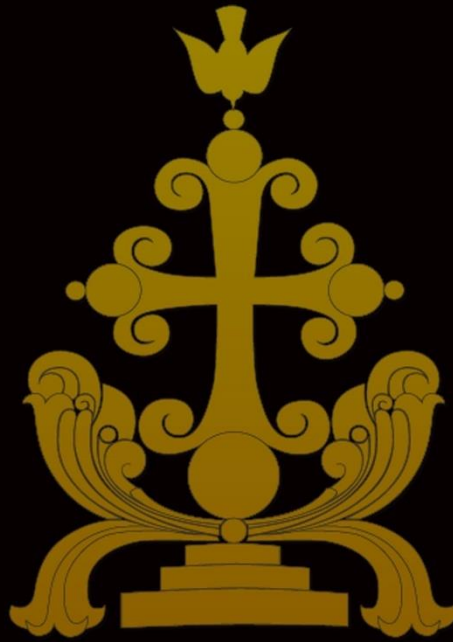


NASRANI or KRISTYANI?



PROF. GEORGE NEDUNGATT, S.J.

Nasrani or Kristyani?

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A rose by any other name may smell equally sweet to Shakespeare, but for the Keralese Trivandrum is not as good as Thiruvananthapuram. So, too, Alleppey has been replaced by Alappuzha, and Calicut by Kozhikode. In the same spirit of the search after *tanima* or authenticity, the name of the Syro-Malabar Church has come under scrutiny. Among the substitutes proposed, or is already being used by some, is *Bharata Nasrani Sabha*, or *Marthoma nasrani sabha*, whose members are to be called *Nasranikal* (plural of *Nasrani*). It would seem useful to weigh the arguments for and against this name *Nasrani*.
Nasrani Catholic Church,

1. Nasrani in the Thomaschristian Tradition

The name *nasrani* is not new among the Thomaschristians of Kerala. They have a long tradition of bearing the name *Marthoma Nasranikal* or simply *Nasranikal*. They are called so routinely in the Acts of the Synod of Diamper¹ and in certain books dealing with their history.² When used by outsiders, including Pope John XXII (1328), that name assumed various affinitive forms like *Nastarini*, *Nastorini*, *Nascarini*, and *Nascorini*. Father Placid Podipara, who has written extensively about the Thomaschristians, states: "The designations *Nastarini* etc. could be deformations of *Nazrani*, a name under which the Thomaschristians were known."³ He explains:

"They were and are Mar Thoma Nazranis and Nazrani Mapilas. Nazrani means Christian. When it is used to specify the Thomas Christians, it is understood in an honorary sense. (Mapila (= great son, king's son, noble) is a title of honour which was conferred on the Thomas Christians, the Jews and the Muslims by a Hindu ruler."

Does *nasrani* really mean "Christian"? Or is there a distinction between these two terms? After the arrival of the Western missionaries, who would not call Latin rite Christians *Nazranis*, this appellation came to be distinctive of Syriac rite Christians.⁴ The name *Marthoma kristyanikal* is later than *Nasrani* and is attested first in the writings of the Latin missionaries of the mendicant orders since the XIII century and of Marco Polo.⁵ "Syro-Malabar" is a still later foreign neologism of the sixteenth century. It would seem then that the more ancient term *Nasrani* has prior claims if one is thinking of a return to the authentic roots. In fact the

¹ Scaria Zacharia, ed., *Udayamperur Sunahadosinte Kanonakal*, Edamattam, Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994.

² For example: Herman Gundert, *Nasranikalute Parama*, Kottayam, D. C. Books, 1992; Z. M. Paret, *Malankara Nasranikal*, 3 vols., Kottayam, Manorama Publishing House - M. D. Seminary, 1965-1967; N. K. Jose, *Nasrani*, Alappuzha, Prakasam Publications, 1976; George Menachery, ed., *The Nazranies*, Thrissur, SARAS, 1998.

³ Placid J. Podipara, *Die Thomaschristen*, (Das östliche Christentum, N. F. 18), Würzburg, Augustinus Verlag, 1966, p. 87; *The Thomas Christians*, London, Dartan Longman (Bombay, St Paul Publications), 1970, p.85.

⁴ Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai, *Sabdataravali*, 7 ed., Kottayam, National Book Stall, 1972, p. 975: "Nasrani [Nazarene]: Suriyani Kristyani."

⁵ Edward R. Hambye, "Note sur les communautés orientales du Malabar," *L'Orient Syrien*, 1 (1956) 97-101, at. p. 99.

first traces of this word *Nasrani* may be found already in the New Testament (Acts 24:5). "Till the arrival of the Latin missionaries this name was the only one in use."⁶ For all these reasons the adoption of the term *Nasrani* should be seriously considered. Such are the arguments for.

Are there any arguments *against*? There are indeed, and they are quite weighty, too. But they are more complex as they belong under various disciplines like philology, semantics, history and theology.

2. *Nasraya* in Syriac Christianity

Nasrani is an Arabic word, which is a cognate of the Syriac word *Nasraya*. As this latter was already in use before *Nasrani* came into use in Arabic, we have first to take a look at the Syriac word *Nasraya*. In the Persian Empire, the home of East Syrian Christianity, with which the Church of the Thomas Christians had hierarchical relations after the fourth century, there were two distinct groups of Christians. We are informed of this by Kartir, a Zoroastrian ecclesiastic. Persia was the country of the Zoroastrians, but Kartir enumerated also the followers of seven other religious groups or sects like Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Christians and Nazaraeans. Kartir lists Christians and Nazaraeans as two distinct groups. "Kartir, the dogmatic Zoroastrian church leader, in his Ka'ba-yi Zartuēt inscription of about 280 (under Bahram II), refers to the persecution (*zatan* "to beat, kill") of Christians ("Nazaraeans *n'cl'y* and Christians *kistyd'n*")."⁷ Both groups were persecuted in one and the same persecution. Thus, though they were two groups they were united as one in persecution. How did they differ then? One probable explanation can be found in the fact that the Greek-speaking Christians deported by Shapur II from the Roman Empire in the fourth century and settled in the Persian Empire did not integrate with the native Syriac-speaking Christians. Each group had its own bishops, an early instance of multiple ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the same territory, albeit in abnormal socio-political conditions.

There were two churches at Rev-Ardashir in Persis, both with their own languages, Greek and Syriac. In Susiana, open strife developed between the two Christian parties because each had its own bishop and neither appeared to be willing to acknowledge or give in to the other. In the eyes of the Iranians, represented by Kartir, they must have seemed two such peculiar forms of Christianity that they took for granted a classification distinguishing between Greek-speaking and Syriac-speaking Christians.⁸

The standard and official Syriac designation of Christians in the Persian Empire was Nazarenes (*Nasraye*). This is how they were called by the Jews, who had grown to a very powerful community since their first settlement there during the Babylonian exile in 722 B.C. The Babylonian Jewry contained a class of native-born aristocrats and were mostly hostile to the Christians. The Christians claimed that the Messiah had already come, while the Jews were still waiting for him to

⁶ Ibid., p. 99. Hambye adds: "Even today, both in Palestine and in Syria, native Christians are often called *Nazareans* instead of *Christians*, particularly by the Muslims". This last phrase may be corrected with the addition "but not by the Christians themselves," according to my Arab Christian students hailing from West Asian countries like Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, etc.

⁷ J. P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. III, 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 924-948, at p. 929.

⁸ Ibid., p. 930; also, Jérôme Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse*, Paris, Lecoivre, 1904, pp. 17-20.

come and bring them back to Palestine.⁹ For the Jews Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christians followed, was not the Messiah, and his followers were simply *Nasraye*, Nazarenes. Given the preponderant social influence of the Jews, it is this Jewish terminology regarding Christians, and not the self-designation of the persecuted Christians, that dominated usage in the Persian society. Moreover, in the context of the traditional hostility between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, politics demanded that, if the followers of the religion of Jesus were called Christians in the Roman Empire, they should bear a different name in the Persian Empire. In fact it is said in the Syriac Acts of the Martyrs that "the Persians chose to call the Christians by the name Nazarenes (*Nāsrāye*)."¹⁰ The chief reason why the Christians of Persia were persecuted in the Sasanian period was because they were suspected of being the fifth column supporters of the Roman enemy. No wonder if occasionally even Christians adopted the term *nasraye*. Thus for example, in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, Simeon bar Sabbae, the archbishop/catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who was martyred on Good Friday in 344 under Shapur II, is called "Head of the Nazaraeans" (*risāde nasraye*).¹¹ In short, the Persians wanted the Christians to be more patriotic and adopt a distinctive, non-Roman name: not *Kristyānē* but *Nasraye* in Syriac.

But Aphrahat, the first Father of the Syriac Church, surnamed the Persian Sage, does not use this "patriotic" Persian designation. He seems to suggest that Jesus Christ himself wanted his disciples to be called Christians (*Kristyane*), that is to say *Msihayē* ("disciples of the Messiah"). Aphrahat writes:

His servants are the people of the nations. And he called them by another name, that is he called them Christians (in the original Syriac: *Kristyane*), that is to say the disciples of the Messiah (*Msihayē*), and not "rulers of Sodoma and people of Gomorrha," as he had called them [the Jews]. For such is the witness of the Preaching of the Twelve Apostles: *There, that is at Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians (Kristyane).*"¹²

According to Aphrahat, then, the Syriac-speaking Christians in the Persian Empire wel/ to be called *Kristyane* or *Msihayē*, following Christ's own will, that is by "divine right" (*ius divinum*). But some Christians would use *Nasraye* ("Nazarenes") as a self-designation either out of political pressure or by force of tradition.¹³ However, the Syriac term in more common use was *Kristyane*.¹⁴ Among the Thomas Christians it is not the Syriac term *Nasraya* that came into use: If it were so, the borrowed form in Malayalam from *Nasraya* would be *Nasrayakkar*, and not *Nāsrani*. This latter is an Arabic word. To it let us now turn our attention.

⁹ Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, (op. cit.), pp. 909-923, at p. 921.

¹⁰ Stephanus Evodius Assemanus, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum*, Pars II, Romae 1748, p. 329: "Christianos (in Syriac *Kristyane*) quos Persae Nazarenos (in Syriac *Nsraye*) adpellare malunt." I am grateful to my friend and colleague Mgr. Jacob Kollaparambil for drawing my attention to this reference and to those in the following four notes.

¹¹ *Patrologia Syriaca*, II, col. 791, line 7.

¹² *Patrologia Syriaca*, I, Paris, 1894, col. 909.

¹³ Joseph S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clem. Vat.*, II, p. 58; III, 2, p. 363.

¹⁴ *Patrologia Syriaca*, II, col. 750/line 20, 754/14, 755/22, 758/4, 775/20, 786/21, 831/18, 834/8, 879/2, 782/16, etc.

3. Nasrani in Philology and History

The pedigree of this word *Nasrani* in Malayam is to be traced through Arabic and Aramaic to the original Hebrew. The Arabic language has today four words to designate Christians. One is *Nasara* which refers to Christians who are members of the Eastern Churches living under Muslim rule, whereas other Christians are called either *Rum*, ("Romans," that is, "of the Roman or Byzantine Empire")¹⁵ or *Ifranji* ("Franks," hence also "Paranki" in Malayalam, "Western Christians").¹⁶ In the Middle East an Arab Christian does not refer to himself as a *Nasrani*, which is the singular of *Nasara*, but as *Masihi*, (from *al-Masih*, "Messiah"), which is the equivalent of the Greek word *Christiano* "Christians", from *Christos* ("Christ"). Why is it that the Arab Christians do not designate themselves as *Nasara* (plural of *Nasrani*) but as *Masihiyyun* (plural of *Masihi*)?¹⁷

The Arabic word *Nasara* is not simply a term of social designation, but a historically and dogmatically loaded word today. *Nasara* derives from *al-Nasira*, the Arabic name for from the ancient Hebrew *Nasara*, the home town of Jesus Christ, which later on came to be more commonly called in Greek "Nazara" or "Nazaret" or "Nazareth." In fact some modern editions of the Bible like the French ecumenical edition and the new Italian CEI version substitute "Nazara" for "Nazareth."¹⁸ Arab scholars recognize that the Arabic word *Nasara*, which is used to designate a 'Christian,' cohered, grew enormously in military an town Nazareth.¹⁹ Syria fell to the Muslim armies with

At the then fell in quick succession Syria, were Jews and Christians in and around Mecca the eighth and ninth centuries uses the word *Nasara* (plural of *Nasrani*) fifteen Sicily and parts of France. By of foreign origin in the Qur'an, which also borrowed extensively ideas and terms from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. "The most probable origin [of *Nasara*] is the Syriac *Nasraye*."²¹

Soon after the death of Muhammad in 632, the Muslims, that is the followers of the new monotheistic religion he preac night and cultural and religious hegemony. Pe 1 the defeat and death of Yazdgard III in 651, t then Egypt, then Turkey and North Africa. It Islam advanced westwards conquering Spain, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Isl as Indonesia, spreading in its wake Arabic as a lingua franca. Even before Islam appeared on the scene the Arabs were carrying on a flourishing trade between the Middle East and the western coast of south India.²² According to several scholars

¹⁵ *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, Leiden, Brill, 1953, p. 440.

¹⁶ *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, 1 ed., Leiden, Brill, 1936, tome 3, s. v. "Nasara," p. 906.

¹⁷ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 1993, vol. 7, article "Nasara" by J. M. Fiey, pp. 970-973.

¹⁸ For example, in Mt 4:13 and Lc 4:16 "Nazara" is better attested than "Nazareth" in the manuscripts such as the fourth century Vatican codex B.

¹⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 1993, vol. 7, s.v. "al-Nasira," pp. 1008-1009.

²⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 4 ed., 1978, vol. 12, col. 1521.

²¹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qu'ran*, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1938, p. 281; on Syriac see pp. 19-23.

²² George F. Haurani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951, p. 83; Ronald E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, Madras, Orient Longman, 2 ed., 1992, p. 41.

the religion of the Prophet reached Kerala through these traders already in the seventh century and consolidated itself subsequently so as to become a considerable social force.²³ Since the twelfth century there were several Muslim settlements in Kerala, chiefly in trade centres like Kollam, Kodungallur and Kozhikode, through which several Arabic words passed into Malayalam.²⁴

The Arab Muslim domination did not stop with political hegemony. The subjugated "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians) were reduced to the status of the *dhimmi*, tolerated and tax paying second class citizens. It is understandable if Christian terminology sometimes conformed to the one established by the Muslims overlords. Thus for example, Ibn-at-Taiyib (+1043), who was secretary of the Patriarch Elias of Babylon, as well as monk, priest and chief physician to the Sultan, made a collection of canons entitled *Fiqh an-nasraniya*,²⁵ the "Law of Christianity." This book is an Arabic translation of the holy canons from the Syriac language, mostly in a condensed version, followed by a synthesis in the second part. The adoption of *nasraniya* seems to reflect and respect the terminology generally in use in the Muslim environment. Such "ecumenical" conformity is met with also in some other Christian authors.²⁶

Muslim domination
influences language
and vocabulary.

"When the Sasanian government fell, people who in accordance with the precepts of the Qurran were recognized as "People of the Book", that is to say the Jews and the Christians, could continue in their former faith as *dhimmis*, members of a recognized confession, on payment of the *jizya*. Moreover, Islam for them spelt liberation from forced labour and military service, which in Iran they had been formerly bound to perform. They enjoyed more liberty in the performance of their religions than had been accorded them under the régime of the Zoroastrian clergy. In return for the *jizya* Islam took them under its protection. ... Needless to say, the *dhimmis* were required to show respect for Islam and the Quran, and not to seek marriage or association with Muslim women, nor to proselytize among Muslims In addition, it was binding upon them that they should not wear the same garb as Muslims and that their buildings should not exceed Muslim edifices in height. The sound of the instruments by which they were permitted to summon their coreligionists to prayer and the sound of their devotions were not to reach Muslim ears. They were not openly to consume wine or show signs of their religions, and their dead were to be interred secretly and separately. They were not to construct new places of worship, nor to carry weapons and ride horses. In accordance with the Quran, payment of the *jizya* was furthermore to be accompanied by signs of humility and recognition of personal inferiority. On payment of the tax a seal, generally of lead, was affixed to the payee's person as a receipt and as a sign of the status of

²³ Seyyed Muhiyiddin Shah, "Islam," in *Kerala Caritram*, (History of Kerala, in Malayalam) by Kerala History Association, vol. 2, Ernakulam, 1974, pp. 486-525; at pp. 490-491.

²⁴ Examples of some other Arabic words in Malayalam: *taluk* (province), *vakkil* (advocate), *mappu* (pardon), *paranki* (Franks): see Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai, *Sabdatarvali*, 7 ed., Kottayam, National Book Stall, 1972. s.v.

²⁵ *Fiqh an-nasraniya*, "Das Recht der Christenheit," CSCO, *Scriptores Arabici*, 161, 162, 167, 168.

²⁶ A reciprocal "ecumenical" sensibility and respect on the part of Muslims is not unknown, though it is not common, according to Samir Khalil, S.J., a wellknown Arab Christian scholar, who is himself preparing a study on the use of the word *Nasara*. Muslims generally insist on calling Christians *Nasara* (plural of *Nasrani*) invoking the authority of the Qu'ran, even though the Arab Christians themselves reject that word as their designation.

dhimma."²⁷

In such a condition of social and political inferiority, understandably the Christians had often to use the same terms their Muslim overlords used to designate Christianity and its followers. But in modern times this situation has changed somewhat, and Christians under Muslim rule can use the terminology they prefer to designate themselves and their religion. This has come about chiefly due to the prestige of Western Islamic scholarship. Leading Western Islamologists do not conform to the Islamic usage of the word *Nasara* to refer to Christians.²⁸ And the Christians of the Middle East have long ceased to use it either. They now use only *Masīhiyyun*, and not *Nasara* (plural of *Nasrani*).

The historical situation in Malabar was of course different. The Arabs, as we said, had long controlled the trade between India and the Middle East, which consisted chiefly of pepper and other spices exported from Kerala. And the Thomas Christians were in the forefront of Kerala's foreign trade, which became intense in the fourth century and would make them ascend the economic and social ladder particularly from the eighth century onwards. The Muslim traders in their dealings with the local kings and businessmen spoke of the local Christians as *Nasranis*. According to the Church historian A. Mathias Mundadan, "This name was of later origin and was first used by the Muslims and the Turks."²⁹ Along with many other Arabic words *Nasrani* entered into Malayalam vocabulary and was adopted by the Thomas Christians. The local Christians do not seem to have suspected the negative implications of the imported word as originally associated with the rejection of Jesus as the Christ by the Jews and evocative of contempt for him and for his followers.

Here a question may be raised. Would not the Arab-speaking bishops of the Thomas Christians, who came from Persia, have put them on their guard against the use of a word which in their own home country they refused to ratify? After the Muslim conquest of Persia Arabic established itself as the language of Persia (now Iraq and Iran) and so it became also the language of the Christians there. But the Persian bishops, chosen as they were from among the monks of some monastery, did not know Malayalam, the language of the Thomas Christians, nor did they care as a rule for the needs of their community excepting the celebration of liturgical rites in Syriac. They were ministers of cult, not pastors. Little wonder then if they did not or could not prevent the infiltration of the word *Nasrani* among the Thomas Christians.

For origins:

4. A Term of Jewish Rejection

During his life Jesus was called routinely by people "Jesus of Nazareth." In the New Testament Jesus is regularly designated as "Nazarene" by others (Mc 14:67, Jn 18:5) including the Apostles themselves (Acts 2:22, 3:6; 4:10; 26:9) and angels

²⁷ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975: "Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkub (Professor, University of Tehran), "The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath," pp. 1-56, at pp. 30-31.

²⁸ For example, Maurice Borrmans, an internationally reputed authority on Islamic law and professor at the Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies and at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, told the present writer that he uses *Masīhiyyun*, and not *Nasara*, to refer to Christians. So said also several of his (and mine) Middle Eastern Arab Christian students.

²⁹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, (Church History Association of India), vol. 1, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1984, p. 174.

(Mc 16:5). At his crucifixion Pilate had this title affixed on the cross of Jesus in three languages, Aramaic, Greek and Latin (Jn 19:19). In Aramaic, both Palestinian and Eastern (or Syriac), this attribute was *Nasraya*; in Greek *Nazoraïos*; and in Latin *Nazarenus* (hence in English "Nazarene"). The Risen Jesus was revealed to the persecutor Saul as "Jesus the Nazarene" (Acts 22:8). If so, why should any follower of Jesus refuse to be called *Nasrani* in Arabic?

The objection is not philological but historical and christological. As we know, apart from a small minority, the Jewish people as a whole did not acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Rather, their leaders condemned him and denounced the few who followed his "way" as "the sect of the Nazarene" (Acts 24:5) implying that they were following a false Messiah and were a divisive or heretical sect within Judaism. At Antioch, where many Greek speaking gentiles accepted the gospel of Jesus, they were called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). Since the second century the Christians themselves adopted this word as their common designation in place of the former names "disciples," "believers," "saints," etc. But the Jews did not call them Christians. For them to do so would have meant to admit implicitly that Jesus had been truly the promised and long awaited Christ (the Messiah) and that their leaders had mistaken their Messiah for an impostor and rejected him and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. This the mainstream Jews refused to admit and they rejected the followers of Jesus as heretics calling them scornfully *Nazeri* or *Nozeri*, that is "Nazarenes" or "the followers of the Nazarene."

This we see clearly illustrated in the life of St. Paul. On his last return to Jerusalem he was about to be lynched by a Jewish rabble for "defiling the temple" when he was rescued and arrested by the Roman tribune. His case was heard by the Roman Governor Felix in Caesarea. Tertullus, employed as an advocate by the Jewish establishment of Jerusalem, accused Paul: "We have found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the *Nazarenes*" (Acts 24:5). Instead of the epithet "Christians" used to designate the disciples in Antioch (Acts 11:26) Tertullus uses the contemptuous term "Nazarenes," implying that they were the followers of an impostor prophet from Nazareth, — "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46) — who had been tried before the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem and condemned to die an ignominious death by crucifixion. This use of the term "Nazarenes" instead of "Christians" contains the implicit denial that Jesus was the expected Messiah (the Christ) but was an impostor. People of all times have known the art of loading words with overtones: enough to think of "Papists," once commonly used as an epithet of disdain and insult by Protestants against Catholics and is used still today particularly by hard core Protestants in Northern Ireland.

This art was practised also by the Jews in designating the Christians. This is stated quite frankly in the article on "Nazareth" in the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: "The early Christians were contemptuously called Nazarenes by their enemies, and the Hebrew and Arabic terms for Christians (*Nozeri* and *Nasrani*) are derived from the town's name."³⁰ In the Jewish Council held at Jamnia in 85 A.D. the great official prayer of the synagogue called Tephillâ was revised with the insertion of the curse "that the Nazarenes and the heretics perish instantly and

³⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1996, vol. 12, s. v. "Nazareth" (col. 900). The author Michael Avi-Yonah is Professor of Archeology and of the History of Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

be deleted from the book of the living."³¹

5. Chritology and Heresy

Gradually divisions arose among the Christians, too. The reason for the earliest division was the question of fidelity to the Torah (Old Testament Scripture, Mosaic Law). Those Judeo-Christians who adhered literally even to the minute prescriptions of the Mosaic law were judged by St. Paul to be "perverting the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7). They eventually got separated from the main body of the Christians. St. Jerome referred to them as a heretical sect wanting to be both Jews and Christians at the same time but was really neither.³² On the one hand they believed in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, died and rose from the dead: so they were condemned by the Pharisees. On the other hand they were rejected by the main body of Christians as heretical since they were too tenaciously attached to the observance of the Mosaic law rejecting the epistles of St. Paul and using a Gospel of the Hebrews, which was an expanded and manipulated version of the Gospel of Matthew.³³ They were called Nazarenes by the Pharisees as well as by the main body of Christians and were rejected by both. As a sect the Nazarenes got extinct, but their name has survived in *Nasara* and *Nasrani*. In the Qur'an these terms do not refer exclusively to this sect but to the Christians of Arabia, who belonged to Syriac Christianity (both East and West) called *Nazeri* or *Nozeri* by the Jews.

Nozeri and *Nasrani* may be considered in two ways: Sociological and theological. As sociological terms they refer to the members of a socially identifiable community; and it is in this sense that the Jews and the Muslims use them. But for Christians Jesus of Nazareth is more than the Nazarene, a sociologically identifiable historical person. He is the object of faith and is proclaimed in the Nicene Creed as "Jesus the Christ, ... who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and who rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures." These last words "according to the Scriptures" refer to the messianic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. The risen Jesus himself used them to interpret his real identity to the two disciples of Emmaus (Lc 24: 26-27) as the one spoken of by the prophets, the promised Messiah. Jesus qualified as *Christus* designates more than Jesus "surnamed" *Nazarenus*. The name given to his followers as *Christians* implicitly affirms the former; the designations *Nozeri* and *Nasrani* express the latter. These may be harmless terms when used by outsiders, but not so when used by Christians to designate themselves as members of a faith community. In so far as these terms deny implicitly that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ "according to the Scriptures" they are heretical.³⁴

³¹ Joseph Bonsirven, *Le Judaïsme palestinien au temps de Jésus Christ*, vol. II. Beauchesne, 1935, p. 146.

³² Epistola ad Augustinum, c. 13, , PL 22, Epist. CXII, col. 924.

³³ *Nuovo Dizionario del Cristianesimo*, Brescia, Queriniana, 1971, vol. 1, s.v. "Nazzareno," p. 356.

³⁴ The Nasranis seem to have been regarded as heretics in Rome. This is implicit in a letter of Pope John XXII (1316-1334) addressed to the leader of the "Nazarani"/ "Nascarini" Christians and his community in Kerala and handed to Jordan Catalani, O.P., appointed the first bishop of Quilon by the pope on 9 August 1329. In this letter Pope John makes an earnest appeal that all the baptized be united "in oneness of the orthodox faith, under one shepherd, and in the solid and untainted union of one flock, the one holy, catholic and universal Roman Church." The Nasranis are exhorted to heed the instructions of the new bishop and to conform themselves "in all things to the one Catholic faith." (cited in A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, (Church History Association of India),

Certain Thomaschristians of Kerala seem to think that *Nasrani* is an integral part of the East Syriac heritage or tradition preserved among the Thomaschristians and hence is to be fostered. But historically, as we have seen, Malayalam got this word from Arabic, which in its turn is indebted to Syriac and points to a Palestinian Aramaic expression originally used by the Jerusalem Jews to despise the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been rejected as a false Messiah and impostor by official Judaism. Thus *Nasrani* is a historically and dogmatically charged word. Adopting it is not like replacing Trivandrum with Thiruvananthapuram, Alleppey with Alappuzha or Calicut with Kozhikode in the search after an authentically Malayalam word to replace a name having a foreign flavour. *Nasrani* is a foreign term that was gradually absorbed into their language by the Thomaschristians of Kerala, who were apparently unaware of the extent of its real connotations. Surely, if they were aware of these connotations, they would not have welcomed a contemptuous and implicitly heretical term rejected by the Arab Christians themselves.

In the years since the Second Vatican Council there has been some discussion about replacing the names "Syro-Malabar Church" and "Syro-Malabarians." Some propose as possible substitutes and use "Bharata Nasrani Sabha" and "Nasranikal." Though well intentioned, their choice calls for discernment. Tradition is valuable, of course, but there are traditions and traditions, some good others bad, some vital others dead wood. Adherence without discernment can become fanaticism.

An illustrative parallel would be the use of the term "Mohammedanism." Since the Middle Ages this term has been used widely by the Christians in the West instead of the correct name "Islam."³⁵ A justification of this "insulting European designation"³⁶ was of course easy to find in the analogous words like "Buddhism," "Hinduism," "Taoism," and "Christianism" (from the Greek "Christianismos" from which the Spanish "cristianismo," the French "christianisme," the Italian "cristianesimo," etc. and less commonly in modern English "Christianism"). But there was also a more subtle rationale, as shown by Norman Daniel.

One constraint acting upon Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam was an analogical one: since Christ is the basis of Christian faith, it was assumed—quite incorrectly—that Mohammed was to Islam what Christ was to Christianity. Hence the polemic name "Mohammedanism" given to Islam, and the automatic epithet "impostor" applied to Mohammed.³⁷

Muslims as a whole have always rejected this prejudiced and polemical designation of their religion as "Mohammedanism," which they call instead "Islam," meaning "submission to God." This shift of focus from Muhammad to God is admirable and must be respected also by outsiders. It would be odd, then, if unaware of all this the Muslims of Kerala were to opt to be called "Mohammedans" and their religion "Mohamadanism." The same must be said about Thomaschristians opting for the epithet *Nasrani*. A return to it will be as misguided as for Muslims in Kerala to

vol. 1, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1984, p. 136. Evidently, the pope thought that the Nasranis did not conform to the Catholic faith.

³⁵ For an example out of legion see Barthélemy d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque orientale*, The Hague, Neaulme & van Daalen, 1777, vol. 2, p. 648.

³⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.66.

³⁷ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh, University Press, 1960, p. 33; cited by Said (previous note), p. 60.

subscribe to be called Mohammedans. Behind the name *Kristyani* lies the conviction that the Lord Jesus was sent by the Father into the world "anointed with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38) and that the baptized believers are given a share in this anointing, as Vatican II teaches (PO 2). *Nasrani* gives away this faith and is objectionable, even as "Papists" would not be acceptable to Catholics as a substitute for "Catholics," in spite of all respect for the Pope.

CONCLUSION

Among the Christians *Nasrani* as a self-designation is met with only among the Thomas Christians. No other Christians use it today. In Kerala, the Catholic daily "Deepika," which was started in 1887 bearing the name *Nasrani Deepika*, later dropped the epithet *Nasrani*, seemingly for practical reasons. This epithet, as we have seen, was originally used by the Jews in Palestinian Aramaic expressive of contempt for the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, who was regarded as an impostor Messiah. This word was received through Syriac into the Arabic of the Qur'an, in which a Christian is called *Nasrani*. It was brought to Kerala by the Arab traders and was taken over by the unsuspecting Thomas Christian community. The Arabic speaking Christians of the Middle East have rejected it knowing that to accept to be called *Nasrani* is ultimately to deny that one is a *Christian*, the follower of Jesus the *Christ*. "The simple expression 'Jesus Christ' is also an act of faith; specifically, faith that Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is the Messiah."³⁸ Hence to say one is a Christian is a profession of faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Messiah. Many Christians went to their martyrdom during the Roman persecutions by declaring simply "I am a Christian." St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Magnesians: "Whosoever is called by any other name besides this, is not of God."³⁹ To call oneself *Nasrani* is a heretical denial of Jesus as the Messiah. It only points to a follower of Jesus the Nazarene in a socio-political sense, implicitly rejecting the messianic title of Jesus. Hence, while *Christian* evokes a positive profession of faith, *Nasrani* is its implicit denial.

As the Second Vatican Council (PO 2) teaches, "The Lord Jesus, 'whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world' (Jn 10:36), makes his whole Mystical Body sharer in the anointing of the Spirit wherewith he has been anointed" (Mt 3:16, Lk 4:18, Acts 4:27, 10:38). This faith is expressed by the follower of Jesus who calls himself a Christian. In contrast, *Nasrani* is a mere follower of Jesus of Nazareth, just as a Gandhian is a follower of Gandhi.

Unaware of these shades and nuances, the Thomas Christians long ago adopted the Arabic word *Nasrani* and used it as a self-designation. It has no wide circulation today, though it is still used by some Thomas Christians. Nor does it appear in any recent official document of the Syro-Malabar Church. But some people with a sense for tradition, others with a certain historical nostalgia for the past, or perhaps following a false sense for honour, hark back to it and vindicate its use, apparently unaware of its philological and dogmatic pedigree. Thus a Priests' association of Kerala is called "Nasrani Catholic Priests Conference" (NCPC).⁴⁰ When the philology of the word *Nasrani* is properly studied and its

³⁸ Iréné Hausherr, *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison*, (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 157) Rome, 1960. Trans. Charles Cummings, *The Name of Jesus*, (Cistercian Studies Series, 44), Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1978, p. 11.

³⁹ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians," 10, 1, p. 63.

⁴⁰ In a recent pamphlet published by the Vice-President of NCPC the claim is made that *Nasranis* are the *ani* ("array, corps, phalanx") of Jesus of Nazareth. Such popular etymology may be ingenious but is uninformed.

semantic history is investigated beyond the narrow limits of the horizon of the Thomaschristians, it will be seen that its use is unenlightened and misguided.⁴¹ It will show up the ignorance and the isolation of the Thomaschristians in the past and demonstrate a pitiable lack of theological sense. But surely, the Syro-Malabar Church with its educated clergy, religious, and laity today can be expected not to canonise a mistake of the past by opting for *Nasrani* but to look elsewhere if need be, for an enlightened choice.

In the 14th century Pope John XXII wrote to the *Nasranis* urging the unity of faith. A return to the term "Nasrani" today is not likely to ~~get~~ win the favour and blessing of the present pope John Paul II. May the Lord bless him!

41 "The name of our Church should be Marthomanasranisabha." This proposition was moved by an eparchy during the 1998 Major Archiepiscopal Assembly. See Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Assembly 1998: Proceedings (Malayalam), Kochi, Munt St Thomas, 1999, p.75. Five other eparchies also asked for a change of name to the Syro-Malabar Church (pp. 64,84,96,97,111). Suggested names: "Indian Church of Apostle Thomas" (64), "St Thomas Church", "The Church of St Thomas," "The Catholic Church of StThomas" (84), "St Thomas Major Archiepiscopal Church" (97). Our purpose here is not to propose a new name but only to warn against an unhappy choice.



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