domestic and political life of the country of the past.\textsuperscript{26} Some works enabled women to become more and more conscious of their rights and privileges, especially

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\textsuperscript{25} Alice W.Clerk, ed. *Gender and Political Economy: Explorations of South Asian Society*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994. In the last decade, international feminist scholarship has undergone paradigm shift as the women's movement had adapted a more militant and radically analytic stance in Third World societies, in more than those of South Asia. And see also Alice W.Clerk, *Writing Women's History: International Perspective*, London, Macmillan, 1992.
\end{flushleft}
legal matters. Robin Jeffery highlights the role of women in the development of Kerala. Neera Desai argues that gender discrimination still continues to prevail in the society. Several gender related studies have come out and many have contributed significantly to the production of knowledge on women issues. In the last twenty years, a good number of studies on a variety of themes, using diverse methodologies and integrating many disciplines have been done. Few scholars incorporated women's ideologies, philosophical concepts, methodologies, theories etc., in their writings. Women writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present brings forth almost all women who have contributed to the field of writing in

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various languages.\textsuperscript{33} There is a broadening and deepening of the range of critical issues on sex and gender. Some of the recent works have made attempts to highlight the connections between sexual oppression and other forms of injustice. Eco-feminism demonstrates the profound connections between the exploitation of mother earth and the oppression of women,\textsuperscript{34} and the Dalit theology\textsuperscript{35} demonstrates the oppression based on caste system and suppression of women.

The French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir's contribution is a great milestone in the development of Women's Studies as it succeeded in setting the direction for raising a feminist consciousness.\textsuperscript{36} Her monumental work \textit{The Second Sex} is a twentieth century classic and landmark in the history of feminism. Of all the writings that emerged from the existentialist movement, Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking study on women will probably have the most extensive and enduring impact. It is at once a work of anthropology and sociology, of biology and psychoanalysis. The central thesis of her book is that since patriarchal time, women have, in general, been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with

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\item \textsuperscript{34} Vandana Siva and Maria Mies, \textit{Eco-feminism}, Noide, Kali for women, 1993.
\end{itemize}
that of racial minorities, inspite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race.

Side by side with the general field of feminist writings, works came up in the area of feminist spirituality and theology. The Christian feminist spirituality is closely connected with feminist theology, which has developed as a new branch of theology created and voiced by women, although men also wrote about it occasionally. Paraphrasing the American Declaration of Independence, Elizabeth Cadystanton, Mrs. Lucretia Moot and others brought out a 'Declaration of principles' and one of their resolutions was that, the fact that 'woman is man's equal, was intended to be so by the creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.' Elizabeth Cadystanton made a speech at Seneca Falls, on 19 July 1848. She urged:

Let woman live, as she should. Let her feel her accountability to her Maker. Let her know that her spirit is filled for as high a sphere as men, and that her soul requires food as pure and exalted as his. Let her live first for God and she will not make imperfect an object of reverence and awe.

37 Feminist theology developed in USA before it came to Europe where it is found since about 1975. However feminist theology is by no means restricted to North America and Western Europe but, like feminism itself, it posses a global dimension. Feminist theological thinking can be found among women in Australia, and elsewhere around the world. Ursula King, _Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise_, London, Macmillian Education, 1989.


In 1895, Elizabeth Cadystanton set about writing and editing the
Women’s Bible, a series of commentaries on biblical passages pertaining
to women. The project was a product of Elizabeth Cadystanton’s firm
conviction that the political and economic subordination of women has
deep ideological and religious roots. She felt that the degradation of
women is based on biblical view of creation and redemption. Therefore,
she says, ‘the emancipation of women is finally impossible unless the
Bible is repudiated as revelation and understood from a feminist
perspective’. It was Elizabeth Cadystanton who was largely responsible
for the Women’s Bible – a mixture of deism, rationalist Protestantism,
devout Christianity and current culture – published in two parts in 1895
and 1898. This seems to have been part of her political strategy, as she
recognised that Bible was used for oppression of women by many and
had great cultural power.40 Elizabeth Cadystanton questioned in the
Women’s Bible, the biblical roots of sexism. With all its limitations the
Women’s Bible is still worth reading, for the author’s perception of the
way in which an amalgam of canon and civil law, church and state, priests
and legislators, political parties and religious denominations had
inculcated in women a fundamental conviction of their inferiority,
conveyed to them not least by their alleged incapacity to ‘image’ God.41

40 Mary D. Pellader, Towards a Tradition of Feminist Theology: The Religious Social
Thought of Elizabeth Cadystanton. Susan B Antony and Anna Howard Shaw,
The emergence of feminist theology can be dated to the article of Valerie Saiving Goldsteins, entitled *The Human Situation: A Feminine View*. This was the first notable work in feminist theology, which was not recognized as such at the time. As a student of theology, Valerie Saiving became aware that the universal human condition, discussed by the theologians, did not take into account the difference between the experience of women and men. She had the courage to see that the sexual identity of a theologian has much to do with her or his perception of theology, and thus she proves that the gender of a theologian makes a difference in the process of theologizing.

Feminist theology is reflected in the sizable literature, which presents the women's movement in the synagogue, the Christian Church, and the feminist spirituality movements, which had already developed into a tradition, which is ecumenical, pluralist and academically serious. Feminist theologians like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza say,

Feminist spirituality has to grow out of a feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation. The task of such a theology is to uncover Christian theological traditions and myths that perpetuate sexist ideologies, violence and alienation.

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The essential challenge for women interested in theological issues is summed up in questions such as: Does traditional theology still speak to women's experience today or do women need to create a new religious and spiritual tradition? Do feminists need to reconstruct their religious traditions by reinterpreting their insights in the light of new experience? These issues are squarely faced in the book of essays edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Women Spirit Rising.* From a Christian point of view they are more fully explored in the methodological and critical section of Rosemary Redford Ruether's work, *Sexism and God Talk,* and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's book *In Memory of Her.*

One of the best known and the most radical feminist theologian is Mary Daly, who had formerly been a Roman Catholic. An explicitly feminist stance was articulated in Mary Daly's book *The Church and the Second Sex,* a widely recognized and acclaimed work on the role of women in the Church. Following the publication of Mary Daly's work, a flood of books appeared on feminist theology. She was not only the first to articulate fully a feminist stance in theology, but also one among those to repudiate her own earlier reformist position taken in *The Church and the Second Sex* developing an extreme radicalism in her subsequent

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publications. In her ‘New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction’ to the 1975 edition of her book, *Beyond God the Father* (first published in 1973), she argues that, it is not sexism alone which makes Christianity oppressive, but its very core symbolism of God, the Father and the male Christ.\(^49\) She later greatly shifted her focus and radicalized her perspectives, which are summarized in such articles as “Theology after the Demise of God the Father: A Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion”\(^50\) and “After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness.”\(^51\) Her radical, separatist stance is seen in her highly original books, which have introduced a lot of new concepts like *Gyn/Ecology*\(^52\) and *Pure Lust*.\(^53\)

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a well-known feminist theologian and a prolific writer raises her voice in a ‘balanced and moderate’ way. Her strength lies in blending the best of Christian tradition with feminist vision and restating Christian insights in the context of women’s experience today. Rosemary Radford Ruether’s feminist theology is based on a vision of a world without sexism, a world truly transformed by

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divine redemption. Over the years, her perspective has widened considerably and she now lists among the sources of her theologizing not only the Bible and the dominant theological traditions of the major Christian Churches, but also the counter culture movements in early Christianity and Church history, pagan veneration of nature and the goddess, and modern resources found in Liberalism, Marxism and Romanticism. Rosemary Radford Ruether developed a new written symbol ‘God/ess’ for ‘God’. It combines words of male and female linguistic form whilst preserving the fundamental affirmation that divinity is one. For worship she developed the term ‘Holy One’ or ‘Holy Wisdom’.

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s early work was concerned with Liberation Theology and the theological roots of anti-semitism Faith and Fratricide. This was followed by two collections of essays Religion and Sexism and New women/New Earth dealing with sexist ideologies and human liberation. After a brief study on Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church, she edited with Elanor MC Laughlin

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Women of Spirit,\textsuperscript{59} which explores the lives, and insights of several women leaders in Judaism and Christianity. Rosemary Radford Ruether’s important introduction to feminist theology Sexism and God–Talk\textsuperscript{60} is based on a vision of world without sexism. Women Guides: Reading Towards a Feminist Theology\textsuperscript{61} and Women –Church: The Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities\textsuperscript{62} are her other works. Rosemary Radford Ruether has suggested that it is not the maleness of God and Christ as such which gave rise to sexist attitude, but rather their association with our patriarchal models of maleness as dominance and of femaleness as subordination. Much of the experiences of the divine feminine in Christianity has been projected on the figure of Blessed Virgin Mary and it is no surprise that both secular and religious feminists have shown an interest in the thought and cult associated with her. Mary has also been ‘the feminine face of the Church’ and is often seen as the theological counter-image of Eve, as a ‘New Eve’. The cult of Virgin Mary became popular in the West from the twelfth century onwards.

Writing on women in Medieval Theology Eleanor MC Laughlin says:


Virgin Mary is always addressed as the passive woman 'the servant of the Lord'. Her exaltation has often enforced the subordination of Christian women. This is what Feminist theologians criticise, but they also attempt to develop new perspectives on Mary, especially as we meet her in the New Testament in her association with the mission of Jesus -marriage at Cana-(John 2/1-11). Mary is also presented in a challenging prophetic role linked to the theme of liberation, especially as expressed in the Magnificat (Lk. 1/43ff). It is not the traditional role of comfort and solace, which is stressed, but one of challenge and independence, an image of autonomy rather than subjection.63

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza contributed much through her pathbreaking attempts. In her work *Breaking the Silence - Becoming Visible* she portrays the visibility of women.64 Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's major book takes its title from an incident involving an unnamed woman. *In Memory of Her* has an immensely powerful introduction, by way of reconsidering the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet.65 This book gives her feminist reinterpretation of biblical passages. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza remarks that both Christian feminist theology and biblical interpretation are in the process of rediscovering that the Christian gospel cannot be proclaimed if the women disciples and what they have done are not remembered. So she wants to reconstruct early Christian history as 'women's' history, thus

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restoring women’s stories, and also to reclaim this history as the history of both men and women.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s *Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity and Catholic Vision* proves a clear rationale for the reformist position, and for her, patriarchy is a many-headed monster and it must, therefore, be attacked with all the strategies at our command.66 Since she began to question female cultural roles precisely because of her Christian faith, Fiorenza discusses those aspects of Catholicism that supported women’s growth. The God whom Jesus preached, she claims, is not - as Mary Daly insists - an authoritarian ‘Other’, but is, the same ‘Creator’ and ‘Nurturer’ of life, central to feminist spirituality. While this God was imagined in increasingly patriarchal ways, the compensatory figure of Mary allowed Catholics to experience the divine also as female. Moreover, the call to sainthood, which is meant for all, irrespective of gender, has provided Christian women with opportunities to choose vocations other than wife and mother. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza never claims that these liberative insights prove the Church free of sexism. But she finds them as sufficient grounds to hope and work for the Church’s repentance, rather than abandoning it for its sins.

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When we consider how much of the history of early Christianity must have been lost to us, those references to women that survive become meagre. But even they suggest that women played a major role in the history of the Church. Women were found among the followers of Jesus (Mathew 27/55-56; Mark 15/40-41; Luke 8/1-3; John 19/25). In endorsing Mary’s choice of listening to His teachings, Jesus recognizes women’s capacity to study and learn Scriptures (Luke 10/38-42). Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman (John 4/7-42), woman caught in adultery (John 8/3-11), Jesus’ friendship with Marta and Mary (Luke 10/38-42; John 11/1-44), the anointing of Jesus by a woman (Mathew 26/6-13; Mark 14/3-9; Luke 7/36-38; John 12/1-8) etc., speak volumes of Jesus’ relationship with women. They were the first witnesses to his resurrection (Mathew 28/1-8; Mark 16/1-10; Luke 24/1-10; John 20/1-18).

There were women prophets, disciples and full participants in the missionary work of the early Christian community. Leading woman of Beroea (Acts 17/4), Lydia (Acts 16/14-15), Damaris (Acts 17/34), Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16/3-15), Phoebe, who worked as a church deacon (Rom 16/1-2) are examples of women’s involvement in the formative phase of early Church. The differences of ministries and women’s crucial participation in the life of the early Christian communities are evident from the study of New Testament and early
Church history. There were martyrs among women. The names of Blandina (A.D.117), Perpetua, Felicitas, Priscilla (Prisca) and Maximilla stand high among the women martyrs of the early Church.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her *Bread not Stone* explains the process of women-Church movement, and in this movement more and more Christian women seek *bread and not stone* to nourish their inner and outer life. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza insists that ‘to speak of the Church of women does not mean to advocate a separatist strategy but to underline the visibility of women in biblical religion and to safeguard our freedom from spiritual male control’. According to her, women are becoming more radical as current Church authorities will only rarely listen to their voice; women have to initiate action for themselves. They cannot wait for the Christian Churches to reform themselves sufficiently as to provide a life of faith and worship that women need today.

Of Feminist scholars of the Old Testament, Phyllis Trible is clearly outstanding and as early as in 1973 she had claimed that ‘Hebrew Scriptures and women’s liberation do meet and ... their encounter need not be hostile’. In her paper to the Journal *American Academy of Religions*, titled “Depatriarchalizing the Biblical Interpretation”, she admitted that ‘Patriarchy’ referred appropriately to the male-dominated society and the God of the fathers to be found in scripture, but argued that

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the ‘intentionality’ of biblical faith is neither to create nor to perpetuate such patriarchy, but rather to function as salvation of both women and men. Her two major works illustrate the difficulties and the promise: *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* represents ‘promise’. While it is not difficult to find texts indicating women’s inferiority, subordination and abuse in scripture, those same scriptures also contain challenges to such devaluation, not only in the figures of some of the magnificent women of the Jewish tradition, but importantly, in the unlikely sources of chapters two and three of ‘Genesis’.  

Phyllis Trible’s interpretation of ‘Genesis’ becomes a key to unlock some of the meaning of the ‘Song of Songs’ of the Bible, and she pays a great deal of attention to some of the metaphors of God in whose image female and male are made. Her work *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Reading of the Biblical Narratives* speaks powerfully of the present male domination through the study of the stories of Hagar, Tamar and Amnon, Jephthah’s daughter and the unnamed concubine of Chapter nineteen of ‘Judges’. Born and lived in a land of patriarchy, the Bible abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries, interpretations have explored and exploited this male language to articulate theology; and to instruct human beings – male and female – who they are, what

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roles they should play, and how they should behave. This association has become so harmonious, of scripture with sexism, of faith with culture, that only a few have questioned it. In her *Feminist Hermeneutical and Biblical Studies* she proposes feminist approach to the Bible.\(^1\)

Phyllis Trible surveyed three feminist approaches to the study of women in scripture. The first explores the inferiority, subordination and abuse of women in ancient Israel. Within this context, the second pursues the counter-literature that is itself a critique of patriarchy. Utilizing both these approaches, the third retells sympathetically the stories of terror about women. Feminist hermeneutics embrace a variety of methodologies and disciplines like Archaeology, Linguistics, Anthropology, Literary and historical criticism and all have specific contributions to make, thereby knowledge of the past increases and deepens, as it informs the present.

Within the past decades, however, challenges have come in the name of feminism, and they refuse to go away. As a critique of culture in the light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment and calling for repentance. In various ways this hermeneutical pursuit interacts with the Bible in its remoteness, complexity, diversity and contemporaneity and gives new insights into the text.

To what extent are patriarchy and androcentrism as well as gender bias inherent in all religious institutions? How is women's movement linked to the age-old human quest for spirituality, the search for meaning, ultimate values, liberation and transcendence? In voicing their own experiences, Ursala King believes that women around the world are expressing a new consciousness and worldview as they search for wholeness, a life affirming spirituality, open to the needs of the world. In her book, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*, Ursala King takes a critical look at feminism and explores its explicit and implicit spiritual dimensions. Her discussion encompasses women mystics, goddess worship, matriarchy, and androgyny and feminist theology and includes reflections on peace, non-violence and ecology. *Women and Spirituality* is concerned with important issues of personal and social transformation. It provides a wide-ranging account of women and world religions and raises thought-provoking questions about the spiritual dimensions of human life. She has published many articles on women, world religion and spirituality. Her books include an edited volume on *Women in the World Religions: Past and Present* and *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions*.

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Gabriele Dietrich, a teacher by profession and an activist by choice, has raised the women’s question untiringly during her work in India since 1972. *Reflection of the Women’s Movement in India* is an indepth study by Gabriele Dietrich with fundamental questions on many basic issues, which confront Indian women. It includes a wide-ranging discussion on women and their bondage in almost all religions, including secularism, communalism and issues concerning freedom of religion and women’s rights. Gabriele Dietrich suggests a new methodology for “Women’s Studies” in the Indian context. Her active participation and experience of working in this field helped her to formulate a few answers of how to deal with religious traditions. It is necessary to analyse religious sources as far as possible with methods of materialist theory i.e., connecting any statement on women with their actual position within the mode of production of the time in which the statement is made. It is to be noted that most of the religious sources and most history books has been written by men and that this has ideological implications. Gabriel Dietrich is very hopeful and she observes that the biblical statement that “all human beings”, women and men, are created in the image of God, overrides other statements of subordination.

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The present study draws insights from the above-mentioned works only in a very general way. It is basically a case illustration of Women spirituality and the genesis of various Religious Congregations of nuns within the Kerala Catholic Church, in particular Syro-Malabar Church. So it tries to find out the various forces that helped to formulate faith and spirituality of St.Thomas Christians. For this, it is essential to find out the sources of life and nature of St.Thomas Christian Church from its inception here in Kerala soil until at least the first quarter of the twentieth century, which formed the socio-religious and cultural background against which the various Religious Women congregations of Kerala took shape. A review of the available literature regarding Church history of Kerala is recorded here as to see the current status of the topic that is taken for study.

76 'Syro-Malabar Church' in Kerala is an Apostolic Church, as it was founded by St.Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas Christians or Syrian Catholics, are also called ‘Nazrani Mappillas’ meaning ‘Noble Christians’ who follow ‘Jesus the Nazarene’ and they are the most ancient Christians in India and the Far East. They are the only Christian community, which existed at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in India in the sixteenth century. Now they are called the ‘Malabar Catholics’, ‘Syrian Catholics’ and ‘Syro-Malabarians’. The Syro-Malabarians are not Syrians racially or culturally, but only by ‘Rite’. For details see G.Menacherry, ed. The St.Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India, Vol. I, Trichur, B.N.K Press, 1982, p.7. Hereafter G.Menacherry, The St.Thomas Christian Encyclopedia. The Catholic St. Thomas Christians came to be called ‘Syrians’ for they followed ‘Syrian liturgy’ in contrast to their Latin brethren. P.J.Podipara, The Thomas Christians, Bombay, 1970, p.7. Hereafter P.J.Podipara, The Thomas Christians. Antony Manjaly, Ecclesiology of the St. Thomas Christians in India, Katholische.Universiteit, Leuven, 1990, p.11. Here after Antony Manjaly, Ecclesiology. A ‘Rite’ is the whole religio-cultural heritage of a people or Christian community that practices it.
Sources of the early history of Christianity in India are available in a number of languages. The early history of Christianity in India is available from traditions, travelers' accounts and archaeological sources. St.Thomas tradition is very deep rooted in the minds of the people as well as in history. The earliest record about the apostle St. Thomas is the apocryphal Acts of Judas Thomas written in Syriac in the Edessan circle at the turn of the third century A.D. From the fourth century onwards the major Churches are unanimous in endorsing the tradition.

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80 Edessa, today called Urfa is located in eastern Turkey. Edessa was the seat of a most important school of theology, of which St.Ephrem was one of the most distinguished names.

81 The Syriac Acts of Thomas (c.200), Clement of Alexandria, Syriac Doctrine of the Apostles, Origen (c.231, Quoted in Eusebius). Ambobius (305), Eusebius of Caesarea (d.340), Ephrem (d.373), Gregory of Nazianzus (d.389), Ambrose (d. 397); Jerome (d. 420), Thosodet of Cyrus (d. 427), ‘Martyrologium Hieronymianum’, Balai (d.c. 460); ‘Passio Thomae’ (c. 550), Gregory of Tours (d. 594); John of Saba (c. 630), Iscdores of Seville (d. 636) are some of them. A.C. Perumalil, The Apostles in India, Patna, 1971 and A.E Medlycott, India and the Apostle St. Thomas. An Inquiry with a critical analysis of the Acta Thomae, London,
Several attempts have been made to convert the oral tradition into a written account. The tradition is also found in a few songs viz., the Rabban song and Margam Kalipattu, now existing in written records.

The first unquestionable historical evidence of the Church in Malabar is found in the famous passage of Byzantine Monk Cosmos Indicopleustes. In his *Christian Topography* he gives an account of his far-ranging travels in the East between A.D. 520 and 525, which he published in about 535. The Tarisapalli Copper Plate that was executed in A.D. 849 by Ayyan Adikal Tiruvatikal of Venad during the reign of Sthanu Ravi throws immense light on the socio-economic life of the Christians of Quilon.

The Tazhekad Church inscription of Rajasimha (A.D. 1028 – 43) and the Copper Plate Grant (A.D. 1225) issued by Vira Raghava

1905, cite many of the texts. Another important work was the one by Vath A.S.J, *Der HI. Thomas Der Apostel Indians. Ein Untersuchung Gehalt der Thomas-Legende* Aachen, 1925. E.R. Hambye S.J, *St. Thomas and India*, 1952 also gives a fairly good idea of the studies on St.Thomas Christians and a personal appreciation of the sources.


Chakravarthi, the ruler of Mahodayapuram to Iravi Kortan, a Christian merchant of Mahodayapuram, are other two historical evidences to understand the life of St. Thomas Christians. But they give only fragmentary information and that too mainly about their economic activities.86

*Mirabilia Descripta* written by Jordan Catalani of Severac, a Dominican Monk, who arrived in India in A.D.1321 as a missionary in accordance with the arrangement the Pope had made, reveals the writings of the Papal delegate John of Marignoli, who, on his way back from China, visited Kollam and nearby places in A.D.1346, give some fragmentary information about this Christian Community, prior to the arrival of the Portuguese.87 An Arabic work entitled ‘Description of Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and some neighbouring countries’

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86 The Tazhekad Church inscription of Rajasimha (1028-43) refers to two Christian merchants, Chatan Vadukan and Iravi Chathan, who were members of the Manigramam enjoying certain privileges conferred on them. The Copper Plate Grant (1225 A.D) issued by Vira Raghava Chakravarthi, the ruler of Mahodayapuram to Iravi Kortan, a Christian merchant of Mahodayapuram, confers on the latter, the office of ‘Manigramam’ i.e., the leadership of the merchants of the place, in addition to other rights and privileges. A. Sreedhara Menon, A Survey of Kerala History, Madras, S.Viswanathan, Pvt., Ltd., 1991, p. 85.

87 Jordan Catalani visited the Christian communities in Thana, Sopara and Broach along the West Coast of Central India. He wrote the book *Mirabilia Descripta* on the basis of what he saw and experienced here. In April 1329 the Latin Diocese of Kollam was erected and Jordan was made its first Bishop. While he was visiting Europe Pope John XII gave him a few letters for several princes and people of India, all dated 21 August 1329. Among these letters a few were addressed to Christians of India in general; one addressed to the Christians of Mylapore, another addressed to the leader of the ‘Nascarin’ (Nazrani) Christians and his community. Dominicans from Nagpur have recently published the writings of Jordanus of Severac O. P, *Mirabilia Descripta*, London, 1863. Peter O.P, ed., *The wonders of the East*, Nagpur, Dominican Publications, 1993. Bishop John of Marignoli has left behind some writings on the St. Thomas Christians who received him with great honour. Mundadan, *History of Christianity...Op.cit.*, pp. 120-141
written by Abu Salih, the Armenian who lived at the turn of the fourteenth century, has two passages about India.\(^8\)

'Joseph the Indian' is the best-documented account of early visitors to Europe from India. Travelling abroad in one of the ships of Pedro Alvares Cabral, which set sail from Cochin, Joseph, a leading priest of the St. Thomas Christians, reached Lisbon in June or July 1501 and the reports of the interviews Joseph gave in Lisbon, Rome and Venice are now recently published under the name *India in 1500 A.D.: The Narratives of Joseph the Indian.*\(^9\) In it one can hear the very words of a sixteenth century, well-informed, educated leader of the ancient Christians of India. It also throws light on those Christians, their traditions, customs and practices, so too about the wider cultural context in which the Christians lived at the turn of the sixteenth century. The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper are also a good source for understanding the life of the Stomas Christians before 1600.\(^10\)

From the sixteenth century to the present day, we get source materials in plenty in the form of written records and published books. With the arrival of the missionaries, we get an ocean of source materials, for most of the Religious Orders have kept the reports of their missionary

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activities. In this regard the works of Schurhammer\textsuperscript{91} on the life of St. Francis Xavier, and the compilation of documents in twelve volumes containing selection from Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit Orders by Fr. A. Silva Rego\textsuperscript{92} and documents collected by Fr. J. Wicki\textsuperscript{93} containing Latin, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian sources are of great help to understand the inner dynamics of this Christian community in the pre-modern era.

With all the available sources, the task still becomes difficult to the historian due to a most unfortunate incident, which burned all the locally available source materials after the Synod of Diamper (1599). The Syro-Malabar Church has been taking stock of its identity in the recent past in the light of the renewal spearheaded by the Second Vatican Council (1964).\textsuperscript{94} The Second Vatican Council has urged the Christians to go to the sources and to adhere to the sources, to renew the Church according to the present needs,\textsuperscript{95} which gave an impetus to the St. Thomas Christians to probe deep and find out their origin and sources in a scientific manner. Subsequently attempts were made by many Church historians\textsuperscript{96} and the


\textsuperscript{92} Fr. Antonia d Silva Rego, ed. \textit{Documentação para a História das Missões do padroado Português do Oriente, Índia}, Lisbon, 1949.

\textsuperscript{93} Fr. J. Wicki S.J., ed. \textit{Documenta Indica}, Rome, 1948-75.

\textsuperscript{94} The Vatican Council II (11October 1962-8December 1965) was called by Pope John XXIII and continued by Pope Paul VI.

\textsuperscript{95} Vatican Council II, \textit{Perfectas Caritatis}, No.2.

\textsuperscript{96} Church historians like Placid J Podipara, A Mathias Mundadan, Xavier Koodapuzha and a host of others deserve mention.
concerned authorities\(^97\) to find out and write the history of St. Thomas Christians highlighting the socio-cultural aspects of their life. Recently many studies on the St. Thomas Christians have come out. However, most of them were in the field of Church history\(^98\) and a few were either in the field of Canon Law\(^99\) or Liturgy.\(^100\) There are also different studies made on the various other aspects of Syro-Malabar Church.\(^101\)

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\(^97\) Some of the official institutions erected for this purpose include the St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary - 'Paurastiya Vidyapitham' - Vadavathoor, Kottayam and its publications department, 'Oriental Institute of Religious Studies in India' and 'Dharmaram Vidyakshethram' and its Dharmaram Publications Bangalore and Mount St. Thomas, Liturgical Research Centre of the Syro-Malabar Church, Kochi and its publications department and others.


However, no systematic study on the spirituality and religious life of the St. Thomas Christian women has been done so far. In order to fill this vacuum, the present scholar has taken up this research work titled *Gender and Spirituality: Archæology of Religious life in Kerala.*

**Design of the Study**

This study is conceived in six chapters. Besides the introduction which forms the first chapter, this study proceeds with the second chapter that tries to present an overall view of the St. Thomas Christians. It
proposes to discuss the socio, economic, cultural and religious changes brought in by the interaction of the western missionaries. It also tries to explain the coming of ‘Padroco and Propaganda’ and the subsequent break in the church with the ‘Synod of Diamper’. Here it is necessary to highlight the reactions of St Thomas Christians against this foreign intervention.

Chapter three deals with the monastic life through the ages. It specifically mentions the religious life of women and goes about highlighting the position of women in the Catholic Church. The fourth chapter traces the origin of the first five women religious congregations in Kerala. Beginning with CMC, FCC, SVM, SABS and SH, it gives a detailed account of the origin of the congregations, its founder members, the difficulties faced in the set up of the congregation etc. It also mentions the apostolate and the developments made by the congregations.

The fifth is the core chapter that discusses in detail the biography of Mother Mariam Thresia and the historic foundation of the Congregation of Holy Family by the Mother. It traces the peculiar charism of Family Apostolate, which was started by Mother Mariam Thresia. It also analyses in detail the spirituality of the Mother. The sixth chapter is conclusion. A detailed bibliography is also appended.