

India

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The 'arrival' or 'rising presence' of Christians in India¹ was neither sudden nor simple. The spread of Christian belief and congregations within the continent, or subcontinent, of India, moreover, is still an ongoing, uneven process. This process is believed to have begun nearly two thousand years ago, stretching from *c.* 52 CE to the present. No single arrival marks a clear starting point. Broken bits or shards of the Gospel came in small increments; believers also emerged one by one and sometimes in clusters. Each new presence was different in dimension and texture. Main features of this development can be conveniently, if arbitrarily, divided into three conventional categories. For simplicity, identifying waves of Christian arrival as ancient, medieval and modern corresponds roughly to Thomas (including Babylonian/Chaldean/Syrian Orthodox), Catholic (Roman), and Evangelical (Protestant) phases. These terms themselves suggest kinds of particularity in relation to the universality of Christian history: 'Thomas Christians' are the oldest and most narrowly focused; 'Catholic' and 'Evangelical' Christians each have possessed distinctive attributes which, in normative terms, might be applied to Christians almost anywhere. What began as a small and thin stream of Christian presence in Malabar and Mylapur (Mylapore), peoples claiming descent from converts of the Apostle Thomas, has been joined and mingled in complex ways by innumerable later accretions. Each later arrival, moreover, has generated its own kind of internal 'reformation', 'revival' or 'reawakening'. Each also has brought some further particularity or specificity. Obviously, however, as these waves of arrival have turned into ongoing streams and rivers, attention cannot be focused upon all at the same time. The procedure followed here is to assume ongoing but developmental processes within each tradition, even though all details cannot be specified. More concentrated attention is focused upon each new arrival or development at the time of its occurrence.

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First waves of arrival: the Thomas Christians

The antiquity of Christian communities in India, along with the origins of Christian institutions, is not easy to identify, trace or understand. Questions of historicity and antiquity are matters of amazing complexity – with answers coming from the south and north, east and west. The 'southern' and/or 'eastern' traditions stress maritime origins while 'northern' and 'western' traditions tend rather to the overland. Yet, before either can be examined more closely, it is useful to appreciate how peoples of India have themselves produced, preserved and perpetuated their own unique forms of historical understanding. This understanding is here woven into the story.

That Christians of India have tended to fashion their own historical understandings in ways comparable to those of other peoples of India is hardly strange. They have preserved their own *itihasa-puranas* and their own *vamshāvalis*. Family members have told and retold their own stories – about how the lineages in their own communities first came into being, settled in their own places and developed their own institutions. Their own traditions have indicated that the Apostle Thomas came by sea from Arabia and landed on the Malabar coast. Alternatively, they have shown that he came overland, down from the north. Details of arrival and subsequent events have been celebrated in song and verse for generations untold. Lyrical sagas, such as the *Margam Kali Pattu*, the *Rabban Pattu* and the *Thomma Parvam*, tell about 'the Coming of the Way of the Son of God'.

Distilled to essentials, these sources indicate that the Apostle, after staying in Malabar, sailed around the Cape of Kanya-Kumari and up the Coromandel Coast; that he stopped at Mylapur (now within the city of Madras, recently renamed Chennai); and that, after going on to China, he returned (c. 52–58 CE) to Malabar, settled in Tiruvanchikkulam (near Cranganore) and established congregations at Malankara, Chayal, Koka-mangalam, Niranam, Paravur (Kottakkayal), Palayur and Quilon. Finally, they indicate that, having trained leaders (*achāryas* and *gurus*) from high-caste families for each congregation, the Apostle departed from Malabar for the last time (c. 69?), leaving behind a strong, self-propagating and self-sustaining community. One poetic source goes so far as to give a demographic and social breakdown (*varnāshramadharmā*) of lineage groups (castes) making up this earliest Christian community: namely, 6,850 Brahmans, 2,800 Kshatriyas, 3,750 Vaishiyas and 4,250 Shudras. Significantly, no mention is made of what 'others' (i.e. aboriginals or untouchables: Adivāsis or Dalīts, in today's argot) might also have become Christians. Such groups, in terms of 'Hindu' traditions, would not have

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been worth counting. What were worth counting were miraculous healings and deliverances performed by the Apostle – 94 from death, 260 from devils, 230 from leprosy, 220 from paralysis and 250 from blindness.

Oral traditions and palm-leaf, copperplate and stone inscriptions, preserved by leading families who claimed descent from Brahman and Nayar lineages, record details concerning the migrations, habitations and places visited by the Apostle. These, according to Placid Podipara (one of many authorities who have devoted years to studying Thomas Christian texts), make clear that many families of Kerala still trace their conversion to the time of the Apostle or to any number of migrations which occurred for many centuries prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. *Vamshāvalis* (lineage histories) claim hereditary clerical authority as *kattanas* (pastors) or as local *metrans* (bishops or elders) – on the basis of apostolic succession going back to Thomas – and contain as many as 50, 60 or even 70 unbroken generations of office-holders. Leading families claiming such distinction are Kalli, Kalikay, Kottakali, Kayakkam, Madaipur, Muttal, Nedumpalli, Pakalomattam, Panakkamattam and Sankarapuri. Artefacts, especially stone crosses and monuments preserved by *kattana* families and villages, further reinforce (or vindicate) claims of hoary antiquity and distinction. Apostolic baptisms near one ancient building at Palayur prompted Brahmans to avoid pollution by bathing or drinking at an older temple tank.

All these traditions take the story further, indicating that Thomas returned to Mylapur, perhaps in 69 CE. They tell how a local raja imprisoned Thomas when money entrusted to him for constructing a palace was distributed to the poor; how the raja's brother who had just died was restored to life in order to tell his sibling of the heavenly palaces which the Apostle had just built; and, finally, how the brother's testimony had convinced the raja and seven hundred members of his court to accept the Gospel and become baptized. Yet another story indicates that the Apostle's days subsequently came to a dramatic end when, while walking near Little Mount, he was confronted by Brahmans leading a procession for the purpose of a blood sacrifice to the goddess Kali: the Apostle, refusing to join the event, so infuriated the crowd that it attacked and slew him, piercing his side with a three-pronged lance (*trishul* or trident). A prayer alleged to have come from the martyr's lips as he died is still regularly sung by Thomas Christians, on 3 July each year, to commemorate the historic arrival and mission of the Apostle to India. Traditions relating to the burial place of the Apostle, whether in Mylapur itself (which seems unlikely) or at the little white shrine which now adorns the top of the hill which for centuries uncounted has been known as St Thomas Mount, continue to give special saliency to this indigenous form of 'Apostolic' Christianity in India. Many centuries before the Portuguese

arrival, healing powers were attributed to this shrine and its surroundings, even to the dust on its footpaths. Whatever the historicity of such indigenous traditions, there can be no question as to their great antiquity or to their great appeal in popular imagination. Such imaginings are certainly as strong as those supporting claims concerning the rise of early Christian communities in various parts of Europe.

The oldest literary account of the Apostle's missionary work in India is found in the *Acts of Thomas*. This document is of unknown origin, language or provenance. Its earliest surviving versions, which are in Syriac, have enabled scholars to trace it at least to fourth-century Edessa. These clearly show, from their content and contextual detail, that the document itself could have originated in the second century.² This wonderfully colourful narrative, while mingling allegory and romance, also depicts actual people and places. The story itself, repeated in various forms and venues, commences in the Upper Room, with apostolic responses to the Great Commission, 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel'. The Eleven, after dividing the world into regions and drawing lots over who should go where, assigned India to Thomas-the-Twin (Didymus). When Thomas objected, saying that a Jew would have trouble communicating with Indians, his brother apostles turned to prayer, hoping that God would bring about a change of heart in Thomas. At that moment, even while prayers were rising, a royal commissioner of Gundaphorus arrived in Jerusalem. His name was Abban; and his mission was to recruit a master builder who could build a palace for his royal master. Thomas was a master builder (or carpenter – stone being more plentiful in the area than wood). He had served his apprenticeship as a disciple of Jesus. Such were his credentials that he was immediately offered the task. The offer being too good to refuse, royal agent and apostle set off together on the long journey back to India. Many were the strange and wonderful adventures which befell them along the way. In Andrapolis, for example, a Jewish flute-girl became the apostle's first convert. Then, when the king's daughter proclaimed faith in Christ on her wedding day and then refused to participate in the ceremony, a hasty departure had to be made to avert the royal wrath of her father. On their reaching India, King Gundaphorus advanced funds for the new palace. Thomas, disturbed by the miserable plight of countless poor and by the profligate luxury of the rich, felt compelled to distribute all the funds to alleviate suffering. When the king returned from his journey and asked for a glimpse of his new palace, he was told that it was being built in heaven and that on earth Thomas had given the funds to the poor, all the while 'teaching about a new God, healing the sick, driving out demons and doing wonderful things [in the name] of the new God of whom he was preaching' (*Acts of Thomas* 1:1920 [paraphrased here]). Outraged, the king threw Thomas

and Abban into prison. That very night, however, the king's brother (Gad) died and went to heaven where, beholding the glorious palace which Thomas had built for his brother, he begged for a chance to tell his brother what he had seen. This boon being granted, the king heard his brother's words (perhaps in a dream) and immediately became a believer, together with many others. All received three signs of grace from the Apostle: anointing with oil ('the seal'), baptism ('the added seal') and communion ('bread and wine' of the Eucharist) (*Acts of Thomas* 2:22-27). Deacons and elders were trained to lead the new congregation. After this the Apostle again set off and established congregations in other parts of India before meeting his death in the realm of King Mazdai, on the eastern coast. His radical teachings against marriage brought about the conversion of many women, including the queen; when she forsook her marriage bed for the sake of piety, her royal husband became so enraged that he ordered Thomas's immediate execution. The Apostle, facing the spears of his executioners at a mount just outside the city, then prayed: 'My Lord and my God, my Hope and Redeemer . . . I have fulfilled your work and accomplished your command. I have been bound but today I receive freedom' (*Acts of Thomas* 13:167; John 20:28). Whether this romantic tale of questionable historicity contains any residue of historical substance we shall never know; but we do know that Gundaphorus and Gad ruled an empire on both sides of the Indus during the years 19 to 45 CE, years when the Apostle could well have carried the Gospel to that part of the world.

Traders, settlers and refugees came from the West to the shores of India. They came in small groups over many centuries. Commercial relations between the Indian and Roman worlds had increased with the discovery of seasonal (*monsoon*) winds which steadily blew ships to India during certain months and then blew them back to Africa and Arabia. Both Strabo and the *Periplus*, a mariners' manual written about the time of Thomas (c. 50-73), describe fleets (with ships of up to seven sails and 300 tons) which moved back and forth across the Arabian Sea. Roman peace brought increasing traffic and prosperity. Romans built colonies on the coasts of India; and Indians moved into Egyptian market places where Greeks and Arabs, Jews and Syrians, Armenians and Persians benefited. Sanskrit and Tamil epics mentioned *Yavana* (Greek) ships, laden with glass, gold and horses, which returned with gems, ivory, pepper, exotic animals and birds, especially peacocks. Greek workmen were used to build a Chola palace. Whatever the historicity of the Thomas story, historical evidence confirms that comparable events did happen, so that items in the story are plausible.

Hints of early Christian presence in India are found in writings which date only a century or two later than the 73 CE date for Thomas's death

preserved in local traditions. From Alexandria, citadel of early Christian learning, a remarkably gifted Jewish scholar and Christian convert named Pantaenus (mentor of Clement and Origen) determined 'to preach Christ to the Brahmans and philosophers'. According to Eusebius, he went as far as India and 'found that Matthew's gospel had arrived before him and was in the hands of some there who had come to know Christ'. Whether this was the real India to which Pantaenus went cannot be determined; however, 'Brahmans' mentioned by Jerome could hardly have come from anywhere but India. Moreover, Jewish communities such as the Beni Israel (perhaps dating back to the first Exile) were already settled along the coasts of India; and more Jews also arrived after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 (and again in 136). It seems clear that Christian and Jewish communities were already settled along the shores of the subcontinent from the second century onwards.

Evidence of links between Christians in Parthian Persia and in Edessa (now Urfa in modern Turkey) is strong. Due to the religious pluralism of Parthian rulers, Christians were able to organize a religious community and to become an important minority within the Persian Empire. They were mainly middle-class families who were well off, known for their medicine, science and trusted positions within the government. Edessa, the capital of a tiny principality known as Osrhoene, lay between the empires of Rome and Parthia. Often squeezed by one power or the other, it became a leading centre of Christian culture. Its language, an Aramaic dialect known as Syriac, became the literary and liturgical language for all 'Eastern' (Assyrian, Chaldean and Persian) Christians. Its theological scholars became famous. It was there that Tatian (born c. 150) wrote his polemic against Greek cultural dominance over Christian institutions and his *Diatessaron* or harmony of the Gospels, for long the only Gospel used in the East (but condemned in the West). During the reign of Abgar VIII (c. 190), Christians of Edessa and Persia became caught up in controversies with Christians of the West over the date of Easter. When the Romans conquered Edessa in 216, Christians of Mesopotamia and Persia were again caught in the middle, and became increasingly suspect. Ardeshir, founder of the Sassanian dynasty (in 226) and restorer of Zoroastrian religious dominance, reconquered Edessa and Syria in 258, capturing the Roman Emperor Valerian. Zoroastrian priests (*mobeds*) mounted virulent campaigns against Christians. Calamity struck on Good Friday, 17 April 341: in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the twin cities bestriding the Tigris, Catholicos Simon Bar Sabbae and over a hundred prominent Christian leaders of the empire were put to death by Shapur II. Years of martyrdom and suffering followed.

After the promulgation of Yezdgerd's Edict of Toleration (c. 401: comparable to the Edict of Constantine 85 years earlier), the Persian Church

enjoyed a time of restoration. This reached its zenith under the ecclesiastical rule of Catholicos Isaac, 'Grand Metropolitan and Head of All Bishops'. But theological disputes in the West led to a permanent rift with Eastern Christians. Theologians at Edessa and throughout the Sassanian Empire, beyond the boundaries of Byzantium, rejected the Council of Ephesus and its view of Mary as 'Theotokos' or 'Mother of God'. After 431, ties with the West became weaker and the patriarchate of Babylon or 'The Church of the East' held sway among Christians in Persia and India.

A century before Eastern Christians fell beneath the shadow of Islam, an Indian traveller from the island of Socotra, with the Greek name Cosmas Indicopleustes, wrote a travelogue entitled *Christian Topography* (c. 535). This work shows that he found Syrian Christian bishops and communities along the coasts of India and Sri Lanka. By then wars between Sassanian kings and Eastern Roman rulers of Byzantium had brought more waves of refugees to India; and political pressures in Persia prompted a further severance of bonds with the West. By then also the Patriarch of Babylon had long claimed ecclesiastical authority over Malabar Christians. The term 'Nestorian' as applied to all Christians of India at the end of the sixth century was as much a matter of ecclesiastical and geographical distinction as it was a term applied to doctrine or ritual. Missionary ventures across Asia and into China continued to grow well into the thirteenth century. But Muslim expansion in the seventh century cut the East off from Byzantium and the West, more effectively than any previous event: by diminishing communication, it closed off occasions for theological or ecclesiastical contact or conciliation.³

The question of why Christianity disappeared so completely from Persia (as also from certain parts of Arabia) remains unanswered. At least two factors may have played an important part in this disappearance. First, in both Syrian and Persian forms of Christianity – after coming out of Antioch and later stemming out of Edessa – language was allowed to come between clerical leadership and ordinary believers. The language of the Church, Syriac (a form of Aramaic), became the exclusive preserve of the learned and literate, the only vehicle for liturgy, through which the Gospel and biblical literature was transmitted from one generation to the next. In Persia and other lands to the east, Syriac was not the tongue of the common people. Efforts made to translate some Scripture, sermons and religious discourses, especially hymns, into Pahlavi were not effective; and, for the most part, the language of the Church remained foreign and could not be understood by the less learned or less literate. Persians had long held a great affection for the beauty of their language. The failure of Christians to use Persian for purposes of faith, worship and scholarship left an enormous cultural void and residual ignorance, a gulf which could not easily be bridged.

Second, Christianity in the East became increasingly, if not predominantly, monastic in character and celibate in normative social doctrines. As a consequence, very little is known about the daily life of the ordinary Christian believer in Persia, or in other eastern lands. While extraordinary missionary efforts and ventures were undertaken, carrying the Gospel to China and India, if not to islands beyond, both the faith and the faithful became increasingly isolated and relegated. Strict celibacy was equated with spirituality: some even suggested that celibacy might be mandatory for gaining eternal salvation. The Persian sage, Aphrates, had written as early as the fourth century that Christians were divided into two groups: the 'Offspring of the Covenant' (*Bar Qiyama*) and the 'Penitents', emphasizing that only those dedicated to an ascetic and celibate life could be baptized while those who were not so inclined were denied baptism. This virtually Manichaean separation between the tiny elite and the masses, between those dwelling in the Light and those consigned to living in Darkness, coming at a time when the Church faced a strong and hostile state religion that inflicted persecutions over long periods of time, greatly weakened the Christian community and left it vulnerable. And while the bar between marriage and baptism did not last, the strict rules of the Bar Qiyama continued to be upheld – with celibacy, prolonged periods of fasting and prayer, vows of poverty, simplicity of food and garb, ceaseless study and silence. Such world-renouncing was not attractive to Zoroastrians. Such ways were viewed as a blasphemy against life itself. Ironically, with the coming of Islam, both Christians and Zoroastrians were marginalized in Persia. Sunni Islam, at least initially, was averse to asceticism and elitism alike, striving to obliterate all distinctions between the religious and not so religious, between specialists and ordinary people. Only Armenian Christians, coming from the homelands and strongholds to the north and west, managed to maintain a clear identity in Islamic lands. Armenians became a striving Christian community, thriving within the Islamicized societies of the East in the centuries which followed.

From an Indian perspective, processes by which Christians, either as refugees or as settlers and traders, had been coming to the western shores of India, at various times for many centuries, both before and after the rise of Islam, can be documented. Such waves can sometimes be dated by looking at grants of lands and privileges which Christians received. These grants, certified or deeded documents on copper, stone or palm leaf, were often later embellished and reinforced in oral traditions. One such tradition indicates that, as early as 293, a great persecution occurred within the Chola kingdom ('Cholamandalam' along the east coast), that 76 families fled to Malabar and settled among Christians of Quilon, and that some refugees came under the influence of a sectarian Tamil Shaiva (presumably *bhakti*) teacher, insomuch that disputes arose over religious

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rites, such as smearing ashes on the forehead and venerating the five products of the cow. In the year 345, not long after the great persecutions of Christians within the Persian Empire had begun, a community of Syrian Christians landed on the Malabar coast under the leadership of an Armenian merchant banker named Thomas of Kana. Kana was cordially welcomed by the local king, Cheraman Perumal, and given special privileges: formal grants certified in copper-plate and stone inscriptions, which specified exactly which lands his settlers were to occupy and which prerogatives of high status they were to enjoy. The deeds indicate that Syrian Christians were sought after and highly valued along the Malabar coast. As enterprising traders, their activities generated prosperity wherever they settled. Syriac documents indicate that it was the Catholicos of Babylon who sent 'Thomas of Jerusalem' (alias Thomas of Kana), and that when he arrived at Malankara, he was accompanied by a bishop, deacons and a group of men, women and children.

The processes of separation between East and West which increased after the rise and expansion of Islam brought many more Christian refugees across the Arabian Sea, fleeing from persecution in lands immediately to the west and north. A late eighth-century copper plate in Kottāyam indicates that a grant was given by a king named Veera Raghavan Chakravarthi to a Christian leader named Eravi Korthan. Another set of five plates (known as the *Tarisa Palli* [Persian Christian] plates, two in Thiruvalla and three in Kottāyam) shows that privileges were granted by Aryan Aigal of Venad to Marwan Savriso of Tyre early in the following century (c. 825); and, later, that King Ayyan of Vencat [Southern Travancore] (c. 880) granted privileges to *Tarisa* (Persian Christians), to *Anjunannam* (Jews) and *Mānigrāmmam* (trade guild members, many being Christians). Lands given were demarcated in the traditional manner, by letting a female elephant roam free; and leaders were granted self-government, protection, corvée labour, and bride-price privileges.

Quite clearly, the different Christian communities which evolved in Malabar became, for the most part, an aristocratic elite. Hindu in culture, Christian in faith and Syrian (or 'Nestorian') in doctrine, ecclesiology and ritual, these Christians constituted a complex of high-caste communities whose occupational position, ritual purity and social ranking, as merchant traders, became ever more firmly fixed and well grounded. Within a Brahmanically framed social order (*vārnāsbramadharma*) of a 'four-class' or 'four-colour' (*chaturvārnya*) system, most Christians fell somewhere between Kshatriya and Vaishya. Christian cultures – not all being of the same caste (*jāti*) or lineage (*vamsba*) – were far from uniform. Yet all possessed features which were distinctly native to the land, or 'Hindu' in that sense of the term. A new husband would tie a *thāli* around his bride's neck, and perform a ceremonial of investiture of 'marriage cloth'.

Some of the most exclusive (who claimed a pure lineal descent from Thomas of Kana) wore a tonsure. This elite, known as the Malankara Nazaranis, seems to have paralleled Nayars in the nature of their relations with Brahmans and with each other: their places of dwelling were referred to as *tharavād* and their rituals for removing pollution (from *ghee* and *gbur*, as with food and drink and utensils) were very similar. Even in matters of interdining and intermarriage, as also in disposal of dead bodies, Nayars and Thomas (or 'Syrian') Christians became linked. Indeed, as wealthy merchant bankers and traders whose transactions and travels called for armed protection by skilled warriors, the same kinds of training in martial sciences (*kalāri-pāyat*) were given to boys of both communities. According to the *Villiarvattom Pāna*, Malankara Nazaranis scattered across Kerala even went so far as to form their own 'little kingdom', a domain or realm of authority stretching north and south along the coast, with its capital at Mahadevapatnam (Port of the Great God) on the island of Chennamangalam. This was later moved to Udayamperūr so as to avoid Arab depredations. The Udayamperūr Church's place of worship was built, according to Christian tradition, by the Raja of Villiarvattom (c. 510); and the kingdom seems to have survived until after the coming of the Portuguese. Only then, after receiving promises of help to defend themselves from Arabs, were the Malankara Christians betrayed and partially conquered. But they were never completely subdued.

In the centuries which followed (and right down to the present), these earliest expressions of indigenous Christianity to be found anywhere in the subcontinent, in both ideological and institutional forms, survived. At least six communities still claim the apostolic tradition of St Thomas as the historic basis both for their origin and for their doctrinal and ecclesiastical authority. These six groups, as found today, are the Orthodox Syrian Church (in two branches), the Independent Syrian Church of Malabar (Kunnamkulam), the Mar Thoma Church, the Malankara (Syrian Rite) Catholic Church, the (Chaldean) Church of the East and the St Thomas Evangelical Church (or factions thereof), along with (formerly CMS) segments within the Church of South India. Virtually all these groups, or branches and subcommunities thereof, interacted from the sixteenth century onward with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. As such, they either answered to or resisted the authority of the Portuguese *Padroado* in Goa or directly communicated with the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in Rome.

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urban areas, by the importance of lingua francas – Swahili or Lingala, Amharinya or Hausa, not to mention Afrikaans – languages which have wide currency in regional communication. At an even wider level, Africans have made their own the languages of world communication, notably French and English, Arabic and Portuguese. In the twenty-first century, as the numerical preponderance and dynamic of Christianity continues to shift from Europe and North America, it has been estimated that Africa will contain more Christians than any other continent, and this ability to express Christianity both locally, and on an international, global level will be crucial.²

Egypt, North Africa, Nubia and Islam

The interplay between local and metropolitan has not only been a feature of the modern history of Christianity and Africa; it is also an important feature in understanding the early period of African Christianity in the first 600 years of the Christian era. Christianity spread along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, taking advantage of the *Pax Romana*. Finding Greek and Latin already established as the languages of trade and the army, of administration and learning, the Christian message expressed itself on African soil through these languages: the Greek of Origen, Athanasius and Cyril in Egypt; the Latin of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine in North Africa; as well as the dissident traditions of Arius (Greek) and Donatus (Latin). But Christianity was never simply the religion of empire – the witness of the martyrs in the first centuries shows that African Christians could stubbornly and courageously resist the civil power. And from early in its history, Christianity in Africa began to be articulated in vernaculars. In Egypt, the flourishing of the monastic movement was important in enabling Christian piety and theology to be expressed in terms of Coptic culture. St Antony himself knew no Greek; one of the fruits of Athanasius's *Life of Antony* was to emphasize the common concerns of both Greek and Coptic in the upholding of Christian orthodoxy.

As far as Christianity was concerned, the next centuries were disastrous. With the capture of Alexandria by the Islamic armies in 641 CE, Islam spread over North Africa even more rapidly and deeply than had Christianity some 500 years earlier. Islam took over the inheritance of the collapsed Roman Empire, imposing a new metropolitan language – Arabic – for the Greek and Latin of the Romans, and replacing what had become the imperial religion, Christianity, by a new religion of empire, Islam. The unity and moral fervour of a pristine Islam, in stark contrast to what appeared to be a fractious and worldly Christianity, may have some

explanatory value for the success of Islam. Certainly, the fact that Christianity in Africa so decisively collapsed in the face of Islam poses difficult historical and theological problems for Christianity in general and African Christianity in particular.

It is tempting, but probably mistaken, to look for explanations in the area of African Christianity's supposed lack of indigenous roots. And yet, as far as the language question is concerned, Islam's relationship to Arabic has been even more intimate than the Christian reliance on Greek or Latin. It was not that Christianity had failed to incorporate itself into local culture, and Islam succeeded in this; but rather that world religions (as opposed to local 'traditional' cults) were seen as being inextricably bound up with a universal civilization. When, in North Africa, the Graeco-Roman civilization was replaced by that of the Arabs, this was signified by a change to a new but equally universal monotheistic religion.

Christianity in Africa did survive the advance of Islam, but only narrowly. It survived in Egypt but not further west. Could this really be because of the higher 'quality' of the Church over which Bishop Cyril had presided in Alexandria as compared to Bishop Augustine's Church in Numidia and Carthage? Perhaps a more useful explanation lies in the contrasting nature of the conquest in Egypt and in North Africa: in Egypt the Arab conquest came extremely rapidly, and was accepted pacifically by the population, which had, in any case, been largely alienated from the Eastern Roman Empire. This was bound up with the drive for religious conformity and the persecution of the Copts for their adherence to the 'one nature' (Monophysite) theology which had been condemned at Chalcedon in 451. The Arabs were, by contrast, tolerant of Coptic religious sensibilities. The Eastern Empire had always been more diverse and heterogeneous – not least in the variety of its Christian expressions based on Antioch, Alexandria or Constantinople; and divided, in terms of Christology, into Melchite ('the king's faction', i.e. the emperor's Chalcedonian party), Nestorian or Jacobite. Long before 641 these differences had in many parts of the East come to have an ethnic dimension. The Islamic practice of recognizing ethnic minorities in the East, in so far as they followed a 'religion of the Book' – the *Dhimma* or 'protected people' – worked to the advantage of the Egyptian Church. Indeed the Orthodox Copts, proud of their monastic heritage and anchored in the *mia physis* (one nature) theology of Cyril, regarded the coming of the Muslim rulers as a relief from Melchite oppression from Byzantium. The invasion of North Africa was much more prolonged and bitter, and the proximity of co-religionists in south Italy and Spain meant that flight, rather than the 'internal emigration' of Coptic intellectuals, was often easier and more sensible, when resistance became futile.

One aspect of the survival of the Church in Egypt is the fact that,

partly as a century, Coptic, and the Nile valley languages. for the survival of the culture. The Coptic community had been required to be distinctive and would be in there were a tax system, immigration, Islam, Coptic. But the very Copts helped Arabic as the liturgical Patriarch or state interference. This encouraged a community of predominant Christendom in Egypt, benefits, and Christendom. Egyptian rule theological and administrative through Coptic Christianity, flourishing in cataract at Aswan, always been Christianity's probably also along the bar

partly as a result of the monastic movement beginning in the early fourth century, Christianity had ceased to be overwhelmingly urban and Hellenic, and had become incorporated into the native Egyptian culture of the Nile valley. The Bible and liturgy had been translated into Coptic languages. They, along with monasticism, became the principal vehicle for the survival of Christianity in an increasingly Arabic and Islamic culture. The Muslim rulers of Egypt continued to rely on the Christian Coptic community for their professional, literary and commercial skills as administrators, traders, fullers, cabinetmakers. By the tenth century, Copts had become a minority in the population, and increasingly they were required to live in special settlements (ghettos), and to wear a distinctive uniform. Christian men were not allowed to marry out of the community. Muslim men could marry Christian women – the children would be Muslim. Active evangelism by Christians was prohibited, and there were incentives, notably relief from the burden of a discriminatory tax system, for Christians who converted to Islam. As a result of immigration from Arabia and the entropy of individual conversion to Islam, Coptic Christianity over the centuries became the minority faith. But the very distinctiveness, introversion and silence imposed on the Copts helped the Christian community to survive even the change to Arabic as the language of the Christian community (Coptic continued as the liturgical and biblical language). The leader of the Copts, their Patriarch or Pope, was chosen by lot (a practice which perhaps minimized state interference in the choice) from a list of monks, preferably young. This encouraged long patriarchates, and reduced the disruption to the community which the death of a patriarch always caused. The Coptic community was always conscious of the fragility of its relationship to a predominantly Muslim power. The Crusades, that incursion of Western Christendom ('the Franks') into the East, put the local Christian community in Egypt under intolerable suspicion without giving any tangible benefits, and forced the Copts to be very wary of contacts with Latin Christendom. These could be so easily misinterpreted as disloyalty to the Egyptian rulers. In any case the Latins showed little sensitivity to the theological and spiritual traditions of Coptic Christianity, now reinvigorated through a wealth of scholarly and devotional literature in Arabic.³

Coptic Christianity continued to be the focal point for a wider African Christianity, no longer spread out along the Mediterranean littoral, but flourishing in the Nile valley. The land of Nubia, to the south of the first cataract at Aswan, had never been part of the Roman Empire, but had always been receptive to religious movements coming from Egypt. Christianity spread in an informal way into Nubia through trade and probably also through the establishment of Coptic monastic communities along the banks and islands of the Nile. In the sixth century, just a

century before Rome lost its control of Africa, Nubia became the target of rival evangelistic missions from the Byzantine court. The initial impetus for this state-directed evangelism had a lot to do with strategic considerations – providing, in the upper Nile valley, stable regimes allied to the empire. Rivalries between the Chalcedonian Christology of Emperor Justinian and the Monophysite leanings of his wife, the Empress Theodora, resulted in the official mission being held up. The party of Theodora, led by Julian and Longinus, were the first to preach to King Silko of Nobatia (the northernmost kingdom of Nubia). The aim of keeping the southern border quiet remained a strategic consideration for the Muslim rulers who took over Egypt in 641. Peace and security were promoted for many centuries by the *Baqt* treaty with the rulers of Nubia, giving them the space and freedom to develop a distinctively Nubian Christian culture. Nubia continued to look to Byzantine court models for its inspiration; but the Christological divisions, unlikely to have been of great significance either way for rulers or people, were resolved in favour of the Monophysitism of the Copts, who now provided the chief supply of monks, priests and bishops for the Church in Nubia. 7

Archaeological excavations, conducted by Polish archaeologists (and other national teams) under the auspices of UNESCO in the 1950s and 1960s, have done much to further understanding of Nubian Christianity, emphasizing, for example, the vigour of the mural pictorial representation of the churches excavated on the islands and along the banks of the Nile, and the possibility that there were black (i.e. Nubian) priests and religious as well as Copts. During times when the Nubian kingdoms were strong they were even able to offer some kind of protection for the minority Coptic community – for example, in 745 marching to Cairo to secure the release of an imprisoned Pope. Relations with the Fatimid regime which ruled Egypt from 969 tended to be cordial, but the coming of the Abbuyids in 1171 inaugurated a more aggressive policy towards Nubia on the part of Egypt. The next centuries saw increasing pressures on the Christian kingdoms, Arab invasion and settlement, conversion to Islam and Egyptian backing for Muslim contenders for the throne. The last Christian King of Nobatia was defeated in 1323, though a smaller splinter-kingdom of Dotawo did have a Christian ruler as late as 1494. The large number of churches destroyed during this period testifies to an intense conflict; the rebuilding of churches as fortresses shows equally that there was a strong national resistance to the inexorable Islamification. Although a Christian kingdom in Alwa to the south does seem to have lingered on, by 1500 Christianity had all but disappeared from Nubia.⁴ ✓

China and its neighbours

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The introduction of Christianity into eastern Asia proved exceptionally difficult, for here it encountered highly sophisticated and culturally stable societies based on different ideological and organizational principles. South-east Asia had long been exposed to cultural and religious influences from India, which further added to the significant ethnic and cultural diversity of the region. Theravada Buddhism, in both its elite and folk variants, was strongly entrenched among the dominant ethnic groups of Burma and Siam (modern Thailand) and played a central part in the politico-religious traditions of these kingdoms. In the South-east Asian island world, animist traditions remained strong in spite of the introduction of elements of Hinduism in ancient times and the expansion of Islam into the region since the twelfth century. The East Asian world consisted of the large 'Confucianized high cultures' of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. These powerful polities, with their organized religions, hierarchies of priests and monks, sophisticated scriptures and well-endowed temples, proved particularly resistant to the introduction of alien religious systems from western Eurasia.

China before 1500: Nestorians and Franciscans

Much of pre-modern East and South-east Asia was subject to or influenced by China, the dominant cultural and political power in the region. In time this populous but distant empire was to become the principal object of Western evangelization. However, it was an Eastern variant of the Christian faith that first gained entrance into China.

As Nestorian Christianity spread eastward from Persia among the Turkic nomads of Central Asia and along well-established trade routes, it eventually came into contact with Chinese civilization, probably some time in the sixth century. The first reliable evidence of Christian mission-

ary activity in China is found on the famous Nestorian monument – erected in 781 and rediscovered in 1625 – with its lengthy and informative inscriptions in Chinese and Syriac. It states that a certain Alopen arrived in the Tang dynasty's capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an) in 635 during the reign of Emperor Taizong (627–649). This was a period of remarkable cultural openness and religious tolerance, allowing native Daoism as well as foreign creeds such as Buddhism, and to a lesser extent Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Islam, to exist alongside Confucianism, the orthodox tradition of Chinese culture. As the following passage inscribed on the stele indicates, Christianity, too, had received imperial patronage:

✓ Bishop A-lo-pên of the Kingdom of Ta-ch'in [Syria], bringing with him the Sutras and Images, has come from afar and presented them at our Capital. Having carefully examined the scope of his teaching, we find it to be mysteriously spiritual, and of silent operation. Having observed its principal and most essential points, we reached the conclusion that they cover all that is most important in life.¹ ✓

With imperial financial support, the first Christian church and monastery were built at Chang'an in 638. In the same year Alopen, with the permission of the emperor and help of Chinese collaborators, completed the translation of *The Sutra of Jesus the Messiah*, which thus became the first Christian book in Chinese. By this time 21 Nestorian monks, probably all from Persia, were active in China.

However, after these auspicious beginnings, two developments were to affect the Nestorian mission in China: the persecutions under the pro-Buddhist Empress Wu (625–705) and the Arab conquests in western Asia which cut off the Nestorian missionary outpost from its Persian heartland. Still, during the reign of Xuanzong (712–756) the Church recovered and made considerable progress. According to the monument, church buildings were restored and new missionaries arrived from Persia by sea in 744. Moreover, the faith spread among the Uighurs, the dominant Turko-Mongolian power on China's north-western frontier.

Yet in the Chinese Empire itself, Nestorianism was in decline soon after the erection of the monument. The great persecution under Emperor Wenzong in 845 proved particularly disastrous. In the final analysis, its fortunes had always been too closely tied to those of the Tang, and when the dynasty was overthrown in 907, China's first Christian Church vanished in the chaos which followed. As Samuel Moffett concludes, the decisive factor which caused the collapse of the Chinese Church 'was neither religious persecution, nor theological compromise, nor even its foreignness, but rather the fall of the imperial house on which the Church

had too long relied for its patronage and protection'.² However, the Nestorian faith survived among some of China's Inner-Asian neighbours. ✓

The Mongol expansion in Asia created relative stability along the principal trade routes which significantly promoted the movement of peoples, goods and ideas between East and West Asia, creating the conditions for the reappearance of Christianity in China. Nestorianism returned to the Middle Kingdom in the wake of the Mongol conquest of North China in 1260. The Mongol world empire also facilitated direct contacts between Chinese and Europeans. The latter responded to stories circulating in Europe by the middle of the twelfth century of a benevolent Christian ruler named 'Prester John', who was said to live among the nomads of Central Asia.³ Pope Innocent IV and other European rulers conceived the idea of an alliance with the Mongols against Islam. Thus the Council of Lyons in 1245 decided to send fact-finding missions to the Mongols, to establish friendly relations with them and possibly convert them. One of the missions, led by the Franciscan friar John of Plano Carpini (Giovanni del Pian di Carpini), arrived in the Mongol capital at Qaraqorum in time to witness the enthronement on 24 August 1246 of Güyük, the third Great Khān (1246-1248). Although John was received by the new supreme Mongol ruler, the papal letters urging the Mongols to convert to Christianity and abandon their military campaigns in Europe, angered Güyük. Consequently, Plano Carpini returned empty-handed, arriving in Lyons in November 1247. Other missions to the East were equally ill-fated, including the one which set out in 1253 under William of Rubruck, a Franciscan in the entourage of crusading King Louis IX of France. An interview with the new Great Khān Möngke (1251-59) merely aggravated long-standing differences.⁴ However, Rubruck left a more detailed account of life in the Mongol capital and the various people assembled there from many parts of Eurasia. While it alludes to the presence of Christians, it also reveals more clearly the persisting antagonism between Nestorians and Catholics. Thus, in connection with the Easter celebrations in 1254, 'a great crowd of Christians appeared - Hungarians, Alans, Russians, Georgians and Armenians - none of whom had set eyes on the sacrament since their capture, as the Nestorians would not admit them into their Church, from what they told us, unless they were rebaptized by them'.⁵ ✓

During the period of Mongol rule, East Asian Christians also came to Europe. In 1287 Arghun, the Il-khān of Persia, sent the Nestorian monk Rabban Saumā on an embassy to foster an alliance with the Europeans. He visited Rome, Paris and Bordeaux and met the Pope and the kings of France and England. Originally Saumā had set out on a pilgrimage from China to Jerusalem with a monk named Rabban Markos, but they were unable to reach their destination and remained in the Nestorian heartland

in Iraq.⁶ Both were Önggüt Turks from Inner Mongolia. Some of the Önggüts, along with elements of other Turko-Mongolian tribes such as the Uighurs, Keraites and Naimans, had converted to Nestorian Christianity several generations earlier.⁷

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Nestorian Kerait princess Sorqoqtani (died 1252) was the mother of Qubilai Khan, who in 1271 founded the Yuan dynasty in North China and by 1279 had conquered all of China. It was his pragmatic policy of religious toleration which enabled Nestorianism to make a comeback in China proper. Qubilai's vulnerable situation as a foreign ruler of a subjugated but thickly populated and highly civilized China led him to adopt a strategy of administering the country through foreign intermediaries. This in turn gave these advisers, including Eastern Christians, far more power than their small numbers warranted.

The favourable conditions prevailing during the Yuan dynasty also allowed Roman Catholicism to enter the Middle Kingdom itself. A solitary Franciscan friar, John of Montecorvino, after an arduous journey by sea via India, reached Khanbaliq (or Dadu, present-day Beijing) in 1294 and was received by Emperor Temür Öljeitü (1294–1307), grandson of the recently deceased Qubilai. With the help of the influential Prince George of the Önggüts, whom he had converted from Nestorianism (thereby aggravating the smouldering enmity between Nestorians and Catholics), John was permitted to build a church in Beijing in 1299 on land bought by an Italian merchant, Peter of Lucalongo. In a letter written in 1305, he reported some 6,000 converts. He added that 'I have already grown old, and my hair is white from the labours and tribulations rather than years, for I am fifty-eight years old'.⁸ By then he had built a second church and assembled and baptized some 150 boys, instructing them in Greek and Latin, and teaching some of them to sing the Divine Office.

In recognition of these achievements, Pope Clement V appointed him Archbishop of Cambaluc (Khanbaliq) and Patriarch of the East. However, it would be several years before reinforcements arrived from Europe. Of seven Franciscan bishops sent out by the Pope, only three reached Khanbaliq in 1308. They spent five years in the capital, supported by generous grants from the Emperor of China. In 1313 the Franciscan China mission was able to expand, when a wealthy Armenian woman provided the funds to build a church in the important port of Quanzhou (Zaitun) in Fujian province. Subsequently a Catholic presence was also established in Yangzhou, Hangzhou (Quinsai) and other places.

Around 1322 a Franciscan visitor, Odoric of Pordenone (c. 1265–1331), arrived in South China, carrying with him the bones of four Franciscans who had been killed in India during an earlier attempt to reach China.

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On his way to Beijing he visited members of his order at Quanzhou and Hangzhou. One other, rather large, group of clerics is known to have reached China, led by John of Marignolli. They set out from Avignon in 1338, reaching Beijing in 1342. Five years later John left China via Quanzhou to return to Europe. By this time the Yuan dynasty was already in decline, to be overthrown in 1368. The fifth Bishop of Zaitun, James of Florence, was killed by Chinese patriots in 1362, and in 1369 all Christians were expelled from Beijing. Once again Christianity disappeared with the fall of the dynasty. The new isolationist Chinese Ming dynasty would not tolerate foreigners and their religions, whether Catholic or Nestorian.

The planting of Christianity, 1500–1800

The expansion of Portuguese colonial and mercantile power in Asia during the first half of the sixteenth century was accompanied by a surge of militant Catholic missionary zeal to preach Christianity to the peoples of the newly discovered countries. In accordance with a bull of Pope Alexander VI (1493) and the treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Saragossa (1529), the world had been divided into two exclusive spiritual jurisdictions under the royal patronage of the monarchs of Spain and Portugal who assumed direct responsibility for the conversion of the 'heathen' and the building of churches and monasteries. Consequently, as the Portuguese proceeded to establish a string of trading stations in Asia, extending from Goa (1510) in India to Melaka (1511) on the Malay peninsula, Ternate (1522), Tidore and Ambon in the Maluku or 'spice islands', Faifo (now called Hoi An) near Da Nang in Vietnam, Macao in China (granted as a trading post in 1557) and Japan, priests came along as chaplains and evangelists under the royal patronage (*padroado*) arrangement.

Except for the major establishments at Melaka, the Portuguese were not particularly successful in planting Christianity in South-east Asia. In the Indonesian islands the high point came in 1546 with the arrival of the Spanish Jesuit Francis Xavier (1506–52). He spent two years in the Maluku region and was said to have made thousands of 'converts' among the non-Muslim tribes. His missionary efforts stimulated a wider interest in Christianity, and by 1555 some 30 villages on the island of Ambon had become Christian. Even so, the lack of priests meant that such congregations were left to their own devices. Moreover, because the Portuguese Crown failed to provide effective support, the missionaries were unable to assist local rulers who had accepted Christianity against their (more often than not Muslim) enemies. The Catholic mission was further weakened after 1605 when the Dutch East India Company drove

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the Portuguese from Ambon and Tidore. Only some remnants of Dominican mission work survived into the nineteenth century on the islands of Solor and Flores, in the vicinity of Portuguese East Timor. The capture of Portuguese Melaka by the Dutch in 1641 and the destruction of its numerous monasteries and churches severely reduced the Catholic presence in South-east Asia.

The Philippines

Whereas the Christianity promoted by the Portuguese made relatively little impression in much of South-east Asia, the situation was quite different under royal Spanish patronage in the Philippines. After initial contact had been made by Magellan's ill-fated fleet in Cebu in 1521, evangelization began in earnest with the decision of King Philip II in 1570 to commit Spain to the colonization and Christianization of the islands. Following the capture of Manila, the local chief agreed to a treaty accepting Spanish protection and the propagation of Christianity. By 1595 there were 134 missionaries working in the Philippines, and it was estimated that 288,000 baptisms had taken place.

The Christianizing process in the Philippines followed precedents already established in Spanish America, where missionaries had learnt that it was vital to obtain the conversion of chiefs in order to win over their followers and that the most effective way of converting local leaders was to teach Christian ideas to their children. An important factor in the success of Christianity was the fact that many aspects of worship could be accommodated by Filipino culture. It is important to note that – except for Mindanao in the south where Islam had made some inroads – the Spanish did not have to confront the 'high cultures' of mainland Asia. Instead, in a setting where animism was the dominant belief amongst the various local social groupings, Christian practices were vaguely akin to indigenous rituals. It has been suggested that the sprinkling of holy water, the recitation of prayers in Latin and the sign of the cross provided an alternative to animistic healing rites. At the same time traditional popular Filipino practices were included in or adapted to Christian worship, in spite of missionary concern. In a society where spirit worship was widely practised, the vast array of Catholic holy figures was accepted as an effectual and attractive source of power. As had hitherto been the case with the ancestors, the names of saints could be invoked to obtain assistance and protection. Blessed by the priest, rosaries, crosses and holy medals became potent talismans. On the other hand, Filipinos gradually came to accept the Christian idea of monogamy and the indissolubility of marriage. In this way a kind of folk Catholicism was enabled to take firm root in the northern part of the Philippines.