

# The Orthodox Church And Traditions - A Commoner's Perspective

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## Abstract

Many Christians, other than Catholics, belittle the traditions and customs followed by the Orthodox Christians around the world. The author believes that the underlying fallacy in their understanding of the Life and teachings of Christ, the quoting of selective Biblical passages and their convenient interpretations, all combined with a lack of understanding of the church history of the last two thousand years, is the reason for this lack of appreciation. The document, from the view point of an Indian Orthodox Christian, tries to clear up some of these misunderstandings. <sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

An important question the Orthodox youth of today encounters in any gathering of Christians or religious scholars is regarding the relevance of the Orthodox Church following the centuries old traditions and customs and not trying to refine itself to suit the modern times. Outwardly, it appears a very valid question.

Indian Christians (called Thoma Christians) have remained united for almost one thousand five hundred years. The advent of the colonialist powers from the West brought with it differing theological concepts regarding Christ and his teachings. The overriding influence of the West to sway the unruffled Indian Mind started the schisms and factions breaking away. The questions regarding traditions is put forward by our fellow Christian believers from the breakaway factions of mainstream Christianity, which came into existence during the past three to four centuries. These Christian denominations severed their links with the old Christian Church as it existed for about two thousand years in India (aka Kerala, the cradle of Christianity in India and also of the oldest Christians in the world)

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<sup>1</sup>It may be better for the reader to have preliminary knowledge of early Church history in India, though not mandatory, to appreciate this paper.

This passage is an attempt to put forth facts from the perspective of traditions and to clear the above misconceptions. It is also hoped that the Western Christians and their followers in India (though originally Eastern in origin) will try to understand and appreciate the rich lineage and traditions of the Eastern Christians while at the same time, together with them, experience the eternal spiritual bliss of the God and our Lord Jesus Christ. This paper is an academic exercise to understand the Orthodox traditions, though the over-riding purpose of any religion or denomination is to help the people understand God and his creation and bring them nearer to Him, which most are able to achieve.

## 2 Origins of Indian Christianity

The Indian Christians (Thoma Christians) take pride in the fact that Christianity in India is apostolic in its origins, having been established by the apostle of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas who arrived in Kerala, India in the year 52 A.D. The founding of the Church in India by St. Thomas the apostle is attested by West Asian writings since the 2nd century. The Doctrine of the Apostle Thomas and the Acta Thomae, both of which were written at or near Edessa about 200-250 AD - St. Ephrem, St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregorios Nazianzen, in the 4th century; St. Jerome, around 400 AD are the religious documents which attest the establishment of Christianity in India. Historians Eusabius around the year 338 and Theodore, of the 5th century also write about the arrival of St. Thomas to India. [3].

The historical records which existed in India about the coming of St. Thomas and establishment of Christianity were wiped out during the time of the Papal Over-Lordship (1599-1653) imposed on the Christians in Kerala by the Portuguese authorities who could not digest another form of Christianity in the world without the Pope in Rome as its head. The Coonen Kurissu Sathyam taken by our great forefathers reinforced the independence of the Indian Christians. After the Papal Over Lordship we were left without a proper liturgy and spiritual guidance. The Indian Christians were forced to look to the East towards Antioch to establish a temporal arrangement to revive this great Eastern Christian tradition - to release itself from the clutches of Papal domination. This temporal arrangement did more harm than good, which is evident from recent church history. The Indian Supreme Court delivered the judgment to get Indian Orthodox Church constitution of 1934 accepted as original and binding and established the autocephalous nature of the church. [1].

The average educated Indian knows only of the Western form of Christianity, the Catholic and Protestant beliefs. If he is well read, he is likely to know the different forms and names of Protestantism: Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Congregational, Church of South India, Church of North India and so on. And he knows that all these forms of Christianity, be it the Catholics or the protestants, have come from Europe, along with the colonialist - imperialist movements of the 15th century and after wards riding piggyback on their political masters [2]. Little does he know of an indigenous version which has been in the country for almost two thousand years and still continuing its efforts

to spread the good word and love of the Lord Jesus.

This paper looks at the classification of traditions and their description in the third section. The major differences of these traditions with the Protestant faith, both the older and newer versions, are dealt with in the fourth section. The last section gives the conclusion.

### 3 Traditions - classification

The root meaning of the word tradition is to hand over something from one person to another [4]. It can also mean something which is handed over from one generation to the next. So it is a verb as well as a noun.

Reji Mathew [4]<sup>2</sup> has classified traditions basically into five groups. They are

1. Scriptural
2. Doctrinal
3. Liturgical
4. Customs and Practices
5. Habits and Values

A brief explanation of each follows here.

1. *Scriptural traditions* are got from the scriptures, from the Bible, both the old and new testaments. The traditions of offering sacrifices, observing the sabbath, non-worshipping of idols, the songs of praise by King David in Psalms, the words of wisdom of King Solomon, the prophecies of the prophets etc.. are all scriptural traditions. After generations and generations, this deposit of faith matters began to grow in abundance and is being transferred from one generation to the next just like family treasures are transferred from father to children. For the Orthodox believers, it is a very valuable gift to be handed over to our children while others without any such inheritance may consider it folly to do so. Let us not forget that this is in addition to the vast resources of faith and scriptures transferred over two thousand years.

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<sup>2</sup>This paper is an offshoot of the paper written by Dr. Reji Mathew and referred to in the Bibliography. Rev. Dr. Reji Mathew is the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. Rev. Dr. Reji Mathew completed his Ph.D. from Germany and has researched extensively on the New Testament. The Nagpur Seminary is the second Theological Seminary of the Indian Orthodox Church other than the one in Kottayam, Kerala, which also happens to be the oldest Seminary in India, for obvious reasons.

2. *Doctrinal traditions* got their growth with the New Testament and the councils of the first five centuries. They include the issues relating to the divine nature of the God, human and divine nature of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The fathers of the Church convened at Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD) to formulate the Nicene creed. Through the recitation of the four paragraphs of the *Nicene Creed* we confess our faith about the creator God, his Son Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Salvation and the Resurrection of the departed. *It is among the richest traditions of the Church today.* Such traditions are kept unchanged because we can refer to them when people begin to teach us wrong ideas about the above mentioned matters. These traditions help us to keep off the new wave Christians who do not have any of the above concepts in their theology.
  
3. *Liturgical traditions* relate to the tradition of the worship of the God. The Greek origin of the word *ortho* means right and *doxa* means glory or praise. Our worship as the word Orthodox goes is not merely submitting our petitions to God, or asking for favours or attending prayer meetings and charismatic gatherings. We stand before God as angels do and remember the things, good and bad, God did to this world. We attempt to comprehend his infinite wisdom and grace showered on all living and non-living things on this earth and give thanks. In other words, the orthodox way of worship is being un-selfish and un-demanding. This may not be acceptable to the present day generation for whom the world goes very fast, revolves around them, their immediate family, workplace, achievements and accomplishments - being selfish and self-centered.  
  
In contrast, the Orthodox worship takes into consideration our harmony with God, with our fellow human beings and with the whole universe which has all the living and non-living things [4].
  
4. *Customs and Practices* are the traditions which can get changed with the passage of time, of imbibing local customs and traditions, like marriage, burial of the dead, local church festivals and the like. This tradition differs from place to place. It is closely related to the culture of the land in which the Christians live. And again it is only for the believers who make an effort to integrate with the local customs and traditions, who make a concerted effort to preserve communal harmony which is integral with the Indian culture and ethos. For a belief which is a recent import from the West, this aspect may not be understood in the right perspective.
  
5. *Habits and Values* constitute the behavior and habits of the believers which are handed over from generation to generation. They have their origin in the Bible and the writings of the fathers of the church. These values are charity, praying for the good of others, joy in suffering, love and care for others which are Christian in origin.

The moral traditions of the early Christians are referred here.

While traditions numbering three and four are subject to change, those numbering one, two and five are fixed. The former traditions are more or less a product of local customs, circumstances and beliefs while the latter are irrefutable biblical truths and Christian values, handed over from generation to generation.

An interesting issue worth contemplating here is whether Jesus himself followed traditions or not. For all those who belittle traditions in the church, this will be an eye opener. All through the New Testament we find Jesus submitted himself to the Jewish traditions like circumcision on the eighth day, going to the Jerusalem temple for important festivals, participating in the worship in the synagogues on every Sabbath day, reading the Bible of his ancestors and giving sermons based on what he read, paid the annual taxes of the Jerusalem temple and was even buried after his death according to the customs of his ancestors. All the same he was against the false traditions practiced by the religious leaders of his time like the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. According to Jesus, religion was not to be exhibited, but should help the poor and needy. It should help people to come near to God. [4].

## 4 Traditions in comparison

The Catholics also have their own traditions and customs which are predominantly Western in character and belief. The more recent forms of Protestantism, of the born-again form, again Western in their outlook, mushrooming dime to a dozen and found to be very liberal in their outlook and interpretation of the teachings and message of the Bible and the life of Christ. have unfortunately been the most vociferous in attacking the orthodox traditions.

The Orthodox faith is the confluence of both the Holy Bible and the church traditions as different from the Protestant faith which lays more stress on the former compared to the latter ( and is much more modern both in history and outlook with limited traditions to claim their own, being the import from the West). This is made clear in this passage written by the learned Orthodox Theologian Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios <sup>3</sup>.

With the Protestants, the differences are even greater. The Orthodox, do not believe that the Bible is the only authority for the Christian teaching. The whole tradition of the Church, which not only includes the Bible, but also the teachings of the ancient Fathers and the decisions of the Councils, is authoritative for them. They do not believe, as some Protestants do, that the Church is composed of

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<sup>3</sup>Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios (1922-1996) was the Bishop of the Delhi Diocese of the Indian Orthodox Church. He was the President of the World Council of Churches from 1973-1981, eight years in a row. A brief glimpse of the life of the theologian, philosopher, thinker, prolific writer, teacher and educationist Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios and his writings can be had by visiting the Internet website <http://www.paulosmargregorios.com>

the believers coming together. They believe that the Church is one in all ages and all places, and that all those who have ever believed in Christ (even those, who lived before Christ) are even now members of the Church, and that the Christians now living form only a small part of the Church.

The Orthodox, do not regard the bishop, or his representative the priest, as merely someone commissioned to preach the word and administer the sacraments. The bishop or priest is a visible manifestation of Christ Himself and they revere Him accordingly. The Orthodox also give greater importance to the sacraments like Baptism, the Holy Anointing, Confession, Eucharist (Mass), Ordination of priests, the Sacrament of matrimony etc. Protestants have fewer sacraments (mainly Baptism and Lord's Supper) and do not give the same importance to these as the Orthodox do. [2]

The abiding interest of the Eastern Christians to remain passive believers, though *strong in spirit* and at peace with other communities in a multi-religious country like India, giving and earning respect, striving to maintain communal harmony in the society in the true Christian spirit, has often been misconstrued as lacking Christian dedication and zeal by other Christians in general (and lacking the aggressive spirit by the modern born-again variants). The silent and passive display of Christian love and brotherhood through actions and through one's own life is more powerful in the long run than the aggressive stance. In fact, Christ never wanted his followers to be over-imposing and aggressive in spreading the Gospel and showing Christian love. This thought is neatly expressed in this passage by Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios.

The main tenant of the Orthodox faith is the belief that salvation is by being united with Christ who is Isvara incarnate. By being united with Him, we are to grow into God's image by becoming more and more god-like in character, in love, in goodness and in wisdom. This process of transformation is called theosis or divinisation. This is very close to certain schools of Hindu thinking about salvation by yoga or union with Brahma.

The Orthodox Church in India lives at peace with followers of other religions like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees, Jains, Buddhists etc. They are not aggressive in trying to convert the others, but are prepared to live with them in peace and concord, and with respect. For this reason they are often accused by more aggressive Protestant and Catholics, of being defective or lacking in missionary Zeal.

The Orthodox place greater emphasis on the quality of spiritual life, on worshipping God in a fitting way, and in showing love and compassion to all, rather than on evangelism or social activism. They run schools and hospitals, orphanages and homes for the destitute, but not for the sake of attracting converts. It is a silent labour of service in humility, which is its own reward. [2]

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Orthodox faith embodying traditions is being presented to be the right way of glorifying God. This is being submitted in all humility, with full respect to the other communities, even to our brethren from other churches, who may not agree to the orthodox line of thinking. For the dissenting, it may be valid to point out that Jesus would never approve of their aggressive postures regarding conversion and faith if it is not laced with the characteristic Christian virtues of love, understanding, sharing, caring and concern for fellow human beings. And it is this belief with all humility, seeking the infinite Grace of the Almighty and a strong yearning to share his infinite wisdom, that has helped the orthodox believers all this while in preserving their faith and gives them the hope to march ahead silently, with confidence, in the years to come.

## References

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