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## The Eastern Christian Churches

### Oriental Orthodox Churches: Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

In the mid-17th century, most of the Thomas Christians in India (see The Thomas Christians and the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church ) had become increasingly upset with the high-handed methods of the Portuguese and the increasing latinization of their church. This led thousands of faithful to gather at the Coonan Cross in Mattancherry on January 3, 1653, and to take an oath to submit no longer to the authority of Archbishop Francis Garcia of Crangannore or his Portuguese Jesuit associates. This oath would later become a rallying point for those who wished to break entirely with the Catholic Church. The leader of the dissidents attempted to reestablish communion with the Assyrian Church of the East, but this was not achieved. Then in 1665, the Syrian Patriarch agreed to send a bishop to head the community on the condition that its leader and his followers agree to accept Syrian christology and follow the West Syrian rite. This group was eventually administered as an autonomous church within the Syrian Patriarchate.

However, in 1912 there was a split in the community when a significant section declared itself an autocephalous church and announced the re-establishment of the ancient Catholicosate of the East in India. This was not accepted by those who remained loyal to the Syrian Patriarch. The two sides were reconciled in 1958 when the Indian Supreme Court declared that only the autocephalous Catholicos and bishops in communion with him had legal standing. But in 1975 the Syrian Patriarch excommunicated and deposed the Catholicos and appointed a rival, an action that resulted in the community splitting yet again. In June 1996 the Supreme Court of India rendered a decision that (a) upheld the Constitution of the church that had been adopted in 1934 and made it binding on both factions, (b)

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stated that there is only one Orthodox church in India, currently divided into two factions, and (c) recognized the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch as the spiritual head of the universal Syrian Church, while affirming that the autocephalous Catholicos has legal standing as the head of the entire church, and that he is custodian of its parishes and properties.

The precise size of these two communities is difficult to determine. But reliable sources indicate that in 2004 the autocephalous Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church had about 2,500,000 members, while the autonomous church under the supervision of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate [see the Syrian Orthodox Church] had about 1,200,000 faithful.

There are two other churches in Kerala that originated in the Malankara Orthodox community. Due in part to the activity of Anglican missionaries, a reform movement grew up within this church in the 19th century. Those who adhered to the movement eventually formed *The Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar*, which to a great extent conserves oriental liturgical practice and ethos. This church, whose episcopal succession derives from the Syrian Orthodox Church, tends to accept reformed theology and has been in communion with the Anglican Provinces since 1974. It now has about 700,000 members.

In the late 18th century, a Syrian prelate from Jerusalem ordained a local monk as bishop, but he was not accepted by the Malankara Metropolitan. This bishop then fled to the north and established his own group of followers at the village of Thozhiyoor. Less than 10,000 faithful make up this church today, which is called *The Malabar Independent Syrian Church of Thozhiyoor*. While preserving its oriental heritage, this group has links with the Mar Thoma Church and increasingly with the Anglican Communion.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church administers the Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam, which was founded in the early 19th century and now has about 140 students. New facilities have recently been built, including the “Sophia Centre” for the theological training of lay men and women, and a School for Liturgical Music affiliated with Kottayam’s Mahatma Gandhi University. The church also operates a number of colleges, schools, hospitals and orphanages.

This church also has a modest monastic tradition. There are four communities of men that follow a monastic rule and eleven for celibate priests and laity without a definite monastic order. There are also ten convents where nuns live a dedicated life of service and worship.

His Grace Mathews Mar Barnabas, the Metropolitan of the American Diocese, has his offices at the Malankara Indian Orthodox Church Center, 80-34 Commonwealth Blvd., Bellerose, New York 11426. There are 56

priests and 56 parishes within that jurisdiction. The Malankara Orthodox Church has a parish in Great Britain (Fr. M. S. Skariah, 44 Newbury Road, Newbury Park, Ilford, Essex 1G2 7HD). There is also a parish in Australia that can be reached through Fr. Skariah at 73 Little George Street, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065.

**LOCATION:** India, small diaspora

**HEAD:** Baselius Mar Thoma Matthews II (born 1915, elected 1991)

**TITLE:** Catholicos of the East; Catholicos of the Apostolic Throne of St. Thomas and Malankara Metropolitan

**RESIDENCE:** Kottayam, Kerala State, India

**MEMBERSHIP:** 2,500,000

**WEB SITE:** <http://www.orthodoxsyrianchurch.org/>



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