

REPORT ON ACTIVITIES IN CREATING AWARENESS AND COOPERATION AMONG ORTHODOX AND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN INDIA

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The history of the interactions between the Orthodox Church in India and the Evangelical Traditions goes back to early nineteenth century. In spite of the ruptures and tremors of the past the relationship and interactions had reaped mutual benefits too. We could trace in-numerous events of mutual interactions which happened in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty first centuries. Several of the events had gone without any written records. I would like to particularly highlight the travels made by two of our luminary bishops to the western countries in the first half of the twentieth century. Those visionary leaders of the Church travelled extensively in the western European countries to make contacts and interactions with the Churches of Protestant traditions. In turn they had visitors from these respective Churches visiting the Malankara Orthodox Church and staying in the monasteries which these two bishops had found. Their attempts were before the formal inception of the international ecumenical bodies. Later on the founding of the World Council of Churches, in the inception of which the Orthodox Church in India has played a role too, has added momentum to the fraternal ties between the traditions.

Exploring to the early part of the 19th century, it is made clear that the cooperation in the beginning was mainly made in publishing the Holy Scripture, and in promoting western form of education in Keralite¹ society. Later it has developed into theological higher education. Here we attempt to present a brief outline of joint ventures and programmes of Orthodox Church and Reformed and Evangelical Churches in India.

1. Cooperation in printing and publishing the Holy Bible in Malayalam, the local vernacular of Kerala.

Even though the Holy Bible was translated into Malayalam earlier, it was not printed and published until 19th century, and so it was not sufficiently available to the believers. The first Malayalam translation of the Holy Bible was printed and published with the cooperation of Rev. Claudius Buchanan in 1829. He was a Scottish theologian, an ordained minister of the Church of England, and a missionary of the Church Mission Society, who was stationed and worked in Calcutta, a city in North-East of India. Translation of the Bible was done by certain monk priests of the Malankara Orthodox Church and the printing and publishing was organized by Rev. Buchanan.

¹ Kerala is a state in south-west of India, where Christianity was flourished even from early centuries.

2. Cooperation in theological education.

Malankara Orthodox Church established a Theological Seminary at Kottayam, Kerala, India in 1815 for making theological education more centralized and organized. It is the first non-Catholic institute for theological training in India. In the second half of twentieth century, the seminary was affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College, in West Bengal, which was established by a team of western missionaries² in 1827. Even now the Senate of Serampore College remains an umbrella institution of theological training in India for many denominations of orthodox, reformed, and evangelical backgrounds. Serampore College still serves as an effective platform for theological interactions between theologians and theological educators with diverse backgrounds and doctrinal positions.

The Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture with prime intention to promote research in disciplines connected with religion and culture leading to Masters' and Doctoral degrees of the Senate of Serampore College was established in 1980. It was a joint venture of the theological faculties of Orthodox and reformed Churches in Kerala. Initiative for such a great endeavor was primarily from Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios Metropolitan of the Malankara Orthodox Church of India, who was the principal of the Seminary then. FFRRC still ensures great cooperation between the theological faculty of Orthodox seminary and the seminaries of Marthoma Church and the Church of South India³. FFRRC provides theological training to students from orthodox, reformed, evangelical, and Pentecostal backgrounds.

FFRRC is serving as a very effective platform for interaction between the churches through students and educators and it helps in widening the horizons of their theological thinking and leadership. One of the major contributions of FFRRC, as I would see it, is the chance it provides to the students, especially from reformed and evangelical background to be familiar with the theological content, perspectives, and methodology of the early Christian thinkers. Faculty of Orthodox Theological Seminary has a crucial role in introducing the world of early Patristic sources to the students whom are not much familiar with them. Certain of the students from evangelical background has taken up effective researches in the writings of the Early Christian Teachers. In the other hand side the Orthodox students get exposure to hermeneutic diversity and different approaches in contextualization in theology. Living in the same campus and worshipping and learning together help students with both backgrounds in developing mutual understanding of theological positions and strong personal ties, which would strengthen ecumenical relations

² William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and John Clark Marshman were the founders of the Senate of Serampore College.

³ Both of these Churches are belonging to the Anglican Communion.

Effective communication in higher level of theological education created more openness and awareness among the leaders of the Churches and thus cordiality between the Christian communities in Kerala has been significantly improved.