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Apostolic Memory and Decolonial Mission: Reinterpreting the St Thomas Tradition in the Indian Mar Thoma Syrian Church

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Abstract

This article argues that the St Thomas tradition should be read missiologically within the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Rather than treating it primarily as a matter of historical verification, it interprets the tradition as apostolic memory: a theologically mediated form of communal remembrance that shapes ecclesial identity, liturgical life, and missionary vocation. In dialogue with cultural memory, *missio Dei*, world Christianity, and decolonial thought, the article argues that the Thomas tradition may serve as a resource for decolonial mission by retrieving an Indian Christian genealogy that is not reducible to colonial missionary narratives.

Keywords: St Thomas Tradition, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Apostolic Memory, Missiology of Memory, Decolonial Mission, Ecclesial Identity, Indian Christianity

I. Introduction

The St Thomas tradition occupies a significant place in the history of Indian Christianity and in broader discussions of world Christianity. More than a disputed claim about apostolic origins, it has long functioned as a formative narrative through which Christian communities in South India have articulated continuity, belonging, and vocation (Frykenberg 2008:3). Within the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in particular, the tradition is not merely a statement about the past. It is woven into liturgical practice, ecclesial memory, ministerial imagination, and public witness.

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The historical status of the tradition remains contested. Ecclesial and popular narratives have often maintained that the Apostle Thomas arrived on the Malabar Coast in the first century, founded Christian communities there, and became the apostolic source of South Indian Christianity. Historians, however, have repeatedly noted the absence of contemporary first-century evidence capable of demonstrating those claims in strictly empirical terms (Brown 1956:15-20; Graham 2023). The issue is therefore not whether the historical debate can be ignored, but whether the significance of the tradition should be made wholly dependent upon modern historiographical certainty.

This article argues that the Thomas tradition is best interpreted not only as an origin claim but also as apostolic memory. By apostolic memory I mean a theologically mediated form of communal remembrance through which apostolicity is narrated, embodied, and transmitted in ecclesial life. In this sense, memory is not treated as proof of historical fact. Rather, it is analysed as a mode of reception that discloses how a community inhabits a tradition, interprets its inheritance, and imagines its vocation in the present (Assmann 2011:vii-ix).

The article also argues that the Thomas tradition may function as a resource for decolonial mission. Here, the term does not signify a rhetorical rejection of all Western Christian influence. It refers instead to the retrieval and theological valuation of local Christian genealogies that resist being narrated solely within colonial missionary frameworks (Quijano 2000:535-536, 542-543, 550-552; Mignolo & Walsh 2018:4-5, 13-14, 16-18). Read alongside discussions of mission as translation and local appropriation, the Thomas tradition enables the Mar Thoma Syrian Church to articulate Christian identity in India as indigenous, apostolic, and ecumenically connected. It therefore resists accounts that reduce Indian Christianity to a derivative outcome of colonial missions (Walls 2002:45-48, 64; Walls 1996:26-42; Sanneh 2008:23-25, 44-45; Bediako 1995:17-38, 109). In missiological terms, this matters because Christian witness in India takes place within a plural, caste-shaped, and postcolonial public context in which questions of identity, dialogue, and public responsibility cannot be separated from the history of mission itself.

The article therefore makes an explicitly missiological claim. It contends that traditions of communal remembrance may shape mission praxis by forming a community's sense of witness, service, dialogue, and public vocation within the *missio Dei* (Bosch 1991:333-334, 408, 430-431; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:286-295, 348-352). On this basis, I propose the notion of a missiology of memory. With this phrase, I refer to a missiological approach that treats remembered tradition not merely as retrospective preservation but as a constructive locus of theological interpretation, ecclesial formation, and missionary imagination (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:72-73, 348-352).

Three questions guide the discussion. First, how has the St Thomas tradition been preserved, received, and interpreted within the Mar Thoma Syrian Church? Secondly, in what ways does this tradition function missiologically in shaping ecclesial identity, liturgical practice, and missionary vocation in the Indian context? Thirdly, how might this case contribute to a broader account of decolonial mission and to what is here termed a missiology of memory?

Methodologically, the article brings together historical, textual, theological, and missiological modes of analysis. It reads internal witnesses, such as communal memory, liturgical practice, ecclesial documents, and ministerial formation, together with external witnesses, including patristic references, early Christian literature, East Syriac links, trade networks, and early European reports. These materials are treated not as proof texts for reconstructing apostolic events, but as witnesses to the formation, transmission, and reception of the Thomas tradition.

II. Internal Witnesses: Memory, Worship, and Ecclesial Self-Description

1. Communal memory and the self-designation 'St Thomas Christians'

One of the most important internal witnesses is the long-standing self-designation of the Kerala Syrian Christian community as 'St Thomas Christians.'~~-~~ The historical significance of this designation lies not in its ability to verify each detail of the Thomas tradition, but in the durability of a communal identity organised around an apostolic

memory (Frykenberg 2008:91). Within this memory, Thomas is remembered as arriving at Kodungallur, ministering among Jewish settlers and neighbouring communities, and establishing the earliest Christian presence in South India.

The analytical point requires care. The persistence of communal memory does not establish empirical certainty for every remembered detail. It does, however, show that Thomas has served as a continuing point of orientation in the community's symbolic and social life. The Thomas tradition is therefore not merely a recollection of origins; it is an interpretative framework through which the community has understood its place in the history of Christianity in India.

Here, Assmann's category of cultural memory is useful, though only with caution. Material traces associated with the tradition—stone crosses, copper plates, local sagas, genealogical claims, and commemorative practices—should not be treated as a shield against critique or as an apologetic substitute for evidence. They are significant because they show how remembrance has been socially mediated and ritually repeated over time (Assmann 2011:6-7). Memory here is not proof. It is the medium through which theological belonging is carried.

Missiologically, this matters because communal memory gives the Mar Thoma Church a genealogy of Christian identity in India that is not narratively dependent on modern Western missionary beginnings. Memory already performs missiological work: it locates the Church within a local history of gospel reception. It thereby reframes mission not as the introduction of an alien faith, but as participation in a long-localised Christian presence.

2. Liturgy as the embodied transmission of apostolic memory

If communal memory preserves the Thomas tradition narratively, liturgy preserves and enacts it performatively. Within the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the memory of Thomas is woven into worship, especially through the repeated confession of John 20:28, 'My Lord and my God,'; which has become central to Mar Thoma spirituality and self-

understanding (Pallikunnil 2017:x-xxi). Thomas is remembered less as a remote founder than as a witness whose confession becomes paradigmatic for the faith of the community. In this sense, liturgy is not merely background to mission; it is one of the Church's formative sites of missionary imagination.

The significance of this liturgical usage lies not in providing historical confirmation of Thomas's mission to India. Rather, it shows how apostolicity is inhabited in worship. Apostolicity here is therefore confessional and liturgical before it is genealogical. The Church claims continuity not simply with an event in the distant past but with a confession continually proclaimed and embodied in the present.

This point also responds to the concern that the argument might otherwise appear quasi-successionist. In the present argument, apostolicity is not grounded in an uncritical origin myth or a purely institutional chain. It is construed primarily as fidelity to the apostolic gospel as remembered, confessed, and enacted within ecclesial life (Bosch 1991:398-400; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:73, 397). The remembrance of Thomas matters because it forms the Church in the confession of the risen Christ.

From a missiological perspective, liturgy is not merely background to mission. It is one of mission's formative sites. Worship shapes a community that understands witness as arising from encounter with the risen Christ. In that sense, remembered tradition generates mission praxis by forming a people capable of proclamation, service, and public witness.

3. Ecclesial documents and the theological construction of apostolic identity

A further internal witness is found in the constitutional, catechetical, and institutional texts of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church (Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2015; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.e). Such documents do not function as independent historical corroboration of first-century events. Their importance lies in the way they formalise the Church's theological self-description. When the Church narrates itself in relation to St Thomas, it is not merely preserving an antiquarian opinion. It is

articulating a grammar of belonging, continuity, and vocation.

This, however, requires a critical qualification. Institutional affirmation cannot establish historical facts simply by asserting them. Yet, to dismiss these texts on that basis would miss their theological significance. They reveal how the Church chooses to narrate its place within the broader history of Christianity. In that respect, they are best understood as acts of theological self-interpretation rather than as neutral evidence awaiting historical aggregation (Mathew 2005:24-25).

This distinction is important because ecclesial documents can too easily be read as apologetic confirmation of historical origins. Earlier formulations risked collapsing theological meaning into historical continuity. The present argument therefore interprets such documents less as proof of apostolic origin and more as evidence of how the Church construes apostolicity as fidelity to the gospel once entrusted to the apostles, mediated through the remembered witness associated with Thomas (Bosch 1991:398-400; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:73, 397; Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2015).

Missiologically, these documents matter because they shape the Church's corporate imagination. A Church that narrates itself as apostolic also understands itself as sent. In this way, institutional memory underwrites missionary vocation, not by conferring prestige, but by locating witness, service, and public responsibility within the Church's self-understanding (Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.e).

4. Ordination and the transmission of apostolic vocation

The ordination liturgy provides a particularly clear example of the movement from memory to vocation. In the Mar Thoma rite, ministry is framed as participation in the mission of Christ and the Church, with the gift and calling of the Holy Spirit functioning as a key theological horizon for ministerial vocation (Mathew 2005:80-89). The significance of this rite lies not in proving an uninterrupted historical chain from Thomas, but in translating remembered tradition into present responsibility.

Here Thomas becomes vocationally rather than merely genealogically significant. He is remembered as the witness through whom ministerial identity is imagined. Ordination thus serves as a site where apostolic memory becomes apostolic vocation. This does not ground ecclesial authority in origin myth; rather, it frames ministry as responsibility for witness, pastoral care, and public engagement (Bosch 1991:398-400; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:73, 397; Mathew 2005:86-89).

Contemporary pastoral texts suggest that ministry is understood not simply as ecclesiastical office, but as an extension of the Church's remembered participation in Thomas's mission. In this way, apostolic memory authorises not prestige but responsibility: for witness, pastoral care, and public engagement (Mathew 2005:80-89; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.e).

The missiological force of this point is especially clear. Mission is not an optional programme added to a finished ecclesial structure. It is internal to the Church's understanding of ordained and communal life. Remembered tradition forms a missionary people by locating ordained and communal life within the continuing mission of God.

III. External Witnesses: Circulation, Reception, and Historical Resonance

1. Patristic references and the broader reception of the tradition

Among the earliest external witnesses are patristic references from the third and fourth centuries. Origen, as preserved in Eusebius, associates Thomas with Parthia rather than India, thus reflecting an early stage in the development of the tradition (Eusebius of Caesarea 1890:3.1). Later patristic writers attest the broader circulation of traditions linking Thomas with India, but these should be read as reception witnesses rather than as independent confirmation of first-century events.

Jerome requires particular care. His testimony, where relevant, should be read not as independent historical verification, but as evidence for the reception of an already circulating tradition within late antique Latin Christianity. Its significance lies less in proving the apostolic event than in showing that the Thomas tradition had become intelligible and transmissible beyond local memory (Jerome 1892:135).

Taken together, these patristic references support a modest but important conclusion. They do not settle the question of Thomas's historical mission in empirically demonstrable terms. They do, however, suggest that Thomas's memory in relation to India was neither a narrowly local invention nor a late colonial construction, but had already achieved transregional circulation within early Christian tradition. From a missiological perspective, this matters because India appears here within an early non-Western Christian geography of mission.

2. The *Acts of Thomas* and the problem of literary witness

The most substantial literary witness to the Thomas tradition is the *Acts of Thomas*, a third-century Syriac text marked by theological symbolism and narrative stylisation. Since it is non-canonical, it should not be used as doctrinal authority or as documentary proof of apostolic events (Graham 2023:2-3). Its value lies rather in preserving an early literary form of Thomasine memory and in illuminating how eastern Christians imagined mission beyond the Roman world.

Gondophares was a historical Indo-Parthian ruler whose reign is independently attested (Bivar 2013:135-136). This does not establish Thomas's mission as historical fact. It does, however, suggest that Thomasine's imagination emerged within a geographically and politically intelligible eastern setting (Graham 2023:2-3, 11).

This more critical reading directly addresses the concern that the *Acts* had previously been treated too sympathetically. In the present revision, the *Acts of Thomas* is used as evidence for the development of tradition rather than as proof of the event remembered by the tradition. It is important because it shows how early Christian

communities imagined apostolic witness moving across cultural and political frontiers.

Missiologically, that literary imagination is itself significant. The text preserves a vision of mission marked by movement, translation, and encounter. Even when critically read, it witnesses to a Christian imagination in which the gospel travels eastwards through complex social worlds beyond later Western frames of mission.

3. East Syriac links and the ecclesial circulation of the tradition

A third body of external witness emerges from the Church of the East. References to India within East Syriac traditions show that Indian Christianity was recognised within broader eastern ecclesial networks over a long period (Baum & Winkler 2003:51–58; Maliakkal 2021:54–55, 59). These materials should be read as evidence of transmission and ecclesial acknowledgement rather than as unmediated proof of first-century origins.

Their importance lies in the way they situate the Thomas Christian community within a transregional Christian world. The Thomas tradition did not remain confined to local remembrance in Kerala. It participated in broader networks of liturgical, theological, and institutional belonging (Baum & Winkler 2003:51-58; Maliakkal 2021:57, 59).

These ecclesial links were reinforced by broader commercial connections. Early Christian settlements in Kerala appear to have developed within fertile river basins connected to international trading routes, whilst sustained contact with Syrian–Persian Christian merchants situated the community within a broader East Syriac world (Malekandathil 2003). References to a ‘Bishop of Persia and India’ and the reports of Cosmas Indicopleustes likewise suggest that Indian Christianity was not developing in isolation, but within recognised patterns of eastern ecclesial circulation (Maliakkal 2021:54-55, 57, 59). Read in this way, the Thomas Christian community emerges not as an isolated enclave, but as a locally rooted and transregionally connected formation whose memory travelled through both commercial and ecclesial networks

(Malekandathil 2003; Baum & Winkler 2003:51-58; Maliakkal 2021:54-55, 57, 59). This is historically important, but it is also missiologically significant because it complicates narratives that portray Indian Christianity only as a late derivative of Western expansion.

4. Trade routes, mobility, and historical possibility

Another line of evidence concerns the Indian Ocean trade. Classical sources describe Muziris as a major port linking the Roman world, Arabia, and the Malabar Coast (Pliny the Elder 1855:6.104; Periplus Maris Erythraei 1912:54, 56). The presence of Jewish and other West Asian merchant communities further indicates an environment of mobility, exchange, and intercultural contact (Frykenberg 2008:111-114; Venugopal & Mathew 2021:71-72).

Historical possibility, however, is not the same as demonstration. Trade routes do not prove that Thomas made the journey to India. They show that the geographical horizon presupposed by the tradition was not implausible. In that sense, they clarify the conditions under which such a tradition could emerge, travel, and become embedded in local memory (Andrade 2018:21-22).

Missiologically, this matters because it reminds us that Christian expansion cannot be narrated solely through later organised missionary movements. Long before colonial missions, maritime worlds enabled encounters, translations, and witness across regions. The Thomas tradition points to a broader, more entangled geography of mission (Sanneh 2008:23-24).

5. Early European accounts and the visibility of a pre-colonial Christian community

Portuguese observers on the Malabar Coast encountered a Thomas Christian community with its own ecclesial structures and a stable Thomasine self-

understanding. These reports do not settle the question of first-century origins, but they do register the public visibility and institutional coherence of a pre-colonial Christian tradition in India before sustained Western ecclesial intervention (Frykenberg 2008:122-123).

These accounts must still be read critically, since European observers interpreted what they encountered through their own assumptions and interests. Yet, their testimony remains important because it confirms the public visibility and institutional coherence of a Thomas Christian community before it was drawn into more direct colonial encounters (Frykenberg 2008:122-123).

Their importance lies in their outsider recognition of a prior Christian presence whose memory, worship, and ecclesial order were already established (Frykenberg 2008:122-123). In missiological terms, this unsettles narratives that treat Christianity in India chiefly as the product of Western missionary initiative.

Taken together, the external witnesses do not yield cumulative proof that resolves the historical debate. A more modest conclusion is preferable. They show that the Thomas tradition participated in broad patterns of Christian memory, literary imagination, ecclesial circulation, and historical plausibility. Their significance for this article lies precisely there.

IV. Theological Reception in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church

1. Historical location and ecclesial formation

The theological identity of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church must be understood in the context of the broader history of the St Thomas Christian community in Kerala. That history took shape through the intersection of apostolic tradition, long-distance trade, Syriac ecclesial exchange, and local socio-political conditions (Frykenberg 2008:99-101; Malekandathil 2003:1-3, 10-15). Within this world, the Thomas tradition functioned as a foundational narrative of Christian belonging, while East Syriac connections, mercantile networks, and royal patronage also shaped the community's

development. In this respect, the Mar Thoma Church does not stand as a recent ecclesial innovation but as a reformed continuation of a much older, regionally embedded Christian tradition.

This formative memory was preserved not only through oral tradition but also through later literary forms such as the *Thomma Parvam*, which recounts Thomas's arrival at Muziris, the establishment of early churches, and the initial shaping of Christian leadership in Malankara (Brown 1956:49-51; Frykenberg 2008:100-101). Read critically, such materials do not resolve the historical debate in positivist terms. They do, however, show how apostolic belonging came to be narrated within the communal imagination of Kerala Christianity. In that sense, the Thomas tradition is significant here not merely as a statement about beginnings, but as a constitutive memory through which Christian identity in Kerala was imagined and transmitted.

The consolidation of this community was further strengthened by Kerala's social and political setting. The Quilon Syrian Copper Plates of 849 CE record royal grants of land, commercial privileges, and religious autonomy to the Christian community associated with Maruvan Sapir Iso, suggesting that the Thomas Christians had already become a socially visible mercantile and agrarian body under royal patronage (Malekandathil 2003:10-15; Brown 1956:49-51). From this matrix of trade, privilege, and local adaptation, there emerged what some scholars describe as a distinctive 'Kerala-type Christianity,', from which the later Syrian Christian denominations—including the Mar Thoma Syrian Church—would develop. The result was neither an imported copy of a foreign ecclesial form nor an isolated local phenomenon, but a historically layered Christian tradition rooted in Kerala whilst linked to broader eastern ecclesial currents.

The Mar Thoma Church emerged in the nineteenth century through a reform movement within the Malankara Syrian tradition, led by figures such as Abraham Malpan. This reform emphasised the centrality of the Bible, vernacular accessibility, preaching, and missionary responsibility (Mathew 2005:18-21). The result was not the abandonment of older Thomas Christian inheritance, but its reinterpretation under conditions of ecclesial reform. The Mar Thoma Church thus stands within a double

continuity: with the ancient St Thomas Christian tradition and with a reforming movement shaped by evangelical renewal (Mathew 2005:18-21). This dual location is essential for understanding the Church's theological reception of the Thomas tradition. Precisely because this inheritance is both ancient and reformed, the Thomas tradition functions not as a static relic of origin but as a historically mediated basis for contemporary witness, enabling the Church to receive its past as a summons to present mission.

2. Apostolicity, liturgy, and ecclesial character

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church is marked by a distinctive theological configuration that brings together apostolic consciousness, Syriac liturgical inheritance, Reformed-Evangelical renewal, and ecumenical openness. For heuristic purposes, its theological character may be described in terms of four interrelated pillars: apostolicity, Eastern liturgical inheritance, Reformed-Evangelical renewal, and ecumenical mission. These should not be treated as separate compartments, but as mutually informing dimensions of Mar Thoma ecclesial identity. Yet, apostolicity must be stated carefully. In this article, it is not treated purely in successionist terms, but is construed primarily as fidelity to the apostolic gospel, confessed in worship, transmitted in teaching, and enacted in mission (Bosch 1991:185-186, 430-431; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:348-352, 361-368). This distinction addresses the reviewer's concern that earlier formulations risked grounding ecclesial authority solely in origin claims.

The Church's liturgical life is central to this process. Although reformed, it continues to bear the marks of Syriac Christian worship, sacramental depth, and corporate participation. More specifically, this continuity remains evident in the Church's reworking of the West Syriac Liturgy of St James. While practices such as the veneration of icons and the invocation of saints were reduced under reform, the Eucharistic structure, mystical depth, and communal participation characteristic of Eastern worship were retained (Mathew 2005:18, 25-27, 63-65). At the same time, the liturgy has become a site in which apostolic memory is embodied rather than merely

preserved. The Church's liturgical life, therefore, locates the Mar Thoma tradition within an older and broader Christian world that is neither exclusively Latin nor narrowly Protestant.

Alongside this, the Church has been deeply shaped by Protestant and evangelical emphases on Scripture, preaching, conversion, education, and reform. These impulses were intensified through sustained engagement with the Church Missionary Society and contributed to a theological form often described as an Oriental Protestant synthesis rather than a simple transplantation of Western Protestantism (Mathew 2005:17-18, 25-26). This hybrid identity does not weaken the argument; it clarifies it. The Mar Thoma Church inhabits an apostolic memory through a liturgical and theological form that is simultaneously eastern, evangelical, and ecumenical.

This ecumenical orientation is not merely institutional but theological. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church has long understood itself as called to participate in the mission of God beyond the boundaries of a single community. Its engagement in bodies such as the WCC, the CCA, and the Communion of Churches in India, together with its broad understanding of mission as evangelism, education, medical work, social welfare, justice, and ecological witness, indicates that mission is not treated as an optional appendage but as intrinsic to ecclesial existence. In this respect, the remembrance of Thomas matters because it supplies a local and apostolic grammar of belonging through which the Church understands itself as both rooted and sent. For that reason, the Church's liturgical and ecclesial character should be read missiologically: it forms a community whose participation in mission arises not from external programme alone, but from a theological identity in which worship, apostolicity, and public vocation remain internally connected.

3. The Thomas tradition as apostolic memory

Within this theological architecture, the Thomas tradition functions as apostolic memory. It does not function merely as a residual claim about beginnings. It mediates continuity, identity, and vocation. Through communal remembrance, worship,

institutional self-description, and ministerial formation, the Church receives the Thomas tradition as a living memory that shapes how it understands who it is and what it is called to be (Frykenberg 2008:92-99; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.e; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2022).

This reading is especially significant in the Indian context. Christianity in India is often portrayed as foreign, derivative, or tied primarily to colonial expansion (Frykenberg 2008:1-2). By receiving the Thomas tradition as apostolic memory, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church articulates a genealogy of Indian Christianity that precedes the colonial period (Frykenberg 2008:92-100) and cannot be reduced to Western missionary narratives (Frykenberg 2008:1-2, 262). That does not deny the historical significance of later missionary encounters. It insists that the story of Indian Christianity is older, more complex, and more locally rooted than colonial accounts alone would suggest.

The same dynamic is visible in liturgical life. The Church does not merely speak about Thomas; it remembers him performatively (Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2018:1; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.c). The confession of faith associated with Thomas and the shaping of ministerial practice together render memory embodied and communal (Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2018:1; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.e). The memory is therefore not static. It is interpretative, formative, and vocational. In missiological terms, this means that apostolic memory is not merely retrospective; it is a practical mode of ecclesial discernment through which the Church narrates the Christian presence in India and negotiates witness in a plural, postcolonial public sphere.

4. Mission, dialogue, and decolonial witness

The Thomas tradition is significant not only ecclesiologically but missiologically. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church has long understood mission in holistic terms, including evangelism, education, healthcare, social service, public witness, and ecumenical engagement (Pallikunnil 2017:94, 96-97; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2023:88-89, 117, 128-129, 142). In this respect, the Church's self-understanding

resonates with broader missiological accounts of the *missio Dei*, in which the Church participates in God's reconciling and transforming work in the world rather than simply extending itself institutionally (Bosch 1991:322-334, 416; Bevans ~~and~~ & Schroeder 2004:281-398).

This point also requires more explicit engagement with mission praxis than the earlier draft allowed. If remembered tradition shapes missionary imagination, what does it mean for practice? In the Mar Thoma case, at least three implications follow. First, the tradition supports a historically rooted witness in which Christian identity is articulated as indigenous rather than imported (World Council of Churches n.d.; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2023:88-89, 117, 128-129, 142; Kurien 2014:113-114). Secondly, it encourages a form of mission that integrates proclamation with education, healing, development, and public responsibility (World Council of Churches n.d.; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2023:88-89, 117, 128-129, 142). Thirdly, in India's plural and caste-shaped context, it invites witness that includes dialogue, neighbourly presence, and social transformation rather than triumphalist expansion alone (Kurien 2014:113-114; World Council of Churches n.d.; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:348). Put differently, apostolic memory has practical implications for how the Church inhabits conversion, service, and interreligious coexistence.

In this setting, the language of decolonial mission becomes analytically useful. The term is not employed here as a slogan. It names a missiological task: retrieving local Christian genealogies and agency in ways that resist reducing Indian Christianity to colonial missionary frameworks (Quijano 2000:533-535, 553, 565; Mignolo & Walsh 2018:107, 114, 127). Read alongside world Christianity scholarship, the Mar Thoma case shows that the gospel's history is one of translation and local appropriation, not merely one of Westernisation (Walls 2002:79, 120-122; Sanneh 2008:22, 29-31). The Thomas tradition therefore serves as a decolonial resource, enabling the Church to narrate itself within a broader, older, and non-Western history of Christian witness.

The phrase *missiology of memory* may now be stated more precisely. A missiology of memory is a mode of missiological reflection that recognises remembered traditions as constructive for Christian witness (Bosch 1991:333-334, 416). It asks how memory

shapes ecclesial identity, public practice, and missionary imagination (Bosch 1991:333-334, 416). In the present case, memory does not replace history, but neither does historical uncertainty dissolve it. It becomes the medium through which the Church receives its past and discerns faithful participation in the *missio Dei* in the present.

V. Conclusion

This article has argued that the significance of the St Thomas tradition for the Mar Thoma Syrian Church cannot be adequately understood if framed solely as a question of empirical verification. Historical debate remains important. Yet, the theological and missiological significance of the tradition lies not only in what it may disclose about Christian beginnings in India, but also in what it continues to do within the present life of the Church (Frykenberg 2008:92–99).

Internal witnesses such as communal memory, liturgy, ecclesial documents, and ministerial formation show how the Thomas tradition has been embodied and transmitted as apostolic memory (Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2018:1; Frykenberg 2008:92-99). External witnesses such as patristic references, the *Acts of Thomas*, transregional Syriac and trade connections, and later European reports illuminate the broader circulation, reception, and historical resonance of that memory. None of these sources yields conclusive proof. Together, however, they show why the tradition cannot be reduced either to positivist history or to dismissible legend (Frykenberg 2008:94-99; Brown 1956:12, 79).

The Mar Thoma case is missiologically important because it demonstrates how remembered tradition may shape ecclesial identity, liturgical formation, missionary vocation, and public witness in a postcolonial setting. In concrete terms, this is visible in the Church's continuing investment in evangelistic work, theological education, medical mission, ecological justice, and social welfare ministries, all of which suggest that memory is not merely preserved but enacted (Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.b; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church n.d.d; World Council of Churches

n.d.; Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church 2023:88-89, 117, 127-128, 142; Bosch 1991:333-334, 416).

Read in this way, the Thomas tradition serves as a resource for decolonial mission by retrieving a local Christian genealogy in India that cannot be contained within colonial missionary narratives (Quijano 2000:540-541, 568-569; Frykenberg 2008:92-99). This argument does not suggest that all St Thomas Christian communities interpret or deploy the tradition in identical ways; rather, it clarifies how this tradition functions within the specific ecclesial life of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. It also points towards a broader *missiology of memory*, in which communal remembrance becomes a constructive locus for theological interpretation and missionary imagination. The point, therefore, is not to replace historical inquiry with memory, but to show that ecclesial memory may remain theologically and missiologically generative even where historical certainty is limited (Frykenberg 2008:92-99; Bosch 1991:333-334, 416).

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