CHAPTER III

Asceticism and Monasticism: Way to Spirituality
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Spiritual tradition was initially embodied in people rather than doctrine, and it grew out of life rather than from abstract ideas. Religious life did not develop in a single straight line, but was plural from its earliest stages with both monastic and non-monastic streams. There was not a common ascetical-monastic root for religious life as a whole. Asceticism or ascetic life\(^1\) is considered as a direct response to the longing for salvation. The emphasis on spiritual realisation manifests itself in the phenomenon of asceticism and renunciation.\(^2\) There were few holy men and women who wanted to surrender themselves completely to God — to go with the life of the renounced.

The free commitment of virgins and widows and the creation of a distinct life style within the Christian community from the apostolic period onwards mark the starting point of all later developments. Virginity really becomes the distinguishing feature of life styles that were ultimately described as religious life. Celibacy was important for women

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1. A life radically renounced in pursuit of the Absolute and for spiritual realisation is what we mean as ascetic life or monastic life or religious life in this chapter. The term ascetic refers to a person who has opted out of society, renounced social mores and cast herself away. Ostensibly she has also taken upon herself the goal of discovering the ecstasy in the comprehension of the ultimate reality and of characterising this search by resorting to austerity and meditation with the final aim of union with the ultimate reality.

2. A fundamental distinction between asceticism and renunciation was that whereas the ascetics were figures of loneliness working out their salvation each one for her, the
as it made them equal participants with men in a common search for perfection. It created a special space for them other than that allotted to wife, mother or courtesan. Though marriage was the accepted institution for the unity and continuity of the human race, the choice of virginity had radical social implications.

As we scan the pages of history to find the roots of religious life, it can be seen that traditional histories tended to situate the origin of religious life in Egyptian desert monasticism at the end of the third century A.D. But now there are evidences for the existence of religious life even before the Egyptian desert monasticism. These are seen in the life of the early autonomous virgins and the tradition of Syriac asceticism. In the middle of the third century, a number of holy men in Europe left their residence and village in which they were living and went out into the desert to spend their lives in solitude, prayer, meditation and mortification. Among these were St.Anthony and St.Paul who were known as the first Christian hermits. About the year 311 A.D., St.Anthony went to Alexandria and brought back into the desert a number of followers. He organised them into a community. Later on, it became the custom for the monks to live in one building and to follow a certain fixed rule of law. From the time of St.Paccomius, community life was

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renouncer was concerned about other people and this concern was expressed in her desire to lead others along the path, which she had found.

more important. In course of time, a new life style emerged, blending charitable work with religious life. St. Basil played a major role in this respect. St. Basil founded a monastery and wrote a rule for it, which since that time has been the standard for all religious communities in the East.⁵

St. Benedict was the real father of monasticism in the West. When fed up with worldly life, he left home to lead a life of prayer and penance, hidden away in a cave and later he went to Monte Cassino. Soon, people flocked to him, hoping to lead a monastic life under his direction. He organized them into a community and wrote their rule of life. This was the beginning of the Benedictine Order. They opened schools and the monasteries became centres of learning. In their monastery, they rose at dawn and sang hymns in praise of God. After this, they meditated on the Holy Scriptures and came together to pray at nine o'clock, at twelve and at three. The rest of the time they devoted to labour.⁶

*Virgines Sacrae (Sacred Virgins)* appears at an early date in Rome, perhaps, inspired in part by the tradition of virgin martyrs and even the Vestal Virgins. By the time of St. Ambrose in the fourth century, many virgins were consecrated annually in Italy, Constantinople, Alexandria and North Africa. They were under the care of local bishops and were frequently well educated. Engaging in prayer and fasting, virgins

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
frequently gave hospitality to the needy and undertook various forms of charity. Some offered spiritual counsel and studied Scripture. There is evidence that a number of virgins travelled as pilgrims.\textsuperscript{7}

The emergence of celibate community life cannot be dated with certainty. However, the indications are that it first emerged among the virgins. By the fourth century, there were communities of virgins in Palestine and nearby places. It is recorded that Antony of the Desert sent his sister into a community before he retired as a hermit at the end of the third century. The growing number of virgins, the emergence of community life and the increasing concern of Church authorities to regulate this phenomenon probably contributed to the beginning of enclosure. By the fifth century the process had begun and the fate of this initially autonomous and informal way of life was to merge with the growing Cenobitic-Monastic movement. By the eight century the order of widows had disappeared and consecrated virginity had become associated with monastic profession in convents following a rule.\textsuperscript{8}

The original singleness of consecrated life was absorbed into Cenobitic structures. By tradition, it was St. Augustine who gathered the first canonical community around him at Hippo in North Africa. Ministry

\textsuperscript{8} On widows and virgins as well as early form of community life see Rose Mary Rader, “Early Christian forms of Communal Spirituality: Women’s Communities”, in William Skudlarek, ed. \textit{The Continuing Quest for God}, Collegeville, 1982. Also see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Word, Spirit and Power: Women in Early
to others was an integral part of canonical life. Originally most canonical houses were involved directly in pastoral care. There were anchorites, various kinds of hermits or solitaries, wanderers and members of groups such as Third Order or Beguines, who did not necessarily live in community.

The Beguine, who emerged as a spiritual movement of women towards the end of the twelfth century in Northern Europe, offered an alternative to traditional structures of fully conventional religious life. In fact, we know surprisingly little about the origin of the Beguines. The first evidence of the use of the term was in 1199, in the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesar of Heisterbach. There was no single founder, no original rule of life, and led a radical Christian life style outside the canonical constraints of religious life. We can consider Beguines of the thirteenth century as probably the first women’s movement in western religious history. Beguines did create a new religious role, opposed to the complex and male-dominated institutional structure and exercised spiritual leadership. The Beguines and their spirituality clearly reflected the realities of a particular age. It should be noted that the Beguines were an urban phenomenon. The rapid growth of towns seems to have left a large number of women in a particularly insecure position. Some women began to live independently within their family homes by pooling their

own hard earned resources. The Beguines expressed two key religious motivations, the cult of chastity and a desire for voluntary poverty, which relate to the general spiritual fervour of their age. They expressed the values of the powerful diverse spiritual movements known as the *Vita Apostolica*, which advocated imitation of the primitive Church: evangelisation and service, gospel poverty, frequently associated with some form of manual labour, in imitation of the poor Christ and chastity. The Beguines also organised a way of life for laywomen, which was informal and not constrained by the canonical regulations of traditional religious life. They did not grow up in isolation but were part of a much wider spiritual movement, and reflected many of the values, which the different elements of that movement had in common. Not only did the Beguines create an alternative life style, but they placed a great premium on two things, which were not generally favoured by the Church authority: biblical translation and vernacular preaching of a radical kind. Their spirituality fitted the needs of the thirteenth century, when women could live an apostolic life and seek perfection while remaining free of strict enclosure.

In course of time, in order to meet the needs of the Church or to find solutions to the problems faced by the Church, different types of religious life came into existence. A wider spiritual movement known as

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Vita Apostolica began to emerge in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. The emphasis on poverty as the literal imitation of the poor and homeless Jesus was central to this. The groups that came into being as a result of the Vita Apostolica were varied. In the case of some new Religious Orders, there were leper houses and other charitable hospitals, recluses, contemplative stigmatists and a variety of groups occupied a twilight zone between formal religious life and everyday Christian existence. By the thirteenth century Religious Orders founded new branches, known as Tertiaries for those unable or unwilling to take on the full life-style of the parent body. Some members lived in community, but others continued to live at home to undertake a life of prayer and good works compatible with their everyday commitments.

The Mendicant Religious Orders that came up in the spirit of St. Francis Assisi (1182 – 1226) and St. Dominic (1170 – 1221) are landmarks in the Christian religious tradition. The emergence of mendicant spirituality in the thirteenth century represented both an evangelical and a social reaction to the wealth and power of the society and the Church. The mendicant movement also reflected a partly conscious and partly unconscious attempt to break free from the dominance of monastic elite in spirituality. The actual preaching of the Gospel and spiritual guidance of the people became their principal work along with pastoral work, social work, missionary activity and education.
On Mount Carmel in Palestine there existed a prophetic community who lived in constant communion with God through contemplation and rendered charitable service to their neighbours in their needs. The Carmelite Order was founded in the same spirit of this community. It established itself when, in 1209 St. Albert, who was the Patriarch of Jerusalem, gave a constitution to St. Brocard and his followers to lead a life of contemplation, beside the river on Mount Carmel. By the end of the first half of the thirteenth century, the Carmelite Order had spread to different parts of Europe. It was in 1452 A.D. that the Carmelite Order for women was founded. The Carmelites belonging to the Discalced Carmelite Order, which St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross renewed in the sixteenth century, reached Kerala as missionaries in the seventeenth century. In the sixteenth century, as if to counteract the Protestant Reformation, religious life had gained a new vigour and strength. Many old Religious Orders were renewed and updated at this time. The beginning of the Order of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) added momentum to these revival activities in the Church.  

The Syriac ascetical movement involved both men and women and seemed, like the Beguines, to have been predominantly autonomous in its early stage. In the East, divisions into distinct Orders are unknown. A

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10 Ignatius of Loyola is the founder of Society of Jesus. The members of this Order are known as the Jesuits.
variety of patterns existed within a single, all-embracing tradition. St. Basil in the East saw in Coenobitism many things worthy of emulation. Firstly there were widow-nuns and lay-nuns. They mainly lived at home in the midst of the local community, and spent their time for Church work, such as making vestments or flour for the communion bread. Then, there were couples that became celibate, sometimes temporarily, as married religious at home. A third category that lived among ordinary people was the city hermits. Some were extremely ascetic. Their life was primarily one of silence and prayer. While some hermits preached, all avoided involvement in normal social relationships. There was a strong antipathy to the accumulation of power in a few hands. They considered monastic commitment a way of life. So the individual religious moved freely from one monastery or convent to another.

The first Religious Convent established in India for women was the convent of Santa Monica of Goa founded by Dom Alexis de Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa, in 1606. There were about 100 inmates in this contemplative convent, which continued to exist till 1834. In that year it was suppressed along with other Religious Orders of Portugal and Goa following the influence of anti-religious movements that got wide acceptance in the mother country till 1926.\textsuperscript{11}

There was an attempt to bring European Sisters to India by the

\textsuperscript{11} Emma Maria, \textit{Women in Goa: 1510-1834}, Tellicherry, IRISH, 2003
other European missionaries who worked here. In 1738 a group of Ursulane Sisters were brought to Pondicherry; but due to some unfavourable circumstances, the sisters returned to France. Again, in the nineteenth century, European sisters came to India as missionaries. The first ones to come from abroad were the Sisters of St.Joseph of Cluny in 1827, the Religious of Jesus and Mary in 1842, the Congregation of the Sisters of St.Joseph of Chembery in 1851, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary Loretta in 1853 and Sisters of Charity of Ss.Bartholomea Capitanio and Vincenzs Gerosa on 1860. They were followed by many other Congregations.

It is in the seventeenth century that we get some traces of vowed life among women in other parts of India. In one of the reports of the missionaries in the Madurai mission in South India, it is stated that a young woman of twenty three, who had been converted to Christianity by Fr. Robert de Nobili under his influence, embraced a life of renunciation by making the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. A few other girls and widows also were encouraged to lead similar lives. In 1750 Fr.Ansaldo S.J. founded the Congregation of St.Aloysius Gonzaga at Pondicherry. Since then many religious institutes were established. The

earliest was the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1844, followed by the Franciscan Presentation Sisters in 1853, the Congregation of Our Lady of Dolours in 1854, the Franciscan Bon Succours Sisters in 1858, the Congregation of St. Ann of Madras in 1863 etc.  

**Indian Monasticism**

The cult of renunciation in India goes back to greater antiquity, say c.600 B.C. Asceticism has a historical continuity from the earliest times, although inevitably the role and nature of the ascetic groups have changed over the centuries. The Indian ascetic tradition is eremitic, since most of the Sannyasins lived and worked as recluses. The mode of life and the persons who live this life are known by various names in Indian literature. *Sannyasin* is the most common term applied to an ascetic who completely renounces the world and its attachments. They are suggestive of renunciation or casting aside one’s social obligation, of the taking up of a

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17 There are four other terms, *parivrajaka, sramana, bhiksu* and *yati*-which were used to denote the Sannyasin. The renouncer isolates himself totally and is thus lost to his kin and his society and to other ascetic colleagues. The term renouncer approximates more closely to the meaning of sannyasin. Ascetic groups are referred to in Vedic literature and some texts such as the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* as largely concerned with asceticism. In the later Vedic literature terms such as *tapasvin, sramana, sannyasin, parivrajaka*, and *yogi* occur more commonly. Bhavya, *Indian Women..., Op. cit.*, p.35.
life of austerity, of controlling the functions of the body (particularly breathing) and above all, of wandering from place to place. They stood apart, disenchanted with the world, seeking ultimate truths. They recognized the need for individual salvation. In isolation and through sannyasa (asceticism), the individual could find his moksha (salvation), which would release his atma (individual soul) and enable it to unite with the brahma (all-soul).\textsuperscript{18} Asceticism was motivated by the conviction that meditation was an effective means to acquire the knowledge that furthers self-realisation as well as the power (tapas) to become superior even to the gods. Perhaps, the most important aspect of asceticism was that it resulted in total freedom, a break with family ties and social regulations. They renounced family ties not as suppression or of their sexual instincts. This freedom insured the renouncer a better status.

Post Vedic period witnessed a spate of cults centered on renunciation and life of austerity. The ideals of brahmanical Sannyasa are opposed by the renouncers of various persuasions, who organised themselves into monastic units and who are characterised by an ethic of moderation in action. There were sixty-three of whom the Jains, Buddhists and Ajivikas ranked the foremost. Monastic traditions and religious life were very much an integral part of Jainism and Buddhism. The term Yati was used to indicate a Jaina monk and Bhikshu and

\textsuperscript{18} Romila Thapar, "Renunciation"..., \textit{Op.cit.}, p.49.
Sramana for a Buddhist monk. The Buddhist monastic order is called Sangha. The purpose of founding the Sangha was two fold: self-realisation that is nirvana, and the good of mankind. A monk or nun in Pali language is called Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni and the Sanskrit is Bhikshu or Bhikshuni, originally meaning almsman or almswoman. Buddhist viharas and monasteries were a common sight and their monks and nuns were living an austere life.

The brahmanical religion maintained antipathy towards the women religious life. Since marriage, family life and motherhood were the highest ideals recommended for women, these ideals stood in the way of establishing any monastic institution for women in this religion. Theoretically, the state of sannyasa was not meant for women and hence many did not embrace it. India recognized two main ideals for women: that of brahmavadini and that of sadyovadhu.

In the initial years the heterodox movements also did not differ from orthodox Brahmanism on the crucial question of female spirituality. However, in the subsequent period, the heterodox sects like Jainism and

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20 The brahmavadini of ancient India are of the ascetic type, who took the vow of celibacy, renounced the world and took to meditation for the realization of Brahman. About the sannyasinis mention is found in the Mahabharatha. M.G.Bhagat says, “There are references to female ascetics who devoted themselves to the life long austerities and remained unmarried. They seem to have taken to life long celibacy (Naisthika Brahmacharya). They include king Yayat’s daughter Madhavi, the daughters of rsi Kungara and Sardilya, Sulabha and Prabhavati.” M.G. Bhagat, *Ancient Indian Asceticism*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1976, p.206. A sadyovadhu, on the other hand, is of a domestic type who spends her time mostly in daily domestic duties of an ordinary kind.
Buddhism welcomed women to the cult of renunciation. Many women embraced spiritual life in Jain and Buddhist religions. Five years after attaining enlightenment Gautama seems to have agreed upon women joining the Order. Under the leadership of Mahaprajapati, the Gotami, the aunt of Gautama, a large number of women approached Gautama with the request. The admission of women into the Order was granted by him on condition, that Mahaprajapati should take upon herself the eight rules.21 The Order was opened to widows and matrons as well as to the unmarried and women from all walks of life. Jain texts both Digambara and Svetambara, argue that women are not merely physically weaker than men but intellectually and morally inferior as well. Within the given paradigms of renunciation and monasticism, both the heterodox movements did grapple with the question of women spiritual capacity to renunciation and salvation.22 The most significant contribution of Buddhism was the entry and participation of women in the spiritual

21 The eight chief rules were: 1) An almswoman, even if of a hundred years standing, shall make salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties towards an almsman, even if only just initiated; 2) She is not to spend the rainy season (of Vassa) in a district in which there is no almsman; 3) Every half-month she is to await from the chapter of almsmen two things, asking the time of the Uposatha ceremony (days of fasting) and the time when the almsman will come to give the exhortation; 4) After keeping the rainy season she is to enquire before both Sanghas of almsmen as well as almswomen whether any fault can be laid to her charge; 5) One who has been guilty of a serious offence is to undergo the Manastha discipline towards both the Sanghas; 6) When she as a novice has been trained for two years in the six rules, she is to ask leave for the upasampada (initiation) from both Sanghas; 7) An almswoman is on no pretext to revile or abuse an almsman; 8) Official admonition of almswomen to almsmen is forbidden, where as the official admonition of almsmen by almsmen is not forbidden. See A.S.Altekar, The Position of Women... Op.cit., p.208.
discipline to strive for salvation. The first Buddhist monastic order was established soon after the preaching of the ‘Wheel of Law’ by the Buddha at Saranath in around 534 B.C. Six years later the first convent for Buddhist nuns was established. A detailed account of the entry of nuns into the Buddhist spiritual order is found in the Theravada text *Vinaya Pitaka* dating back to the early Christian era, in which Chapter X of the *Cullavagga* called ‘Bhikkhuni Khanda’ and the ‘Bhikkhuni Vibhanga’ are specific to the issue of gender and spirituality in Buddhism. Women whether as nuns in the Buddhist and Jaina orders or as parivrajikas, were on the whole grudgingly accepted. Nuns were always under the jurisdiction of the monks and in both orders were regarded as an inferior category.

Women in South India too had gained in terms of the creation of a sacred space for themselves under the heterodox faiths. Both these religions had penetrated to South India during second century A.D. The reference to a convent of Jain nuns in *Silappadikaram* is the first major evidence of monastic life in the Tamil country. The presence of a large number of women in the Jain monastic order is borne out by history. In fact, the term *palli*, which is used to designate a church in Kerala, is

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23 Ibid, p.84
25 *Silappadikaram* X: 32ff.
borrowed from the Buddhists, who called their *Viharas* and *monasteries* by that title.26

The most important aspect of the social role of the renouncer is the relationship between the renouncer and the lay community. There is first of all an initiation ceremony at the time of entering *Sannyasa*, which indicates the renouncing of one's social obligations and ties and opting out of the society into which one was born. Where the entry is according to the ultimate *asrama*, the *samskara* becomes a life-cycle rite. Celibacy was a necessary condition to all sects of renouncers although in some of the more extreme Tantric acts ritualized sex was required. The renouncer was forbidden from any kind of profession or occupation and more particularly manual labour. The break with society and the anonymity of the new entrant were sought to be established by the taking of a new name.27

**The Monastic Traditions of the St. Thomas Christians**

According to historians the Indian Christians came into close connection with the See of Seleucia – Ctesiphon located in Edessa in about A.D.450.28 These two Churches have exchanged their spiritual heritage and monastic traditions. There is clear evidence of the presence of Syrian monks and missionaries in India from the early centuries.

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Monasticism was deeply rooted in the strongly ascetic-minded Oriental Christianity, which gave birth to ascetical institutions like the 'sons and daughters of the covenant'.

The monastic life of the Syrian monks was centred on prayer. They took monastic profession and practised various forms of asceticism. The prayer life consisted in reading and studying of the Scriptures, hours of liturgical prayer, meditation and liturgical ceremonies. Continence, together with voluntary poverty, obedience to the superior and austerity of life were the constitutive elements of the monastic life. The reading from the sacred Scriptures was held in great esteem in the Syrian monastic system. Hearing the word of God was practised by the monks as a discipline designed to concentrate their thoughts. The Scriptures were the rule of life. They memorized them and gave total attention to Biblical thought and expression. Psalmody occupied the central place in the Syrian monastic life style. In fact “the whole of monastic activity could be defined by the term Psalmody.” According to St. Ephrem the best means to stimulate the soul and give theme to meditation is to make one aware of the sins and trespasses. There were explicit references to celibacy as the content of the profession. The commitment to the community included the renunciation of property, possessions and submission to an authority. Abdication of worldly good is a fundamental principle of

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asceticism. St. Ephrem suggested fasting for higher spiritual life. He also suggested abstinence from meat and drinks. Wakefulness and vigils were consistent with spiritual life. They were concerned with their soul and were trying to escape from their body to attain God-realisation. Arthur Voobus in his book, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* says: “the route from Persia to India was covered with monasteries that created new communication line and enlivened the interchange in the spiritual life between these areas”.31

St. Thomas Christians practised monasticism in the first centuries of the Christian era. There are a few historical writings and documents, which show that there had been monks and nuns in Malabar. Cosmos Indecopleustes in his *Christian Topography* (A.D. 535) writes:

“...In inner India where the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians with clergy and a congregation of believers... As such also is the case in the land called Male (Malabar). They have many martyrs and recluses leading monastic life.”32

In his work *Gloria Martyrdum*, St. Gregory, Bishop of Tours mentions the existence of the monastery of St. Thomas. It was written around A.D. 590.

“Thomas the Apostle according to the narrative of his martyrdom is stated to have suffered in India.... In that part of India where they first rested, stand a Monastery and a

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church of striking dimensions, elaborately adorned and
designed..."33

Owing to the frequent contacts between the Persian Church and Malabar, the Thomas Christians of Malabar were certainly aware of the monastic life that was led there. There is evidence of a monastery at the tomb of St. Thomas known as Beth Thuma. Many visitors and pilgrims from Syria and other eastern regions came to visit Beth Thuma, the house of St.Thomas.34 The Portuguese changed the Syrian word Beth Thuma to San Thoma.35 While describing the tomb of St.Thomas, the Arab scholar and historian Amer, specially mentions about a religious house he found there in the name of St.Thomas.36 This house was known as the convent of St.Thomas. The Christians who desired a spiritual life used to make pilgrimage to this convent and many among them used to join the convent and spend the rest of their lives as religious.37 Joseph the Indian speaks at length about the monks and monastic life in the Malabar Church. The study of sacred Scriptures thrived among them and they had many learned doctors who interpreted the Bible with authority.

“They (the Thomas Christians) have monasteries where monks with black habits live a very chaste life. They have also many nuns. They have the hermitages where the black monks live in perfect continence. And they have also many

33 Ibid, p.71.
35 V.C.George, Christianity in India..., Op.cit., p.54.
nuns. The priests live very chastely. If one is found lacking in chastity, he is deprived of the right to celebrate the Mass... They had monks who lived in perfect continence and poverty; their priests live very chastely.**38**

There is evidence of a monastery situated in Mylapore. Stephen Neil in his book *A History of Christianity in India*, writes:

> The Portuguese Governor sent to Mylapore a priest of good life, Alvaro Penteado, to take charge of the work there. He had the idea of building a monastery for religious at the foot of the mount, went to Goa and even to Portugal to give the king exact information about the famous house of St. Thomas.**39**

The Thomas Christians had contact with several European Religious Orders like the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Jesuits, the Augustinians and the Carmelites. But they were viewed as the instruments for the propagation of the Latin Church. Furthermore, their support for the western colonization, their misunderstanding of the native practices and their attempt at Latinisation of the Thomas Christians created confusion and mistrust.**40**

The St. Thomas Christians and the Archdeacon George of the Cross had the desire to have a religious house for those who were longing for solitude and monastic life. The Archdeacon disclosed his desire to Archbishop Stephen de Britto and later requested permission for the same from Rome. In January 1626 on the feast day of the local image of our Lady at Edappalli a meeting was convoked. Ecclesiastical authorities and

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representatives of priests and laity had participated in the meeting. The meeting decided to start a religious Congregation under the patronage of St.Thomas, the Apostle. The Archbishop approved the rules and regulations drawn up by the members and thus the new religious Congregation of St. Thomas came into being on 5 February 1626. It was known as ‘Recolhimento de Repelim’ (Retreat house of Edappalli). Regarding this monastery, the vision of Archdeacon is very clear from the letter he wrote to Rome:

“There had been many among us who were leading the contemplative life returning to solitude and even to mountains and deserts. The patriarchs had erected religious houses for those who wished to have such retired and contemplative life. So, grant us permission to found a religious house on the model of Basilians for those who are longing for such a kind of life.”

The Archdeacon wanted to form a monastic community and to train them as preachers, missionaries and confessors rather than only as parish priests. In the beginning there were five members in the monastery. The members of the Community increased from seven to twenty four. This congregation did not continue long. It is likely that it became engulfed in the turmoil that followed the Coonan Cross Revolt in January 1653, and in the latinising tendencies of the missionaries.

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After the lapse of three centuries here in Kerala, Thomas Christians tried their best to revive and restore their traditional and native way of spiritual life. The creation of a regular native clergy was an excellent move. It led to the formation of an elite Thomas Christian community and in consequence strengthened and revitalized their Catholic life. Some enlightened Thomas Christian priests decided to make a move to raise a monastic order among the Thomas Christians in late 1820’s. The Third Order of the Syrian Carmelite was the result of this attempt. This was the first indigenous Men Religious Congregation to be established in Malabar.  

Two priests from the Thomas Christian community – Fr. Thomas Palakkal and Fr. Thomas Porukkara – took initiative and the first step for the establishment of the Syrian Carmelite Religious Congregation for men. They conceived to found an institution of some kind of a preaching Congregation after the model of St. Dominic. However their frequent contacts with the missionaries especially with Carmelites helped them to give a definite shape for the Congregation. They asked Msgr. Maurilius Stabellini, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly, permission to lead religious life in 1829. The Vicar Apostolic welcomed the idea and authorized them to collect financial help from various churches through a

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42 Ibid, p. 143
43 Bernard Thoma, Charitra Samkhsepam 1829 – 1908, (Brief History of the Carmelite Discalced Third order), Mannanam, 1908
circular. They have received wholehearted support from the Thomas Christian community, and thus founded the first house of the Congregation at Mannanam in 1831. At that time there was a need for a major seminary for the formation of the Catholic Thomas Christian clergy. Thus a new theological seminary was started at Mannanam in 1833. Archbishop, Msgr. Francis Xavier (1832 – 1844) appreciated the success of the seminary at Mannanam. Soon after the death of Malpan Thomas Palakkal, Archbishop promoted Fr. Chavara Kuriakose Elias of Mannanam to be the next 'Malpan'.

The Religious congregation started at Mannanam had to wait for 24 years to get its canonical approbation. As the leader of the Congregation, Fr. Chavara took initiative for the same. Finally, Msgr. Baccinelli, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly gave them the initial rules for the newly formed Carmelite Order with some changes made in accordance with the situation of the region. The Order was renamed as Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel. On 8 December 1855, on the feast of Immaculate Conception, Fr. Chavara made his religious profession before Fr. Marcellino Berardi, the delegate of the Vicar Apostolic, in St. Joseph's monastery chapel at Mannanam.

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took the name *Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family* and was made the superior of the Congregation and was called *prior*. Other ten members made their profession and *prior* accepted it. With this, regular religious life began there in 1855.\(^5\) This Order eventually came to be known as the *Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI)* and managed to grow under the able leadership of their first Prior General Fr.Chavara Kuriakose Elias.\(^5\)

The Syrian Carmelites (CMI) played a very important role in the growth and development of the Church of the Thomas Christians. They introduced diverse means for the growth of spiritual life, like preaching retreats, propagating popular devotions, besides resorting indirectly to the same by establishing schools and other institutions, publications.

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In 1857 Koonammavu monastery was given to Fr.Chavara and it became the Novitiate house of theirs. In 1858 a new monastery was attempted at Aranattukara, Trichur, but later in 1868 it was shifted to Elthuruthu, Trichur. Eventually a monastery and a seminary came into existence there. The monastery at Vazhakulam was blessed in 1859. A seminary was opened in this monastery in 1866. Later at Ambazhakkad (1868), Pulinkunnu (1860) and Mutholy monasteries were started during the lifetime of Fr.Chavara himself. In 1872 Ambazhakkad monastery developed into a seminary; in the novitiate of the Pulinkunnu a seminary was established for those who aspire for religious life. Msgr. Bacinelli closed down nearly 20 *Malpanates* where up to then the Syrian Catholics had been initiated to priesthood in Malabar. He erected 5 regional seminaries. Four of them were exclusively for Thomas Christians. Mannanam, Elthuruthu, Vazhakulam, Pulinkunnu and Verapoly. However Verapoly was for both Latins and Syrians. Bacinelli opened a new common seminary for the Syrians and Latins at Puthenpally on 15\(^{th}\) August 1866. In 1867 Fr. Antony Corriea started a seminary at Mangalapuzha, Alwaye, for the Syrian Catholics. In 1886 the seminary of Puthenpally became the central seminary for all the Syrian Catholics and also for the local Latin clergy of the dioceses of Verapoly, Quilon and Mangalore. In 1896 the CMI seminaries were suppressed in favour of the Puthenpally central seminary, which was then declared *apostolic seminary*. In 1933 it was shifted to Mangalapuzha, Alwaye. It was large enough to house more than 500 seminarians, the majority of whom were Syrian Catholics.
newspaper, journals etc. Moreover, Fr.Chavara Kuriakose took interest and initiatives to start a Women Religious Congregation here in Kerala along with Fr.Leopold OCD, a Carmelite missionary.

Though monastic and ascetic way of life formed something intrinsically linked with human culture, there was a great amount of uniqueness and distinctiveness with regard to the formation of various Religious Congregations of Kerala, as the latter emerged as a happy blending of both the eastern and western monastic traditions. The analysis of the ascetic and monastic features of the West and East is done to show the nature of the inner dimensions operating behind the various Women Religious Congregations founded in Kerala.

This chapter is indented as a survey of the erstwhile religious institutions in India which will provide a suitable background study to the women religious congregations which is undertaken in the next chapter.

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