



An Identity Crisis -- the Church From the East

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An identity crisis -- the church from the East My wife and I visited a local clinic the other day. The nurse was interested to know about us, probably noticing our skin color (we are brown-skinned as are most of us from India) and our names (which are distinctly Christian sounding). "Where are you from?" she asked. "From South India" I told her. "Hmm, the blessed missionaries," she uttered under her breath, smiling knowingly. I knew what she was thinking and did not blame her. She, like many people in the West knew of Christianity in India as either the work of Roman Catholic or Anglican missionaries from the West. I wanted to tell her that assumption was wrong. I wanted to tell her about the church in India that is as old as any in Christendom, but I just sighed.

I once had a boss who told me, "Your name just cannot be Mathew Samuel. It's got to have some middle name that I cannot pronounce." He was referring to the names of Christians from India he had met who perhaps had their family names as their middle names. I told him my name was common in South India where I was born. I wanted to tell him about the Church of St. Thomas in India, but I just smiled.

The sad truth is that this identity crisis for the Christian church from the East is not just from outside. Ask a Malankara Orthodox Christian (Malankara refers to the place where St. Thomas, one of the 12 disciples, is believed to have landed in India from the sea) if he is Catholic or Protestant and you are likely to get answers like "I think Catholic because we are not liberals" or "I think Protestant because we do not have a pope."

Over the centuries, Indian Christians were nurtured spiritually by traditions and clergy from various regions, including Persia and Syria. That the Malankara Church (or Indian Orthodox Church as it is now known) has a lineage starting from a time when the Roman Catholic Church was called the Church of Rome is news to most Christians.

While the Armenian and Russian churches were persecuted by their local rulers, Indian Church leaders were honored by Hindu kings. The Indian Church assimilated aspects of Hindu culture, such as the tying of a knot during the marriage ceremony, while maintaining an Oriental Orthodox Christian faith, similar to the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian and Syrian churches. This unique blend of cross-bearing "Hindus" did not go unnoticed by the Western imperialists who followed Vasco da Gama in 1498 to the rich land of India, who saw them as "pagans" and vowed to bring them to the faith.

Thus began a sad part of Indian Orthodox Church history, which included links with the Catholic Church, links with Protestant missionaries and help from the Syrian Church. Sadly each encounter, with friend and foe, took its toll and there were breakaway groups that wounded the church. It found its footing around the turn of the 20th century with a realization of its roots dating to the beginning of Christianity and the establishment of a Catholicate, or headquarters, in Kerala, South India, in 1912.

Christianity in India today includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, and two factions claiming to be Orthodox Christians. (I belong to one of those.) Add to this the flow of missionaries and evangelists from the West who see India as a fertile land for implantation of their own versions of the Gospel. This tumultuous history of the original Indian Church has taken away its focus from the true priorities, which is to be the Church of India and of the East, to show the love of Christ to India. A bitter quarrel over control of church property lingers between the two factions.

Now in its second and third generations as an immigrant community in the United States, the Indian Orthodox Church faces the challenges of language barriers, cultural differences and the eternal balancing act to preserve its traditions while ensuring a meaningful Christian life to its children in American society. The church is tackling these new issues. But the original identity crisis remains and only awareness and education can help stem the rot, and enable the church to flourish in this country.

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