

THE JACOBITES OF MALABAR

SOMEWHAT over three years ago, the Catholic Church was rejoiced by the conversion of Mar Ivanios, the schismatic Metropolitan of Trivandrum on the Malabar Coast of India, together with his suffragan bishop, Mar Theophilus, and many of their followers, both clerical and lay. The body to which these distinguished converts belonged is the Jacobite Church, and the details of these events are still fresh in the minds of most Catholics by reason of the steady stream of conversions from the Jacobite ranks that has gone on ever since the submission to Rome of Mar Ivanios and Mar Theophilus. But it seems to the writer of this article that there is a considerable lack of clarity on the part of those who have chronicled these happenings as to the exact nature and position of the Jacobites in India—one is told, for example, that the particular branch to which Mar Ivanios belonged split off from some other body, but what that parent body is or was is not made clear. It would seem, therefore, that it is not out of place to endeavour to trace the history and character of the church which formerly numbered Mar Ivanios as its most distinguished member.

The region with which our story deals is the undulating stretch of country which lies along the south-western coast of India between the sea and the Anamullay mountains. It stretches for about two hundred miles from Mangalore on the north to Cape Comorin, and includes British Malabar and the native states of Travancore and Cochin.

To understand who the Jacobites are and what their name means we must go back several centuries. The story is a complicated one, and as a beginning we must say something about a schismatical body which stands doctrinally at the opposite pole to the Jacobites.

One of the greatest heresies of the early Church was that known by the name of Nestorianism. Nestorius had taught that Christ was born not as the Son of God, but as a man

in whom God dwelt—in other words, that there were two distinct persons in Christ, the human and the divine. This heresy was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.

But already there had been growing up in Syria and Egypt a heresy that was diametrically opposed to the position maintained by the followers of Nestorius. The new party had, as Dr. Fortescue has remarked,¹ ‘declaimed so vigorously against the Nestorian theory of two persons in Christ that they had come to suspect any distinction in Him at all. He was one in every sense, one in nature too.’ In Him the human nature was absorbed in the divine. Those who held this opposite heresy we call Monophysites. Patriotic and political ardour helped on the progress of this sect. The Egyptians thought that Monophysism was the teaching of their national hero, St. Cyril of Alexandria, in opposition to that of Nestorius, and (which formed an even weightier motive) the new doctrine was not that held by the hated Roman tyrant of Byzantium. Monophysism was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.

The decrees of Chalcedon did not find ready acceptance at the Court of Constantinople. But after much vacillation the Emperor, Justinian I, made up his mind to adhere to the Council, and he proceeded to insist upon the submission of everyone to its decrees. As a result the Monophysite party in Syria began to decline rapidly almost to the point of extinction. However, a new and powerful ally was found in the Empress, the ex-dancing girl, Theodora. She was always a convinced Monophysite, and she promptly embarked upon a course which resulted in giving new life and hope to the Syrian Monophysites. There was a monk at Constantinople named James Zanzalos, born at Tella early in the sixth century. He was afterwards nicknamed ‘Baradai’ because he went about dressed in a ragged cloak. This man had always been a Monophysite, but whilst at Constantinople, his heresy, thanks to the repressive measures of the Emperor, was decidedly at a discount. In fact,

¹ *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, London, 1913, pp. 74-5.

most of the Monophysite bishops, including the Patriarch of Alexandria, were in prison at Constantinople. Theodora then contrived that the latter prelate should consecrate two bishops—Theodorè for Bostra and the South, and James Baradai for Edessa and the East. This consecration took place probably in A.D. 543.

It is to James Baradai that the Jacobites owe their name—the Syrian form of James being Ia'qob, whence Ia'qobaie or Jacobites. As soon as he was consecrated James set off for Syria, and by his astounding labours there he revived his sect, of which, at least in Syria, he may be considered as the second founder. Ever in danger from the Government of Constantinople, he journeyed for nearly forty years, clad in the ragged cloak which earned him his nickname, over Syria, Egypt, Thrace, and the islands of the Archipelago, preaching his doctrine and ordaining priests and bishops. Of course, he always maintained relations with his co-religionists in Egypt, but the party there was able to stand without him, and the chief scene of his labours was in Syria. From his great work in that country it has come about that the name Jacobite means primarily a Syrian Monophysite.

Baradai died in A.D. 578, spent with labour for his cause.

It may seem that I have made a long digression from the coast of Malabar, especially as there does not appear to be any evidence that James Baradai ever visited that region. But this much of preliminary explanation is necessary if we are to understand how the name Jacobite arose and the position for which it stands. The story of any of the Eastern Churches, whether Uniate or Schismatic, is seldom other than complicated, and clarity of thought thereon is usually attainable only by laborious and careful chronological statement of the history of the particular Eastern body that one happens to be considering.

Our next enquiry is, how did the Jacobite name and faith reach Southern India? As I have said, there is no mention of India amongst the scenes of Baradai's missionary labours though one would perhaps have expected to find

that he had laboured in that part of the globe. The early history of Christianity in Malabar is obscure. As usual in the case of Eastern Churches the Christians in that region claim that the Gospel was originally preached there by one of the Apostles—in this case it being the Apostle St. Thomas from whom they reckon their spiritual descent. How far the legend of St. Thomas is true cannot be discussed here, but it is interesting to note that it found credence in the England of King Alfred's time, and Dr. Fortescue² thinks that a rather better case can be made out than one might think for an Indian Mission of St. Thomas, but that his alleged foundation of a Church in Malabar is very doubtful. The most we can say is that at some unknown period, probably in the second century, there were Christians in India who had come from Arabia. In the fourth century the Persian Christians were being cruelly persecuted, and it would appear that a number of them fled to the Malabar Coast. These people were subject originally to the Persian Metropolitan of Edessa; that is to say, they belonged to the East Syrian Church. Probably they set up in Malabar a missionary Church directly dependent on the Katholikos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. So apparently there was Christianity in India long before the days of Nestorius and his heresy.

It is impossible to say definitely at what date the Malabar Church became Nestorian, but in all probability, since the former was a daughter of the East Syrian Church, the change took place when the Mother Church lapsed into heresy. The bishop of the Malabar Church was sent out by the East Syrian Katholikos and naturally his teaching would affect the Malabar Christians. At some date, which, however, is not certain—perhaps in the seventh century—the Malabar people began to apply to the Monophysites, who as we have seen were the doctrinal enemies of the East Syrian and Malabar Churches, for bishops.

The natural inference to be drawn from these contacts of the Malabar Church with the Monophysites is that the

² *Op. cit.*, p. 355.

former had no very clear idea of their own or of anyone else's heresy, if indeed they cared at all! But on the whole the Malabar Church remained, at least nominally, Nestorian and flourished very greatly under the tolerant Hindu Kings. The bishop called himself Metropolitan of India with his see at Angamale. He was always a foreigner ordained and sent out (normally speaking) by the Nestorian Katholikos, but he was assisted by an archdeacon chosen always from the family of Palakomatta because legend ascribed to St. Thomas the choice of an archdeacon from this family.

We have now to pass over several centuries for the history of which we have no evidence. Our next certain event is the coming to India in 1498 of Vasco da Gama, who by 1502 completed the conquest of the coast, so that Malabar became subject to Portugal. The Portuguese made great efforts to stamp out the Nestorianism of the Malabar Church, and for that purpose they set up the Inquisition. A line of Uniate Patriarchs was also established. But the result was not very happy, and the Malabar people never whole-heartedly accepted the new state of things. In 1653 a secret conspiracy took place in the Church of Alanghat, which had as its object the setting up of a schismatical Metropolitan as before. The person chosen was Thomas Palakomatta of the archidiaconal family mentioned above. But it was found impossible for him to get out of India in order to be consecrated—the Portuguese Government was not taking any chances. Nor were the attempts to obtain a Metropolitan from Egypt any more successful. So Thomas Palakomatta continued to rule his party as archdeacon. But many of his followers returned to the obedience of the Uniate Archbishop, and he had only a small remnant when the Dutch began their attacks on the Portuguese power in India. By 1663 they had conquered the whole coast. Now, of course, the anti-Uniate party were free to do as they liked, but they did not apply to the Nestorians for a bishop. In 1665 Gregory, Jacobite Metropolitan of Jerusalem, came to India and

ordained Thomas Metropolitan. The result was that the formerly Nestorian Church of Malabar now became definitely Jacobite in communion with the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch.

The history of the Malabar Church from this point onwards is very confusing—quarrels, schisms and rival claimants abound. Naturally the Nestorians made attempts to recover the obedience of the Malabar Church, but without success. By the end of the eighteenth century the British had completely ousted the Dutch and become supreme in Southern India. Now for the first time the Malabar Christians begin to come into contact with the Anglicans. In 1816 the emissaries of the Church Missionary Society commenced their campaign. These missionaries were of a very Low Church brand indeed, and they began to spread their peculiar tenets amongst the natives, in doing which they showed a strange ignorance of Monophysism and of the doctrinal position, liturgy and ritual of the Malabar Church. Naturally every liturgical custom that they could not understand was a Popish abuse. So as a counterblast they printed and distributed vernacular Bibles, and built a college at Kottayam for the spread of their ideas. The result was that there were soon set up within the Jacobite body frankly Protestant sects with a vernacular service of their own and a married clergy. Dr. Fortescue tells us that these Protestant missionaries preached the pure Gospel with such effect that out of the one Jacobite body there were produced seven quarrelling sects. However by 1835 the Jacobite Metran (Metropolitan) had got tired of the reforming party's activities and excommunicated them. The result was a definite split, the Reformers becoming an entirely separate body at feud with the Metran and his party.

A certain priest who was a teacher in the Kottayam College, named Abraham, embraced the Protestant ideas warmly. He had a nephew, Matthew; the latter was expelled from college at Madras, whereupon he went to Syria and got himself ordained Bishop by the Jacobite Patriarch.

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In 1843 he came back calling himself Metran of the Reformed Church. He was promptly excommunicated by the Jacobite Metran, as a consequence of which he embarked on the usual Malabar practice of litigation with the Jacobites over Church property, but without success. He called himself Mar Athanasius Matthew and was recognised by the Government, and had already begun to celebrate the liturgy in the vernacular Malayalam. In 1877 Matthew died and was succeeded by his cousin, Mar Thomas Athanasius, whom Matthew had ordained as his auxiliary. At this time the head of the unreformed Jacobites was one Mar Dionysius V, at whose invitation in 1875 the Jacobite Patriarch Ignatius 'Abdu-l Masih came out to India and did his best, by excommunicating Thomas Athanasius and his followers, to crush the Reformed party, but his efforts did not meet with success. The result of all this was that there were two non-Uniate Churches, the Jacobites (known as the Patriarch's party) and the Reformed (the Metran's party). As usual, there was considerable litigation between them over Church property, resulting, quite properly, in a victory for the Jacobites.

It is interesting to note that a new Nestorian group sprang up shortly after the Vatican Council as a result of the ill-considered action of the Chaldaean (Uniate) Patriarch of Babylon in sending a certain Elias Mellus (formerly Chaldaean Bishop of Akra in Kurdistan) to India to rule over all the Malabar Uniates. Mellus eventually died in schism, and his party went over to the Nestorians. But they have no continuity from the old Nestorians of India. They are the modern schism of Mellus from the Uniates.

Lastly we come to the schism among the Jacobites from which resulted the party to which Mar Ivanios belonged before his conversion. In 1909 the Jacobite Patriarch Ignatius 'Abdullah Satuf came to India, quarrelled with the head of the unreformed Jacobites, Mar Dionysius V, and excommunicated him. In his place he ordained a certain Mar Cyril, to whom about half the Jacobites adhered. Mar Dionysius refused to accept his Patriarch's action and

argued that the latter had no right to excommunicate him inasmuch as the Jacobite Church of Malabar was an autocephalous branch of the Church of Christ and he was not going to be deposed. In this attitude the remaining half of the Jacobites supported Dionysius, so that within the Jacobite Church there were again two factions out of communion with each other, viz., the Patriarch's party and the Metran's party. It is well to point out here that these names thus acquire a new significance. Previously, as we have seen, the 'Patriarch's party' were the unreformed Jacobites, whilst the 'Metran's party' were the Reformers. Now the latter are the Jacobite anti-Patriarchal party.

Mar Dionysius' next step was to invite the ex-Patriarch Ignatius 'Abdu-l Masih to India in order that the latter might lend his support against the ruling Patriarch. In 1909 Ignatius 'Abdu-l Masih was deposed in place of Ignatius 'Abdullah Satuf, and since the Jacobites were by no means all agreed as to the lawfulness of this deposition the ex-patriarch was a valuable weapon in the hands of Mar Dionysius. The ex-patriarch came to India and gave his support to the latter, excommunicating Mar Cyril and the 'Patriarch's party.' He then set up a bishop of Dionysius' party with the title of Katholikos. The Katholikos is independent of Antioch and the Syrian Jacobites, and may ordain bishops by his own authority; when he dies they are to choose his successor. In this way the ex-patriarch set up an autocephalous church at Malabar, completely ignoring the rights of Antioch. As has been said above, *this autocephalous Church is the one to which Mar Ivanios belonged at the time of his conversion.*

A word may here be said about the so-called 'Malabar rites' since certain accounts of Mar Ivanios show a lack of clarity on the point. Let it be said at once that these 'Malabar rites' have nothing to do with the ritual of any of the churches of Malabar. On the contrary the phrase 'Malabar rites' is a conventional term for certain customs or practices of the natives of South India which the Jesuit missionaries allowed their converts to retain after conver-

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sion, but which were afterwards prohibited by the Holy See. The missions concerned are not those of the coast of South-West India, to which the name Malabar properly belongs, but those of inner Southern India, especially those of the former kingdoms of Madura, Mysore, and the Karnatic. An account of the matter may be found in the *Catholic Encyclopædia*.

Such in brief is the history and development of the party in the Jacobite Church to which Mar Ivanios belonged previous to his conversion. Into the later history of the party it is not necessary to enter here—the details should be sufficiently well known to all those interested in the subject. It is pleasant to notice, however, that the stream of conversions to Rome from the Jacobites seems to show no signs of slackening, rather the reverse.

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