

Abstract

The Survival Story of Syriac Chants among the St. Thomas Christians in South India

by

Joseph J. Palackal

In

The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities,
edited by Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Reily
Oxford University Press

India is an essential part of the Christian musical geography of the world. Christianity in India is believed to be as old as Christianity itself. More importantly, the St. Thomas Christians in South India, who trace the origin of their faith to the preaching of Thomas the Apostle, continue to preserve the Chaldean and Antiochene liturgies. These liturgies and the respective theologies and melodies took shape in the Semitic context of West Asia, in Syriac, a form of Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. In spite of attempts by the Portuguese missionaries to suppress the Syriac tradition in the sixteenth century, and the voluntary efforts of the Syriac churches in India to vernacularize the liturgies in the 1950s, the unique musical styles associated with Syriac Christianity have survived in oral transmission. The Syriac melodies, which are currently sung more in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, than in Syriac, are musical treasures of humanity; they connect us to the very source of West Asian Christianity. This chapter, which is the result of a “re-search” by the author who grew up in the Syriac tradition in India, shows that what we often consider to be local music may not be as local as we think. Sometimes, seemingly simple melodies may carry with them multiple layers of history of movements of peoples and ideas from one region to another, and from one linguistic and cultural setting to another. The study also challenges scholars to broaden their perspectives on the musical geography of India and early Christianity.