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The Origins of Christian Society in Ancient India

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Abstract

Approximately 2.4% of the Indian population identify themselves as Christians¹. As the number of followers grows, it is only natural to question how this religion came to India. The Syrian Christians of Kerala have taken great pride for countless centuries in the fact that their church was personally founded by the apostle Thomas. However, does this legend accurately portray the historical reality? Numerous scholars claim that Christianity was brought to the continent by merchants, other evangelists, or Jewish settlers. This study seeks to identify the evidence behind these claims by comparing the existing primary source documents and observable historic trends. This detailed analysis concludes that substantial evidence supports the claim that Thomas was the first to establish Christian communities on the continent in the first century CE with the purpose of evangelization.

¹ Thomas, Abraham Vazhayil. *Christians in Secular India*. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1974, p. 13.

India is home to several religious systems. To Indians, there is no distinction between the secular and sacred aspects of daily life.¹ In some regions, community members focus their lives around the local church.² According to Stanley Wolpert, previously a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Indians deem that “religion and philosophy are mother’s milk, daily nourishment, not esoterica to be remembered only on Saturdays or Sundays, locked in books never read.”³ Faith and philosophy are therefore, critical components to daily life.⁴

Christianity plays a dominant role in most factions of Indian life, including those that are traditionally thought to be of a secular nature. The day begins, progresses, and concludes with a variety of activities focused around this faith. The conversion rate of Christianity continued to increase and today it is regarded as the third largest religious minority, composing 2.3% of the population. In 2001, the Christian population encompassed 24,080,016 individuals.⁵ Philip Jenkins, a professor at Pennsylvania State University,⁶ divides these Christians into Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox.⁷ According to the same census, the most prominent religion is Hinduism, followed by Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism respectively. Christianity has influenced the social, political, and economic elements of Indian society since its arrival in the first century CE.⁸ The largest population of Christians remains in the western state of Kerala⁹, which is known as “one of the oldest Christian communities in the world.”¹⁰ The region is said to have an “ancient and honorable history.”¹¹ But how did this Christian community begin in Western India? What factors carried this prophet’s message all the way from Jerusalem to this predominantly Hindu nation and how did it manage to gain support?

Numerous individuals, consisting of various historians, religious leaders, and politicians, present contradicting theories on the Christian evangelization in India. Some, such as Wolpert, a scholar who works extensively with large surveys of Indian history, and Brown, who once the principal at the Kerela United Theological Seminary at Trivandum and Bishop of Uganda,¹² state that Christianity came through merchant trading vessels. Others, such as S. G. Pothan, a scholar who published the majority of his work in the 1960's, suggest that Jewish settlers allowed this transfer. George Mark Moraes, a Christian scholar living and working in India, postulates that other evangelists brought the Christian messages to India. However, numerous theories claim that St. Thomas brought this tradition in the first century CE.¹³ Relevant primary sources support this claim and indicate that these early Christian churches would continue to solidify throughout the first few centuries.

Modern scholars such as Abraham Thomas, professor at Kerala Christian Bible college,¹⁴ divide the Indian Christian population into distinct groups. These groups include Christians from the Goa region, those established by European missionaries in the colonial age, and the Syrian Christians, whose founding is analyzed in this text. However, according to Sarah Park, a student in the Postcolonial Studies program at Emory University, "Christians and churches relate to surrounding society in vastly differing ways, from being a dominant force in Kerala, a significant influence in other southern and northeastern states, to a desperately weak minority in the main body of India."¹⁵ In the same fashion, Park also notes that "representations of small fundamentalist sects still exist throughout India creating a kaleidoscopic conglomeration of people, languages, cultures, perspectives, theologies, and practices"¹⁶.

Scholars have reached a consensus on the existence of an origin of Christianity in India. More specifically, Brown states that “the existence of an ancient Christian church on the Malabar coast in south-west India has been known to Europeans since the time of Marco Polo.”¹⁷ The Malabar coast is a region found on the southwestern coastline of India, often beginning from Goa and traveling south. This area contains the majority of the modern state of Kerala.¹⁸ However, Jenkins states that “Christianity appeared in southern India no later than the second century, and other missions and monasteries followed.”¹⁹ Due to the fact that the early Indian church maintained poor record keeping until the sixteenth century when the Indian church came under the power of the Portuguese,²⁰ little is known about their development. Jenkins reports only two notable dates: first, that “Around 425, we hear of an Indian priest translating the Epistle of the Romans from Greek to Syriac”,²¹ and second, that an author named Cosmas writes in 550 CE that a large Christian settlement is present in what he calls “Further India.”²²

Jenkins accounts for this lack of records by stating that “Unlike other churches, which so often feature in the record of martyrdoms and persecutions, the Thomas Christians were blessed with having very little history to report.”²³ He draws his knowledge from an incident in 1500 when “a Nestorian reported that, in India, ‘there are here about thirty thousand families of Christians, our co-religionists... They have begun to build new churches, are prosperous in every respect, and living in peace and security’.”²⁴ Nevertheless, this blessing may be their downfall. The lack of primary source materials from this community has led to a great debate among historians about the true founding of these religious communities.²⁵

The origins of Christianity in India had been discussed on the continent ever since the religion was brought to the nation in the first century CE. Christians attributing their salvation to St. Thomas were vocal about this opinion and the idea was soon absorbed by other local churches. However, the topic does not become a major issue until the early nineteenth century. According to Richard Young, an expert on Christian encounters with Asian societies, “India’s Christian history has been the subject of several ambitious master narratives, with coverage from deep antiquity into each author’s respective ‘present.’”²⁶ Although these narratives were composed by highly skilled, well trained historians, they often presented biases due to their shared Christian backgrounds and overall beliefs that Christianity improved Indian society.²⁷

This question is a critical focal point in the field of Christian history in India. Throughout the centuries, India has supported a strong and devoted community of Christians that has attempted to study the history of its development. However, this question puts a great deal at stake. Since the original founding of these Indian Christian communities, members have taken great pride in claiming that their church was founded by St. Thomas.²⁸ To deny this assumption, one would be stripping the church of this source of validity.

While the original discussions of this topic focused solely on the evidence behind St. Thomas’s founding, later texts have broadened their scope to include possible alternatives and even more in depth, primary source research. This scholastic development can be attributed to cultural shifts both within India and abroad that allow scholars to feel more comfortable in disagreeing with religious institutions. The text of

the late twentieth and early twenty-first century focus on determining which theory is the most plausible explanation of India's Christian heritage.

Three scholars in particular represent the changing opinions in the field. By the mid twentieth century, a large collection of literature had already been composed about St. Thomas and his mission.²⁹ However, these works were often simplistic pieces that were often plagued with bias and sought only to prove the validity of the St. Thomas legend.³⁰ The first significant edition that altered the scholarship of the field was made by L. W. Brown. Brown is described as a “dispassionate and reasonably impartial observer”³¹ who “fulfilled a long-standing want of an authoritative book on the Syrian Christians in India.”³² Brown provides an in-depth academic analysis of the question through extensive primary source research.³³ Furthermore, Fredrick S. Downs, a classically trained scholar who reviewed Brown's text, claimed that “because this book represents an early example of the current emphasis upon the social perspective among historians in Christianity in India, it is already regarded as a standard authority on the subject.”³⁴ This piece is a critical selection for any scholar studying the field. However, the text can be limiting due to its less detailed, broad survey of Indian Christian history and basic report of factual developments.

Throughout the next four decades, these works would build off of Brown's literature and begin to specialize their field of view. These changes include recognizing the unique elements of Indian culture, highlighting Indian Christian developments, and moving farther away from the traditional views on the absolute certainty of the Saint Thomas legend. For instance, Frykenberg, a renowned scholar of Indian Christianity, published a piece in 2008 which emphasizes the role of India's hybrid cultures and

lasting results of British imperialism.³⁵ He brings a specialized interpretation of the question due to “his upbringing in southern India” and “his identification as a Christian who believes in the positive influence of that belief on the subcontinent.”³⁶ Furthermore, he “puts forward a case that Christianity is *Indian* and must be studied as an Indian religion” by focusing a great deal of his research on local histories.³⁷ This text is an excellent supplement to broad survey texts, like Brown’s, but would provide an incomplete representation if read on its own.

Likewise, Chad M. Bauman, an associate professor of religion at Butler University, also contributed to the scholarship in this field. While Frykenberg focused on culture and local history, Bauman focuses on the aspect of Christianity that allowed for its adaptation in India. This conversion was not “a simple or individualistic task.”³⁸ Steven C. Dinero, a professor from Philadelphia University, states that, in Bauman’s text, “Christianization is deconstructed and passed out here as something which is both individual and communal, social and economic, brought on by endogamous and exogamous factions, and which is very much a reflection of the times and place within which the phenomenon evolved over time.”³⁹ By developing such a detailed analysis of the nature of Christianity, Bauman creates a unique perspective on the evangelization. However, much like the works of Frykenberg, this specialized text only provides a partial picture of the era. By pulling all of these diverse texts together, scholars are able to comprehend the question at hand on multiple levels.

On the other hand, a discussion of this scholarship would be incomplete without mentioning the primary sources themselves. Numerous types of documents are analyzed, including myths, poems, plays, letters, gospels, artwork, and formal ecclesiastic histories.

Each of these selections grants new insight into the field and correspond a unique perspective of Christianization in India. However, these documents are highly limited both in quantity and historic validity. Few records of the early church were kept, and those that were, often cannot be verified due to their antiquity. For instance, the motivations for St. Thomas's mission to India are most often identified from the Gospel of John.

Regardless of all of this scholarship and materials, there division still exists in the field. Some scholars, such as Brown, fully reject the legend of St. Thomas on the grounds that there is no valid historical evidence to support such claims.⁴⁰ Other historians, such as Bauman and Frykenberg, recognize the ambiguity of the evidence and attempt to identify the most plausible situation or situations.

Today, there is a resurgence of interest in this field. On one hand, countless individuals remain devoted to St. Thomas by celebrating his feast day and naming their sons in his honor.⁴¹ On the other hand, India is plagued with deep religious divisions that often end in violent conflict. With so many diverse and powerful religions, many individuals have questioned how all of these philosophies were able to take hold and develop within India. Studies such as the one presented here allow for a detailed analysis of one of these religions origins in hopes of identifying their appropriate role in the modern Indian social order.

How did Christianity come to India? One of the first widely held theories argues that Christianity was brought to Kerala by merchants, not by St. Thomas the apostle. The merchants in question were "East Syrian traders, from the Persian Gulf area" who came to the continent through the Greco-Bactrian-Persian bridge.⁴² Furthermore, Jenkins

agrees with such statements and notes that “Since long-established trade routes connected southern India with the Mediterranean world, Christianity may have indeed have reached India as early as the second century, or perhaps even the first.”⁴³ Kerala’s geographic position on the coast facilitated such international trade. Therefore, this argument can be regarded as a realistic claim.⁴⁴

It is also logical to presume that, while merchants were conducting their business, cultural exchanges were also occurring.⁴⁵ Therefore, merchants may well have introduced Christianity to the Indians without any intention to do so. Traders often married foreign women who would learn their husband’s culture and, in turn, transmit their ideas to their own families or neighbors.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Brown argues that the traders continued to visit the Malabar region until the end of the fourth century.⁴⁷ These continual visits influenced the development of the transmitted religious systems and allowed further cultural adaptations to occur. Trade was so consistent in this region throughout this era and the next few centuries that Christian worship maintained its original character, as opposed to adapting a unique, regional, Indian style.⁴⁸

However, the simple fact that such a claim could be feasible does not guarantee that it is accurate. Although it is possible that merchants came to this region and introduced the Christian faith, this may not tell the whole story. Brown argues that these trading vessels only influenced the religious development on the continent to the extent that they carried St. Thomas or other missionaries to India.⁴⁹ He states that “the evidence available seems to confirm this probability, and whether or not the Apostle himself came to South India, it seems certain that other Christians from east Syria who claimed a connection with him did come to reinforce, if not found, the Malabar Church in the first

three centuries.”⁵⁰ Therefore, proving that merchants arrived in the region around Kerala does not instantly imply that St. Thomas did not use those methods of transportation to satisfy his own goals. Although such shipping routes would allow St. Thomas to complete his mission, their existence does not guarantee his passage.

Other scholars, such as Stanley Wolpert, reject these inferences due to their lack of primary source evidence and suggest that Christianity and other cultural traditions were brought to India through land passages. He states that “Greco-Bactrian legatees of Alexander’s frontier provinces were the first invaders to pour over the passes and recapture the Indus valley. They were followed by the Persians from the West and the Scythians from the North.”⁵¹ As the central Asian silk route began to develop, this became known as the “diamond path” because of its high accessibility.⁵² According to Wolpert, “North-West India’s Gandharan bridge to East Asia and Persia was to emerge as the ancient world’s most vital artery of cultural exchange as well as trade.”⁵³ By the end of the first century, this path will bring the teachings of the Buddha to China, therefore, Wolpert concludes that it is only logical to conclude that this route will also carry Christian influences.⁵⁴ Although this option of cultural transference is less probable, Wolpert poses an alternative explanation that could also account for this development.

However, the establishment of Christianity in this region was not an easy task. Moraes believes that merchants alone would not have seen such great success unless they were aided by an evangelist. Moraes indicates that St. Thomas could have been this individual, yet there are other individuals who could be acknowledged in this endeavor. Primarily, he identifies a man known as “Bartholomew.”⁵⁵ This individual is referred to in Eusebius’s text, *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius*.” Eusebius, a bishop of

Caesarea in the late third century,⁵⁶ tells of a traveler named Pantenus came to India and found a group of people who “were acquainted with the Gospel of Mathew, to whom Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached.”⁵⁷ This information is further validated in St. Jerome’s text, *Liber de Viris Illustribus*. Here, St. Jerome, who lived from 345 to 420 and is known for his extensive scholastic view on scripture,⁵⁸ repeats this tale and describes how Pantenus came to India and discovered that Bartholomew had preached the Gospel of St. Mathew there.⁵⁹ Moraes concludes that this documentation is enough to suggest the presence of Bartholomew on the continent.⁶⁰

However, these hypotheses have even less evidence than those that mention St. Thomas. Although it cannot be strictly denied that Bartholomew was “India’s Apostle”, it also cannot be proven.⁶¹ Brown attributes the disregard of these claims to the fact that the memory of Bartholomew “was overwhelmed by the later universal reference to St. Thomas.”⁶² Even Moraes, who concludes that Bartholomew came to India before St. Thomas’s arrival, cannot deny Thomas’s presence in India at some point.⁶³ In the same fashion, while other authors suggest that other primary sources attribute the Christian evangelization of India to a third and even a fourth evangelist who arrived before St. Thomas, these claims have even fewer historical references.⁶⁴ The references on St. Thomas and his mission outweigh the claims of Bartholomew or merchants carrying this tradition both in sheer quantity and historical validity.

The only other missionary of note who could possibly outweigh this claim is Jesus of Nazareth himself. Jews were present on this continent in the first century CE and Wolpert notes how the *Bene Israel* community, or the “Sons of Israel” community who are known for being the original Jewish migrants to the Indian region,⁶⁵ is located in

the Kerala region and “is India’s oldest Jewish community.”⁶⁶ Roger Buckley, a professor at the University of Connecticut, suggests that Jesus could have been drawn to the continent by these communities while still formulating his unique philosophies⁶⁷. Although little historical evidence exists to support this claim, many historians recognize its possibility due to the Jewish propensity of wide spread traveling and the unrecorded eighteen years of Jesus’s life between the ages of twelve and thirty.

In fact, Pothan also acknowledges that these Jewish communities could have been the first to spread the teachings of Jesus. Brown states that “there is a Jewish colony settled in various places around the Periyar river and in Quilon, the very places which claim Christian churches were founded by St. Thomas.”⁶⁸ According to the groups own written traditions, they came to the area in 68 CE, which was around the same time that Thomas was said to have made his first mission.⁶⁹ Other Jews could have been drawn to the area after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE when they became targets of persecution under Titus Vespasian,⁷⁰ who lived from 39-81 CE.⁷¹ Historical records indicate that these Jewish groups were allowed to settle and flourish in the region which would have allowed for a good deal of cultural exchange within the local communities.⁷²

Although these Jewish colonies would have given Thomas all the more reason to begin his apostolic mission in India, Brown states that the existence of these colonies “is not by any means certain.”⁷³ As with most temporary settlements of this time, few remains exist that prove its location and written records can rarely be considered accurate due to their tendency to mislabel both relative locations and neighboring countries. While a few historical records exist that note the arrival and growth of these colonies, they are few in number and cannot be considered conclusive due to their potential lack of

validity.⁷⁴ The only evidence that one can acquire through the identification of these colonies is that such a migration was possible.⁷⁵

Therefore, if none of the theories above can be proven, then additional studies on Thomas's mission are necessary. Historians must wade through the legends and myths which surround the topic in order to identify valid sources of evidence. This first century world is unlike the modern region and Christianity would not arrived to the continent from the Western, "developed", nations,⁷⁶ but instead from a minor, powerless individual with a rare theology.

Throughout the centuries, citizens in Kerala have preached their connection to St. Thomas. According to Jenkins, "the ubiquitous Syrian Missionaries founded native Christian communities that claimed to follow St. Thomas, *Mar Thoma*."⁷⁷ Pothan further declares that "When St. Thomas came to India, he came not with the prestige of a mighty Christian power, but as a humble disciple from Palestine, carrying the message of his Master, from one Eastern land to another."⁷⁸ But who exactly was this St. Thomas? Why did he come to the continent and what did he hope to leave behind?

Thomas's full name was Didymous Judas Thomas.⁷⁹ The derivation of the name "Didymous", which means "twin" in Greek, and the close relationship Thomas had with Jesus has led some to conclude that this individual could have been Jesus's own twin.⁸⁰ Regardless of his family ties, Thomas earned his own reputation of being "infinitely skeptical and infinitely faithful."⁸¹ He was honored throughout Syrian tradition as "an apostle par excellence."⁸²

Most individuals will recognize Thomas from his tale in the Gospel of John. The account goes as follows:

When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and while the doors were shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, Peace be to you. And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced at seeing the Lord... But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, We have seen the Lord! But he said to them, Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails and put my finger into the mark of the nails and put my hands into His side, I will by no means believe... And after Eight days, His disciples were again within, and Thomas *was* with them. Jesus came, though the doors were shut, and stood in the midst and said, Peace be with you. Then He said to Thomas, Bring your fingers here and see My hands, and bring your hand and put *it* into My side and do not be unbelieving, but believing. Thomas Answered and said to Him, My Lord and my God!⁸³

It is from this tale that we now get the expression “doubting Thomas.”

When the time came for the Apostles go out into the world to bring Jesus’s teachings to other communities, the *Acts of the Apostles* suggest that they “divided the regions of the world by lot, and each going to his allotted place to preach the Gospel.”⁸⁴ Thomas was recorded as being assigned to India, “but he complained that a man with his Jewish background could not evangelize the Indians.”⁸⁵ Most likely he protested due to the vast cultural and religious backgrounds shared by the two parties. The legend continues that the Lord then intervened.⁸⁶ Finally, Thomas accepted his mission to “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to all the creation.”⁸⁷

But how did Thomas manage to travel to this continent? Abraham Thomas claims that St. Thomas arrived in India in 52 BCE on “a Roman trading vessel”⁸⁸ sent to trade pepper, which was a highly trafficked product in this era.⁸⁹ This claim is consistent with tradition and represents the most probable situation. Furthermore, through the use of these trading vessels, Pothan concludes that this trip from Palestine to India would have been manageable.⁹⁰ According to Francis A. Judd, the author of *The Rose of India*,

it is even possible that Thomas made several stops on this journey and also worked with the Medes and Persians.⁹¹

Once Thomas arrived in India, stories began to be told throughout the nation about the miracles that Thomas worked after arriving there. One states that:

According to tradition, St. Thomas made his first conversions by miracle. At the village of Palur, he found some Brahman priests throwing handfuls of water into the air as they performed their purification prayers. Thomas threw some water into the air himself, and it hung suspended in the form of sparkling flowers. Tradition continues that most of the Brahmans embraced Christianity on the spot, and that the rest fled. To this day, no orthodox Brahman will take a bath in Palur.⁹²

Several other legends from various sources and of similar character exist.⁹³ However, all of these are based off of tradition and word of mouth. No finite, primary source texts have been found that concretely support these claims. Therefore, instead of viewing them as history, these myths should be used to understand the culture of the time and the local impressions about St. Thomas.

However, the apostle was unable to complete his work. The *Passio*, a Latin text, claims that Thomas was martyred in Mylapore.⁹⁴ According to legend, a lance was thrust at him by an angry Brahman and he was buried in Edessa.⁹⁵ Although his burial place is “much disputed” and was never found⁹⁶, Stringer states that “there is no solid reason to reject it.”⁹⁷ Kurikilamkatt, an India priest from the Missionary Society of St. Thomas, the Apostle, however, disagrees. He believes that “Thomas died a natural death.”⁹⁸ He bases these conclusions on the records of early church fathers.

Despite disagreements in Thomas’s life and ministry, both Eastern and Western churches recognize Thomas’s potential influence.⁹⁹ Countless modern Syrian Christians insist that their local church was founded by Saint Thomas.¹⁰⁰ Syrians throughout the

first centuries and into the modern age have great pride in this tradition since it “made them exclusive.”¹⁰¹ This fierce attachment to an apostle or to a revered holy man was not uncommon for the era. For instance, similar to the way that the Syrian Christians find pride in their link to Saint Thomas, Paul, another disciple of Jesus, describes the Corinthians as also dividing themselves based upon their founder. For instance, Paul wrote the following in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“Now I beseech you, brothers, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be attuned in the same mind and in the same opinion. For it has been made clear to me concerning you, my brothers, by those of *the household of Chloe*, that there are strifes among you. Now I mean this, that each of you says, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.”¹⁰²

This desire to create authority for a church by linking it to a well respected individual was a common trait in early Christian societies. However, if this connection was critical in the process of churches becoming valid or exclusive, it becomes possible that some churches, including the Syrian Church, may have forged these claims in order to achieve a higher social status. For example, although the tradition of the Syrian Church highly supports the belief that their community was founded by St. Thomas, these alternative motivations of forging such connections could possibly invalidate their original claims.

However, some evidence exists which suggest that the legend of St. Thomas’s founding is an accurate account of early church history. First, Brown notes that “the existence of... families whose ancestry seems ancient and indigenous, rather than of foreign immigrant trading stock, are factors which suggest the possibility of an early evangelist in the country.”¹⁰³ In other words, many India Christian families can trace their ancestry back to ancient sources. These families are thought to have converted

before the rise of widespread European missions to the continent, and therefore, must have learned the faith through an alternative source.

Second, others chose to believe the legend based upon the churches long standing acceptance of it. For instance, Father Marcellin da Civezza, a well-renowned Franciscan historian, comments that because of this “constant tradition of the church, it would be an act of temerity and of incredible audacity to raise even a shadow of a doubt on the fact of the Apostolate and Martyrdom of St. Thomas in India.”¹⁰⁴ Although this claim is based more off of Civezza’s personal support of church teachings than actual primary source evidence, his statement represents a widespread claim that is consistent with the beliefs of many Syrian Christians today.

Third, St. John Damascene, who lived from 676 to 754 CE and wrote extensively on religious matters,¹⁰⁵ mentions St. Thomas in his fictional text *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. This piece was a popular medieval legend in Europe.¹⁰⁶ In this text, “Iosaph’s tyrannical father persecuted the church but lived in dread of a prophecy that his own son would become a Christian.”¹⁰⁷ Although modern historians recognize this account merely as a fictional story whose goal was “the glorification of this Christian monasticism”,¹⁰⁸ the author “regarded his story as a true narrative of the lives of real characters” because of the widespread acceptance of the legend in his time.¹⁰⁹ In the piece, St. John Damascene claims that “one of the company of Christ’s Twelve Apostles, most holy Thomas, was sent out to the land of the Indians, preaching the Gospel of Salvation.”¹¹⁰ By referring to Thomas in his piece, St. John Damascene both supports the reality of this legend as well as continues to spread it throughout Europe.

The work of proving such claims becomes difficult since no complete record of Thomas's founding exist.¹¹¹ Therefore, historians must refer to a collection of smaller, less direct primary sources. First, let's begin with the Acts of the Apostles.¹¹² Not only has it managed to survive approximately twenty centuries, but it demonstrates numerous references to valid historic sites, makes claims consistent with archeological results, and presents numerous Christian beliefs and practices that are also mentioned in various other documents, such as the other biblical texts, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, and several of the pieces discussed below.¹¹³

According to Judd, there are four additional sources on the legend of St. Thomas. The most reliable is *Acta S Thomae Apostoli* since it was completed only about one century after Thomas's arrival in India.¹¹⁴ Pothan describes it as "an apocryphal work" which "is considered to have been written by one Bardesanesa, a Syrian and native of Edessa in Mesopotamia."¹¹⁵ Although historians cannot agree on its exact date, suggestions range from the first to the fourth century CE. Copies have been found in Syriac, Greek, Latin, Armenian, and Ethiopic.¹¹⁶

Acta S Thomae Apostoli is divided into nine parts, but it is the seventh section which clearly states that "Judas [Thomas] was preaching throughout all India."¹¹⁷ Although this statement could have been forged, Judd claims that "old people would have been alive whose grandparents had met the Apostle" and that "an author at so early a date would hardly have dared to concoct a fictitious account and try to pass it off as genuine."¹¹⁸ Many other historical references within this text have proven to be accurate as well, such as the mention of a King Gondophares¹¹⁹, whose existence was proven through a series of coins discovered in Northwest India.¹²⁰

Doctrine of the Apostles, a document found in Syria and dated to the mid second century, also mentions Thomas's work in India. It comments that "India and all its own countries, and those bordering on it, even to the farther sea, received the Apostles' Hand of Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was Guide and Ruler in the Church which he built and ministered there."¹²¹ This quote not only reveals further evidence of Thomas's work, but it also shows the breadth of his influence and the respect that he may have received in many of these communities.

Historians also must not ignore the *Gospel of Thomas* itself. This text was discovered in Egypt in 1945.¹²² It is a set of 114 "logia of 'naked sayings'"¹²³ that were "probably written in Syriac in the fourth century and later translated into Greek, Latin, Ethiopic and Armenian."¹²⁴ These statements are usually brief and aim to teach a lesson about proper Christian behavior. For instance Logion One states that "He who finds the significance of these words will not taste death."¹²⁵ The author recounts in Logion 33 Jesus's command "that which you hear with one ear tell it to another ear, proclaim it from the rooftops."¹²⁶ These loggias present clear motivations that St. Thomas may have held when beginning his missionary journey.

However, numerous problems with these quotes exist. Scholars constantly question what this gospel's role should be in the historical community. Not only could countless meanings have been lost through the translation process, but Brown goes as far as to call it "a popular romance" whose purpose "was to call attention to the necessity of virginity and poverty for the truly Christian life."¹²⁷ These concerns can also be applied to the use of any other biblical documents.

Thomas's presence on the continent is also noted in other, minor works. First, the *Origen* and the *Clementine Recognitions*, which are Clement's autobiographies that describe how he learned his religious tradition from St. Peter,¹²⁸ comment on St. Thomas preaching the Gospel in this overall region.¹²⁹ Second, all of the fourth century ecclesiastical writers, except for Rufinus of Aquileia, who lived from 340-410 and moved from Italy to the East,¹³⁰ "are unanimous that Thomas's field of mission was India."¹³¹ Third, in 363 CE, St. Ephraem, a teacher and deacon from the late fourth century,¹³² composed a hymn in his *Madrashas* that honors St. Thomas. It was written as follows:

Blessed art thou, like a solar ray,
 India's darkness doth dispel.
 Thou the great lamp, one among the Twelve,
 With oil from the cross replenished
 India's night flooded with light.

Oh Blessed Apostle, valiant Mar Thoma
 Whom violent threats did not affright,
 Blessed apostle be thou praised,
 Whom the Great King has sent
 That India to his one begotten thou shouldest espouse."¹³³

Fourth, the *Thoma Parvam*, a song written by Rambaan Thomas around the 1600's,¹³⁴ mentions several of Thomas's missions. It describes how "St Thomas everywhere established churches and planted crosses."¹³⁵ It details the long process of "the coming of the Way of the Son of God" to Kerala.¹³⁶ The widespread recognition of St. Thomas in these pieces highlight the power of this legend and the extent to which it was received throughout its first few hundred years.

What is even more remarkable is that Thomas is mentioned in non-Christian works. For instance, Dr. P. J. Thomas, who served as a previous First Economic Advisor to the Government of India,¹³⁷ has done extensive work on the *Keralolpathi*, a piece

written by Brahman scholars in the seventeenth century¹³⁸ to support the cultural claims of a group of Brahmins known as the Namabudiri. This text claims “that a certain foreigner, Thomman, who is spoken of as Sarva Veda Vighrahan (an opponent of all Vedas) came to Malabar.”¹³⁹ The *Nagargarandhavaryola*, a piece written by a Brahmin family with the name Kalathumana, also commented in 53 CE that “the foreigner Thomas Sanyasi came to our village, preached there causing pollution. We therefore came away from that village.”¹⁴⁰

However, it is possible that even these sources may be inaccurate. For instance, Brown suggests that the authors of these documents may have described Thomas’s location incorrectly by placing him south-east of his true position in the area to the North of India.¹⁴¹ In one of the initial writings of these authors, Brown notices that “the name India is used very loosely.”¹⁴² Even as late as 200 CE, Axum and Southern Arabia were included in several sources as parts of “India” and many writers of the time used the term “India” for any distant land in the East.¹⁴³

While most scholars attempt to reconcile the contradictory primary sources which claim that different individuals brought Christianity to the continent, Moraes has developed his own theory. Through his own research, he has deduced that “in their meteoric progress across the continents, the apostles had time enough only to see to the church’s bare organization, leaving the work of actual consolidation to the local machinery.”¹⁴⁴ Evidence suggests that Thomas appointed his own successor, a Greek man named Xantippus.¹⁴⁵ Although Thomas was a critical component of the mission, other individuals may have played vital roles as well.

Following this logic, it may also be possible for *both* the hypotheses on St. Thomas's role as well as that on the influence of merchants to be accurate? Moraes claims that Thomas traveled to the continent onboard a merchant vessel from Rome that was sent to trade pepper.¹⁴⁶ These merchants could have been some of the key players that established lives in the region and solidified the church after Thomas travelled elsewhere. Although it may not have been their primary goal, it is highly possible that these traders spread these Christian ideas to the Indian natives without a direct intent to do so.

However, scholars must ask why Hindu natives would allow such a strong, foreign religion to be taught throughout their nations. To answer this, one must first understand the nature of Hinduism in the first century CE. According to Wolpert, "we generally say that Hinduism emerged as a syncretism of Aryan and pre-Aryan ideas and doctrines, at around the dawn of the Christian era."¹⁴⁷ Therefore, both religions were new and in their nascent stages.

Furthermore, both religions demonstrated striking similarities to each other. For instance, both traditions have a tale about a legendary flood. While the Bible discusses Noah, the Vedas claim that Vishnu, in the body of his first *avatara*,¹⁴⁸ saved the world. In the same fashion, both also share a strikingly similar creation myth. Wolpert recounts the tale by stating the following:

"Before the dawn of creation, Hindu myth has Vishnu asleep on the snake of a thousand heads at the bottom of a cosmic ocean, and from his navel grew a lovely lotus that bore demiurge Brahma aloft to build the world we inhabit, after which Vishnu flew to heaven to keep everything warm. Constrained as the sun-god to remain on high, Vishnu arms himself with the capacity to delegate part of his powers to various avatars, each of whom 'saves' the world when demonic danger seems to be winning."¹⁴⁹

These Hindu avataras strongly represent the Christian idea of Jesus Christ coming down from heaven in order to save those who believe. It is even possible to argue that these highly different creeds came to have such strong similarities because of their potential interaction in each of their early years.

These interactions may have been caused by each religion's simultaneous development. However, very few historical records exist that document these transformations. Bauman suggests that individuals may have even practiced both Hinduism and Christianity in what he calls "syncretism."¹⁵⁰ According to him, syncretism involves "hybrid religious identities" that mix in both theology and practice until "the lines between religions simply cease to exist."¹⁵¹ Brown agrees with this statement and describes the situation by explaining that the "Christians of St. Thomas appeared to have lived in two worlds at the same time, but with no disharmony within themselves... In church they professed belief in one Almighty God, out of church they observed omens and propitious days and were content to recognize the existence of Hindu gods."¹⁵² Syncretism was especially clear during large, public occasions, such as marriage.¹⁵³

Although Christianity was often not maintained in its pure form because of syncretism, repeated contact with other Christian churches prevented the organization from developing in a severely different direction and this contact also built a connection between these churches and the larger Christian communities.¹⁵⁴ Jenkins notes that "Reflecting the vast sphere of Eastern Christianity, these Indian Christians spoke a Syrian dialect and retained their links with the Nestorian patriarch of Babylon, who resided at Baghdad."¹⁵⁵ However, this dual acceptance of religions may have proved to be one of

Christianity's greatest assets. Since it was common for Indian individuals to add Christian traditions into their previous creeds, as opposed to completely converting,¹⁵⁶ they created a new class of Christians which would develop and maintain their own traditions until the present day.¹⁵⁷

However, not everything between Hinduism and Christianity was able to be combined. Jenkins states that the largest difference between the two religions is caste. He recalls that "caste symbols implied a belief in reincarnation and former lives" and that "acknowledging caste meant refusing to treat the poorest on terms of equality, violating the teachings of Jesus- an issue that is still desperately contentious for Indian Christians today."¹⁵⁸ These crucial teachings are not easily abandoned or abridged since both are key elements to these two religions.

Nevertheless, this syncretism persists until the modern age. Kenneth Woodward, an author, claims that "In India, where sin is identified with bad karma in this and previous lives, many converts interpret the cross to mean that Jesus' self-sacrifice removes their own karmic deficiencies, thus liberating their souls from future rebirths."¹⁵⁹ He argues that this behavior is created because "As in the past, today's new Christians tend to take from the Bible whatever fits their needs- and ignore whatever fails to resonate with their own native religious traditions."¹⁶⁰ Although this action is inconsistent with Christian teaching, it is most likely a leading factor for the growth of the Christian congregations in India.

Other scholars suggest that Christianity gained such a large following because it was a way to escape the caste system and other socio-economic standards that developed in India. Brown recalls that "the Christian desire to continue as a separate closed

community was to the non-Christians not only acceptable but inevitable.”¹⁶¹ Christians were never considered to be members of this caste system, and, if their status was ever debated, they were usually assigned to a higher, more respectable position in society.¹⁶² This motivation for conversion continued through the present day. According to *Time* in 2007, the Dalit caste “accounts for the most converts to Christianity” because it allows them “to move outside the caste system and... hopefully become more socially mobile.”¹⁶³ Although scholars cannot be certain, it is logical to assume that if this motivation to convert is present in modern India, then traces of such philosophies may be identified throughout the history of the caste system.

Christianity also had strong similarities to Buddhism. Wolpert believes that “Buddhism journeyed east over these passes at the top of the world, evolving into a religion with many schools and countless gods, among them a compassionate ‘savior’ (Bodhisattva) resembling Jesus in some respects.”¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, “Buddhist monks had for some time been venturing West as well, and their reverential gesture of piety, open hands pressed together, would soon become as common among Christians as it remains among Hindus.”¹⁶⁵ With these common threads connecting several religious traditions, it comes as no surprise that Christianity was not immediately rejected.

This supportive environment allowed the church to not only survive, but to prosper.¹⁶⁶ Some scholars, such as L.W. Brown, the former Bishop of Uganda, even insist that Christianity could have gained more strength in the ancient world if it was not for the severely handicapping language differences.¹⁶⁷ Christian converts faced little prejudice from local communities and Thomas even suggests that “Syrian Christians were merchants and seem to have occupied a highly honorable position in the state and to

have continued to enjoy the patronage of rulers for a long time.”¹⁶⁸ According to him, they “numbered about 200,000 and they were a martial people” who were prized because of their merchant abilities.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Thomas continues that “In many local matters they were autonomous and they showed their loyalty to the bishop not only in spiritual matters, but also in civil matters.”¹⁷⁰ According to numerous European accounts, these Christians held a respectable role in society which was awarded with the same recognition that one would give to a member of the higher castes.¹⁷¹

Thomas bases this claim on a series of copper plates which contained official notations of the “special privileges” given to Christians of that time.¹⁷² Many of these privileges “related to weddings and similar social events” and “were shared... with local Brahmins.”¹⁷³ For instance, one privilege that Christians were afforded was “the right to ride elephants to church.”¹⁷⁴ Stringer also notes that Christians were also able to purify objects touched by lower-caste people and return them to their higher caste members.¹⁷⁵

However, other scholars disagree with these assumptions. According to Park, evangelization of Christianity in this region primarily focused around “the lower caste and outcastes”, who may have been attracted to the religious system through its lessons on the denial of material wealth.¹⁷⁶ Kooliman, who published *Conversation and Social Equality in India* in 1983, also agrees that this was “the religion of the poor.”¹⁷⁷ This is a striking contradiction to Thomas who portrays the Christians as an elitist society. This change can most likely be attributed to the changing nature of Christianity. While the missions aimed to convert the wealthy, affluent members of society, modern Christianity has become highly popular with lower socioeconomic classes.

This is not to say, however, that the church didn't face any challenges. Thomas notes that "Muslim invasions and rulers, with the exception of Akbar's reign, led to a period of vast religious persecution and intolerance."¹⁷⁸ This, in combination of the fact that the church in India was not strongly united until 1653,¹⁷⁹ creates a perilous situation. Brown suggests that it is only through the kindness and acceptance of the Hindu rulers that preserved the Christian faith on the continent.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, in any discussion of the founding of the Christian churches in India, these Hindu officials must be a key component.

Furthermore, Jenkins reports that in 1599, "Catholic authorities in southern India sought to absorb the ancient Syriac-founded churches of the region, the Thomas Christians."¹⁸¹ Aleixo de Menezes, the archbishop leading the operation, led a powerful campaign to achieve his goal, but the Saint Thomas Christians refused to abandon their sovereignty.¹⁸² According to Jenkins, "In Indian Christian memory, de Menezes remains a villainous symbol of European imperialism."¹⁸³ The unique identity of these Saint Thomas Christians was a source of pride and devotion to those who described themselves as such.

As these Christian communities continued to develop, they gained more and more followers throughout the following centuries. Series of missionaries came to India in this time. First, the Roman Catholic Church arrived with the Portuguese under Vasco de Gama when he established the first trading posts between these two nations. Second, during the age of imperialism, Great Britain took control of the area and established their own regulations on the Indian churches. India would see its greatest number of missionaries at this time.¹⁸⁴ Although a great number of Indians were converted, they

were rarely seen as equals. According to Jenkins, the Roman Catholic Church in 1914 only had a small group of non Euro-American bishops, all of which worked for these Saint Thomas Christians.¹⁸⁵ When India gains its independence from the British in 1947, it establishes religious freedom and allows the Christian churches the ability to develop in whatever manner they choose.

Today, modern Syrian Christians “are now scattered over the length and breadth of India.”¹⁸⁶ In 2001, there were 24,080,016 reported Christians living in India.¹⁸⁷ However, this number may not tell the whole story. Jenkins postulates that “all observers recognize that that government figure for Christians is too low.”¹⁸⁸ He believes that these statistics are manipulated because of “the government’s vested interest in denying the power of ‘foreign’ faiths, especially those that appeal chiefly to those of low or no caste.”¹⁸⁹ Instead of these formal statistics, Jenkins turns to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* who estimated the population of Indian Christians in 2000, to be 62 million people, which is about 6 percent of the nation.¹⁹⁰ The author also suggests that by 2025, India will boast up to 100 million Christians.¹⁹¹ However, Jenkins also reports that “Indian Christian observers opt for figures between the two extremes, suggesting perhaps 40 million believers in India today, or 3.7 percent of the total population.”¹⁹² Regardless of the absolute, concrete numbers, it is undeniable that this large, Christian population is growing each year.

This is a matter of great concern to the Indian government. News reporters commonly cover the violent explosions between Christians and their Muslim, Buddhist, or even Hindu neighbors.¹⁹³ On the other hand, Jenkins believes that such a position is counter intuitive. He states that “In theory, Hinduism should be sufficiently responsive to

include almost any theological idea. Why should Jesus not be seen as simply another avatar or manifestation of the divine?”¹⁹⁴ He even recalls that “Gandhi himself loved the New Testament.”¹⁹⁵ However, there is a difference between appreciating and promoting a religion. Many Indians, including Gandhi, did not want missionaries spreading Christianity throughout India because they believed that it upset the preexisting social order.¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, the history of Thomas’s founding has been adequately recognized. Despite the overwhelmingly large population of Indian Christians, Pothan notes that “it came to me as no small surprise when talking to Syrian Christian friends, particularly of the younger generation, and to those who have been compelled to live far away from Kerala, to find how little is known of the community.”¹⁹⁷ This lack of factual knowledge has led to an overwhelming support of this St. Thomas legend. Judd comments that not only “in every family there is a boy who bears the Apostle’s name”,¹⁹⁸ but that St. Thomas’s feast day on July 3rd is “regarded as the principle Feast of the year.”¹⁹⁹ Stamps have been issued by the Indian government in his honor and in December, 1955, a large celebration occurred to honor the 1900th anniversary of St. Thomas’s arrival.²⁰⁰ Prayers have even been spread throughout the continent that call for Thomas’s intercession. For instance, one of the most popular of these is shown below.

“Dear Saint Thomas, you were once slow in believing that Christ had gloriously risen; but later, because you had seen him, you exclaimed: ‘My Lord and my God!’ According to an ancient story, you rendered most powerful assistance for constructing a church in a place where pagan priests opposed it. Please bless architects, builds and carpenters that through them the Lord may be honored. Amen.”²⁰¹

Many Indians do not question St. Thomas's role in their Christianization. For example, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the president of India from 1952-1962, gave a speech in New Delhi for the St. Thomas's Day Celebration which stated the following:

“Remember that St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian, and so, those Indians who trace their Christianity to him have a longer history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians of many European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened.”²⁰²

The ancient pride derived from these connections to St. Thomas are clearly not only an issue of the past. As studies continue in this field, it is clear that personal bias may still influence each scholar's results.

Furthermore, it is critical to note the widespread acceptance of this legend. Although evidence does suggest that Thomas, most likely, played some sort of role in the founding of Christian India, it cannot be denied that he still plays a critical role to these individuals today. When simply discussing the influence that he had over his people, it is clear that millions still look to his example and his intercession to frame their own Christianity. In this way, it can be concluded that St. Thomas had more of a role over the development of Christianity in India than merchants, Jews, or other evangelists.

However, concrete conclusions of the original founding of Christianity in India are impossible to draw in these studies. First, there simply is not enough primary source evidence. Brown states that “There was no interest in recording history in Hindu India until the nineteenth century, when Western scholars initiated some concern with the subject.”²⁰³ This naturally leads to the vague representations of the era.

For some scholars, this lack of evidence is enough for them to avoid the questions all together. Brown claims that:

“Most of the considerable number of books written about the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar attempt to trace their history from its beginning, starting with an examination of the tradition of St. Thomas’s mission to south India. But such a method is unsatisfactory because the sources for our knowledge of the first fifteen centuries are of very different degrees of historical worth, and the reader cannot easily get an unconfused picture of the events which certainly happened because of the entanglement of legendary... incident.”²⁰⁴

This is certainly a valid argument. Each historian must push aside their acceptance of this widespread legend in order to analyze the documents at hand. However, this can be said for most areas in history. By acknowledging the imprecision of these texts and applying a critical eye to the multiple perspectives listed, a complete narrative is able to be created. Historians must accept the ambiguity of the situation and expand their hypotheses to incorporate the multiple factors that may have influenced the early Christian Churches. In this manner, the subjectivity of the documents may become one of the historian’s greatest tools.

Nevertheless, other challenges remain. This subject area needs even more scholarship conducted in the field. With the development and use of archeology and local history sites, new evidence can be uncovered. In the same fashion, many scholars shy away from such topics because, as Bauman explains, “There is a bias, in the academic world, against studies of this kind, against investigating Christianity, particularly Christianity in the nonwestern world.”²⁰⁵ This is due to the fact that “In the secular academy, anthropologists conducting research in Africa, Asia, and Latin American have tended to focus on ‘autochthonous’ religions, rather than ‘imported’ ones, such as Christianity, which are seen as intrusions upon the ‘unspoiled’ cultures under investigation.”²⁰⁶ This is a philosophy that needs to be dispelled. As one can see in the study of India, Christianity has played a critical role in the nation’s development even

though it is not native to the region. Bauman even notes that, to some degree, “no culture or religion is purely ‘autochthonous’.”²⁰⁷

The studies that do exist are often plagued with different forms of personal bias. While some work with the subject out of an individual desire to prove their communities connection with St. Thomas, other skeptics regard Indian History as fictional accounts that blur the division between reality and myth,²⁰⁸ making primary source documents completely invalid. Both of these aims are highly detrimental to the study and Frykenberg suggests that “anyone who approaches the history of Christianity in India, be they Indian or not, must perforce exercise judicious deference and humility.”²⁰⁹ This is certainly not a simple topic to analyze and Frykenberg notes that “For anyone who comes from outside India, it takes temerity to attempt such a work as this.”²¹⁰

Regardless of the challenge, this is a field that must be studied. Christianity has created a new cultural identity. The use of scholarship will enhance this identification and determine the truth behind this powerful community’s history. Brown, even states the following:

“St. Thomas Christians have already made a great contribution to India and the world Church. If they could drive out the devil of litigiousness and come together once more as a united body the old dream of the first English missionaries might become a reality, and the Syrian Church of Malabar become a most powerful instrument for the evangelization of India, and the immeasurable strengthening of the whole Christian body in that great country.”²¹¹

This ancient community deserves the historical scholarship that will add to not only its strength, but its majesty.

In conclusion, Christianity is an ancient religion that has become an integral piece of Indian society. According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, an Indian philosopher and statesman

who lived from 1888 to 1975,²¹² “Christianity has been with us from the second century A.D. It has not merely been the rights of guests but the rights of a *native*.”²¹³ This religion most likely crossed over to the Indian region through the simultaneous efforts of various degrees from missionaries, Jewish communities, minor evangelist, and the work of St. Thomas. Without the proper conditions, Christianity would never have been able to take hold and flourish in this remarkable nation. To Syrian Christians, it truly is a gift from God.

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