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SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
A THEOLOGIAN WITH AN *EYE OF HEART*

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Editorial

**SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
A THEOLOGIAN WITH AN EYE OF HEART**

Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI
Editor-in-Chief

Eastern theology tends to prioritize harmony, balance, and the integration of the spiritual and material realms. The central themes often include the interconnectedness of everything in the universe fostering the unity of all creation, the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment or union with the divine, and an emphasis on mystical experience and practices such as meditation and contemplation. Eastern theological vision gives priority to spiritual experiences through meditation, prayer, and often reveres nature as sacred and fosters a deep respect for the environment and all living beings. According to Saint Ephrem, the right attitude and response to the nature are of wonder, gratitude, admiration, love and respect; and he delineates the sacramental character of the created world and the potential of everything in it to be the indicators of the creator. To see these hidden links an eye of faith illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit is a necessary requirement. Thus, guided by faith, the early Syriac writers reflect the Semitic roots of Christianity in a special way and their mode of discourse is essentially in the tradition of the Bible, and it lacks the rhetorical overlay.¹ In the Syriac tradition, salvation is re-entry into the lost paradise, a 'homecoming and a return to the Father's house' (*Hymns on Paradise* 14.7).

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a prominent figure in the Syriac Christian tradition, particularly within the Syro-Malabar Church was instrumental in spearheading renewal in the Church. He addressed both internal and external challenges, promoted unity and cohesion in the Church, and urged its members to deepen their faith through his loyalty

¹ S.P. Brock, "The Syriac Orient: A Third 'Lung' for the Church?," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005), 57.

to the Church and its liturgical life, theological heritage and spirituality. He embraced a life of asceticism, holiness and personal sanctification, for asceticism was a dominant feature of Christian life in the Syriac tradition and a motivational force of the ecclesial life. He regarded the purity of heart as the basic virtue, and the abiding compunction of heart prompted him to compare himself to the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-24) and lament his sins and plead for God's mercy. Nevertheless, Chavara, a brilliant paradigm of virtues and holiness of life, believed that each Christian at baptism is betrothed to Christ the bridegroom; and he could maintain the purity of the robe of glory put on at his baptism. He stated at his deathbed: "By the grace of God, I dare say that with their [Holy Family] help never had I experienced an occasion where I was deprived of the grace received in baptism."² At the passing of Chavara, the sisters wrote about his holy and inspiring life in their chronicle: "This Father of ours was a model and guiding light to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a pillar that supported the Catholic Church because of the zeal he evinced in its expansion and in the protection of faith."³ He mirrored Christ and established the convents and the monasteries to remain as "the mirror of virtues and the "abode of saints."

The biblical simplicity is perfectly echoed in Chavara's writings, and they are steeped in the tradition of the Scripture, Fathers of the Church and the symbolic-poetic style of thought with a lot of symbolism, imagery and types. The symbolic-poetic approach of Chavara with the *heart's eye* (Eph 1:18) attempts to wonder at and be grateful to the mystery of Christ in the history of salvation. He advises: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty you must look at Him with *the eye of your heart* and worship Him."⁴ Chavara had *the eye of his heart*, and he could see God's providence in everything, and experience and enjoy the uninterrupted vision of God, for the *eye of the heart* suggests profound comprehension of the mystery of God beyond mere intellectual understanding of the depths of inner being. As a man of prayer, Chavara prayed truly, for according to the famous aphorism of Evagrius, "If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you will be a theologian" (PG 79, col. 1180B).

² Moolayil, *Positio*, 548. Quoted in A.M. Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, revised edition, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 392-393.

³ *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, vol. 2, 2002, 23.

⁴ *Dyanasallapankal* in Chavara Achante Sampurna Kritikal, vol. 3, Mannanam, 1981, 25.

A careful study of his spiritual experience and the general picture of his writings, be it historical (*The Chronicles*), literary (*Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anastasia's Martyrdom*), spiritual (*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*) and the *Letters*, reflect and reveal the nature of his theology and spirituality. He was an apostle of the Eucharist who urged his confreres to love Jesus present in the most Holy Eucharist with all their hearts.⁵ With ardent love and deep faith, he longed to see the Lord and to have an enlightened understanding of the history of salvation and truth explained through his poetic logic and vision, committed to the service of the Church and its pastoral concerns, had tender devotion to Mother Mary and proudly described himself as a servant of Mary, and sought God's will always and everywhere. A re-visiting of the life and works of Chavara through the lens of Eastern/Syriac mind would help us to unveil the Eastern/Syriac theological vision enshrined in them.

The present issue of the *Herald of the East* examines the Eastern theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The volume has seven articles and four of them are directly related to the theme. The authors, whose papers are presented in this issue, have differing perspectives. Nevertheless, each one shares the conviction that Chavara was imbued with the Eastern theological vision and equals the great Fathers and doctors of the Church who contributed immensely to the growth of the Church through their excellent biblical, liturgical, catechetical, homiletic, and apologetic works.

Siby Kavattu in his article investigates the theological foundations and spiritual dispositions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara within the framework of Syriac Christian tradition. According to Kavattu, the theological vision of Chavara was rooted in the Syriac tradition of sacramental understanding of God, humans, and the world. His writings reflect the unique characteristics of Syriac Christian tradition, i.e., the integration of revelation and faith as mystery, the experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing. Chavara's profound love for the Church, and his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are key aspects of his spiritual legacy, which are also the characteristic traits of Syriac Christianity.

Annie Noel in her article delves into Chavara's spirituality through the lens of Eastern Christian mysticism and draws parallels with the wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Chavara's spirituality reflects Eastern

⁵ *Positio*, 548.

Christianity's concept of God's unconditional love. Noel explores asceticism, virtuous life, prayer, and contemplation as means of experiencing the divine love. Chavara's life illustrates detachment from worldly distractions and continuous dialogue with the divine as integral to experiencing God's love. Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes prayer, contemplation, and embracing divine love amidst trials and suffering. Chavara dedicated himself to prayer and trust in divine providence; and his compassionate concern for others, especially the marginalized, reflects divine love in action. His life inspires everyone to embrace spirituality through asceticism, virtuous living, prayer, contemplation, and compassionate service.

Geo Pallikunnel expounds the compunction of the heart as an ascetic ideal practiced both in the East and the West to reach the monastic way of perfection, and he highlights this Eastern ascetic ideal in the life and works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. In the Syriac tradition, anchorites were called 'mourners' (*'abīlē*). Many spiritual authors witness to this ascetic ideal of compunction of the heart both in the desert and in the Syriac traditions. Focusing the research on *Atmanuthapam*, Pallikunnel establishes that Chavara follows the tradition of compunction of the soul.

Rincy Maria delineates the Eastern mystical paradigms in Chavara, and she affirms that his profound faith in Christ and deep love for the Lord had a transformative effect, shaping him into a vessel of divine grace. Inspired and strengthened by the Word of God, Chavara undertook extraordinary measures for his community. Constant communion with the Almighty not only cultivated a rich inner life within him but also impelled him to dedicate his life to the service of God. Through meditation, he established unity with God, and in and through his actions, he embodied solidarity with the marginalized and impoverished. Chavara emulated the fervour of Elijah, driven by an unwavering zeal for the living God. His teachings emanated from his own lived experiences. In the tradition of Carmelite mystics, Chavara embraced spousal mysticism, wherein the relationship between humanity and God mirrors a spiritual marriage—an intimate and reciprocal bond of love and commitment. Rincy Maria underscores the Abba (*appa*) experience as the core of Chavara's mysticism.

Sebastian Elavathingal, in his article, presents Kuriakose Elias Chavara as God's work of art. Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art". The human person becomes ultimately an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials into a spiritual or a transfigured body. It is against the background of this Biblical view of creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer that Chavara has laid out in his works. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person which can be compared to the formation of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. Chavara is an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection. He bears witness to the transfigured glory of Jesus who entered his glory through his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Joel Chiramal and Joy Philip Kakkanatt read through the Parable of the Prodigal Son in *Dhyānasallāpanṇal*, where Chavara makes a synthesis of the Sacred Scripture and his personal reflection. They analyze some passages from it to understand the inner dynamics involved in the way he quotes the Scripture. Chavara's presentation of this parable in a 'Three-Scene Perspective' shows his radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture as well as a three-fold identification, namely, with the character in the parable, society of the nineteenth century and the culture of the time. Chavara presents himself before God and the community as a corporate personality; and the Sacred Scripture was the focus and foundation in his reformation pedagogy. Chiramal and Kakkantt propose it as a paradigm for modern-day pastors. This method of radical interiorization and contextual interpretation is a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

Jipson Joseph Edappulavan examines the theology of marriage presented in the *Chavarul*, one of the most inspiring literary contributions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. It is his last testament particularly addressed to the people of Kainakari symbolising the entire Thomas Christians of Kerala. Against the context of most of the researchers identifying it in connection with the family life in general, Edappulavan proposes it to be a practical manual for married persons than addressing family in general. This nineteenth century work is still relevant due to its in-depth scriptural foundation, theological

articulation, and practical framework. It invites the spouses to focus on mutuality for a meaningful marital life.

These pages on various dimensions of the Eastern/Syriac theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara offer an inspiration to pursue the theological and spiritual dispositions of Chavara within the framework of Eastern Christian tradition in general and Syriac Christian tradition in particular; and invite the readers to opt for developing the vision further.

SYRIAC THEOLOGICAL VISION OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Siby Kuriakose Kavattu CMI♦

Abstract: The article explores the theological foundations and spiritual dispositions of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara within the framework of Syriac Christian tradition. Chavara's theological vision was rooted in the Syriac tradition of sacramental understanding of God, humans, and the world. The concept of mystery (*Raza*), the importance of the Scripture and liturgy in theology, divinization as the purpose of revelation can be found occurring in the writings of both the Syriac Fathers and Chavara. Chavara's profound love for the Church, and his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are key aspects of his spiritual legacy, which are also part of the patrimony of Syriac Christianity. Chavara's theological insights and spiritual practices offer valuable perspectives for contemporary Christian doctrine and praxis, particularly in understanding and interpreting the universal call to holiness and salvation.

♦ **Siby Kuriakose Kavattu CMI** is distinguished for his scholarly expertise in theology. His academic journey culminated in earning a Doctorate in theology from Rome, Italy. Throughout his career, Siby has undertaken various pastoral roles, such as Associate Pastor, Director of Catechesis and Faith Formation and imparted theological knowledge in Europe, Africa, and India. Illustrious as a professor of theology and religion, he underscores his commitment to theological education. Actively engaging in international conferences, Siby has presented papers on topics such as 'Christology', 'Syriac Mysticism', 'Saint Chavara' etc., in India and abroad. His scholarly contributions include a published book, *Divine Pedagogy in Creation*, and articles exploring 'Apophatic Theology' and 'Early Syriac Christological Conceptions,' etc. Currently, he serves as an Associate Professor at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK), and Master of Students at Dharmaram College, Bengaluru, India. Email: kavattusiby@gmail.com

Keywords: Divinization, Deification, *Theosis*, *Raza*, *Lex orandi lex credendi*, Eastern Spirituality, Syriac Theology, Eye of the Heart, Eye of Faith, *Tukasa*, Divine-human Engagement, History of Salvation

1. Introduction

Theology as a concept, method and practice is an attempt to comprehend and interpret 'divine revelation' and 'faith response' based on Sacred Scripture and Tradition. The purpose of theology is deification, or *theosis*, which results from divine human encounters of revelation through creation, incarnation and resurrection; and faith through the sacramental celebrations, especially baptism and eucharist in the Church. The 'Syriac theological vision'¹ of God, humans and the world is sacramental in nature and transformative in effect. The theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara², present in his own writings and writings about him, resonates with the Syriac theological vision. One of the dictums of Chavara, 'God's will be done always and everywhere'³ is echoing his sacramental and transformative theological vision in theory and in practical implications. Psalm 16:5 was Chavara's favourite verse in the Bible: "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure." The sources of the above-mentioned dictums often appearing in the writings and sayings of Chavara seems to be inspired by the phrase in the Lord's prayer, 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10) and in the verses of the Psalm 62:1-2, "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken". They present a beautiful blending of Scriptural, Semitic (Jewish) and theological visions of the

¹ Syriac theology, a branch of Christian theology is present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church who wrote in Syriac language, which is characterized by its resonance with semitic cultural and religious ethos and its particular thrust on scriptural and liturgical theology. Syriac theology in the past was left in oblivion and remained dormant, but is now actively influencing the theological milieu with translations of the writings into modern languages and its interpretations and application in context.

² The names Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Cyriac Elias Chavara are interchangeably used by different authors. The name Kuriakose was his baptismal name whereas the name Elias was chosen by Chavara when he made his religious vows and Chavara was his surname/family name. In this paper we make use of the surname Chavara.

³ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 15.

reality of the Syriac Christians present in the theological vision of Chavara.

The life and activities of Chavara were in conformity with this conviction, and every aspect of his life was permeated with its fragrance. Being a child of God and thus a faithful son of the Church, he could go beyond the limiting beliefs and enticing trends of his time to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by God for His glory and the good of the people. In the words of Fr. Leopold, the most outstanding virtue of Chavara was his love for the Church: "Among his virtues, the most outstanding was his ardent faith in and the devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and the Holy Father. ... Never did Chavara hold himself back from any work, of fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and the salvation of souls."⁴

Chavara's spirituality was deeply rooted in faith, hope and charity, and he practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness in a heroic manner. He was able to understand and translate the mystery of God and the mystery of life in loving compassion towards human beings and towards nature and he lived this mystery gracefully in the Church through the celebration of the sacrament. Thus, Chavara can be called a true son of the Church and a man of God for others.

This paper is a humble attempt to search for the salient features of the Syriac theological vision present in the life and writings of Chavara. The life and legacy of Chavara are open to the public through many biographies and his own writings.⁵ The main sources of this research are the books of Chavara himself: *Atmanuthapam (The Compunction of Soul)*, *Dhyanasallapangal (Colloquies with the Heavenly Father)*, *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitvam (Anasthasia's Martyrdom)*, *Nalagamangal (Chronicles)*, and *Kathukal (Letters)* and some of the studies that have sought to understand and find the legacy of Chavara.

2. Theological Vision of Syriac Christians

Syriac theology represents a remarkably unique trend in Christian theology, inspired by its semitic background, Syriac culture and the particular historical vicissitudes of different Syriac churches. The idea

⁴ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, Mannanam, 2003, 13-14.

⁵ Z. M. Muzhoor, *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vols I, II & III, Mannanam, 1981. Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol IV, Mannanam, 1982.

'the East was the cradle of Christianity' has gained general historical consensus, and this accord gives a legitimate and valid testimony to the importance of Syriac theology. The people among whom Christianity was born, first spread and developed set the mark of their own genius on its first forms of expression.

What makes the thought of the early Syriac theologians so attractive is its universal/catholic amplitude, joined with its triumphant eschatological tone. The constant object of their contemplation was the mystery in all the glory of its unity. In creation, God inaugurated the salvific plan, and through incarnation and resurrection, it was fulfilled and perfected. It continues in the Church with the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, which points to the 'already and not yet' eschatological vision of the Church, as St. Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:10, 'God all in all'.

The sources of theology and the process of theologising are integrated realities in the East. John Meyendorff says in this regard, as follows:

Theology should be based on the Scripture, on the doctrinal decisions of the Church's Magisterium, or on the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must be able to reach beyond the letters of the Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the Church throughout the ages.⁶

Robert Taft speaks of Eastern theology as follows: "It is an integrated world in which liturgy, spirituality, art and architecture comprise an integrated, harmonious whole in a way unthinkable in the west, with its clash of competing methodologies and philosophies."⁷ Today, the Syriac/Eastern/Oriental way of theologizing receives much importance and momentum. While there have been translations of Syriac writings into German and French, these have remained relatively inaccessible to those who read only English. As a positive sign, Robert Murray, Sebastian Brock, Kathleen McVey, Thomas Kollampampil and a few

⁶ John Meyendorff, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 13.

⁷ Robert Taft, "Eastern Catholic Theology: Slow Rebirth after a Long and Difficult Gestation," 75.

others are making the genius of Syriac Christian writings and authors better known to English readers through their commendable efforts.

3. Salient Characteristic Features of Chavara's Syriac Theological Vision

In 1805, Chavara was born into the rich and complex socio-cultural and politico-ecclesial context of Kerala as one who was a special envoy from God for the restoration of the society and Church of his time. Chavara was called by God with a special charism for the renewal and growth of the Church in India, especially the Syro-Malabar Church⁸, as acclaimed by many.⁹ The particular socio-cultural and ecclesial circumstances of that time have influenced tremendously the life and mission of Chavara, and that is evident in his writings. He was faithful to the Church and her teachings and defended them with courage and fortitude, especially the tradition, beliefs, customs and practices of the St. Thomas Christians. St. Thomas Christians of his time were particularly in a phase of growth that necessitated order, discipline, new initiatives, testimonies of faith, moral uprightness as well as turmoil, uncertainties, intrusions. etc. Chavara could function as a catalyst to manage the situation gracefully for the glory of God and for the good of the people, with an absolute trust in God and unwavering commitment to the cause of the people of God.

The salient characteristic features of the Syriac theological vision, such as revelation and faith as mystery (*raza*), experience of heart and mind, symbolism and typology, biblical and liturgical foundation, poetic mode of expression and divinization/*theosis* as purpose of revelation and faith, are directly or indirectly present in the theologizing of Chavara as it is seen in his life and expressed in his writings.

3.1. Understanding of Reality, both Sacred and Secular, as Mystery (*Raza*)

The concept of mystery is central to understanding Syriac theology. The human experience of reality, both sacred and secular, is made possible through encounters with words (verbal symbols) and/or gestures and actions (non-verbal symbols). The sense of mystery (*raza*) permeates the

⁸ The now, Syro-Malabar Church was called Saint Thomas Christian at the time of Chavara, which remained faithful to the Catholic faith under the guidance of Chavara, amidst the attacks of Roccas Schism.

⁹ CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 6.

symbolic and typological expressions used by the early Syriac authors to express divine realities. The Syriac noun *raza* is used to mean type, figure, sign, symbol, likeness, mystery, sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, Trinity, Christ, Church, etc.

In the Bible, *raza* connotes the salvific plan of God, which is centred on the incarnate Lord. Syriac theologians Ephrem and Narsai have always emphasized the sharp divide between the creator and creation and recognized in their writings that human being is unable to grasp fully the 'divine hidden-ness' through intellectual scrutiny. Ephrem sings, "Lord, your symbols are everywhere, yet you are hidden from everywhere."¹⁰

Syriac theology does not rule out reason and investigation in the theological method. Contemplative theology is not the product of mere imagination; it considers the mystery of God, human being and the world revealed in the Scriptures and manifested in nature with the help of reason. Therefore, a true theologian is one who has intense God-experience obtained through liturgical celebration. The most striking aspect of eastern theology is that it is permeated with an attitude of reverential awe. For an eastern Christian, his humble parish Church is the heavenly sanctuary where men and women, according to their capacity and desire, are caught up in the worship of the redeemed cosmos, where dogmas are no barren abstractions but hymns of exulting praise.

Chavara's life and activities were always permeated with a sense of mystery. As a child, he was spiritually oriented and showed a keen interest in learning the prayers, which were mostly in Syriac.¹¹ As he grew up, he cultivated a genuine prayer culture and considered prayer to be a true virtue.¹² His parents were of excellent virtue, especially his mother, who sowed in his tender heart the seeds of the spirit of prayer. In *Ātmanūthāpam*, it can be noticed as follows:

¹⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns of Faith* 4:9, see also, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 55.

¹¹ Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 38.

¹² Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 214.

Through baptism's grace you made me your cherished son
 And showed me heaven's joys to tend me grow
 Gave me parents grounded in faith secure
 And faith in me engraved full firm, besides
 A mother to feed me while yet feeble babe
 To shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me soft
 To pour that tender love you filled her with
 That nectar, unto my tiny blissful heart
 Mixed with her sweet milk, she regaled me
 With thoughts of heaven, and words of grace, so pure!
 And when reason grew strong, my little mind
 Patiently, informed, to lisp holy names
 Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright
 Gently, of matters sublime, of my faith
 As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer
 Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air
 Long hours, on her knee in prayer she stayed
 Leaning on her then I would seat myself
 While devoutly a string of pious words
 To mother of God and the Christ, King of kings.¹³

After joining the seminary in the first year, he learned Syriac, the liturgical language of the Malabar Christians,¹⁴ and as a brilliant student, he learned Latin and Portuguese besides Syriac.¹⁵ Chavara's confessor and spiritual director, Fr. Leopold, writes about his seminary life as follows:

As his fellow seminarians, who are still alive, attest, the young Kuriakose was deeply interested in his studies, in observing the rules (of the seminary), and in cultivating the fear of God, motivated solely by the desire of pleasing God. He never harboured any petty jealousy

¹³ Cf., Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1989, 2-3.

¹⁴ CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 31.

¹⁵ Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 39.

or bad blood against his companions, as was usual among the young, but always kind and charitable towards them.¹⁶

Chavara adopted the motto 'the Lord is my portion' (Ps 16:5) for life at his reception of the minor order of tonsure. The experience of God that Chavara enjoyed and liked to enjoy is expressed in his own words as follows:

Oh my God, you are my love, my joy, and all my fortune.

If not in you, how could I live my life?

You are my breath, my food and my drink.

What a solace have I in you!¹⁷

Chavara was a man on fire, a mystic in his core, who experienced the mystery of God, humans and the world, which was evident in his prayer and celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He used to spend many hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament conversing with God. His exterior life was the mirror of his interior life.¹⁸ Chavara used to exclaim, 'What a bliss it is for us humans that God allows us to converse with Him.'¹⁹ Fr. Marceline Alackapally writes:

According to the first constitution [of 1863] the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr. Prior spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears. ... at the end of the meditation he had to be reminded by others that the time was up. ... during the adoration of the blessed sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation.²⁰

Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.²¹ His mystical experiences were theocentric and self-transcending for the union with the divine.²² There are many instances recorded in the biographies of

¹⁶ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 5.

¹⁷ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 10.

¹⁸ Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 5.

¹⁹ *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, Vatican, 1997, 623.

²⁰ *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 561.

²¹ *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.

²² *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.

Chavara about his fervent prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament or in the cemetery.²³ Fr. Leopold makes the following observation:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the divine liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visit to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.²⁴

Contemplation and action are very talked-about aspects of Catholic spirituality, especially in the eastern tradition.²⁵ Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.²⁶ From the life of Chavara, one can learn love, hope, compassion and authenticity, the genuine fruits of deep mystical life and practice.²⁷

One of the most attractive features of early Syriac theology is its symbolic character. The early Syriac fathers used images and symbols to expound the truth of salvation.²⁸ For instance, Ephrem uses the metaphor of clothing to understand the mystery of the incarnation. Everything in the created world, and in creation as a whole, is a symbol.

On the human level, all modes of logical patterns are necessary and applicable. But as one is invited to approach the divine level through divine revelation, the medium of analogy and the symbolic mode of perception have to be sought. At such a level, the vehicles are types, symbols, images and mysteries of salvation in words and deeds. Symbolic theology does not look for 'the logical sequence' and does not jump directly into conclusions.

²³ Valerian Plathottam, *Very Reverend Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam, 1939, 242.

²⁴ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13.

²⁵ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 5.

²⁶ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

²⁷ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

²⁸ For a detailed study in this regard see, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 53-84.

In the sacramental vision, the natural world stands side by side with Scripture as a witness to God. Everyone, literate or illiterate, can read and understand the book of nature. The approach of the early fathers of the Church to nature was one of wonder and reverence, not greed and exploitation.

Chavara was aware of the mystery aspect of reality, both divine and secular and he had great admiration for the revelation of reality through the mediums of Scripture and nature. In his writings, there are instances where this aspect is evidently presented. While speaking about his vocation, he writes in *The Compunction of Soul* verses 118-120:

My mother's heart leaped with exultation
That God did ear-mark me to be his possession
Tear-dimmed eyes gleamed as sun amid clouds
Could a heart maternal brave such parenting.²⁹

3.2. Experience and Expression of God with Heart and Mind than with Head and Intellect

In Syriac Christian context, theology is not just information and systematic knowledge about God and divine matters attained through epistemological endeavour; rather, it is the lived experience of God of the faithful on personal and communitarian levels, attained through faith and liturgical celebrations. While speaking on the specific characteristics of Syriac theology in the decree on ecumenism, Vatican Council II refers to the most important sources of theology in the East:

With regard to the authentic theological traditions of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scripture, fostered and given expression in liturgical life, and nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the writings of the Fathers and spiritual authors of the East; they are directed towards a right ordering of life, indeed toward a full contemplation of Christian truth.³⁰

For a long period in history, the importance of a genuine and authentic personal experience in the elaboration of theology had not been recognized by theologians. This was mainly because of the fear that Christian faith would be reduced to mere feelings. For eastern theologians, contemplation of God is the very basis of theology. Pope

²⁹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 4.

³⁰ *Unitatis Redintegratio* 17.

John Paul II stated in his 'Sunday Angelus' message on September 29, 1996: "Today's prevailing scientific culture puts an enormous quantity of information at our disposal; but every day it is apparent that this is not enough for an authentic process of humanization. We have greater need than ever to discover the dimensions of the heart." He pointed out that eastern spirituality makes a specific contribution to authentic knowledge of human being by insisting on this perspective of the heart.

For Chavara, faith is the 'heart's eye', an expression present in the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians 1:18.³¹ Chavara advised his readers in *Dhyanasallapangal*: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty, you must look at him with the eye of your heart and worship Him."³² In fact, Chavara had the eye of the heart always wide open so that in every event of life – small or big, delightful or painful – he would easily see God's hand, and thus, he could enjoy uninterrupted vision of God.³³ *Dhyanasallapangal* presents Chavara's personal encounter with God, in which one can find his profound *Abba* experience.³⁴

Chavara's life of prayer was inspired by a close and intimate relation with God the Father, whom he called '*ente appa*' (my father).³⁵ Making the sentiments of the prodigal son his own, Chavara states:

Oh, its long time since I saw my *appan*, I squandered all he gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. ... Oh, my soul, your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of ingratitude of yours. ... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? Still *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear. ... Oh, *ente appa*, I cast myself on my knees before your throne of mercy.³⁶

³¹ So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

³² Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 25.

³³ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 235.

³⁴ Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 29.

³⁵ Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 329.

³⁶ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 4-5.

Chavara indeed experienced God's hands in everything that happened to him and around him. It was inspired by the divine wisdom of faith. He looked at all things with his heart's eye.³⁷ Chavara instructed the inhabitants of *bes-rauma*, the 'vision house', to possess a pure heart and clear conscience so that their intentions may be purified, and they can do everything for the greater glory of God and the good of the people.³⁸

3.3. Biblical and Liturgical Foundations of the Syriac Theological Vision

The early Syriac ecclesial tradition and its theology represent the authentic Semitic world out of which the Bible sprang. The theologians of the East depended primarily on Sacred Scripture for theologizing. The writings of both Aphrahat and Ephrem demonstrate an intimate familiarity with the Bible, and their writings are packed with biblical citations, images and allusions, especially from the Old Testament. The early Syriac theologians approach Scripture as the book of faith, and their interpretation of the biblical texts is both spiritual and practical. For instance, Ephrem regards Scripture as the incarnation of God in human language. The reading of the Scripture was for the fathers, synonymous with conversation with Christ.

Historical exegesis of the scripture was not the primary concern of the early Syriac fathers. Rather, they emphasized the spiritual exegesis that proceeds from faith. The inner meaning of the scripture can only be perceived by the inner eye of faith.

Early Syriac theology is liturgical theology. Liturgical theology refers to the theology that is present in the liturgical texts. Basically, when the liturgical texts are analyzed, the Trinitarian and Christological dimensions of human salvation can be found in them. When theology is said to be liturgical theology, the liturgical prayers are the source of theologizing, taking inspiration from the axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer establishes the law of faith). In the liturgical celebration, one encounters the mystery of God, which theologians try to articulate. Thus, liturgy is the natural root of theology, and the theological thinking of the Church should be verifiable in the liturgical text of the Church. Pope John Paul II states in his encyclical, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* # 1: "The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth

³⁷ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 299.

³⁸ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 105.

does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church."

The Word of God was for Chavara, food and drink. His sermons and other teachings are mostly based on the Sacred Scripture, and he learned the mysteries of God by meditating on the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ His approach to the Word of God is far from academic; it is spiritual and personal. In a spirit of faith and an attitude of reverence, he attentively listens to the Word and zealously responds to it with docility and awe.⁴⁰

In *Dhyanasallapangal*, there are 43 explicit citations from the Bible and 70 implicit or allusive ones. Then there are seven texts that Chavara interprets by way of expressing, explaining and translating them. "His whole personality was an expression of the Word of God ... He could explain the Bible in his own life situation ... thus the Word of God became his own word."⁴¹

The liturgical renewal that Chavara initiated in the Church and its after effects are positively experienced by the Church today. The first thing that Chavara did in this regard was the compilation of the divine office of his Church.⁴² The daily divine office that was in use those days was too lengthy and available only in manuscripts, and the priests tended to ignore its recital. After having discussed this with several *malpans* assembled at Koonammavu, he prepared a handy book of divine office in 1862. It is to be noted that this was the divine office that was in use until the late 1960s, when the breviary in Malayalam was introduced.

The Holy Eucharist was the centre of the spirituality of Chavara. To use his own terminology, he preferred to shut himself up in the tabernacle with Jesus. He wrote to the nuns, "Behold I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us stay there until the day of resurrection."⁴³ Fr. Leopold gives

³⁹ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 238.

⁴⁰ Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 246.

⁴¹ Paul Kalluveetil, "Chavara the Dynamic Hermeneut of the Word" in Paul Kalluveetil & Paulachan Kochapilly eds., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 294-311.

⁴² Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 32.

⁴³ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

an unambiguous testimony of Chavara's devotion to the Eucharistic as follows:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the Sacred liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.⁴⁴

Chavara also made sure that the Holy Eucharist was celebrated in an orderly manner. As the available missal lacked the correct rubrics, priests, while celebrating the Holy Eucharist, followed customs and practices that were different from place to place. To remedy this, Chavara wrote a book called *Tukasa* containing the rubrics of the Syrian Mass and got it printed for the use of priests.⁴⁵ This book, reprinted in 1926, was in use until 1962, when a new missal with an ordo was promulgated by Rome.⁴⁶ That means, for almost a century, Chavara's *Tukasa* served as the only means of ensuring an orderly manner of eucharistic celebration in the Syro-Malabar Church.

The restoration and updating of the liturgical calendar of the Syrian community was also a great contribution that Chavara actualized. For many years, the Syrians used the Latin Rite calendar, which naturally enjoined Latin practices and ignored the Syrian one, such as the division of the year into specific liturgical seasons of the Syrian Church. With much dedication and difficulty, Chavara prepared and printed the Syrian rite liturgical calendar. This pays testimony to Chavara's knowledge of his Church's ancient traditions and his concern to preserve them. Along with the liturgical renewal, Chavara also introduced retreat preaching and pastoral care for the faithful, especially the sick and the poor.

The practice of preaching homilies during the Holy Eucharist and annual retreat in the parishes were also initiated and made popular by Chavara. He also introduced and promoted religious practices and devotions such as adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the office for the

⁴⁴ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13.

⁴⁵ Bernard TOCD, *Malayalathinte Ka. Ni. Mu. Sa Sabhayude Charithra Samshepam*, Mannanam, 1908, 136.

⁴⁶ Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 268.

dead, the way of the cross, the rosary and scapular, novena prayers, etc. Even though they are neither liturgical prayers nor originally Syrian practices, with their introduction and promotion, Christian life among the Syrians became lively and more appealing, responding to the legitimate emotional needs of the common people.

3.4. Poetic Mode of Expression of Theology

Theology in poetry and theologians as poets may sound like contradictions to the modern mind. Syriac fathers employed poetry as the principal vehicle of their theologizing. It is not because they were unable to pursue the prosaic medium, but because they found the poetic way doubly useful. Poetic medium can equally handle conceptual matters usually carried by prosaic medium, and personal sensorial experiences usually effected mainly by poetic medium, at the same time. The poetic medium can effectively handle the seeming paradoxes and contradictions in the divine-human engagements in the history of salvation. The language of poetry can express spiritual reality more successfully. Doctrines and teachings, when given in a poetic manner, contain the needed flexibility, fluidity, dynamism and personal applicability. But when doctrines and teachings are given at the logical and rational levels alone, they will remain more hardened by losing adaptability and dynamism.

Chavara was a great poet. He found the poetic medium apt for communicating matters of faith, spirituality, and morals, as it was for the early Syriac fathers. Chavara's God-experience is well expressed in his poetic writings, which he calls spiritual canticles (*atma-geetangal*), spiritual colloquies (*atma-sallapangal*) and spiritual union (*atma-vismruti*).⁴⁷ All his writings contain a poetic style, especially *Atmanuthapam*, *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitoam* and *Maranaveettil Padunna Pana*, which are written in poetic metres.

In one of his correspondences, Chavara, the mystic, depicts a moment of divine love using a style and language that closely resemble the poetic and spiritual expressions found in the *Songs of Songs* and the *Spiritual Canticle*:

When the human spirit is in the delightful solitude, the Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet His beloved in that lovely solitude. He begins to speak with her sweetly, at first, she does not clearly understand His

⁴⁷ Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 30.

language and intentions. Then He takes her to the wine cellar and pours her some wine, initially a little. Having enjoyed it she begins to understand His language; yes, she understands His love. Then this lover of hers begins to speak more distinctly, and opens His heart so as she realizes how great His love for her is. Her love too increases. He becomes pleased with her, adorns her with precious ornaments. This is how the affair begins and then it doesn't ever stop.⁴⁸

3.5. Divinization, the Purpose of Revelation and Faith

Syriac fathers conceived that the very aim of the incarnation was the deification of human beings. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem states, "He clothed himself in the likeness of man in order to bring man to the likeness of Himself."⁴⁹ In the theology of the salvation of the Syriac fathers, divinization is seen as the result of a downward movement – 'divine descent' – and an upward movement – 'human ascent'. God's love for humanity is so great that God took the initiative, in revelation, to bring humanity back to paradise.

The life, activities and writings of Chavara were focused on one and only purpose: the salvation of the soul, primarily his own soul and the souls of others. In his letters, there are instances where his confreres, sisters and lay faithful are instructed and encouraged to strive for salvation.

Chavara's prophetic role and enormous contribution in fighting the Roccas schism are a testimony to his noteworthy zeal for the Church and the salvation of souls. In the book, *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, it is noted as follows: "If there were not the Ark of Noah during the flood no single human being would have been spared; similarly, if there were not the Prior and this religious community, it is quite reasonable to think that all Syrian churches would have been lost in schism."⁵⁰

3.6. Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary

Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the characteristic features of Syriac theology. Hymns and treatises on Mary are abundant in Syriac writings. Chavara too had a great devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. Chavara's approach to the Blessed Virgin Mary was one of filial and

⁴⁸ Cf. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

⁴⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, II:6-7.

⁵⁰ *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, Mannanam, 1995, 28.

spontaneous, whom he addresses as 'ente amme'.⁵¹ He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her.⁵² The most impressive testimony of Chavara's Marian devotion is the foundation of two indigenous religious congregations in her name. Concerning his trust in Mary, he writes, "Till now I have never had to draw the net empty after casting it in the name of our holy Mother."⁵³ About Chavara's filial love and trust in Mother Mary, Fr. Leopold has testified as follows:

His devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call 'Mother', to overcome fears and temptations associated with the fateful moment.⁵⁴

4. Conclusion

Chavara was a luminary of the Church, and he shines bright with his theological vision founded on the Syriac Christian tradition and he opens new horizons for understanding and interpreting the Christian doctrine and praxis. His theology is permeated with the salient features of the Syriac Christian theological vision, and there are parallels in understanding, experience and expression of it in his life, activities and writings. For Chavara, theologizing was not merely an academic exercise but a sacramental and transformative engagement with divine revelation and faith, grounded in the Sacred Scripture and Tradition. His favorite biblical verse, Psalm 16:5, "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup" encapsulates his deep trust in God's providence, reflecting the Syriac theological emphasis on God's will and the mystical union between the divine and the human. Chavara's theological outlook was significantly influenced by the socio-cultural and ecclesial context of Kerala, his devotion to the Church, and his deep spiritual life. His writings, including 'Atmanuthapam' and 'Dhyanasallapangal', among others, reflect the Syriac Christian tradition's unique characteristics, such as the integration of revelation and faith as mystery (*Raza*), the

⁵¹ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 250.

⁵² Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

⁵³ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 55.

⁵⁴ Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing.

Central to Chavara's life and teachings was the exploration of the concept of *theosis* or deification, as the purpose of God's revelation and human response in faith, which facilitates divine-human encounter and effects salvation. His admiration of Blessed Virgin Mary and the affection he shows towards her, the praises he showers on her and his adherence to her intercession are akin to the Syriac traditions, where the Mother of God adorns the first place among the saints. He also heroically practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness and gave inspiration and impetus to the Church today for a holy life and radical following of Jesus. The purpose and resolve of the call and mission of every believer in Christ are the same: radical following of Jesus Christ and being a true and faithful child of the Church to obtain one's own salvation and to invite everyone for the same.

EMBRACING DIVINE LOVE: EASTERN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Annie Noel CMC♦

Abstract: Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spirituality, deeply rooted in Eastern Christian mysticism, emphasizes the inseparable connection between the love of God and love of neighbour. His teachings parallel those of Eastern mystics like St Isaac the Syrian, focusing on divine love as foundational to the Christian journey. His contemplation on God's boundless mercy underscores the transformative power of love, nurturing spiritual growth and inspiring compassionate service. His spirituality reflects Eastern Christianity's concept of God's unconditional love, epitomized in Jesus Christ. This article explores asceticism, virtuous life, prayer, and contemplation as means of experiencing divine love. Asceticism is a purification process and virtuous life is aligning with God's will. Chavara's life illustrates detachment from worldly distractions and continuous dialogue with the Divine as integral to experiencing God's love. Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes prayer, contemplation, and embracing divine love amidst trials and suffering, with Chavara exemplifying dedication to prayer and trust in divine providence. Compassionate concern for others, seen in Chavara's commitment to serving the marginalized, reflects divine love in action. His life inspires

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embracing spirituality through asceticism, virtuous living, prayer, contemplation, and compassionate service.

Keywords: Love of God, Love of neighbour, Contemplation, Prayer, Humility, Repentance, Compassion, Forgiveness, Purity of heart, Solitude, Obedience, Meditative reading of Scripture, Compassionate service

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's significance in Eastern Christian spirituality lies in his reflective teachings on love, prayer, and the pursuit of a virtuous life. He emphasized the inseparable connection between the love of God and the love of neighbour, advocating for a spirituality that transcends individual contemplation to actively engage with and serve the community. Kuriakose Elias Chavara emerges as a beacon of divine love. His spirituality deeply rooted in the mystical tradition of Eastern Christianity, reflects a harmonious blend of contemplation and compassionate service. Through his writings and exemplary life, Chavara continues to inspire individuals to seek a deeper connection with God, practice love and compassion, and engage in selfless service for the betterment of society. This article explores deeply into the teachings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, with a primary focus on the theme of love within his spiritual viewpoint. To illuminate the profound resonance of his teachings with Eastern spirituality, we turn to St Isaac the Syrian¹, an eminent mystic of the East whose insights enrich our understanding of divine love and union with God. In this exploration, we delve into the spiritual legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara through the lens of Eastern Christian mysticism, drawing parallels with the timeless wisdom of St Isaac the Syrian.

2. Understanding Divine Love

At the heart of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spirituality lies a profound recognition of love of God as the cornerstone of the Christian journey. That is, the love of God is the central point of his spirituality. As in

¹ St Isaac the Syrian, also known as Isaac of Nineveh, was a prominent figure in early Christian monasticism and Eastern Christian spirituality. He lived during the 7th century in present-day Iraq. St. Isaac is renowned for his profound spiritual writings, which explore themes such as the nature of God, the soul's ascent to divine union, and the transformative power of love and humility. His writings have had a lasting influence on Christian mysticism and Eastern spirituality.

Eastern Christian spirituality, he understands the divine love as a lived experience that shapes his spiritual journey. It was the foundation of his relationship with God and the driving force behind his pursuit of holiness and union with the divine. In the depths of his spiritual journey, he came to a profound realization: that God's essence, His very nature, is love. Through his contemplation and personal experience, he understood that God's love knows no bounds, extending infinitely to all beings. Reflecting on this divine truth, he proclaimed, "*ente appan* is most merciful, abounding in love and maintains the compassionate love, which is His very name."² In these words, he encapsulated the essence of his understanding - that God's mercy and love are inseparable, woven into the fabric of His being. For Chavara, God's love was not merely a benevolent attribute but the very essence of His identity. It was a love that surpassed human comprehension, encompassing all beings with its boundless embrace. St Isaac the Syrian beautifully articulates this truth, describing God's act of creation and governance as manifestations of divine love. He says, "In love did He bring the world into existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised."³

2.1. God's Unconditional Love and Mercy

Divine love in Eastern Christianity is characterized by its unconditional and selfless nature. It is freely given by God to all creation, regardless of merit or worthiness. This love is not constrained by human limitations or conditions but flows from the overflowing goodness and mercy of God. God is good, and He results everything for us in order to set us on the upright path. There is no end to the good things He gives. But there is an end to every painful thing He allows.⁴ The Scripture says, "I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth" (Jer 9:24). God loves with an everlasting love, and He is continuing His faithfulness to us (Cf. Jer 31:3). The mercy and love of God is the door which is opened (Cf. Rev 4:1) for all to heaven. It is an open door which no one is able to shut (Cf. Rev 3:8). It is a great door (Cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12) and

² Cf. Z.M., Moozhoor, ed., *Chavarayachente Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. III, *Adhyatmikakruthikal*, Mannanam: CMC Prasadhaka Committee, 2014, 17.

³ S. P. Brock, tr., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian) 'The Second Part,' Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO, Vol. 555, *Scrit. Syri.* 225, Lovanii: Peeters, 1995, 38/2, 160.

⁴ Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 39/15, 169.

a door of faith (Cf. Acts 14:27) which enables the whole human beings to experience the eternal glory with the Lord.⁵

God is so merciful that “He pours over us (His) immense grace that, like the ocean, knows no measure.”⁶ Contemplating the boundless mercy of God, Kuriakose Elias Chavara also found himself awash in gratitude and wonder. In the depths of his soul, he recognized the infinite grace bestowed upon him by the Lord of mercy. With each passing moment he reflected, ‘the Lord of mercy has bestowed on me His choicest graces.’⁷ These gifts, bestowed upon him without reservation or limit, filled his heart with profound joy and gratitude. In the face of such abundant mercy, he couldn’t help but marvel at the magnanimity of the divine. In moments of prayer and reflection, he lifted his voice to the heavens, expressing his gratitude in words that echoed with sincerity and reverence. ‘O Lord,’ he exclaimed, ‘Your ocean of mercy unstinted lavished on me, how happy am I!’⁸ These words were not merely an acknowledgment of blessings received but a heartfelt recognition of the sheer magnitude of God’s benevolence. For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the mercy of God was not just a theological concept but a living reality that infused every aspect of his existence. It was a source of comfort in times of trial, a beacon of hope in moments of despair, and a constant reminder of the divine love that encompassed him.

All the actions of God are directed towards the single eternal good.⁹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, throughout his life, witnessed how all of God’s actions were directed towards the single eternal good. Just as the Scripture proclaims, he understood that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28). He believed that God’s actions, whether they brought relief, joy, or grief, were ultimately aimed at our advantage and directed towards the eternal good. He recognized God’s compassionate nature, always seeking to lead humanity towards righteousness and salvation. He experienced firsthand God’s immense grace, as an ocean without measure, pouring over him and showering him with mercy and

⁵ Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 5/4, 7.

⁶ Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 40/13, 177.

⁷ Cf. Z.M., Moozhoor ed., *Chavarayachente Sampoorna Kruthikal, Vol. II, Sahithyakruthikal, Athmanuthapam*, Mannanam: CMC Prasadhaka Committee, 2014, II:57-58.

⁸ Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, II: 57-58.

⁹ Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 39/3, 163.

love. Through his life and teachings, Chavara exemplified the profound love and mercy of God, inviting others to experience the boundless grace and compassion that he himself had encountered.

In the realm of Eastern Christian teachings, particularly exemplified through the experiences of great mystics, lies a profound understanding of divine protection and providence. It is firmly believed that all individuals are encompassed under the benevolent shield of the merciful God. Isaac the Syrian narrates this care of God:

Often it happens that a man unwittingly travels a road where there lies a wild beast, or murderers, or something of the kind. But the universal providence of God delivers him from injury, either by delaying him on his way for some reason until the dangerous beast has gone off, or by an encounter with someone, to make him turn aside from the road. And again, sometimes a venomous serpent is found lying in the road yet out of sight, but God, not willing to surrender the man to this trial, suddenly makes the serpent hiss and withdraw from the place, or slither out in front of him, and the wayfarer when he sees it is put on his guard, and is saved from it, even though he is undeserving on account of his secret sins, which only he knows; yet God still rescues him, for His mercy's sake. And again, it often happens that a house, or a wall, or a stone is about to fall, and it slips from its place with a splintering sound, but people are found sitting there, and in His love for men God commands an angel to hold it back, and to keep it from falling until they rise up from thence; or else, under a certain pretext, He leads them out, so that no one is found underneath. But as soon as they go out, He straightway lets it fall. And even if it happens that someone is caught, He works the matter so that they are in no way hurt. By this, God wishes to show the infinite magnitude of His power.¹⁰

God protects and guides us all the time, but we can see this protection better when we keep away from sin and focus on God alone. Chavara also believed this and he emphasized the importance of purifying oneself from sin and focusing solely on God. He saw divine providence as a radiant thread woven into the tapestry of life, particularly evident to those who faced challenges in pursuit of truth. He believed that during trials and tribulations, those who maintained unwavering faith

¹⁰ Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Miller D., tr., *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston: HTM, 1984, 7, 65.

in God experienced His presence more tangibly, finding solace and sustenance in His care. For him, purity of heart and devotion led to a deeper experience of divine favor and guidance. He experienced God's providential care as a constant presence, offering comfort and support to those who walked the path of righteousness. That is, God's providence is most clearly perceived by those who live in accordance with His will, remaining steadfast in faith and devotion even in the face of challenges. He emphasized the importance of purity, devotion, and unwavering faith as pathways to experiencing the intimate care and guidance of divine providence in one's life.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spiritual journey, much like that of Eastern mystics is marked by a profound realization of the boundless mercy of God. In contemplating the magnificent nature of divine mercy, he, too, stands in awe of its incomprehensible depths. He marvels at the vastness of God's forgiveness and mercy. In echoing Isaac the Syrian's sentiments, Chavara finds solace and wonder in the unyielding mercy of the Creator. He acknowledges that like a powerful spring that remains unaffected by a small amount of dust, the mercy of God continues to flow ceaselessly, unaffected by the imperfections and mistakes of His creations.¹¹ This profound understanding permeates his spirituality, shaping his perspective on repentance, forgiveness, and the transformative power of divine love. For him, the mercy of God stands as an immutable force, capable of washing away even the deepest stains of sin and offering redemption to all who earnestly seek it. In this shared experience of divine mercy, he bears witness to the unfathomable depths of God's love for His creation, inspiring others to turn to Him with contrite hearts and unwavering trust in His boundless compassion.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's encounters with the boundless love and mercy of God are beautifully articulated throughout his writings. He teaches that divine love is the source of spiritual nourishment, sustaining and nurturing the soul, leading to spiritual growth. He humbly acknowledged humanity's limitations, comparing it to the simplicity of worms, yet marveling at God's tender care, reminiscent of a mother nourishing her children even in their sleep.¹² His faith in God's constant presence and benevolence was unwavering. He believed that the Lord stood beside him always, eager to fulfill his needs and desires without

¹¹ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 51, 244.

¹² Cf. Leo Mary, tr., *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol. IV, The Letters*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, VII/10.

even needing to be asked.¹³ He found immense joy in God's blessings, both worldly and spiritual, declaring that his happiness stemmed from the divine goodness and grace.¹⁴ Moreover, Chavara attributed the growth and success of the Congregation not to human efforts but to the miraculous workings of God, who nurtured it with divine intervention and marvels.¹⁵ He acknowledged that all achievements were not due to his own abilities but rather the work of God's hand, despite feeling unworthy. Through these writings, his experiences of God's boundless love, mercy, and providence resonate profoundly, portraying his unwavering faith and reliance on the divine.

2.2. Eternal and Unchanging Love

In Eastern Christian spirituality, divine love is depicted as timeless and steadfast, never subject to alteration or decay. It existed before time began and will continue for eternity. Unlike human emotions or affections, which may fluctuate or fade over time, God's love remains constant and unwavering. It is a steadfast and enduring force that sustains and upholds the universe. Hence with much affirmation Isaac the Syrian says, "For if it is believed by everyone that the creation came into existence as a result of the Creator's goodness and love, then we know that this original does not ever diminish or change in the Creator's Nature as a result of the disordered course of creation."¹⁶ God is complete in His love, and His love is steadfast in nature. From very eternity this love is same and without change. The Scripture says, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart" (1 Kings 8:23). From every eternity God is one and the same and "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases" (Lam 3:22).

The spirituality of Chavara resonates with the eternal and unchanging nature of divine love as described in Eastern Christian spirituality. Just as Isaac the Syrian emphasizes the immutable nature of God's love, his teachings highlight the eternal constancy of God's love for humanity. In his understanding, divine love transcends the limitations of human emotions, persisting unchanged throughout

¹³ Cf. *The Letters*, VII/6; VII/10.

¹⁴ Cf. *The Letters*, VII/2; VII/7.

¹⁵ Cf. *The Letters*, VI/1.

¹⁶ Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 38/5, 161.

eternity. This steadfast love of God forms the cornerstone of his spiritual foundation. God's love can be experienced as unwavering to those who walk before Him with sincerity and devotion. Chavara could affirm the perpetual nature of God's steadfast love, which endures beyond the confines of time and space. Wrapped in the celestial embrace of divine devotion, his verses resound with the profound conviction that his existence finds purpose and sustenance solely through the boundless love of God, as he eloquently proclaims: 'My love, you are my happiness, how can I live unless you stand by me, you are my breath, you are the drink of life, where can I find comfort except in you.'¹⁷ This poem beautifully encapsulates his deep spirituality, portraying a profound sense of devotion and reliance on a higher power, often interpreted as an expression of love for the divine. In these lines, he poetically articulates his inseparable connection to his beloved, who symbolizes the source of his joy, sustenance, and solace. The opening line, 'My love, you are my happiness,' immediately sets the tone of affection and adoration. Here, 'love' transcends the human realm, embodying the divine presence. This love brings profound joy and fulfillment to Chavara's life, emphasizing the centrality of divine love in his spiritual journey. The subsequent lines, 'how can I live unless you stand by me, you are my breath,' further illustrate his dependence on the divine. Just as one cannot survive without breath, he implies that his existence is intertwined with the presence of his beloved. This dependence signifies a deep spiritual connection, where the divine is not just an abstract concept but an essential aspect of his being. 'You are the drink of life' evokes imagery of sustenance and nourishment. Here, Kuriakose Elias Chavara portrays the divine as the source of spiritual nourishment, essential for his sustenance and growth. This imagery resonates with the concept of spiritual nourishment and the idea that divine love is what truly sustains and fulfills the soul. The next line, 'where can I find comfort except in you,' summarizes the essence of his spirituality. It reflects his belief that true comfort and solace can only be found in the divine presence. This line underscores the idea that the ultimate source of peace and contentment lies in a deep and intimate relationship with the divine. That is, Kuriakose Elias Chavara affirms that his existence is upheld by the everlasting and immutable love of God.

¹⁷ Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, II: 143-144.

3. God's Love Revealed in Jesus Christ

The ultimate revelation of divine love in Eastern Christianity is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The main and only reason for the coming of Jesus on earth is not human sin but divine love. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Jesus Christ was the epitome of divine love. He understood Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection as profound demonstrations of God's love for humanity. He believed that Jesus, as the Incarnation of God, showed the depth of divine love by experiencing human life firsthand and sharing in our joys and sorrows. He viewed Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and subsequent resurrection as the ultimate expression of God's love and mercy. He believed that through these events, God demonstrated His willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to reconcile humanity to Himself and to restore harmony between humanity and the entirety of creation. Through the Incarnation, God revealed Himself to human beings to the highest degree. In turn, human beings are called to respond to this revelation of love with their own love for God. It is the result of Incarnation that human beings are able to attain such a state of love when he becomes like God.¹⁸ Isaac the Syrian describes the great privilege of contemplating God and hearing His Voice that human beings got with Incarnation:

The Word Who became man clothed Himself in it, and therewith He spoke to us in our body. Every man who has been clothed with it has truly been made like unto Him Who came down from His own exaltedness, and did the splendour of His majesty, and concealed His glory with humility, lest creation should be utterly consumed by the contemplation of Him. Creation could not look upon Him unless He took a part of it to Himself, and thus conversed with it, and neither could it hear the words of His mouth face to face.¹⁹

Kuriakose Elias Chavara applied these ideas in his life through his deep understanding and personal experience of the significance of the Incarnation and its call for a response of love towards God. He believed that God, in His infinite mercy, chose to reveal Himself fully to humanity

¹⁸ Cf. H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, CSS, 175, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000, 49-50.

¹⁹ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 77, 381.

through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In response to this profound revelation of love, he endeavored to cultivate a deep and sincere love for God in his own life. He expressed this love through prayer, devotion, and service to others, as he recognized that responding to God's love involves not only words but also actions. He understood that through the Incarnation, human beings have the potential to attain a state of love and likeness to God and believed that by embracing the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, he can grow in holiness and become more like God in his thoughts, words, and deeds. Hence, he sought to emulate the humility, compassion, and selflessness of Christ in his own life, striving to embody the love of God in all his interactions with others. He cherished the privilege afforded to humanity through the Incarnation, which allows for contemplation of and communication with God. He understood that through Jesus Christ, God condescended to speak to humanity in a language they could understand, reaching out to them with words of truth, grace, and salvation. So he valued prayer and meditation as means of communing with God, seeking to listen to His voice and discern His will in his life.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus was the peak point of the sacrificial love of the Divinity. Incarnation refers to this peak point. When reflecting on this mystery, Isaac the Syrian sees the Cross as the bridge to the peaceful abode and the crown of thorns (Cf. Mt 27:29) as the helmet of salvation (Cf. Eph 6:17). With these delightful thoughts, Isaac the Syrian utters this heart-touching prayer which reflects God's great love:

May the Cross of shame which You mounted for my sake become a bridge to that peaceful abode; may the crown of thorns with which Your head was crowned, become for me the *helmet of salvation* on the heated day of battle; may the spit which Your face received prepare me to have an open face before the tribunal at Your advent; may Your holy body which was exposed on the Cross crucify me to this world and its lusts by means of love for You; may Your clothing for which lots were cast tear asunder before my eyes the garment of darkness with which I am inwardly clothed; may the water and blood which came forth from You become for me a document granting liberty from the ancient state of servitude; may Your Body and Your Blood which have been mingled with my body remain within me as a pledge that

I will not be deprived of the constant sight of You in that realm which has no end.²⁰

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's deep connection with the embracing love of God was nurtured through meditative reflection on Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the Cross. This contemplation served as a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration, deepening his understanding of divine love and strengthening his faith. He regarded Jesus' journey to Calvary, His crucifixion, and His death with profound reverence and spiritual significance. In his mystical reflection on Jesus' journey to Calvary, he envisions it as a grand procession, the royal journey of the Divine Bridegroom towards the sacred marriage tent, the *kalyāna pantal*. Adorned with a crown of precious diamonds by His mother, Jesus eagerly anticipates the nuptial procession, dressed in resplendent attire and accompanied by joyful melodies and well-decked comrades. Along the way, He is refreshed with sweet drinks, ensuring His strength for the journey. Finally, as the procession reaches Calvary, the sacred mount, the nuptial ceremony climaxes as the Bridegroom enters His bridal chamber, the Cross.²¹ For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, this journey symbolizes not just suffering but a profound act of love and union, where Jesus willingly embraces His destiny for the sake of divine love, ultimately finding union with the Cross in a sacred marriage.

4. Paths to Divine Love

Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes the importance of asceticism, virtuous life, prayer and contemplation as means of experiencing divine love. Through disciplined spiritual practices, one cultivates intimacy with God and open themselves to the transforming power of His love.

4.1. Asceticism

Asceticism, or the practice of self-discipline and self-denial, plays a central role in Eastern Christian spirituality. The Eastern Fathers view asceticism as a means of purifying the soul from sinful passions and attachments that hinder the experience of divine love. By renouncing worldly pleasures and practicing silence and solitude, fasting, vigil, obedience, and other such activities, one creates space in his life for God's grace to work and for divine love to flourish. The ascetic life, characterized by self-denial and detachment from worldly distractions, creates space for the soul to be filled with divine love. If a man in his

²⁰ Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 5/25, 16.

²¹ Cf. *Atmanuthapam*, VIII.

mind is unbound with the world, Isaac the Syrian considered that as a virtue.²² He says that liberation from the world precedes the bond with God.²³ Abandonment of the world itself is the basement for the experience of love. It is followed by solitude which provides the possibility to converse with God and the constant converse results the experience of love. He illustrates:

From genuine prayer, the love of God is born, for love comes of prayer and prayer from the practice of seclusion. We have need of seclusion that we may have the possibility to converse with God by ourselves. But seclusion is preceded by the abandonment of the world. For, if a man does not first abandon the world and abstain from all therein, he will not be able to dwell in solitude. And again, abandonment of the world is preceded by patient endurance. Patience is preceded by hatred of the world, and hatred of the world is preceded by fear and yearning. ... If the mind has not first acquired patience, a man will be unable to choose a wild and desolate place, bereft of any inhabitants. And if he does not choose for himself a life of seclusion, he will be unable to persevere in prayer. And if he does not constantly converse with God and continue in those deliberations and ruminations which are conjoined to prayer, and in the various forms of prayer's teaching, then he will never gain experience of love.²⁴

Kuriakose Elias Chavara emphasized the importance of detachment from worldly distractions and attachments as a necessary step towards deepening one's relationship with God. He believed that by freeing oneself from the influences of the world, one could create space in their hearts and minds to focus on God's presence and guidance. He viewed the abandonment of worldly concerns and desires as foundational to experiencing divine love. It is his vision that by letting go of worldly pursuits and placing God at the center of one's life, one could open themselves up to the transformative power of God's love. For this, he valued solitude and considered it a means of fostering intimacy with God. He believed that withdrawing from the busyness of the world allowed one to engage in meaningful conversation with God through prayer, reflection, and meditation. In the quietude of solitude, Kuriakose

²² Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 1/6, 4.

²³ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 1/29, 7.

²⁴ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 303-304.

Elias Chavara found that one could experience God's presence more deeply and listen attentively to His voice. He says:

When a soul delights in solitude, Jesus Christ will come to converse with it in solitude and begin communing with it. At first you will not understand the language. Then it is that the Lord will lead you to the wine-cellar and pour out some wine for you - a little at first. In course of time you will begin to understand the language. When your spouse sees that you understand His speech, He will speak more and more distinctly and show you the magnitude of His love. Then the bride will love more and the bridegroom will rejoice over it and adorn her with ornaments. Thus commences the divine union.²⁵

Kuriakose Elias Chavara advocated for a life characterized by continuous dialogue with God. He believed that maintaining a constant awareness of God's presence and actively engaging in conversation with Him throughout the day nurtured a vibrant and enduring relationship with the Divine. Through this ongoing communion with God, one could cultivate a deep and abiding experience of divine love. In the spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the journey towards experiencing God's love is intricately linked with the process of detachment from the world, seeking solitude for intimate conversation with God, and fostering a continuous and heartfelt relationship with the Divine. These principles guide one on a path of spiritual growth and transformation, leading to a profound encounter with God's boundless love and grace.

4.2. Virtuous Life

In Eastern Christian spirituality, the importance of living a virtuous life as a means of embracing divine love is foundational. Virtue is seen as essential for spiritual growth and union with God. By cultivating virtues, individuals align themselves with the divine will and open themselves to the transformative power of God's love. Isaac the Syrian says that without attaining perfection in virtues, no man can acquire purity, which is the requirement for perfect love.²⁶ Chavara also believed that attaining the divine love is intimately connected to the cultivation of virtues in daily life. As individuals cultivate virtues, such as, humility, repentance, compassion, forgiveness, purity of heart and obedience their lives become radiant with the transformative power of divine love, influencing their interactions and relationships. They provide a

²⁵ *The Letters*, VII/8.

²⁶ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 34, 157.

framework for living a life that is aligned with the teachings of Jesus Christ and reflective of God's love and grace.

4.2.1. Humility

Humility is considered the mother of all other virtues by the Eastern Church Fathers, both Greek and Syriac.²⁷ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, known for his holiness and dedication to serving God and others, exemplified humility in his life and teachings. He understood humility as encompassing love and compassion, reflecting God's own model. He recognized that true humility expresses fervent love and respect towards one's neighbor, seeking their good above one's own interests. He emphasized that humility entails honoring and respecting others, acknowledging their dignity as fellow creations of God. By showing honor and respect, one cultivates gentleness and humbleness, mirroring the attitude of Christ. He believed that by embodying humility, individuals contribute to reconciliation and healing in relationships and communities, fostering unity and peace. He understands humility as an inner virtue that requires genuine love and spiritual insight. It is not merely outward humility but springs from a heart filled with love and understanding of God's will. He emphasized the importance of meekness and kindness, even towards those who provoke or mistreat us. True humility enables individuals to respond with patience and grace, reflecting the character of Jesus Christ in challenging situations. The life of Chavara teaches that true humility enables individuals to see others through the lens of God's boundless compassion and it involves recognizing the potential for goodness and redemption in every person, regardless of their current moral condition. He understood that those who acquire true humility are blessed, as they are continually drawn close to Jesus' heart. Humility opens the way for a deeper communion with God and participation in His divine love and mercy. Even animals can sense this sort of genuine humility. At the sight of a humble person, their ferocity will calm and they will approach him as he is their own master. Isaac the Syrian asserts:

The humble approaches the beasts of prey and as soon as their eye rests on him, their wildness is tamed and they come to him and accompany him as their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and his feet. For they smell from him the smell which spread from Adam before his transgression, when the beasts gathered near

²⁷ Cf. T. Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, Gythiel A. P., tr., CistSS, 79, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986, 88.

him and he gave them names, in Paradise - the smell which was taken from us and given back to us anew by Christ through His advent, which made the smell of the human race sweet.²⁸

Kuriakose Elias Chavara professed humility as his fourth vow and was humble in all his words and deeds. He embraced humility as the foundation of all his virtues. He exemplified humility through his acts of service to others. He tirelessly worked for the welfare of the poor and the marginalized, considering it a privilege to serve those in need. His life was a testament to the belief that true greatness is found in selfless service. Despite his significant contributions to the Church and society, he remained humble and unassuming. He never sought recognition or praise for his works but instead directed all glory to God. His humility was evident in his simple lifestyle and his willingness to embrace the lowliest tasks. He treated everyone with respect and kindness, regardless of their social status or background. He humbly interacted with people from all walks of life, showing compassion and empathy towards their struggles. His gentle demeanor and humility endeared him to many, making him a beloved figure in his community. Humility was a central theme in Chavara's personal prayer and reflection. He constantly sought to cultivate humility in his own heart, recognizing his own limitations and dependence on God's grace. His deep humility was rooted in his profound sense of God's presence and providence in his life. He embraced God's will with humility and trust, even in the face of adversity and suffering. He saw every trial as an opportunity to grow in humility and faith, surrendering himself completely to God's plan for his life. The life and teachings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplify the transformative influence of humility in the spiritual path, enabling him to wholeheartedly embrace divine love.

4.2.2. Repentance

In Eastern Christian spirituality, repentance is seen as the gateway to divine love, as it opens the heart to receive God's grace and mercy. Through sincere repentance, individuals are restored to communion with God and are empowered to live lives characterized by love, humility, and virtue. Central to the concept of repentance in Eastern Christianity is the belief in God's boundless mercy and forgiveness. Repentance has given to human beings as a grace beyond grace. It is a

²⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises*, Wensinck A. J., tr., *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Nieuwe Reeks Deel 23.1, Wiesbaden, 1969, 82/577, 386.

second birth in God. That of which we have received by Baptism, we receive by means of repentance.²⁹ Isaac the Syrian says, “Repentance is a second grace; it is born in the heart from faith and fear. Fear is the paternal rod which guides us up to the spiritual Eden.”³⁰ This world is an ocean, and we have to cross this ocean to reach the divine love. Repentance, which is the ship and fear, the pilot helps us to cross over the sea of this world to God.³¹

The life of Chavara epitomized repentance as he continually sought spiritual purification and renewal. His journey was marked by a profound humility, acknowledging his own shortcomings and sins before God. He embraced repentance not as a one-time event but as a daily practice, recognizing the need for ongoing conversion of heart and mind. His genuine sorrow for past mistakes and steadfast dedication to improvement were clear signs of his contrite spirit. As a man deeply immersed in the mysteries of Christ, he humbly regarded himself as the most ungrateful of creatures, feeling undeserving even of the title of humanity. He referred to himself as a sinner in numerous instances, acknowledging his shortcomings and faults. Moreover, he expressed his unworthiness by describing himself as a great sinner and the most unworthy one, emphasizing his profound sense of inadequacy. He saw himself as the wicked one and devoid of inner light, highlighting his recognition of his own moral frailty. He considered himself the least among others, devoid of abilities, and likened himself to one who is deaf, dumb, blind, idiotic, and destitute, illustrating his deep humility and self-awareness.³²

Through repentance, he found solace in the mercy of God, fervently seeking reconciliation and communion with the divine. His life serves as a testament to the transformative power of repentance, inspiring others to embrace humility, seek forgiveness, and strive for spiritual growth.

4.2.3. Compassion and Forgiveness

In Eastern Christian spirituality, compassion and forgiveness are deeply rooted in the theological understanding of God’s mercy and love for humanity. The concept encompasses both the divine compassion extended to humanity and the call for believers to embody compassion

²⁹ Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 43, 210.

³⁰ Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 43, 210.

³¹ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 46, 224-225.

³² Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, I:129; III:55; II: 242; VII:162.

and forgiveness in their own lives. God's boundless compassion and love for humanity is exemplified in the Incarnation of Christ, who enters into human suffering to redeem and reconcile humanity to God. The example of Christ's self-sacrificial love serves as a model for believers to follow, inspiring acts of compassion and forgiveness towards all people, regardless of their actions or beliefs.

As human person is the image and likeness of God, a compassionate heart is the reflection of God's own compassion and mercy. It is God's own love and mercy flowing through human hearts. Isaac the Syrian says: "There is nothing which brings the heart as near to God as mercy."³³ It enflames knowledge in the soul as oil feeds the flame of the torch.³⁴ A person with a merciful heart always shows compassion towards his neighbour and does not venture to repay for the sufferings caused by them. Isaac the Syrian claims: "Merciful is he, who shows his compassion towards his neighbour not only in gifts, but who after hearing or seeing anything that causes suffering to any one, cannot withhold his heart from burning; who, even if he receives a blow on his cheek from his brother, does not venture to repay him even with a word and so cause him to suffer intellectually."³⁵ He has compassion on all without making any distinction.³⁶ It makes him more and more in the likeness of God. His mind as well as his body becomes immerse in spiritual things spontaneously. Isaac the Syrian describes this Gospel way of a merciful man:

And further, a man must not merely with joy suffer injustice as regards his possessions and the rest of the external things which come upon him, but he must also lay down his life for his brother. This is the merciful man, and not he that simply shows mercy to his brother by giving him something. And whoever burns within his heart when he sees or hears of something that grieves his brother, such a one is truly merciful, as is also the man who being slapped by his brother does not act shamelessly and answer abusively, thus grieving his brother's heart.³⁷

³³ Hansbury, tr., *St. Isaac of Nineveh on Ascetical Life*, New York: SVS Press, 1989, 4/77, 76.

³⁴ Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 46, 221.

³⁵ Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 4, 30.

³⁶ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 6, 54.

³⁷ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 4, 30-31.

The life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a living testament to the profound intertwining of compassion and forgiveness. He embodied the essence of mercy by forgiving his debtors, rising above the narrow path of retribution to maintain tranquility and radiance throughout his being. His compassion extended far beyond material possessions, encompassing a willingness to surrender his very life for the sake of others. He understood that true mercy involves not only giving but also enduring injustices with joy, following the Gospel command to give without expecting in return. His compassion, rooted in the likeness of God's own mercy, propelled him to become a healer of souls, offering himself as a living sacrifice for the salvation of others. He approached every individual with a heart full of empathy and understanding, recognizing the inherent dignity of each person as a beloved child of God. His commitment to forgiveness mirrored God's unconditional love, as he extended grace and reconciliation even to those who had wronged him. His life was a testament to the transformative power of forgiveness, demonstrating that true strength lies not in holding onto grudges but in embracing the healing freedom found in pardoning others. His compassion knew no bounds, as he tirelessly worked to alleviate the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed, showing kindness and solidarity to all. Like a true martyr, he implored mercy on the world, sharing in the suffering of all humanity, whether righteous or sinful. His life exemplified Isaac's vision of the merciful man - a deliverer, a soother, a defender, and ultimately, a living martyr for the cause of love and redemption.³⁸ Kuriakose Elias Chavara's compassionate and forgiving nature shines through various instances: he patiently taught Syriac to Philipose, a forty year old seminarian despite challenges, praised the ascetic practices of Antony Kudakachira's monastery despite past conflict, and showed love and sympathy to Antony Thondanad, aiding his return to the Church despite his previous involvement in troubles. Despite facing rejection and humiliation from his own parish, he responded with forgiveness and love. He never harbored ill-feelings and continued to serve and support the parish.³⁹ These examples illustrate his embodiment of the love of God through his service to others, regardless of their circumstances or past actions, showcasing his unwavering commitment to forgiveness and compassion. Kuriakose Elias Chavara found profound comfort and

³⁸ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 64, 312-314.

³⁹ Cf. T. Panthaplackal, "Blessed Chavara A Brief History," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*, 16, 1 (2005), 15.

meaning in the embrace of divine love, a journey marked by forgiveness and compassion. Through these virtues, he opened his heart to the transformative power of grace, experiencing spiritual growth and enlightenment.

4.2.4. Purity of Heart

Purity of heart in Eastern Christian spirituality signifies the inner cleanliness and integrity of one's thoughts, desires, and intentions, aligning them with the will of God. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, it involves a constant pursuit of spiritual cleansing through repentance, prayer, and ascetic practices, aiming for freedom from worldly attachments and distractions. This single-minded devotion to God fosters a deep communion with the divine, leading to the transformative experience of union with God. Purity of heart encompasses a holistic transformation of the entire person, guiding individuals towards inner harmony and wholeness as they journey towards the ultimate goal of spiritual perfection. According to the Eastern tradition, the disposition of the constant loving awareness of God is stemming from the purity of heart.⁴⁰ To keep purity in our mind and heart, we need to create hatred towards sin and must ready to uproot the origins of passions from within.⁴¹ Hence Isaac the Syrian warns: "Set every small desire at naught, that you may not ponder upon the vehemence of its burning. For patience, shown for a short time with respect to small matters disperses the danger of great ones. It is impossible to overcome great evils, if you do not subdue with lesser."⁴² As long as we carry evils in ourselves, we shall not be able to perceive their malodour, and if we do not hate them, we cannot smell the stench of their activity. Isaac the Syrian says, "Withdraw from evil, and immediately you will comprehend its malodour. For if you do not withdraw, you will never learn it, nay rather, you will put on its stench like a beautiful fragrance, and you will reckon the nakedness of your shame to be a veil of glory."⁴³

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, characterized by his purity of heart, exemplifies a life liberated from worldly affairs, directing his mind towards God and divine matters. Through an unwavering commitment

⁴⁰ Cf. S.P. Brock, "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition," *Sobornost* 4/2 (1982), 141.

⁴¹ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 151-152.

⁴² Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 154.

⁴³ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 152.

to purity, he cultivated an increasing love for divine mysteries, recognizing the necessity of detesting sin and eradicating passions within. He understood that withdrawal from evil unveils its foulness, enabling spiritual growth and the bearing of new fruits in Christ. For him, the heart remained the focal point, a vessel for constant awareness of God and contemplation of divine mysteries. This purity of heart not only enabled him to participate in God's purity but also guided him towards perfection. On his deathbed, Kuriakose Elias Chavara expressed gratitude for God's grace, acknowledging that he was able to maintain the purity bestowed upon him through baptism. For him, purity served as the conduit through which he could fully embrace divine love, allowing its transformative essence to permeate every aspect of his being.

4.2.5. Obedience

In Eastern Christian spirituality, obedience is a transformative practice essential for embracing divine love, as it fosters humility, trust, and self-emptying. By submitting to the will of God as expressed through spiritual authorities, individuals dismantle barriers of pride and self-centeredness, opening their hearts to receive God's grace more fully. Obedience nurtures trust in the providence and wisdom of God, as individuals learn to rely not on their own understanding but on the guidance of those who are spiritually more advanced. This trust deepens the bond of love between the individual and God, as it reflects a willingness to submit to divine guidance even when it may be difficult or challenging. Furthermore, obedience cultivates a spirit of self-emptying and sacrifice, mirroring the example of Christ who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death on the cross. By imitating Christ's obedience, individuals participate in His self-giving love, which leads to a deeper communion with God and a fuller experience of divine love. In Eastern Christian spirituality, obedience is not merely a matter of external compliance, but a profound spiritual discipline that shapes the heart and soul, enabling individuals to embrace and embody the divine love more fully in their lives. Through humility, trust, and self-emptying, obedience becomes a pathway to union with God, where divine love flows freely and abundantly into the hearts of those who seek it.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplifies the profound connection between obedience and embracing divine love in Eastern Christian spirituality through his life of devotion and submission to the will of

God. As a man deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, he understood obedience not as a mere adherence to external rules but as a spiritual discipline aimed at aligning his will with the Divine. Through embracing obedience to his spiritual mentors and superiors, he nurtured humility, trust, and self-emptying, thereby opening himself to the boundless love of God. His steadfast adherence mirrored Christ's obedience even unto death, illustrating a profound submission to Divine guidance and providence. His commitment to obedience served as a channel for his profound communion with God, allowing divine love to saturate his entire being. As he submitted to the will of God through obedience to his spiritual authorities, he found his path illuminated by the radiant presence of divine love, guiding him ever closer to union with the Divine. His obedience was not merely an obligation but a transformative practice that infused his life with the richness of God's love, leading him on a journey of spiritual growth and fulfillment.

4.2.6. Meditative Reading of the Scripture

In Eastern Christian spirituality, Scripture plays a central and indispensable role in embracing divine love as it serves as a primary source of revelation and guidance for understanding God's nature, His will, and His love for humanity. Through the reading, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture, individuals deepen their understanding of God's love as revealed through the life, teachings, and salvific work of Jesus Christ. Scripture serves as a living word that nourishes the soul, leading individuals into deeper intimacy with God and fostering a personal relationship with Him. Through the study, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture, individuals are invited into a sacred dialogue with God, wherein divine love is encountered and embraced. By immersing oneself in Scripture, individuals cultivate a deeper intimacy with God and a heightened awareness of His abiding love, thereby facilitating a profound embrace of divine love in their lives. Isaac the Syrian asserts: "The reading (of Scripture) manifestly is the fountainhead that gives to prayer - and by these (two things) we are transported in the direction of the love of God whose sweetness is poured out continually in our hearts like honey or a honeycomb, and our souls exult at the taste which the hidden ministry (of prayer) and the reading (of Scripture) pour into our hearts."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 29/5, 131.

Chavara's embrace of divine Love was deeply rooted in his constant meditative reading of Scripture, a practice he held dear for its transformative power. Through the Scriptures, he found a pathway to keep his mind dwelling continually in heaven, fostering a perpetual conversation with God in every moment. This habit acted as a barrier, blocking the door of his mind against worldly distractions, smoothing his journey towards God with an illuminated path free from darkness. Reflective reading of Scripture ensured purity in his soul, enlightening his prayers and guiding him towards contemplation. For him, making a habit of reading Scripture regularly was like keeping a light shining in his soul. He believed it helped him remember important things, like staying away from things that could lead him away from God, and it also strengthened his connection with God through love and prayer. To him, Scripture was akin to an ocean of spiritual wisdom, its depths holding pearls of meaning that captivated his heart and soul, compelling him to forsake the world's distractions. The enlightenment gained from these mysteries fueled his inclination towards the love of God, leading him to forget worldly concerns and focus solely on understanding and embracing divine love.

In resonance with the traditions of the Eastern Fathers, Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spirituality resonates deeply with the teachings of Scripture. His literary works are imbued with profound biblical allusions and references, showcasing a devout adherence to a Scripture-centered approach to spirituality. Drawing from the rich wellspring of Biblical wisdom, he weaves together theological insights and practical guidance, inviting his followers to engage deeply with the sacred texts as a source of spiritual nourishment and guidance. Through his writings, he underscores the timeless relevance of Scripture in shaping one's spiritual journey and fostering a profound connection with the divine love.

4.3. Prayer and Contemplation

In Eastern Christian spirituality, prayer and contemplation play vital roles in embracing divine love. Through prayer, individuals engage in direct communion with God, expressing their love, gratitude, and desires. This dialogue fosters a deepening of the relationship between the individual and the divine, creating an intimate connection characterized by trust and surrender. Contemplation, on the other hand, involves quieting the mind and opening the heart to receive divine guidance and illumination. Through contemplative practices such as

meditation, individuals seek to align their will with the will of God, allowing divine love to permeate every aspect of their being. By cultivating a life of prayer and contemplation, according to Eastern spirituality, individuals can experience the transformative power of divine love, leading to spiritual growth, inner peace, and union with God. Isaac the Syrian says, "From genuine prayer, the love of God is born, for love comes of prayer."⁴⁵ Isaac claims that it is only by constant converse with God, continuous meditations and reflections on things which are conjoined to prayer and by various forms of prayer's teaching that one can attain the experience of love.⁴⁶

Constancy in prayer is an attitude of the soul towards God, which shows her intimacy and nearness with Him. Isaac writes: "Sit before his face at all times, thinking of him and recollecting him in your heart. Otherwise, if you only come to see him after a long interval, you will not be able to speak freely with him because of your sense of shame. Freedom of speech is born from constancy; such constancy among men concerns only the things of the body, but with God, it is the attitude of the soul, and the nearness brought about by prayer."⁴⁷ As a swimmer dives into the sea until he finds a pearl, one has to keep constancy in prayer, until he finds in himself the Pearl, Jesus Christ, the love of God.⁴⁸ Constant memory of God generates love in the heart. Constant prayer in the heart is the continuous expression of this love. Contemplation is a highest mystical stage, which leads the soul towards the love of God. In Isaac's view, it is an experience of the departure from this world and participation in the world to come.⁴⁹

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was known for his profound dedication to prayer and contemplation. He emphasized the importance of prayer, meditation and contemplation as ways to experience God's love and deepen one's relationship with Him. For him, prayer was not merely a ritualistic act but a profound conversation with God, where he poured out his heart, expressed his gratitude, and sought divine guidance. Through prayer, he cultivated a deep intimacy with God, nurturing a relationship built on love, trust, and surrender. He engaged in contemplation as a means of deepening his spiritual connection and

⁴⁵ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 303.

⁴⁶ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 304.

⁴⁷ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 5, 48.

⁴⁸ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 48, 231-232.

⁴⁹ Cf. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 226.

understanding of God's will. In moments of quiet reflection and meditation, he sought to quiet his mind, allowing space for divine wisdom and illumination to penetrate his soul. Through contemplative practices, he opened himself to receive insights and guidance from the divine, leading him closer to the heart of God. Through meditation, he experienced God's mercy and compassion profoundly. He saw Jesus as his Master and Teacher who taught him to pray and to meditate. He addressed Jesus as 'Appa' (Father) in his meditation, symbolizing a close, filial relationship with God.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was deeply devoted to prayer and contemplation, showing a strong preference for being alone to focus on his spiritual connection. He symbolically portrayed his desire for a solitary union with the divine by likening the act of enclosing his heart within the tabernacle of Jesus.⁵⁰ He listened attentively to the voice of Jesus, whom he considered his beloved spouse.⁵¹ He observes that in prayer and contemplation, love creates an environment where communication flows effortlessly, guided by an inherent wisdom within the heart. Even in moments of uncertainty, when love unites two souls, dialogue flourishes and they are drawn together naturally. In his work 'Colloquies,' the concept of meditation is beautifully expressed as a dialogue with God, a heartfelt conversation between intimate companions united with the divine. He portrays this communion as akin to friends sitting closely together, effortlessly finding endless topics to discuss out of their mutual love. In this profound relationship, words become secondary as the heart itself communicates in its own language. The mere presence of these friends, without the need for verbal exchange, brings comfort and warmth to the soul, illustrating the depth and richness of meditative prayer.⁵²

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a man deeply devoted to contemplation, infused his every moment with prayer and communion with the divine. His spiritual practice was not confined to designated times or places but permeated every aspect of his being, as he saw the sacred in the ordinary and the mundane. Inspired by his commitment to prayer, he entered into a covenant with God, a sacred pact wherein he dedicated every heartbeat, every blink of his eyes, every breath he took, and even the

⁵⁰ Cf. *The Letters*, VII/9.

⁵¹ Cf. *The Letters*, VII/7.

⁵² Cf. *Colloquies*, 2.

smallest sounds of nature as offerings to the divine.⁵³ This was not merely a superficial gesture but a profound union of his entire being with the works of the Lord. In his view, every aspect of existence was an opportunity for prayerful connection, an avenue through which he could express his devotion and seek divine presence. His prayer life was characterized by a continuous dialogue with the divine. With each breath, he whispered the mantra, "O Lord, do not separate from us until we are one with you,"⁵⁴ a constant invocation of unity and oneness with the divine presence. This mantra was not just a repetition of words but a heartfelt plea for spiritual union, a desire to dissolve the boundaries between himself and the divine until they became one. Through his unwavering commitment to prayer in every movement, he embodied the essence of contemplative spirituality. His life serves as a testament to the transformative power of prayer, reminding us that true communion with the divine is not limited by time or space but can be found in the rhythm of our breath, the beating of our hearts, and the very fabric of existence itself. He writes to the sisters: "Above all learn the art of loving Jesus Christ. Stay constantly in His presence. Walk along with Him. Converse with Him continuously."⁵⁵

5. Finding Divine Love amidst Trials

In Eastern Christian spirituality, embracing Divine love in trials and sufferings involves surrendering to God through prayer, finding solace in mystical union with Christ, and understanding the redemptive power of the Cross as the ultimate expression of divine love. Individuals cultivate patience, endurance, and compassion, trusting in God's providence and serving others amidst their own struggles. Anchored in the hope of the resurrection, they find strength and transformation, knowing that even in the midst of adversity, God's love sustains and ultimately redeems all suffering, leading to eternal communion with Him. Suffering borne from free will is a manifestation of love. Isaac the Syrian says, "A little trouble for God's sake is more excellent in God's eyes than much service without suffering."⁵⁶ Thus suffering serves as an excellent means to embrace the love of God. God opens His door of

⁵³ Cf. *The Letters*, VII/3.

⁵⁴ *The Letters*, VI/6.

⁵⁵ *The Letters*, VII/6.

⁵⁶ Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 34, 150.

mercy, reveals His mysteries and boosts up with His love to those who endure trials and tribulations for His sake.

The experience of feeling abandoned or undergoing spiritual desolation is also serve as a means to embracing divine love in Eastern Christian spirituality by deepening one's reliance on God's grace and fostering a more profound spiritual intimacy. This stage of spiritual darkness prompts individuals to surrender their ego and self-will entirely to God, allowing divine love to fill the void left by the absence of familiar comforts. By embracing the darkness as a sacred space for encounter with the divine, individuals can cultivate a more profound trust in God's providence, leading to a transformative union with divine love that transcends the limitations of human understanding. Thus, the experience of abandonment becomes a path to deeper communion with God, wherein individuals discover that divine love remains steadfast and unwavering, even in the midst of apparent darkness. Isaac the Syrian claims, "Let us not be troubled when we are found in darkness, especially if the cause of it is not in us. But reckon this as the work of God's providence for a reason which He alone knows."⁵⁷

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, embraced divine love during his trials and sufferings through a life dedicated to prayer, service, and complete trust in God's providence. Despite facing numerous challenges, facing physical ailments like rheumatic fever and loss of vision, as well as mental sufferings such as the opposition of his parents to his divine calling, the loss of his family to epidemic, familial pressure to abandon his vocation after the death of his parents and brother, and the threats posed by the schism in the Malabar Church, his faith in divine providence remained unshaken. Despite facing impediments during the construction of the monastery and the risk of losing monasteries to forceful occupation by schismatics, he found refuge in his unwavering trust in God's plan. Through these trials, he maintained steadfastness in his faith, demonstrating resilience and reliance on divine guidance despite overwhelming challenges.⁵⁸ He maintained unwavering faith in divine providence. He found solace and strength in his deep prayer life, relying on God's guidance and grace to navigate difficult situations. His suffering became a source of sanctification and a testament to his trust in God's love and mercy. His firm trust in divine love enabled him to persevere through adversity with humility, patience, and compassion,

⁵⁷ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 50, 241.

⁵⁸ Cf. Panthaplackal, "Blessed Chavara A Brief History," 18.

leaving a profound legacy of faith, holiness, and service to inspire others in their own journeys of embracing God's love amidst trials and sufferings. His motto 'The Lord is my portion' reflects his unwavering trust in God's providence and his willingness to surrender to God's will even with personal loss and challenges.

6. Compassionate Concern for Others

Eastern Christianity teaches that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, showing compassionate concern for others is not merely a moral duty but also a recognition of the divine presence in each person. By loving and caring for others, individuals honor the image of God within them. Through the Incarnation, God revealed His boundless love for humanity. Compassionate concern for others is seen as participating in this divine love, as individuals are called to imitate Christ's selfless love and compassion for all. It is the contemplation in action. At the same time, it is the fulfillment of the commandment of love.⁵⁹ Isaac the Syrian explains: "I mean the love of God, and what He taught to be the like of this: love unto His image. The possession of the former is the aim of spiritual contemplation; that of the second, of contemplation and practice."⁶⁰ The excellent love of neighbour illumines one's mind by constant contact with and love unto God.⁶¹ Through external deeds one expresses this love openly. It is love in practice.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, known for his deep spirituality and commitment to serving others, shared divine love through compassion and concern for others in various ways. He recognized the importance of education in uplifting society and promoting the dignity of every individual. He initiated to establish schools to provide education, especially to the marginalized and underprivileged sections of society, regardless of caste or creed. Through education, he sought to empower individuals to fulfill their potential and contribute positively to society. He was a strong advocate for the empowerment of women in society. He established religious congregation for women, providing them with opportunities for education and spiritual growth. He was deeply committed to promoting social justice and equality. He spoke out against social evils such as caste discrimination and worked to create a more just

⁵⁹ Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 81, 381.

⁶⁰ Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 81, 381.

⁶¹ Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 4, 32.

and equitable society. He advocated for the rights of the poor and oppressed, providing them with practical assistance and support to improve their lives. As a spiritual leader, Kuriakose Elias Chavara inspired others through his exemplary life of prayer, humility, and service. He lived a simple and austere life, dedicating himself to prayer, contemplation, and the pursuit of holiness. His life of holiness and virtue attracted many followers, who were inspired by his love for God and neighbor. He demonstrated compassion and care for the sick, the elderly, and the marginalized. He personally tended to the sick and suffering, offering them comfort and solace in their time of need. Generally, Kuriakose Elias Chavara shared divine love through his compassionate concern for others, particularly the marginalized and vulnerable members of society. Through these he taught that genuine love for God manifests in acts of service and charity toward others, embodying the selfless love of Christ. He dedicated himself to God through acts of love and service, sharing his divine experiences with others. He saw his actions as expressions of his devotion and understanding of God's will, striving to guide others towards spiritual growth and union with the divine.

7. Conclusion

The spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, viewed through the lens of Eastern Christian tradition, unveils profound insights into the essence of divine love, mercy, and providence. Rooted deeply in the mystical tradition of Eastern Christianity, Kuriakose Elias Chavara's teachings resonate with the timeless wisdom of Eastern mystics like St Isaac the Syrian, highlighting love as the cornerstone of the Christian spirituality. His spirituality emphasizes the inseparable connection between the love of God and the love of neighbor. Central to his spiritual journey is the realization of God's unconditional and eternal love, epitomized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through contemplation on Christ's sacrificial love, he finds inspiration and solace, viewing the crucifixion not as mere suffering but as a grand procession towards union with the divine. His spiritual legacy underscores the transformative power of divine love, nurturing the soul and leading to spiritual growth and fulfillment. Through his writings and exemplary life, Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplifies the profound impact of experiencing God's boundless love, mercy, and providence, inspiring others to cultivate deep relationships with the divine.

In essence, Kuriakose Elias Chavara emerges as a beacon of divine love, inviting individuals to embrace the transformative power of love, live lives rooted in compassion and service, and journey towards union with the divine. His spirituality offers profound insights into asceticism, virtuous living, and the meditative reading of Scripture as pathways to divine love, guiding individuals towards spiritual renewal and a fuller experience of God's boundless love. Through prayer, contemplation, and compassionate concern for others, his life exemplifies the resilience and transformative power of divine love, reminding us that true fulfillment is found in embracing divine love and the overflowing of divine love as actions towards humanity, echoing the profound spirituality of Eastern Christianity.

EASTERN CHRISTIAN ASCETIC IDEAL OF “MOURNING” (PENTHOS) AND THE ATMANUTHAPAM OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Geo Pallikunnel CMI♦

Abstract: Compunction of the heart is an ascetic ideal practised both in the East and the West to reach the monastic way of perfection. The present article attempts to understand this Eastern ascetic ideal in the life and works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, especially in *Atmanuthapam*. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. In the Syriac tradition anchorites were called ‘mourners’ (*‘abīlē*). Different spiritual authors are witnesses to this ascetic ideal of compunction of the heart both in the desert and in the Syriac traditions. Kuriakose Elias Chavara follows the tradition of compunction of the soul. His spiritual work *Atmanuthapam* is a witness to it.

Keywords: East Syriac Tradition, *Penthos*, Compunction of the Heart, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Metanoia*, *Catanyxis*, *Iḥidāyā*, *‘abīlā*, Mourners, *Ruhānūtā*, Ascetic ideal, Spirituality

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1. Introduction

Asceticism is a transformative path toward the union with the divine both in the East and in the West. Asceticism became a mass movement in the East, especially in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts and its east in the 3rd and 4th century, which we later called monasticism. At the heart of Eastern Christian asceticism lies the profound ideal of “compunction of the heart/soul” – remorse and mourning over the past sins. This concept, deeply rooted in the spiritual and monastic traditions, is one of the important ascetical ideals in the spiritual progress, leading to deep repentance, humility, and a transformative journey toward the Divine. Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) is a modern ascetic and monk in Kerala, India, in the Thomas Christian (present Syro Malabar) tradition, which is part of the larger East Syriac tradition. Deep repentance and compunction marked his spirituality, and his work *Atmanuthapam*¹ aptly present this theme in a vivid way. In this article, we try to explore the eastern Christian ascetic ideal of “compunction of the heart” and the resulting “mourning” and tears in the desert fathers and Syriac spiritual writers very briefly in order to understand the compunction of the soul in the spirituality of Chavara. First of all, let us understand the concept of mourning in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature briefly and then examine it in the *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

2. Terms and Concepts

Compunction (of the heart/soul) is an ascetic ideal in the Eastern Christian spirituality. We here briefly describe the terms used in order to get an idea of their use in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature. The third beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount can be considered the biblical basis of compunction: “Blessed are those who mourn (πενθουντες/ܡܢܕܝܢܝܢ), for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4).

Penthos (πένθος) is the Greek word (or its derivatives) that the spiritual authors used in their writings to denote compunction. *Penthos* means grief, sorrow (from *pentheo*, means bewail, lament, mourn) etc.² According to the linguists, this word has the same origin/root with the words *pathos* (πάθος), meaning suffering, passion, etc., (though it is not

¹ *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, vol. 2, translated by Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989. Quotations from the *Atmanuthapam* used in this article are taken from this translation.

² Liddle-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition with a revised supplement, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 1360.

its primary meaning), and *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια) means passionlessness,³ an ascetic ideal in the East. According to I. Hausherr "a synonym, or nearly that, of *penthos* is *catanyxis* (κατάνυξις)."⁴ But this word is more of "that pricking of the heart, or conscience, which acts as a catalyst to repentant thoughts and deeds. It is an essential component of the whole process of mourning for sin, and may be distinguished from *penthos* in that it tends to refer to a particular moment of awakening, the physical sensation of the heart being pricked, whereas mourning is more of a continuous movement."⁵

In the Syriac ascetic literature the common word used for mourning/sorrow is 'abīlūtā/'abīltā (ܐܒܝܠܘܬܐ/ܐܒܝܠܬܐ, from the root ܐܒܠ, means 'to mourn').⁶ The one who is a mourner is called 'abīlā (ܐܒܝܠܐ) and in the Syriac tradition such a person is an ascetic or a monk (*iḥidāyā*).

Atmanuthapam (ആത്മാനുതാപം), is the Malayalam word (from Sanskrit) used by Kuriakose Elias Chavara to denote the compunction of the soul/self, and it is a composite word. *Ātma* is self or soul or even spirit. *Anuthāpam*, which itself is a composite word of *anu* (after, following, under) + *thāpam* (heat) is the word used for repentance or remorse.⁷ *Anuthāpam* is the intense heat emanated from the depth of the self by remorse to the unholiness, i.e., sin.

Penthos/'abīlūtā'/compunction is a necessary practice in the ascetic life. According to Hannah Hunt, it is a process than a state in the spiritual life:

³ "It [*apatheia*] is not an attitude of passive indifference and insensibility, still less a condition in which sinning is impossible, but it is on the contrary a state of inner freedom and integration, in which we are no longer under the domination of sinful impulses, and so are capable of genuine love." Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, Oxford: OUP, 1998, 12.

⁴ Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, translated by Anselm Hufstader, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982, 7.

⁵ Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 16.

⁶ See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1903, 2.

⁷ See, V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, edited by P.K. Gode and C.G. Karve, revised edition, Poona: Y.G. Joshi, 1957, 88-89, 94.

Penthos is a process, not a static condition. It is the remorse of the sinner as much as the charism of the perfected spiritual athlete. In the life of the mourner, godly grief—as opposed to its more secular form—expresses a Trinitarian dynamic. It is prompted by the movement of the Spirit within the heart of the mourner; its living out enables him or her to participate in the sufferings of Christ; it restores the penitent to kinship with the Father.⁸

There is no moving forward to the spiritual perfection without the penitential attitude and the resulting compunction.

3. *Metanoia* and Compunction - Biblical Basis

The concepts of *metanoia* and compunction play a vital role in the narratives of the conversion stories of individuals in the Bible. *Metanoia* and compunction are not two complete different concepts, but at times, they are used interchangeably, though there are subtle differences. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments, these ideas form the foundation for understanding the transformative nature of redemption and the pursuit of a deeper relationship with the divine.

3.1. *Metanoia*: A Change of Mind and Heart

The Greek term *metanoia* (μετάνοια)⁹ in the New Testament, means ‘to change one’s mind,’¹⁰ is often translated as “repentance.” However, it is more than mere remorse or sorrow for sins. *Metanoia* implies a profound shift in one’s thinking and a corresponding change of heart. This biblical term involves turning away from sin and embracing a new direction aligned with God’s will, a complete turn-around to God.

The concept of *metanoia* is rooted in the Old Testament,¹¹ where prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah called upon the people to turn away from their sinful ways and return to God. Isaiah 55:7 captures this sentiment: “Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” Throughout the Bible this turnaround and repentance is portrayed as a pathway to restoration and reconciliation with God. Psalm 51, attributed to David after his sin with

⁸ Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 3.

⁹ See, *TDNT* 4: 980-89, 999-1006.

¹⁰ G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961, 855-858.

¹¹ The Hebrew word *shûb* (means to turn around, return etc.) used in the OT can be considered equivalent to the concept of *metanoia*. See, *TDOT* 14: 461-522.

Bathsheba, is a heart-breaking expression of repentance. In verse 10, David pleads, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." His plea captures the essence of repentance—a longing for inner transformation and renewed communion with the divine.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist heralds the message of *metanoia* as he prepares the way for the coming of Messiah. In Mathew 3:2, he declares, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This call to *metanoia* sets the stage for Jesus' ministry, emphasizing the transformative power of a changed mind and heart. First proclamation of Christ (Mt 4:17) is also the same. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 further illustrates the theme of *metanoia*, which Kuriakose Elias Chavara illustrates also in his *Atmanuthapam*. The wayward son, having squandered his inheritance, returns to his father in humility and remorse. The father's response reflects the mercy and grace awaiting those who turn back to God. The parable highlights the transformative power of repentance, portraying it not as a burdensome obligation but as a liberating journey back to the Father's embrace.

We understand that repentance is the turning point in the spiritual journey. Repentance, almost same as *metanoia*, involves acknowledging and confessing sins, accompanied by a genuine desire to have a change. It signifies a turning point in the spiritual journey, a deliberate choice to forsake the ways of the world and embrace a life in accordance with God's ways.

3.2. Compunction: Sorrow that Leads to Transformation

Compunction (πένθος),¹² often synonymous with the sorrow related to contrition, refers to a deep sense of remorse and grief for one's sins and often leads to tears. It goes beyond the surface-level guilt, including a heartfelt recognition of the gravity of one's sins. In the biblical context, compunction is an essential component of genuine repentance. According to Bultmann it is the "passionate grief which leads to corresponding action."¹³

The story of King David serves as a vivid example of compunction leading to conversion. After having committed the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, when confronted by the

¹² See, TDNT 6: 40-43.

¹³ TDNT 6: 42.

prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-15), David's heart is pierced with compunction. Psalm 51, attributed to this moment, expresses the depth of his contrition. Verse 17 declares, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David's compunction becomes a catalyst for repentance and, ultimately, for the restoration of his relationship with God.

The Apostle Peter's journey also exemplifies the transformative power of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. Despite his bold declaration of loyalty to Jesus, Peter denies him three times during Jesus' trial. The weight of his betrayal hits Peter with deep compunction, leading to tears of genuine remorse (Mt 26:75). Later, after the resurrection, Jesus reinstates Peter, asking him three times, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15-17). Each time, Peter responds affirmatively, and Jesus commissions him to feed His sheep. Peter's journey from denial to restoration exemplifies the redemptive path of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. The Apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, writes about the transformative nature of godly sorrow. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, he states, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Here, Paul distinguishes between two types of sorrow – worldly sorrow that leads to despair and death, and godly sorrow that results in repentance and salvation.

Compunction, with its emphasis on deep sorrow for sin, challenges the superficiality of remorse and guilt. It calls one to confront the gravity of their transgressions and approach God with a contrite heart. The Apostle Paul's distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow serves as a guide, reminding everyone that a transformative sorrow leads to repentance and salvation.

3.3. Compunction and Tears

Compunction leads to tears. The sinful woman at the feet of Jesus, and Peter after the denial of Jesus are examples from the NT. The Woman with the Alabaster Jar (Lk 7:36-50), an unnamed woman with a sinful reputation approaches Jesus during a meal. Overwhelmed with compunction, she weeps at Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears and anointing them with costly perfume. Jesus acknowledges her genuine repentance, stating, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). This touching moment illustrates how compunction, expressed through tears, opens the door to divine forgiveness and redemption.

Another compelling example is Peter's denial of Jesus during His trial (Mt 26:69-75). As Peter realizes the gravity of his betrayal, he experiences compunction, and the Gospel of Mathew records, "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Mt 26:75). The tradition witnesses that later in his life whenever he heard the cockcrow he wept over his denial of the master. Peter's tears symbolize not only his deep remorse but also the beginning of a transformative journey that leads to his restoration by Jesus after the resurrection.

4. Compunction in the Desert Fathers

Compunction of the heart is a constant theme of discussion in the sayings of the desert fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). According to them compunction and weeping over the sin could be considered a monk's constant occupation.¹⁴ It is the way for an ascetic one to avoid sin and purify his or her heart: "A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'What can I do about my sins?' and the old man said to him, 'Weep interiorly, for both deliverance from faults and the acquisition of virtues are gained through compunction. He also said, 'Weeping is the way that Scripture and our Fathers have handed on to us.'"¹⁵

One can weep only while living in this world. Those who do not weep in this world will weep eternally in the next world:

It was said of him [Abba Arsenius] that he had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life while he sat at his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping, 'Truly you are blessed, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself in this world! He who does not weep for himself here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering.'¹⁶

Compunction is actually a gift from God. "A brother questioned Abba Matoes saying, 'Give me a word.' He said to him, 'Go, and pray God to put compunction in your heart, and give you humility.'"¹⁷ According to Abba Poemen, it is also a spiritual protection: "Compunction has two

¹⁴ Graham Gould, *Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 129. See the note 97.

¹⁵ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984, 195. Cf. also saying 119 on page 184.

¹⁶ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 18.

¹⁷ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 145.

sides: it is a good work and a good protection."¹⁸ One cannot become a monk without acquiring compunction.¹⁹

According to Evagrius Ponticus, who had a profound influence on later Greek and Syriac spiritual authors, compunction is a predisposition for pure prayer. In his *Chapters on Prayer*, nos. 5-8, he discusses this notion. For example no. 5-6 says: "Pray first for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow you may soften your native rudeness. Then having confessed your sins to the Lord you will obtain pardon for them. Pray with tears and your request will find a hearing. Nothing so gratifies the Lord as supplication offered in the midst of tears."²⁰ Commenting and summarizing on the Evagrius' discussion on the tears related to pure prayer, Robert E. Sinkewicz says:

Evagrius proposes that the monk pray first for the fundamental disposition of compunction manifested in the gift of tears. Tears thus arise from a profound awareness of one's weakness and sinfulness, together with the acknowledgement of one's dependence on God's forgiveness and gracious assistance. Tearful compunction is then a remedy for the soul's 'wildness,' that is, its propensity to be moved towards anger; further, it instils an attitude of humility that preserves the monk from the dangers of pride and the mental imbalance to which it can lead.²¹

Evagrius differentiates godly sadness and demonic sadness reminding us of the distinction given by St Paul (2 Cor 7:10). "Demonic sadness darkens the soul and may arise either with no apparent cause or from some unusual cause. Godly sadness, in contrast, calls the soul to repentance in tears, reminding it of death and subsequent judgement. The repentance of godly sadness eventually gives way to spiritual joy with its acceptance of death and judgement."²² And Evagrius reminds the ascetics, "Do not forget that you have fallen, even if you have repented, but hold on to the memory of your sin as an occasion of

¹⁸ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 172. Cf. also the second saying of Abba Peter the Pionite on page 201.

¹⁹ Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 177.

²⁰ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger, CSS 4, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981, 56.

²¹ Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 186.

²² Introduction in Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 25. Cf. *Antirrhethikos* 4.74; *Eulogies* 7.

compunction that leads to your humility, so that thus humbled you will by necessity disgorge your pride."²³ Later Greek spiritual writings like *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*²⁴, *Philokalia*²⁵, etc., also treat this subject very elaborately.

5. Compunction on the Way to Perfection in the Syriac Tradition

Repentance and compunction are recurring themes in the Syriac ascetic and spiritual tradition ever since the Proto-monastic²⁶ period. The Proto-monastic tradition of the Syriac East (2-4 c.) was an ascetic movement contemporary (or earlier?) to the Egyptian desert monastic tradition. In Egypt, Antony (+356) was considered the father of monasticism. But in the Syriac tradition, such prominent figures were not known, though Julian Saba²⁷ (+367) was surely one among them who organized monastic community in the Syrian desert. The Syriac father Aphrahat (+345), a senior contemporary of Ephrem the Syrian (+373), was a witness to the proto-monasticism.²⁸ Writings of Ephrem and the ascetic writing *Liber Graduum* (*The Book of Steps*) also dealt with this theme in the 4th century. For example the 18th *memra* of *Liber Graduum* deals on prayer with tears. Later monastic/ascetic authors like John the Solitary [of Apamea] (5th C.), Philoxenos of Mabbug (+523), Isaac of Nineveh (+700), Joseph Hazzaya (b. 710), and John Dalyatha (+780) also dealt this theme constantly.

²³ *Eulogies* 14. Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 40.

²⁴ For example, the 7th step of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus (+649) exclusively treats this subject.

²⁵ It is a collection of the writings of many spiritual authors and fathers of the Church. See, G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, ed. and tr., *The Philokalia*, 5 vols., London: Faber and Faber, 1979-2020.

²⁶ For a study on the (Proto) Monasticism in the Syriac tradition, see, Shafiq AbouZayd, *Ihidayutha: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient: From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.*, Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1993.

²⁷ Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palastinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995.

²⁸ His 6th Demonstration on *Bnay/Bnat Qyama* (Sons/Daughters of the Covenant), an ascetic group in this tradition, is an example.

5.1. Compunction and Tears in the Syriac Ascetical Way

Compunction with tears is part of the ascetical way of life and early Syrian monks are not an exception. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (+466) in his *History of the Monks of Syria*²⁹ gives many instances of compunction with tears. For example, he mentions of a monk called Marcianus, who was “glorious in every virtue and always shedding tears of compunction.”³⁰ Another monk who lived in the Syrian desert, called Theodotus, “night and day he poured forth tears of compunction.”³¹ About Amma Domnina’s constant tears, Theodoret Comments: “For it is fervent love for God that begets these tears, firing the mind to divine contemplation, stinging it with pricks and urging it on to migrate from here.”³²

In the east of the Syrian deserts bloomed many ascetic and monastic individuals and communities, in Edessa, Nisibis and the East of Euphrates, depicting a clear and distinct ascetical way in the Syriac tradition. Christian asceticism is basically a going away from the corrupted and corrupting world, and do penance for one’s own sins and the world. Compunction and tears are part of this penance and the spiritual authors often deal with them for the benefit of other ascetics and monks. For example, *Liber Graduum* describes the mournful tears of prayer in its 18th *memra*:

There are tears that come from sadness and tears that come from joy. As our Lord said, ‘You shall weep and mourn and grieve, and the world will rejoice; but later your tears shall be changed to joy’ (Jn 16:20). A person weeps on account of his sins and he [thus] acts well, as it is written, ‘Sorrow on account of God is remorse that leads to life’ (2 Cor 7:10). There are some who have defeated sin, and have transcended sins and have done good deeds, weeping with joy on account of their love for their Lord who has dealt very kindly with them and has removed them from the servitude of death and made

²⁹ See a recent study on this work: Sunil M. Alexander, *The Concept of Iḥidāyā in Theodoret’s A History of the Monks of Syria: A Study in Comparison with the Ancient Egyptian Monasticism*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2023.

³⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, translated by R.M. Price, Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 44.

³¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 61.

³² Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 187.

them free because they have lowered themselves and have kept his commandments.³³

Generally in the later early Syriac ascetical and spiritual tradition the way of perfection is divided into three: levels of body (*pagrānūtā*), soul (*naphšānūtā*) and spirit (*ruhānūtā*). Compunction of the soul can be considered part of the second level, level of the soul. John the Solitary [Apamea] says:

I will begin by speaking about compunction of soul, in which of the three levels it is found. It is not at the level of the body, nor at the level of the spirit. It is not in people at the level of the body because their reflection is evil. It is not at the level of the spirit because joy elevates them above this suffering. But compunction of soul is only/among those at the level of the soul because the one at the level of the body is moved by the fear of God which leads him to grieve over his deeds; and from sorrow for his sins is born compunction of soul.³⁴

For Isaac of Nineveh also "Tears are to the mind the sure distinction between the bodily and the spiritual state, between the state of apperception and that of purity."³⁵

5.2. Sweet Tears: A Sign of a Burning Heart and Pure Prayer

Compunction and tears of repentance will lead to higher levels spirituality, may be in the Syriac spiritual path of perfection, the level of the spirit (*ruhānūtā*). This is a movement from the attitude of repentance to the humility and wonder emanating from the infinite love and mercy of God. Here, according to Isaac of Nineveh, "a fervent heat burns in the heart and ineffable joy arises in the soul. Further, sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation makes the mind drunk; inexplicable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelt in heaven..."³⁶ According to Sahadana (Martyrius), "if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears which stem from the

³³ *Liber Graduum* 18.1. *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum [Ktābā d-masqātā]*, translated by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004, 177.

³⁴ *John the Solitary on the Soul*, translated by Mary T. Hansbury, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013, 36.

³⁵ *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh [Part I]*, translated by A.J. Wensinck, Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923, 164.

³⁶ *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh*, 372.

emotion of our hearts, then our prayer will be made perfect in accordance with God's wish; being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering."³⁷ This pure prayer is the most delightful offering to God. This type of genuine prayer, according to Shimeon d-Taybuthe, "which issues from a pure mind so refines the heart that groans and tears of joy involuntarily flow forth, and the soul stretches itself out towards God. Blessed is that soul which has tasted its sweetness."³⁸ Joseph Hazzaya "On the Stirrings of the Mind in Prayer" says:

Every time they [immaterial impulses consist in the hidden spiritual knowledge] are revealed to the mind during prayer, they give a sweet taste to the mind's palate, like honey-comb, and they kindle all the faculties of both soul and body with their warmth, so that *tears* without measure pour down from a person's eyes whenever these impulses are set in motion in his mind. These are not *tears* stemming from the passions or from sorrow because of wrongdoing, but rattier they arise from joy and delight, and from a sense of wonder at God's creation, His compassion and care for everything - at how His compassion is poured out abundantly over us human beings ... being continuously raised up with Him in an understanding of His mysteries and in the glorious vision of Him.³⁹

Remembering God's greatness, love and mercy, one's mind is stirred and heart is burned, and the prayer in this state is pure and acceptable to God. This is also one of the signs of the Holy Spirit working in you:

The third sign of the working of the Spirit within you consists in the kindness which represents within you the image of God, through which, when your thoughts extend to all people, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all people were dwelling in your

³⁷ Sahadona, *Book of Perfection*, 2.8.20. Translation by Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987, 210-211.

³⁸ Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012, 142.

³⁹ Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 148-149.

heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all.⁴⁰

When one embraces the whole humankind (and the creation) in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit "goodness and kindness are born in your heart, so that you do not utter anything unkind to anyone, nor does your thought think evil of anyone, but you do good to all people, both in your thought, and in your actions."⁴¹

5.3. Ascetic/Monk as a "Mourner" ('*abīlā*)

In the Syriac tradition, an ascetic/monk (*iḥidāyā*⁴²) is also called a 'mourner' ('*abīlā*) because of his/her constant life in compunction and tears. According to Arthur Vööbus, Syriac monasticism is against laughter of monks, but their basic attitude is sadness and mourning.⁴³ So they are called '*abīlā* (mourner):

He [Ephrem] assures them that this sorrow is the sign of perfection in the Christian life. This is the '*abīlūtā*, in the hymns of Severus called 'the blessed sadness,' according to which the monks were called '*abīlē*. In ascetic understanding, this was identified with the genuine symptoms of true piety. Under this '*abīlūtā*, the Syrian monks did not understand a mere psychological disposition without concrete outward and physical signs. On the contrary, it was supposed that a genuine fright at the thought of punishment must be so intense that the heart is pierced with such vehemence that the inner pain and affliction find a vehicle in tears ... Sadness and mourning were inseparable connected with weeping.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Abdisho [Joseph] Hazzaya, *Book of Questions*, translated in *Early Christian Mystics*, edited by Alphonse Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1934, 166.

⁴¹ *Early Christian Mystics*, 166.

⁴² The Syriac word *iḥidāyā* (ܝܚܝܕܝܝܐ) means single, only-begotten, solitary, etc. See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 191. Christ is the *iḥidāyā*, the Only-Begotten of the Father. Those who follow Christ the solitary single-mindedly are also *iḥidāyē*. Generally ascetics and monastics are known as *iḥidāyē* in the Syriac tradition. The Greek word *monos* (the word *monachos* comes from this root) has the same sense and meaning.

⁴³ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 2, CSCO 197, Subsidia 17, Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1960, 281-283.

⁴⁴ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2:283.

For example, St Symeon the Stylite was known as the ‘chief of the mourners.’ The author of the life of St Symeon gave the title of his life as “Heroic Deeds of Mar Symeon, Chief of the Mourners” (*بِسْمِ سَيِّدِنَا سَيِّدِنَا* (*بِسْمِ سَيِّدِنَا سَيِّدِنَا*),⁴⁵ though its translator, Frederick Lent, puts it as “The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites.”⁴⁶

6. *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Atmanuthapam is one of the main works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. This is both a literary and spiritual work in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, India. The exact date of its composition is not known, but it is believed that it was composed during the last years of the author’s earthly life at Koonammavu. A part of it was published together with the author’s biography by Fr Leopald Beccaro OCD, the spiritual father of Chavara, on the year of Chavara’s death in 1871. The title of the work was *The Concise Biography of the Saintly Soul who Wrote these Devotional Poems*.⁴⁷

This poetical work has fourteen cantos/chapters. Among these the last two cantos are very short ones. The first two cantos comprise mostly autobiographical illustrations of the author, which contains the materials related to compunction. Chapters 3 to 8 are illustration of the life of Christ, where we see an attitude of a penitent, especially when he illustrates Infant Jesus and the passion of Christ. The Chapters 9 to 13 illustrate the life of Mother Mary from the moment she stood under the Cross till her death, and the last chapter is a concluding prayer to Mary. Mary’s life was taken from a Spanish mystic of 17th century, namely, Sr Mary of Jesus Ágreda’s, *Mystical City of God*.⁴⁸

7. Compunction in *Atmanuthapam*

The basic attitude of *Atmanuthapam* is “compunction,” as the name of this work indicated. The author pours out his heart to the heavenly

⁴⁵ *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. 4, edited by Paul Bedjan, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894, 507.

⁴⁶ Frederick Lent, tr. “The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 35 (1915), 111. For a study on the *abiluta* of St Symeon, see, Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 171-223.

⁴⁷ *The Complete Works of Father Chavara* [Malayalam], vol. 2, edited by Z.M. Moozhoor, 3rd Edition, Mannanam: St. Joseph’s Press, 2014, xi.

⁴⁸ For an English translation of the work *Mistica Ciudad de Dios, Vida de la Virgen María*, see, Mary Agreda, *Mystical City of God*, 4 vols, translated by Fiscar Marison, Hammond, IN: W.B. Conkey Company, 1902.

Father, Jesus Christ and Blessed Virgin Mary, and he does it with a genuine compunction of heart.

7.1. Reasons for Compunction

Compunction and tears are indications of spiritual growth and transformation of the person. It could be considered 'godly grief.' Reasons for this redemptive grief in *Atmanuthapam* is discussed here very shortly.

7.1.1. Holiness/Greatness of God the Father and His Son Jesus

God's holiness and greatness is one of the reasons for the awareness of human lowliness and sinfulness. In the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:1-7) on heaven where God enthroned and the Seraphs sing thrice "Holy" he was well aware of his own unholiness and lowliness, and uttered: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" The attitude of Chavara is almost the same.

Creator and creation are completely two different levels of being. Almighty God in his loving kindness created him and sustained him. Chavara starts his work mentioning this fact:

God almighty, who WAS in the beginning
 You created me, a son of Adam
 O God, wherefore this grace, reveal to me
 O Lord eternal, your infinite mercy. (1.1-4⁴⁹)

God is "omnipotent" (1.9), "perfect" (1.13), "boundless mercy" (1.12, 29), "Holy Lord" (1.29), "sea of Mercy, mighty depth unfathomed" (1.30), "fount of mercy" (1.33) and "you, my Lord and my God" (1.37). "You [God] created me" (1.18), "granted me a guardian spirit" (1.19), "shield me from dangers" (1.22), "beside me each passing moment to guide and guard me" (1.23-24). "Through your sole mercy" you "send forth your son" and made a covenant with us (2.167-68), and made him our "elder brother" (2.169-72). "You, my loving Father, aware of my lot, draw me close to your beloved Son" (4.201-203). In the presence of this infinite love and greatness, Chavara feels his utter lowliness and sinfulness.

⁴⁹ Citation here as 1.1-4 means Canto/Chapter 1, lines 1 to 4 of *Atmanuthapam*. The English translation (used here) often misses the beauty (and at times meaning) of Chavara's work in its original language.

For Chavara Jesus is the "Fount of Mercy" (7.477), "My God, my love, my master" (8.1), "the blessed Bridegroom" (8.105), and "my master, my lord, my king" (8.106). He is the "Son incarnate in Mary's purest womb" (1.72), "God of love and goodness" (1.99), "Lord of Mercy" (2.1), "boundless love" (2.61), "my almighty God, Supreme" (2.62), "You my love, my joy, and my good fortune" (2.143) and how can I live without you, "my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). He is the "fount of virtue, God of all creation, wedded to kindness eternal, giver of peace," and "a being immortal, infinite great" (2.159-60), became "poorest of poor, a prince of dire poverty in a filthy manger, wrapt in swaddling clothes" (2.201-202). "O God-man, my master, seat of mercy, Lord, look with eyes of pity on me a sinner" (2.241-42). With the awareness of the greatest mercy of God towards him, Chavara is full of gratitude and at the same time remorse for his sinfulness.

7.1.2. Innumerable Blessings Received in Life

Chavara received numerous blessings from God in his childhood, and the very thought of them makes him grateful to God for His greatness and at the same time they are the cause of compunction when he thinks of his ungratefulness to God: "You moulded truly great in your likeness" (1.10), "He gave me a mother, though "frail," but "a sleepless angel, vigilant" etc. (1.25-28), "gave me parents grounded in faith" (1.43), "faith engraved in me" deeply (1.44), "gave me a mother to feed me" (1.45), a mother "to shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me," and "to pour that tender love you filled her with" (1.46-47), a praying mother even in the long hours of night and with milk she filled him with thoughts of heaven and words of grace (1.49-50). God cleansed him through his grace of baptism (1.33-36), through "your wondrous gifts of mercy and love cleanse my soul and it became holy, spotless and fair" (1.38-39), "through baptismal grace you made me your cherished son" (1.41), "showed me heaven's joys to tend me grow" (1.42), "he called me back from [filth] and sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom" (1.114-115), and vocation to priesthood (1.116-140). In Pallipuram, Malpan Thomas Palackal ("leader priest") received him, "nourishing his soul, he was tutored in paths of virtue, to assist the Holy Mass, gently taught to tread the ways of holiness, to shun all evils that would retard his onward march" (1:135-140). Further blessings he received in the subsequent years and his ungratefulness are remembered in the following chapters of *Atmanuthapam* and asks for forgiveness with a tearful heart. Chavara's life in the following years up to his death was a marching towards holiness and perfection through the practice of asceticism and charity.

7.1.3. Love of God the Father and the Saviour Jesus Christ

Chavara's love of God is often found overflowing in most of his works. He addresses and invokes the heavenly Father as "*Ente Appa* [my (dear) father/dad]", especially in his *Dhyanasallapangal* (Colloquies with the Heavenly Father), which also expresses the remorse to sin and compunction of the heart and deep filial love towards the heavenly Father.

Through these colloquies Chavara expresses the deepest feelings in spiritual life: gratitude to a loving God for all the abundant blessings showered on him and sorrow for the smallest lapses in personal life. His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence. He continuously addresses God and Jesus Christ *Appa* ('father'), *Ente Appa* ('my father'), which has the endearing and intimate meaning of 'father' reserved exclusively to the children ... Though the soul may be sunk in remorse the father-son relation lifts it to sublime heights. So his spirituality ever remains lofty, being absolutely free from any feeling of inferiority.⁵⁰

Before his loving heavenly Father, he stands like a prodigal son: "Your boundless love," no other reason [saved me from death] (2.61), "You [are] my love, my joy, my good fortune" (2.143), and "how can I live without you, my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). Even at times Chavara calls Christ as father: "Alas, my father, my creator, my Lord, in utter shame I bend down my head" (7. 334-35), "like a father, patiently followed my trail, whispered unto my heart 'You are my love'" (7.343-44), but "I pierced your [Christ's] palms, punched you by nails, tore your tender flesh through sin" (7.229-32) and "when I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50). His ardent love for the heavenly father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for his acute remorse and compunction. His ardent desire to see (*darśan*⁵¹) the divine in its various forms comes from this love of God. The third canto of *Atmanuthapam* expresses this passionate longing.

⁵⁰ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 369-370.

⁵¹ *Darśan* is more than mere seeing through the external sense of the eye, but seeing through spiritual eye or luminous eye (*ayna shafytha*). Chavara called the first monastery he founded at Mannanam a *darśanaveedu* (house of/for *darśan*). This reminds the ascetics in the *darśanaveedu* that they are called to the higher perfection which is the goal of monastic life.

7.1.4. Awareness of One's Own Sinfulness

The fundamental reason for the compunction of heart is one's awareness of the sinfulness of human nature. Generally, all the saints sustained this awareness throughout their lives. Chavara's awareness of his sinfulness is very intense and we experience it right from the beginning of *Atmanuthapam*:

Omnipotent your will, that me a sinner
 You moulded truly great in your likeness
 O God, despite my limitless unworthiness
 You did show in it, your mercy boundless
 Perfect One, it was your Holy Will
 Impeccable, that let me be born on earth
 A human being, me, impoverished you raised
 To the highest skies, Your Abode.
 A worm creeping on the face of the earth
 You created me from dust of dust
 Granted me a guardian spirit so pure
 That I may dwell on earth in grace and ease. (1.9-20)

Chavara confesses that though God created him in His likeness and image and granted a guardian angel, due to "infinite unworthiness" impoverished and became like "a worm creeping on the face of the earth." God's boundless mercy and love even at one's human unworthiness and sinfulness lead his/her to strive for higher perfection in the spiritual life. Remaining parts of this work, especially the first two cantos, are the descriptions of the theme.

From (at the feet of) his mother he learnt the matters of sublime faith (1.53-54) and up to the age of five he was the beloved to God the Father (1.87). But he is remorseful of his following years (before entering the seminary) where he mixed himself with the non-Christians [Pagans]: "I have indulged in deeds of pagan blindness" (1.97-98) and "mingling free with those my dizzy friends" (1.103). So, according to him "when I grew up my fervour dimmed" (2.25), "my infant piety I gently forsook" (2.26), "I thought and spoke unseemly, unholy words in heedless speech, a profligate life, willowing in vice, plunged in untruth, sore estranged to grace" (2.27-30). He calls himself as "an unrepenting lad I failed to seek heaven's salvage through a contrite heart, a giddy headed lout, woe to me, verily a prodigal son" (2.31-33). These years of living in a non-Christian environment and friends is the main cause of his remorse in

the later years and the main reason of compunction in his whole life. Though the baptismal grace that he had received at his baptism was not lost until his death⁵², the minor offences and childhood follies were reasons of continuous 'godly sadness' on his way to perfection, which further led him to pure and transformative prayer and spirit-filled life (*ruhānūtā*).

When Chavara remembers the numerous blessings he received from God and his ungratefulness to Him, Chavara's heart is filled with repentance and with pain and he craves for God's pardon (2.364). He says: "It pains me deep, on my sins to reflect ..." (4.197-98), "When I recall my sins their sole cause, a fear, horrible, also grips my soul" (7.151-152) and as "the prodigal son I am yearning for mercy" (7.218-19). "When I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50), and "to turn an ascetic, I lack the needed strength ..." (7.365-366). The lack of strength was his strength in God to pursue the path of spiritual transformation and thus he became a model ascetic in the Church of modern times.

7.2. Praying with Tears

Tears may be of repentance with compunction remembering the great mercy of the heavenly father or of joy and happiness in the Spirit, as a symbol of pure prayer. Anyway it is considered the closeness of the person to the Divine in the transformative way to perfection. Many of the confreres of Chavara witnessed him praying with tears. For example, one such eyewitness is Fr Louis of Manjummel, who testifies: "According to the first Constitutions [of 1863], the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr Prior [Chavara] spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears ... During the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation."⁵³

⁵² "He could declare before his death that he had never lost the baptismal innocence," wrote his spiritual father, Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD. Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. by Lucas Vithuvattical CMI, Mannanam: Postulation of the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 2003, 17.

⁵³ *Positio super Introductione Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio concinnata* (Vatican 1977), 561. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2017, 227-228.

8. Conclusion

Compunction of heart is an ascetic ideal in the ascetic and monastic way of perfection both in the East and in the West. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in the Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. Hence, in the Syriac tradition anchorites were called the 'mourners' (*'abīlē*). Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a true ascetic in line with Eastern Christian asceticism. His compunction of heart and tears of repentance reflected in *Atmanuthapam* and in real life as we learn from the witnesses, he could be considered a real ascetic and monk in line with the ascetic and spiritual tradition of the Syriac Orient. Compunction of the heart, one of the significant ascetic ideals of the Eastern Christian spiritual path was the basic and recurring attitude and theme in the life, prayer, and writings of Chavara. It led him further to the pure prayer, heroic practice of the love of God and charity to his fellow beings, and thus became a true ascetic and monk according to the tradition of the Syriac Orient. The above discussion is only an attempt to comprehend the theme of compunction of the soul in Chavara in line with the Eastern Christian ascetic ideal of *penthos/'abilūtā*, which could open the door to further researches on the topic.

EASTERN MYSTICAL PARADIGMS IN KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Rincy Maria CMC♦

Abstract: Chavara's profound faith in Christ and his deep love for Him had a transformative effect, shaping him into a vessel of divine grace. Immersed in the teachings of God and fortified by His word, Chavara possessed the audacity and certainty to undertake extraordinary measures for his community. True mystics shall play a crucial role in establishing the Kingdom of God within this world by utilizing all the available resources. Constant communion with the Almighty not only cultivated a rich inner life within him but also impelled him to dedicate his existence to the service of the divine. Through meditation, he established unity with God, and in and through his actions, he embodied solidarity with the marginalized and impoverished. Chavara emulated the fervour of Elijah, driven by an unwavering zeal for the living God. His teachings were not mere words but emanated from his own lived experiences. In the tradition of Carmelite mystics, Chavara embraced spousal mysticism, wherein the relationship between humanity and God mirrors a spiritual marriage—an intimate and reciprocal bond of love and commitment. The core of Chavara's mysticism is his Abba (*appa*) experience.

Keywords: Mysticism, *ente appa*, Mystical experience, Mystics, Interiority, Indwelling presence, Contemplation, Long to see, Mystical

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roots, *Dhyansallapangal*, Eastern/oriental, *Darsanam*, *Vasam*, *Sallapam*, *Kāṇākeṇam*, Carmelite, Spousal Mysticism

1. Introduction

In various major religious traditions, a central conceptual theme revolves around the imperative of purifying and transforming the individual to facilitate the integration and maturation of one's personality with the divine. While the methods employed for this purification vary across different cultural and religious contexts, a recurring motif is that of an inner and outer journey. Throughout the history of mysticism, it has been widely acknowledged that the mystical path encompasses distinct stages of progression, ultimately leading to heightened levels of consciousness.

A longstanding tradition within mysticism underscores the necessity for the individuals to undergo inner transformation, involving a relinquishment of selfish attitudes and limited ways of relating to the world. Hence, the major religious traditions emphasize the importance of a path focused on purification and transformation to achieve the integration and unification of the individual's personality with the divine. True mystical experiences are characterized by an immediate sense of contact with the transcendent, signifying a profound connection beyond the ordinary realms of existence.

Pseudo-Dionysius, a fifth-century Syrian Monk, is credited with gathering-up the patristic mystical heritage and definitively introducing the word "mystical" into the Christian tradition. Following Gregory of Nyssa in particular, he used the word to refer to the deeper meaning of scripture and the sacraments, in which God's love is revealed and through which the Christian participates in this mystery.¹ The present article is an attempt to understand and underscore the various dimensions or paradigms of mysticism in Kuriakose Elias Chavara who relentlessly sought the will of God in contemplation and action for the glory of God and the good of the people.

2. Mysticism: A Total Submission to God

Our faith in Christ is a gift of God and a voluntary commitment on our part. Understanding fully the meaning, relevance and the beauty of this faith is our real commitment. This quest is a difficult one, filled with

¹ J. Welch, "Mysticism", in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak (chief ed.), Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 695.

many crises. Its aim is surely not to weaken the faith but to make it a living experience. Mysticism is often regarded as an encounter that transcends the boundaries of religion, intellect, imagination, and the senses. Mystical experiences are deemed the most elevated and purest form of knowledge, and those who embark on the mystical path attain the richness of life by forsaking worldly desires - a realm beyond the grasp of the ordinary people. One of the aims of all religions is the union of the soul with God, which is the highest form of mystical experience. Christian life is much more than a natural human life. A Christian—the saint, according to St Paul, accepts God's invitation and strives to attain the supernatural goal to which human being is elevated and ordained through grace. This acceptance of God's invitation implies the submission of human being's intellect to truths which are beyond discovery by the natural light of reason. It also implies reliance on the superior power that helps him/her to attain the divine distinction. Above all, the acceptance is a symbol of the total and loving dedication of the whole being of man to that supreme God.²

Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplified a life fully immersed in and enriched by his faith. He recognized the distinctive role of his family in nurturing his spiritual journey. His connection with God was deeply personal, allowing him to address the divine with an intimate term "Abba", signifying a close, fatherly bond. Naturally, Chavara used the affectionate expression "ente appa" to address God, reflecting a heartfelt and personal connection. As he grew up, Chavara's relationship with God and fellow humans retained a profound sense of maturity and intimacy. His spiritual journey was characterized by a harmonious blend of deep devotion and a close, personal connection with the divine and those around him. The strong and vibrant faith in Christ and deep love towards Him transformed Chavara to a man of divine graciousness.

The 19th century was, in many respects, a period of crisis for the Catholic community of Kerala. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was the man sent by God to help the people tide over the crisis successfully. The secret behind such wonderful achievements was that Chavara was a man of great interiority, living in constant union with God and dedicating his life and activities to His service. On his deathbed, he proclaimed that he had preserved his baptismal innocence throughout his life. History venerates him as a devout servant of God, a contemporary prophet, and

² K. C. Chacko, *Lead Kindly Light*, Kakkanad: A Beth Rauma Publication, 2014, 111-112.

a man of unwavering faith with a profound vision. Chavara dedicated himself to the spiritual, social, and cultural well-being of God's people, demonstrating extraordinary courage in confronting the challenges of his era. Like the mystics such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena, who encountered the most intimate and sublime ecstasy in their union with God, Kuriakose Elias Chavara experienced this mystical connection in his spiritual journey.

2.1. Mystics: Persons for Others

Mysticism is a profound and unique encounter with the divine reality, a gift freely bestowed by God, leading to a deep sense of union and knowledge. Authentic mysticism invariably engenders a heightened capacity for generous love towards others and is often observed among Christians who devote themselves to prayer and remain attuned to God's presence in their lives. In the perspective of Indian sages, mysticism serves as an experiential and intuitive pathway to access the realm of the ultimate Being. Within the mystical experience, the highest level of knowledge and profound encounter is attained through the pinnacle of intuition, marking it as the foundational and paramount experience.

Understanding Christianity is best achieved through the lives of its notable figures rather than its doctrines and dogmas. The credibility of doctrinal formulations and authoritative declarations within the Church is primarily derived from the character of Jesus Christ. Even when delving into the dynamic and transformative mystical experiences, a more profound grasp is gained through the lives of mystics who have been touched by the divine essence embodied in Jesus Christ, nurtured within the Christian community. Furthermore, a Christian mystic is not someone dwelling in an isolated ivory tower of Christ-consciousness. Christ consciousness, at its core, is inherently focused on others. In Jesus Christ, we encounter a figure who willingly surrendered his own self for the sake of others, ensuring abundant life for all (Jn 10:10). From this standpoint, a Christian mystic is an individual whose consciousness undergoes a deep and fundamental transformation through Christ-consciousness. Such a mystic continues to dwell in a state of profound

awareness of the Divine, effecting change within their own life and contributing to the transformation of others.³

The constant experience of the indwelling presence of the Father not only turned Chavara into a person of profound interiority and helped him to live in continuous mystical union but also to dedicate his life and activities to His service. On his beatification on 8 February 1986 at Kottayam, Kerala, Pope John Paul II said:

The Church throughout the world rejoices with the Church in India as Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara is raised to the rank of the Blessed in the great Communion of Saints. This man advanced to great heights of holiness through his wholehearted cooperation with the grace of God. He possessed an ardent love of God. All his 65 years long earthly life, Blessed Chavara laboured generously for the renewal and enrichment of Christian life and growth of the Church. His deep love of Christ filled him with apostolic zeal, which has helped him in a special way to preserve and strengthen the unity of the Church. With great generosity he collaborated with others, especially his brother priests and religious in the work of salvation.⁴

Theological engagement is deemed incomplete without the essential essence of Mystery, and within this context, mystics are revered for their role in illuminating profound realities inherent in all Christians. These mystics possess a conscious awareness of the divine love story unfolding within the intricate themes and subplots of their lives. In their mystical encounters, there exists a seamless coordination of both intellect and will, both fervently directed towards God - the ultimate and perfect objective of their endeavours. Mystic contemplation, as observed, serves to deepen the entire personality, imbue character with richness, and foster the development of virtues within the individual. Kuriakose Elias Chavara's writings are replete with such elements, portraying his mystical experiences as a profound connection with both God and humanity. Chavara emerges as a mystical personality wholly devoted to both God and humankind.

³ S. Chackalackal, "Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Nineteenth Century," *Herald of the East* 11, 2 (2015), 182.

⁴ T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian*, Ernakulam: The CMI Generalate, 2005, 60.

2.2. Mysticism: An All-Embracing Experience

According to Underhill, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."⁵ Chavara's life and writings exemplify a seamless integration of mystical aspirations and a deep commitment to societal well-being. The mystical dimension, in his perspective, entails a comprehensive merging of seemingly conflicting aspects within the created world and human constructs. Chavara's writings distinctly echo his mystical core rooted in his profound Christ (*Appa*) experience. He encountered God as the embodiment of love and joy, sustaining him like nourishment and vital as his very breath. Despite the trials and tribulations he encountered while nurturing his communities, his heart rejoiced solely due to the profound awareness of the divine presence within. Reflecting on this experience, he sang:

Severed from you, my God my only good
 What joy, peace, or wellbeing can be mine?
 You my love, my joy, and all my good fortune
 If not with you, how could I live my life
 My very breath, my food, my drink
 What a solace have I save in you!⁶ (Canto ii/141-146).

Central to his vision is the Church's primary mission of disseminating this Christic consciousness. Chavara actively pursued this goal by establishing religious communities, nurturing dedicated and holistic pastors, and conceptualizing transformative projects. What stands out is his inclusive approach, evident in initiatives fostering self-respect and self-reliance. All these endeavours collectively contribute to the continuous establishment of the Kingdom of God within the entirety of creation. A genuine mystic does not establish rigid boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Instead, they embrace a perspective that transcends individual traditions, viewing the mystical realm as an integrative attitude. This holistic perception of reality is nurtured in the enduring awareness of the ultimate consciousness. Practical theology takes on a holistic dimension when it evolves into a more experiential framework. For Christians, the quintessential model for life and mission is found in the embodiment of Jesus of Nazareth. His life is characterized

⁵ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, New York: J M Dent & Sons Ltd., 2006, 7.

⁶ *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom* (CWC), Vol. II, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Chavara, 1989, 10.

by a seamless integration between his teachings and actions, as well as a dedicated focus on addressing various human needs. This coherence is evident in the way Jesus approached his mission. Similarly, the life of Chavara serves as a vivid illustration of this integrated and holistic vision. In examining his life, one can observe a harmonious blending of various elements, mirroring the unity between his spiritual teachings and his practical engagement with the diverse needs of humanity. Chavara's holistic approach provides a compelling example for those seeking a balanced and comprehensive perspective in theology and practical application. Thomas Kochumuttom precisely puts this idea:

While thinking of the establishment of a religious house their intention, obviously, was to be able to do the many good works for that would otherwise be left undone in the Church and society- it should be a "house built on hilltop (*bes-rauma*)" for all others to look at and be inspired, a 'mirror of virtuous life' (*punnyattinte Kannati*) looking at which all can easily learn what it means to lead a virtuous life, and 'spiritual resort' (*punya sanketam*) where all are welcome to come and be spiritually refreshed and revitalized.⁷

2.3. Passion for Seeing God

Chavara's spirituality is characterized by an intense yearning to behold God, a longing for the *darśan*, or vision, of the divine. This sentiment is vividly expressed in his *Compunction of Soul*, a lengthy poem spanning 168 lines, wherein he pours out his profound desire to witness the Lord in every aspect of His existence – from every stage of His life to His full glory, beauty, and magnanimity. The refrain that punctuates every other line echoes this fervent longing: *kāṇākeṇam*, ("I long to see you!"). In this book we see:

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God
 His glorious splendour, I long to see!
 How he stayed for nine months
 In the womb of His mother, I long to see!
 Born in her womb, how to Bethlehem he came
 To obey mighty Caesar, I long to see!
 How Jesus, Anna's grand son
 Was hunger-smitten, I long to see

⁷ T. Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 23.

And with the Phrases discussed law
 In his twelfth year, I long to see!
 The Good Shepherd, seeking his flock
 That had gone astray, I long to see;
 The lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself
 As our loving friend, I long to see!⁸

Chavara's longing stemmed from profound meditative prayer and a profound awareness of the ever-present Divine. The pinnacle of religious experience lies in this yearning to witness the celestial manifestation. The fervent aspiration to behold God revolutionizes one's existence; and upon the fulfilment of this longing through a divine encounter, the beholder deems nothing else of value. Feeling the assurance of being God's cherished child, Chavara found the courage to come back to Him, much like the prodigal son. Embracing the same emotions as the prodigal son, Chavara prays:

Oh, it is a long time since I saw *ente appan's* divine face. I squandered all He gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. I am so famished that I wish I could feed on the food the pigs eat... Further delay is suicidal. So here I am on my feet to return home with my jungle-stick and country cap (*toppi-pāla*)... O my soul! Your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of the ingratitude of yours... Would He not be furious with me, would He even deign to look at me? Can I go into His presence without permission?... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? ... Still, *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear... Behold, the doors are wide open! There, *ente appan* is coming out!... O *ente appā!*, I have sinned against heaven and before You... I am not worthy to be called Your son... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *ente appan*... Therefore, *ente appā*... forgive me... O *ente appā*, I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy...⁹

Chavara possessed a keen perception of the heart, one that remained ever vigilant. In the tapestry of life, whether woven with threads of joy or sorrow, he discerned the hand of God with effortless clarity. Thus, his

⁸ CWC II (1989), 17-19.

⁹ *Colloquies* in CWC III (1990), 4-5.

gaze upon the divine remained steadfast and unbroken, transcending the fluctuations of circumstance.

2.4. Mystics: Persons of the New World

Mystical experience is a kind of pilgrimage. The starting point of this pilgrimage is flight from the world, with attention and a life of silence, so that they may listen to God. They enter the living temple, man's heart, where they encounter the living God. St Ephrem says: "O glorious God who dwells in ineffable silence, you have built for my renewal a tabernacle of love on earth where it is your good pleasure to rest, a temple made of flesh and fashioned with the most holy sanctuary oil. Then you filled it with your presence so that worship might be fulfilled in it, indicating the worship of the eternal persons of your Trinity."¹⁰

Once an individual traverses into the depths of one's own heart, he/she finds himself/herself within a treasure house that holds the key to witnessing the celestial riches. The humble discovers the treasures within, and the staircase to heavenly realms is concealed within the chambers of the heart. Sustaining a profound fervour necessitates dwelling within oneself, engaging in introspection, envisioning a new world, and nurturing thoughts and emotions aligned with the aspirations of a renewed existence.

If mysticism may be defined as the experience of a loving knowledge of God, then mystical theology is systematic reflection on that experience. The Eastern Church has never maintained a sharp distinction between the experience and its theory. Experience and doctrine mutually condition one another so that the Eastern theological tradition is essentially a mystical theology. The Fathers of the Church and early writers do not identify spirituality as a discipline distinct from their normal theological endeavours. The mystics are viewed as persons who illumine the deepest realities present in all Christians. The mystery upon which the human rests the centre toward which the soul journeys, is in love with us and desires for us what we most deeply desire ourselves.¹¹ As a man of essential mysticism, Chavara is a practical mystic. The history of the universal Church records that only those men and women who led a life encircled by the Divine Spirit could make

¹⁰ S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987, 349.

¹¹ J. Welch, "Mystical Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak (chief ed.), Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 693.

remarkable and lasting contributions to the Church in its formative years. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was definitely a social reformer, a brilliant educationalist, a great litterateur, an able administrator, a knowledgeable liturgist, a promoter of inter-religious understanding, an orator and linguist, and above all, a very holy man. He pioneered several new initiatives for the spiritual, religious and social uplift of Kerala society, and in that way was a man ahead of his times.

Standing in the great line of Christian mystics, Kuriakose Elias Chavara had a unique vision of God and humankind. The spirituality of Chavara was a combination of Indian, Eastern/oriental and Carmelite features of mysticism. Rooted in these age-old traditions, Chavara and his companions took to a life of contemplation that led them to intense apostolate.

2.5. Mystical Roots of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

2.5.1. Biblical Root

The primary source of Christian spirituality is the Bible which invites and makes us enter into the mystery of salvation unfolded in it, especially in the person of Jesus the eternal Word and the Son of God become man. Chavara was a religious who was transformed by the divine love and in turn, transformed the society in which he lived with his firm conviction of the gospel values. He fostered a profound filial bond with Jesus, affectionately addressing Him as “ente appa” or “my beloved father.” In contrast to many other spiritual figures who perceive their connection with Jesus in terms of a bride and bridegroom relationship, Chavara was deeply influenced by the parable of the Loving Father (Lk 15:11-32). In this parable, he found resonance with his own spiritual journey, seeing himself as the prodigal son returning to the loving embrace of the all-encompassing father, who he recognized as Jesus himself. This “appa experience” symbolized the culmination of an intimate and lifelong filial relationship that Chavara nurtured with Jesus.¹²

In a scientific study of *Dhyanasallapangal*, the contemplative colloquies of Chavara, by the prominent biblical scholar Paul Kalluveettil, we see Chavara emerges as a figure labelled as a “dynamic hermeneut of the Word,” portraying him as a true disciple of Jesus and an exceptional interpreter. Kalluveettil’s analysis suggests that

¹² S. Chackalackal, “Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment,” 191.

Dhyansallapangal is deeply rooted in biblical principles, with both its thematic content and stylistic presentation drawing inspiration from the Bible. Expanding on his observation, it is evident that Chavara embodies not just dynamism but also a mystical interpretation of scripture. His engagement with the Word of God transcends mere academic pursuit, delving into the realms of spirituality and personal connection. With a profound faith and reverent demeanour, he immerses himself in attentive listening to the Word, and fervently engages in response. This is not a detached study, but a deeply personal communion marked by a mystical aura.

2.5.2. Oriental Root

According to one of the pioneers of Christian mysticism Evagrius Ponticus (ca. 345–399), theology is “knowledge of God gained from first-hand experience. It comes not from books, but from prayer.”¹³ Evagrius respects the value of reading, of study, of reason; he did not doubt the profound value of dogma, liturgy, and ecclesiastical authority. But for him, theology in the strict sense is the “encounter of the praying mind with God.”¹⁴ To those who raise their hearts to God, He comes down to meet them, speak to them and entrust them with certain duties. This call echoes in the depth of one’s heart. To listen to it, one needs to descend to the realm of the heart. The Christian spiritual tradition presents the response of human being to the call of God in this manner. The Fathers of the Church, especially the Fathers of the Christian East have encountered this call with great interiority.¹⁵

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a revered saint of the Syro-Malabar Church, was deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of his native Kerala, India, which indeed have Oriental roots. Here are some aspects of Oriental spirituality that influenced Chavara:

2.5.2.1. Syriac Christian Tradition: Chavara belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church, which traces its origins to the early Christian communities in India. The Syriac Christian tradition, with its rich liturgical and spiritual heritage, deeply influenced Chavara’s

¹³ W. Harmless and R. R. Fitzgerald, *The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The Skemmata of Evagrius Ponticus*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 62 (2001), Oxford University Press, 498.

¹⁴ Harmless and Fitzgerald, *The Sapphire Light of the Mind*, 498.

¹⁵ H. Thottakkara, *The Prayer of the Heart*, Always: Star Publications, 2004, 10.

spirituality. This tradition emphasizes asceticism, prayer, and community life.

2.5.2.2. Syro-Malabar Liturgy: Chavara was immersed in the liturgical practices of the Syro-Malabar Church, which incorporates elements from the East Syrian (Chaldean) liturgical tradition. The liturgy emphasizes the mystical participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, fostering a profound spiritual connection with God.

2.5.2.3. Monastic Influence: Chavara was a founding member of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), a religious congregation rooted in the Oriental monastic tradition. Monasticism has been a significant feature of Oriental Christianity, emphasizing prayer, meditation, and asceticism as means to draw closer to God.

2.5.2.4. Eastern Christian Mysticism: Chavara's spirituality was shaped by the mystical traditions of Eastern Christianity, which include practices such as hesychasm (the practice of inner stillness and contemplative prayer) and the Jesus Prayer. These practices aim at cultivating union with God through prayer and inner purification.

2.5.3. Indian Root

We see the mystical experience of Chavara, which are expressed in his *darsanam*, *vasam*, and *sallapam* by means of which he practiced the Christian spiritual values in the Indian society. The Indian Philosophical systems and Hindu-Indian religious traditions offer a rich tapestry of paths toward liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Among these, three classical paths stand out: *Karma-marga*, *Jnana-marga*, and *Bhakti-marga*. Chavara exemplified the essence of *Karma-yoga*, or *Karma-marga*.¹⁶ This spiritual path involves the pursuit of enlightenment through selfless actions, coupled with devoted worship of God and constant contemplation of transcendent truths. Throughout his life, Chavara embraced this path with sincerity and courage.

Chavara's lifestyle, spiritual practices, and mystical insights closely mirror the fundamental teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* advocates the path of detached action, emphasizing the performance of duties without attachment to the outcomes. It encourages the

¹⁶ A. Thottakkara, "Saint Chavara, A Karma-Yogi: A Paradigm of the Mysticism of Active Ministry," Keynote Address in the Workshop on Theological Studies on St Chavara, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2019, 1.

individuals to fulfil their responsibilities while relinquishing selfish desires and maintaining equanimity in success or failure.¹⁷ This philosophy promotes a spirituality rooted in active engagement with the world—an ethos that resonates deeply with the life and teachings of Chavara.

2.5.4 Carmelite Root

The spousal mysticism is the principal theme in the writings of Carmelite mystics basically accepted by Chavara. Just as Theresa of Avila and other mystics, Chavara perceived God as the Bridegroom and the soul as the bride. As George A. Maloney puts it, "the mystics surrender themselves in their own unique energies to those of God. A new communion of love is reached as we seek to 'do' not according to our inner words and desires, but according to God's Word. Our impulsiveness and self-centredness which isolate and insulate us, change to active receptivity in our openness to cooperate with the graceful energies of God operating at each moment in each event."¹⁸

Chavara epitomized a man of God, steeped in contemplation and mysticism. His profound intimacy with the Lord mirrored that of his master, Jesus, allowing him to maintain an inner freedom akin to that which Jesus embodied. This freedom empowered him to traverse freely among people, bearing a message of love. In his transcendence, Chavara shed the shackles of attachment – be it to possessions, acclaim, or even the very success of his divine mission. His detachment extended even to his own life, for he was wholly surrendered to the will of God. Such boundless trust in the divine endowed him with a freedom without limits.¹⁹ Often, he would linger in rapturous communion before the Eucharistic Lord, spending extended periods in ecstatic devotion. Through these moments of profound connection, he drew sustenance and guidance, emanating a spiritual presence that touched the lives of those around him. In his *colloquies*, he wrote with much passion: "O My

¹⁷ A. Thottakkara, "Saint Chavara, A Karma-Yogi: A Paradigm of the Mysticism of Active Ministry," 4.

¹⁸ George A. Maloney, *Mysticism and the New Age: Christic Consciousness in the New Creation*, New York: Alba House, 1991, 55.

¹⁹ M. Maniampra, *Psycho-Theological Paradigms in Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Theological studies on Saint Chavara 3), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 10.

Father (*Ente Appa*), my heart however tells me to call you by no other name than my Father..."²⁰

In his Letter to the sisters, he articulates his inner feelings when he reads about the noble status of the consecrated virgins:

O this is a great blessing! When I read a part of the book, *Monacum Sanctae*, written by Saint Liguori for religious sisters, I was jealous of you. This is true. This is verily true. You are blessed. O queens of my Lord and my God, how great and praise worthy is this state of life you have ascended. Only on the day of judgement you would understand that so many earthly queens have been jealous of your treasures.²¹

In letter, VII/6, Chavara borrows the words of Christ the Bridegroom who has fixed His gaze on His beloved brides who are attracted to the worldly joys and things. He trained early members of the community of sisters to live in the ever-abiding presence of the divine Bridegroom and to keep constant communion and communication:

Ha! Live in the love of Jesus! Remain always in His presence. Walk by His side; converse with him always. When you feel desire, love or attraction towards something, the loving Lord turns towards you and tells you, "Look at me, will that thing make you happier than I will? Is it sorrow or trouble? Then why are you troubled? I can liberate you from your troubles and make you happy. Is it not enough for you? Even for a moment He is not away from you. He wants you to make you happy and he wants only that you love him."²²

In one of his letters, he wrote: "O Lord, do not be separate from us until we are one with you."²³ He could listen to the footsteps of the Lord who accompany him in his soul. He therefore began to see his project as God's projects. Gratefully and with a sense of unworthiness he recalls how he was wonderfully cared, taught and trained in a good path by the special love of God that accompanied him always.²⁴ He continually experienced God as a loving friend accompanying him. His works were natural expressions and extensions of his intimate God experience and lived mysticism. Mystical experience is the mark of a person who is close

²⁰ CWC, vol. III, *Colloquies in Meditation*, 5.

²¹ CWC, vol. IV: Letters, VII/2, Bangalore, 2020, 124.

²² CWC, vol. IV: Letters, VII/6, 131.

²³ CWC, vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/6.

²⁴ CWC, vol. II, *Atmanuthapam*, 1:130-140.

to God in sanctity. Chavara's profound connection with Jesus, nurtured through prayer and austere spiritual disciplines, infused every aspect of his being with a divine essence, allowing him to perceive the world through Jesus' eyes. In his actions and responses, there was a constant yearning to align with God's will, characterized by a spirit of servitude and humility. This intimate communion empowered him to extend care, comfort, forgiveness, and ministry to those in need, reflecting the compassion and love of Jesus Himself. In his Colloquies, Chavara writes, "In order to grant all my heart's desires, and permitting me to ask without any hesitation for whatever favour I like to have, He deigns to dwell day and night continuously very close to my room."²⁵

The Carmelite tradition in the Christian spirituality lays great emphasis on the virtue and wisdom that can be acquired through the practice of silence. Thus, the ancient rule stipulates: "Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty. The practice of prayer is to be fostered in silence. The mystical intuitive experience is 'a ray of darkness' due to the excess of light. It leads one to mystic silence."²⁶ Chavara was very fond of silence and solitude. He invited the sisters to keep this valuable silence: "If you love reading, you will love solitude. When a soul delights in solitude, Jesus Christ will come to converse with it in solitude and begin communing with it."²⁷

3. Conclusion

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a man of contemplation and action. The time that he spent in prayer especially before the Blessed Sacrament boosted his life for the action. One can be a mystic in the sense that one is habitually in personal union with the Lord. Chavara's personal union with God kept ever deepening, never diminishing, and this is what qualifies him for the title of a mystic. In meditation, Chavara found unity with God, while in action; he found unity with the poor and underprivileged. His relationship with God filled him with merciful love, reflecting in his amiable, compassionate nature, always available to others. Drawn irresistibly to the Eucharistic Lord, Chavara learned of divine mercy. His humility, contrition, and self-surrender stemmed from

²⁵ CWC, vol. III: *Colloquies*, 19.

²⁶ T. Kadankavil, *Chavara - A Multidimensional Saint*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014, 192.

²⁷ CWC, vol. IV: *Letters*, VII/8.

the profound belief that he was insignificant before the Lord. Like the prodigal son, he embarked on a journey towards his loving Father.

Chavara indeed exemplifies a profound spiritual perspective, one that sees the hand of God in every aspect of life. Viewing the world through the lens of divine providence, he found peace and acceptance in all circumstances, recognizing them as expressions of God's will rather than mere chance or chaos. His deep faith allowed him to maintain equanimity in both joyful and challenging times, knowing that all experiences served a higher purpose ordained by God. This unwavering trust in divine providence not only brought him tranquillity but also empowered him to navigate life with grace and resilience. By surrendering to God's will completely, Chavara cultivated a sense of inner peace that transcended external circumstances. His steadfast belief in the guiding hand of God provided him with a foundation of strength and serenity, enabling him to remain composed and centered amidst life's storms. In emulating Chavara's attitude of acceptance and trust in God's providence, one can strive to cultivate a similar sense of peace and tranquillity in one's own life, regardless of the challenges one may have to face.

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA - GOD'S WORK OF ART

Sebastian Elavathingal CMI♦

Abstract: "Conformity" to Jesus Christ is the goal of Christian discipleship. Every disciple has to undergo a process of conversion and transformation at all levels of his/her experience - physical, mental, and emotional until he/she becomes a spiritual image of Christ. Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art". The human person becomes ultimately an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials into a spiritual or a transfigured body. It is against the background of this Biblical view of creative imitation of Jesus Christ we try to understand the teaching of prayer that Kuriakose Elias Chavara has laid out in his works. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person which can be compared to the formation of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. Chavara is an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection. St Chavara bears witness to the transfigured glory of Jesus who entered his glory through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Originally, this paper was presented in the Workshop on 'St

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Keywords: Discipleship, Transformation, Work of art, Art of Prayer, Inspiration, Imagination, Holiness, *Alter Christus*, Visualization

1. Conforming to the Image of Christ

The result of prayer is our gradual "conformity" with Jesus Christ. "Conformity" with Jesus Christ means becoming the image of Christ, who is the ultimate form for our imitation and assimilation. It takes place in the life of discipleship. Imitating Christ is a process by which we put on the features of Christ and become another Christ (*Alter Christus*). St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14). Clothing does not mean a superficial change. It is a change of identity of the person. St Paul demands a radical change of life, being liberated from the attractions to sin and renewed in the attitudes of the mind. To the Ephesians, he writes: "Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires" and "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). The life of discipleship is a process of conversion and transformation at all levels of experience - physical, mental, and emotional until the disciple becomes the spiritual image of Christ adorned with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col 3:12).

2. God the Artist - Maker, Inspirer, and Model

Imitation of Christ is essentially a creative process. The creative nature of an activity is seen in its procedure. To be creative, it must be a conscious and purposeful activity. Its result is not accidental or casual, but planned and intentional. Hence, artworks are not mere mechanical productions but meaningful creations. They are expressions of the knowledge and freedom of the maker. The imitation of Christ and the transformation of a disciple are considered successful when the disciple attains perfection as a "work of art."

God has a crucial and decisive role to play in the creative transformation of a disciple into a "work of art" after the model of Christ. God's role in this artistic process can be seen as His three "Trinitarian" functions of the "Maker," the "Inspirer," and the "Model." The Father is the "Maker," the Holy Spirit the "Inspirer," and the Son the "Model." God as the Father is the supreme Maker of everything. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8; See also, Is 29:16).

The Father has called us to existence and provided us with all the physical, mental, and emotional resources we possess. It is with these resources that we undergo the process of transformation for which Jesus is the model or the mould. Already in creation, he is present as the Image of God who is the cause and destiny of every created thing in the universe. "He is the Image of the invisible God ... by him all things were created...all things were created by him and for him" (Col 1:15-16). In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body, suggesting his role as the ultimate form or model according to which everyone is moulded and transformed. Jesus the Son "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:21). But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in us. "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). The agency of the Holy Spirit in our conformation with the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For, we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ... We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:26-29). The Holy Spirit accompanies us with consistent inspiration and help in all the struggles that our transformation demands.

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "masterpiece of God." The agency of our transformation is attributed to God because it is God who, through the Holy Spirit, performs the work. He knows, calls, and predestines all to their final goal. "For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Human beings collaborate in the work by making their physical resources available for transformation. The ultimate goal of the imitation of Christ in discipleship is the transformation of the physical, mental, and emotional resources of the disciples into a spiritual or a transfigured body after the model of Jesus Christ. Prayer stands for the entire gamut of the transforming process in which all faculties of a person are involved.

3. The Art of Prayer in Chavara's Life

Chavara became a "masterpiece of God" through the "art" of prayer. He actualized in his life the words of St Paul: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). His transformation as a work the divine Artist was planned, designed and visualized by God already in advance. Chavara recounts in *Atmanuthapam*¹ how he was chosen by God at different stages of his life. On his part, he cooperated with the choice of God through prayer. He considered himself to be a humble creature like a worm. But as a miracle wrought by God, he was raised to the status of a child of God. Prayer was for him nothing but making himself available to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind (Cf. Mt 22:37). The divine design and inspiration on the one hand and the human resources on the other make prayer a spiritual-material experience rather than a purely spiritual or a merely material event.

Sometimes the result of prayer is thought of simply as an inner experience within the "closed doors" (Mt 6:6). But prayer is also expressive; it produces outward effects. The external visible effect of prayer is the transformation of the person. The body of the praying person becomes the visible witness of the invisible spiritual experience. In prayer, the spiritual and physical aspects, the soul and the body of a praying person communicate in such a way that the inner spiritual experience is manifested as a corresponding physical expression. In authentic prayer, the body of the praying person becomes a symbol, a witness of the experience of the soul. The body gives an eloquent testimony to the spiritual experience of the person. It accounts for the various expressions of faith, praise, and gratitude in prayer. The lack of correspondence between the inner experience and the outer expressions, be it in prayer or social conduct, is condemned by Jesus as hypocrisy. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Mt 23:25). Prayer transforms the whole person, as in the case of the "Transfiguration" of the Lord on Mount Tabor. "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone

¹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul (Athmanuthapam)*, 1.1-4.

like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt 17:1-8). It is a physical-spiritual event impelled by the Spirit of God.

There is a material as well as a spiritual dimension in the transformation that takes place in prayer. As the face and the clothes became as bright as the sun, the materials underwent a striking change, becoming the effective expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is true also of an artistic work. The materials of art, such as wood, metal, or clay, are transformed physically by the hands of the artists. But the transformation is not merely physical; it is simultaneously spiritual. Thus, an artwork is meaningful to the mind as it is beautiful to the eyes.

The meaningfulness of an artwork is due to the concept or design of the work in the mind of the artist. Before setting out to do the physical operation, sculpting, or moulding, the artist has to conceive a design of the work to be done. The artist goes through a meditation in which the hidden potential of the given materials is discovered. It is essentially a spiritual process in which the design of the work to be done is imagined and conceived. According to the traditional principle of Indian art, it is "*dṛṣṭva dhyāyet, dhyātva kuryāt*,"² meaning that artists have to move from "observation to reflection and then from reflection to action." The physical action of making must be preceded by a spiritual preparation of study and reflection. An awareness process is essential in art. That is why it is said that "art without science is nothing." Art is also defined as the "right knowledge of making things."

The personal transformation of Chavara took place through his intense study, reflection, and prayer. He subdued his physical resources, heart, mind, and body to the will of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We can find in his person a union (*yoga*) of material aspects and spiritual energies by which his life became a testimony before the world to God's presence and work.

4. "Method" of Prayer or "Art" of Prayer?

How did Chavara pray? This question naturally refers to the "method" he followed in his journey of prayer. But considering prayer as an experience of personal transformation, the "method" employed in prayer is to be understood as the "art" of prayer. We consider here two words - "method" and "art." They have some similarities and some differences. Both words have more or less the same meaning of the

² Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art - An Indian Perspective*, Rome: Urbanian University Press, 1990, 147.

“technique” of making something. But the term art refers to the “subject” who is the maker, while the method refers only to the “object” that is made. In other words, a method is a scientific approach to the making of something. It is impersonal and task-oriented. It may eventually become “mechanical” or “habitual,” lacking in awareness and freedom. In industrial productions, for example, the production belt stands for efficiency and the quality of production. Art, on the other hand, displays the awareness and the freedom of the artist. Artworks are the artists’ “self-expression,” their vision, inspiration, and imagination.

The transformation of materials like clay or marble into an artwork - a pot or a statue - corresponds also to an inner transformation of their makers. Artworks are simultaneously the witnesses of the artists’ spiritual conversion. In other words, the making of an artwork signifies the “becoming” (the evolving) of the artist as well.

When we consider the methods employed in prayer, we have to emphasize the “artistic” character of those methods. Without the sense of art, all prayer methods run the risk of being mechanical and habitual. The relationship of the praying persons to the methods is often limited to an objective level, in which their aim is limited to some material gain rather than the praying person’s spiritual realization. They overlook the spiritual transformation of the person. But when understood in the artistic sense, the various steps of prayer and their outward expressions correspond to the inner, spiritual conversion of the praying person. In the same way that the artistic process is a “material-spiritual” experience, the various exercises or *sādhanas* of prayer are transformative experiences for the whole person - body and soul. It is a wilful and conscious process, not mechanical or habitual actions. We can, therefore, speak of artworks as products that witness the three basic experiences in all artists: Inspiration, Imagination, and Transformation.

5. The Four Steps of Chavara’s Art of Prayer

Whatever we speak of artistic creativity can be applied to prayer. Prayer is not a mechanical activity but a creative, artistic activity. It is against this background we speak of the “art of prayer” of St Chavara. He has taught us a creative method of prayer. There are four steps in it: Reading, Solitude, Meditation, and Contemplation.³ Evidently, we can discern in

³ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 135. See also *St. Chavara and the Servant of God Fr. Canisius (Vishudha Chavarayachanum Daivadasan*

Chavara's prayer method the various steps of an artistic procedure. They are observing, remembering, visualizing, and making. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of the praying person into a work of art. It can be compared to the moulding and fashioning of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist.

Reading plays an important role in forming the imagination of the person. Reading spiritual books like the Sacred Scripture, the lives of the saints, and motivational literature helps us to enrich our imagination and purge it of all negative thoughts and ideas. By reading good and inspiring books, the ground is prepared for removing the unwanted weeds and sowing the seeds of virtues. Saint Teresa of Avila writes about the initial steps of prayer: "A beginner must look upon himself as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord's pleasure, on the most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds."⁴ Removing the unwanted weeds and nurturing the desired plants in the garden of imagination is a necessary process in the preparation for prayer. We cannot sustain our concentration in prayer due to the invasion of unwanted thoughts and images that have already corrupted our imagination. Reading spiritual and inspirational books nurtures a healthy imagination while weaning off the harmful weeds. This process settles our mind to experience significant silence and peaceful reflection. Chavara always took great interest in providing his spiritual children with good books. For that purpose, he started a printing press that produced prayer books and spiritual books.

Chavara had not only written books but also considered the Book of Nature a veritable source of information and learning. In Nature, we find God's marvels revealed, enriching our imagination. It is true that there is nothing in the mind that is not in the senses. It shows the importance of sense perception in shaping our knowledge.

Kanisiyusachanum), published by Davis Panackal, Kottamuri, Kottackal: Canisius Publications, 2019, 169-181.

⁴ Saint Teresa began to write *The Book of Her Life* in 1562 and completed it in 1565. The centrepiece of the book (Chapters 11-22) is a treatise on prayer. St Teresa speaks of different kinds of prayer as different ways of drawing water for the garden of the soul, where virtues grow.

See "Four Waters of Prayer from the Life of St Teresa by Herself", Penguin, 1957, at <https://catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/wp-content/uploads/7-four-waters-of-prayer-by-st.-teresa-of-avila.pdf>, accessed on 19-08-2023.

Solitude leads to silence, and silence makes a person reflective. In the silence of solitude, one reflects on oneself and the world. Self-awareness may lead a person to gratitude for the gifts received, repentance for the sins committed, and zeal to attain future possibilities. A praying person reflects in the silence of solitude on his/her physical, mental, and emotional strengths and weaknesses to know where he/she needs change and rectification. Knowledge of the self helps to adopt appropriate methods and to do exercises needed for correction and improvement. Chavara's books *Atmānuthāpam* and *Dhyānasallāpangal* are replete with prayerful reflections on his life experiences.

Chavara seems to have understood meditation as setting ablaze the memories of the Saviour – his words and actions. The intense desire to “see” the Lord constantly moves the soul. It craves the vision of the Lord.⁵ The Image of the Lord becomes clearer in the imagination of the praying person, revealing itself as an imitable form. In the practice of art, the “visualization”⁶ of the image is an important creative phase. The artist visualizes the image that is purified from selfish or transitory interests and emotions. According to the traditional principles of art, the artist is supposed to depict the ideal, not the actual image. The artist strives to create the possible perfection, not the actual imperfection. Traditional theories of art prescribe rigorous physical disciplines to “see” the image that is to be depicted by the artist.

Contemplation consists of being conformed to Jesus and identifying with him, sharing in his consciousness of the Son praying to the “Father-Abba.”⁷ A contemplative person has a constant disposition of living and moving in God. St Chavara always breathed “Abba” in his words and actions. He said that his heart did not permit him to call God any other name than “Abba.” Filled with the Holy Spirit, he realized himself as a child of God, conformed to the Son Jesus. It is the Spirit of the Son who prayed from within him. ‘Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father”’ (Gal 4:6).

6. Conformity with the Image of God, Jesus Christ

It is the Holy Spirit who impels a person to be conformed to the Lord, putting on his attitude and mentality. Prayer creates in the person a kind

⁵ Paul Kalluveetil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 64-71.

⁶ Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art*, 145-146.

⁷ Paul Kalluveetil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, 117-121.

and compassionate heart similar to that of Jesus. The impact of imaginative vision is manifested in his/her physical, mental, and emotional behaviour in day-to-day life. It is the spiritual transformation through 'dying and resurrecting.' The person is 'reborn' as a child of God. The Holy Spirit begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person.

The goal of Christian discipleship and religious formation is "conformity" with Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Romans, we read: "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29). Our conformity with the Image of Jesus Christ is already in the plan and design of God. God has its pre-knowledge. Hence it is a vocation, a divine call given to us. God has also predestined us to be conformed to Jesus Christ.

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ means to undergo a purposeful and creative process of conversion and transformation. Every disciple has to undergo this process. It affects all levels of his/her experience - physical, mental, and emotional until he/she becomes a spiritual image of Christ.

The image of the Son Jesus Christ is the rallying point of all disciples who follow him. The challenge before them is to transform their "clay", earthly body into a glorious heavenly body. St Paul writes to the Corinthians: "As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49). Man of dust is Adam, and the man of heaven is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is given to us as the ideal or supreme model for our imitation. His way of life shows the process or the method of imitation. It is the way of death and resurrection like a grain of wheat fallen in the ground, dying and living again with renewed life. As we progress in imitating the given model, we have to undergo a moulding process in our human person, assimilating more and more to the Christ-Image.

The "Exemplar" role of the Christ-Image in relation to the created world is emphasized by St Paul in his letter to the Colossians. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). According to Saint Augustine, Jesus Christ is the 'Art of God' in creation. He is the "Word" or "Design" of creation. In other words, Jesus Christ is the right "measure," "proportion," and "mould" of every perfect work created by God. It also means that in Jesus Christ, we can find the "method" and "process" through which God created and redeemed the world. St Paul uses another expression in the letter to the Romans to

indicate the primacy of Jesus Christ in relation to the redeemed creation. He is the “firstborn” of the new humanity through his resurrection (Rom 8:28-29).

7. We are God’s Masterpieces

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a “work of art.” In the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). It means that we are God’s works of art, His masterpieces, created after the model of Jesus Christ. The entire human person is involved in this transformation. He/she becomes an “artwork” by transforming his/her physical materials of body, mind, and heart into a spiritual or a transfigured image. “The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). The transformation from the earthly to the divine is the end result of a painful struggle. St Paul speaks of it as the pain of childbirth. “The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom 8:22).

While a person undergoes a painful process to become a “work of art,” God plays His crucial and decisive role as the Artist. The obedient collaboration of the human person must accompany God’s work. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: “Lord, we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Is 64:8). The clay needs flexibility and pliability to receive the shape given to it. The attitude of receptivity to new forms is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In every creative experience in human life, there is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit from inspiration to its completion. In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body. But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person. “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

The agency of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of every believer and his/her conformity to the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:28-29).

8. Art in Chavara's Method of Prayer

It is against the background of this Biblical view of the creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer laid out by St Chavara in his writings. The four steps of prayer⁸ - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation - taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person, which can be compared to the formation of artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. We can see Chavara himself as an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection passing through various formative phases of life. We can observe the process of making an artwork in the experiences of prayer practiced and proposed by Chavara.

Reading good books prepares the mind to develop a proper imaginative vision of the model image with its contours, forms, and colours. It has two functions: 1) purging the mind of negative images and 2) filling the mind with noble thoughts and ideas. According to traditional practices of art, artists are supposed to perform some ascetical exercises to free the mind from all transitory images. They include fasting and *yoga*. The unbridled images of sense perception are to be "yoked" and controlled as a preparation for delineating the image to be portrayed. Observation and study of nature are to be complemented by the knowledge of the traditional canons of art from the masters or canonical books. The artist has to achieve the harmony of physical and mental faculties, body and mind, dexterity, and knowledge before he/she sets to work. Chavara's instruction to read good books in preparation for the prayer is to be understood as a means to deepen the awareness of oneself and the world around.

Solitude and silence are necessary for the "visualization" of the image. The observed data are not organized or defined. They are chaotic and unintelligible. Only through a reflective process, the observed and studied forms, patterns, and colours can be developed into an imitable idea. The traditional principle of art is *dr̥stva dhyāyēt* (the perceived data is to be meditated). Knowledge of the traditional canons of art is helpful in the process.

In spiritual life, the given materials to work with are the body, mind, and emotions of the person with their limitations and possibilities. A praying person reflectively assesses them before he/she visualizes the image to be

⁸ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 135.

depicted. The image often lies hidden as a possibility in the actual conditions of life. Silence and solitude help to awaken and animate it.

Meditation or *yoga-dhyāna* is the process of visualizing an image with clarity of all its features. It takes place through a mental activity inspired by the Spirit. The artist in a state of the Spirit's possession transforms the given materials into an imitable idea. It is a spiritual vision that reveals the possibilities hidden in the materials. The inspiration, the working of the Spirit in the artist is so intense that sometimes it is said that the artist has the vision directly from heaven, from God.

In spiritual life, meditation leads to the vision of the Lord. His glorious image of Jesus is revealed through the events of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Hence, the spiritual understanding of the image is as a dynamic reality, not as a static object. It is endowed with the energy to be revealed with infinite possibilities.

Artistic operation consists of realizing in materials the visualized image. The materials are transformed according to the vision of the artist. The materials become meaningful, and the vision becomes effective. Every artistic expression is a continued witnessing and proclamation of the inner vision of the artist. Every image is, therefore, considered an event rather than an object.

Contemplative life makes the life of a person a constant witness and an eloquent proclamation of the Lord, even in the moments of silence. He/she actualizes the presence of the Lord through gestures, words, and actions. His/her life becomes an uninterrupted memory, an aspiratory prayer of repentance, gratitude, praise, and joy. Chavara's life of prayer is an example of this spiritual perfection. Prayer transformed him into a work of art by the hands of God. There is God's signature on him, on all his actions and words. That is the beauty of his holiness. The beauty of holiness is the transcendence of truth captivated by its various spatial and temporal limitations. Holiness liberates truth from the actual conditions of human life, pain, agony, and ugliness. On the cross of Christ, we can find the truth of suffering and death. It is this truth that is transcended by the resurrection and glorified by the beauty of life. Beauty is, therefore, the revelation (*aletheia*)⁹ and the transparency of truth. It is through prayer that Chavara confronted the reality of life and attained the beauty of holiness.

⁹ See Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972, 69–70.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN *DHYĀNASALLĀPAÑÑĀḷ*: AN EXAMPLE FOR THE HERMENEUTICS OF CHAVARA

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to read through the Parable of the Prodigal Son in *Dhyānasallāpaññāḷ*, where Kuriakose Elias Chavara makes a synthesis of the Sacred Scripture and his personal reflection. Some passages from it are analysed to find the inner dynamics involved in the way he quotes the Scripture. Chavara's presentation of this parable in a 'Three-Scene Perspective' shows his radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture as well as a three-fold identification, namely, with the character in the parable, society of the nineteenth century and the culture of the time. He presents himself before God and the community as a corporate personality. We also see that the Sacred Scripture remained his focus and foundation in his reformation pedagogy. It is a paradigm for modern-day pastors. This method of radical interiorization and contextual interpretation is a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

Keywords: Sacred Scripture, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, *Dhyānasallāpaññāḷ*, Radical Interiorisation, Contextual Application,

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Parable of the Prodigal Son, Three Scene Narration, Vernacular Translation.

1. Chavara: 'An Indian Hermeneutic'

Seeing hermeneutics as a science of the rules of exegesis¹ and the way of understanding and appropriating a text,² we find an eminent hermeneutic genius in the person of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as he could understand and appropriate the biblical narratives in a unique manner in his writings and life. A humble attempt is done here to investigate the hermeneutics employed in the biblical narrations of Chavara, especially in his *Dhyānasallāpaṅṅal*.

While considering the approach employed by Chavara, he has a unique approach which is Indian, communitarian, personal and mystic. As Surgirtharajah notes:

Indian biblical interpreters have also been borrowing from the Indian tradition of storytelling. This method has been used by religious teachers to instruct their followers. Hermeneutics for them is not the re-reading of old texts but the re-telling of old stories for a new context. ... their hermeneutical attempts do not conform to the ground rules set by western academics, and their endeavours are likely to be condescendingly dismissed as lacking in "methodological rigour."³

Here, we would like to present the biblical interpretation of St Chavara in this line of thought. Chavara, who was a proud son of the soil, was exemplary to retain the smell of the soil in all his apostolic endeavours. The Indian culture of storytelling and profound integration of the value system into the personal life resulting in an integral personality is seen in his life. The following analysis throws light in this line.

2. Scriptural Interpretations in *Dhyānasallāpaṅṅal*: Lk 15:11-32 in Detail

Chavara cited scriptural verses profusely throughout the *Dhyānasallāpaṅṅal*, in the Indian mode of storytelling as mentioned above

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage, London: Yale University Press, 1970, 54.

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Introduction to a Hermeneutics of Identity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (January-March 2011), 3.

³ R. S. Surgirtharajah, "Introduction, and Some Thoughts on Asian Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), 254.

by Surgirtarajah. Among them, his articulation of Lk 15:11-32 is worth expounding.

2.1. The Parable of the Younger Son and the Merciful Father

God's mercy for the sinners is thrice illustrated⁴ in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to St Luke. They are given through the parables of the shepherd who abandons the ninety-nine sheep to save one, a woman who tries her level best to recover the lost coin, and the evergreen story of the lost son. To call it the story of "The Prodigal Son" alone is to emphasize the first half of the parable (vv. 11-24) to the neglect of the second half (vv. 25-32).⁵ The question of an apt title is a disputed discussion. Nolland seems to attribute the title to all the main characters of the parable. He tells, "The shape of the parable has been disputed in terms of the best title to be given for such a story. Does the story focus on the father, the prodigal, or the elder son?"⁶ For St Chavara, his attention falls with equal importance to the younger son and the father, where the elder son is in oblivion. Hence, in this perspective, the parable could be titled as the 'Parable of the Younger Son and the Merciful Father'.

2.2. Three-Scene Perspective of Chavara

The three-scene perspective of Chavara is the result of spontaneous overflow of a subjective evaluation of this parable, where Chavara is a subject among the other subjects, the son and the father.

According to Culpepper⁷ the parable can be broadly divided into two, vv 11-24 and vv. 25-32, whereas Wiersbe,⁸ use the following structure:

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bangalore: TPI, 1990, 706.

⁵ Culpepper R. Alan, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, in vol. 4, eds. Neil M. Alexander, et. al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 300.

⁶ John Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, in vol. 35b, eds. David A. Hubbard, et. al. Texas: Word Books, 1993, 781.

⁷ David R. Alan, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, eds. Neil M. Alexander, et. al. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 301-303.

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, "The New Testament: Matthew - Galatians," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, in vol. 5, Andhra Pradesh: OM Books, 2005, 234-238.

vv. 11-16: Rebellion – He went to the far country

vv. 17-19: Repentance – He came to himself

vv. 20-24: Rejoicing – He came to the father

vv. 25-32: The joy of forgiving

This parable evokes in the readers the knowledge of the two brothers' stories of the OT in which the younger brother triumphs over the elder as we see in the accounts of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:27-34; 27:1-36); and Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:1-4).⁹

Ringe wishes to see this parable from a two-scene perspective:

The complexity of this parable is remarkable, especially in comparison with the two preceding ones. Instead of the simple movement from lost to found, resulting in a celebration, this parable is developed through two scenes, one featuring each of the two brothers.¹⁰

Here, the three-scene perspective of Chavara becomes a unique interpretation of this parable. All three scenes are oriented on the hinges of relationality: relationality of the son to himself, the son to the father, and the father to the son.

2.2.1. Scene One: Younger Son's Reflection; Lk 15:17-19

These are the verses where the younger son reclaims his lost identity.¹¹ These verses record the interior monologue of the younger son. He is planning to return to his father. In the gospel, we see the three acts the son adopts at this juncture. One is that he came to himself (v. 17), then he plans to get up (v. 18) and go to the father (v. 18). He comes to this realization when he happens to be in the piggery and starves for the food. There, he resolves to say to the father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands" (vv. 18-19).

⁹ Brown et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 706-707.

¹⁰ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 208.

¹¹ Alan, "The Gospel of Luke," 302.

The same passage has details which can be identified in twelve clauses in the account of Chavara given in *Dhyānasallāpaṅṅa!*¹²

- i. Younger son remembers the face of the father seen long ago.
- ii. He realises that the wealth received from the father is scattered.
- iii. He serves an 'immoral one.'
- iv. He keeps someone else' "porks."
- v. He starves for food.
- vi. He became physically unfit because of hunger.
- vii. The gifted attire of the father is thrown away.
- viii. He has no sufficient dress to cover shame.
- ix. Now, he wears a dress made of waste cloth.
- x. He decides to appear before father in this manner.
- xi. The desire to meet his father is now an existential exigency where the delay can cause his death.
- xii. Decides to go to the father with his entire riches of a wild stick and hat of palm leaves.
- xiii. Consoles himself thinking of the fortunes of the servants of the father.
- xiv. Consoles himself trusting the graciousness of the father who forgets deeds of disloyalty.

2.2.2. Scene Two: Younger Son's Confession; Lk 15:21

Here in v. 21, the younger son sincerely starts his rehearsed speech:¹³ "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." We also see in the Lukan narrative, that, the son is unable to continue the prepared speech because of the unexpected intervention of the father. It can also be taken as the dramatic presentation of the author, where, now a clear scene talks nonverbally than the prepared speech of the son.¹⁴ Here, Chavara states and continues the confession in *Dhyānasallāpaṅṅa!* in a 'qualified way'¹⁵:

¹² Chavara Kuriakose Elias, *Cāvarayaccanre Sampūrṇakṛtika!*, vol. III: *Ādhyātmika Kṛtika!*, ed. Z. M. Muzhoor, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1986, 16.

¹³ Alan, "The Gospel of Luke," 302.

¹⁴ Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," 785.

¹⁵ Elias, *Cāvarayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtika!*, vol. III, 17.

- i. The father is addressed with 'possessive nature'.
- ii. The presence of the father is considered 'holy.'
- iii. Being addressed as the son is a 'glorious' title.
- iv. Getting identified with one among the servants of the father is a matter of 'great fortune.'

The subjective mode of textual analysis and the relationality are more evident in the further reflection Chavara makes on the text.

- i. Chavara identifies himself with the repented son.
- ii. Even in the sinful state, the relationality with the father is firm, which helps to address him "father."
- iii. The father in the story is identified as Jesus and God the Father at the same time. Chavara reminds Jesus that "the command to call him 'father' is received from him."¹⁶
- iv. The possessive address to the father is repeated with the addition of the quality of being bountiful.
- v. Chavara reiterates the confession of the younger son in the story as his own confession.

2.2.3. Scene Three: The Father; Lk 15:22-24

Through this third scene, Chavara tries to show the mind of the father reflected through his actions in Lk 15:22-24. In these verses, we see that the father is acting out forgiveness towards his son.¹⁷ The developments in vv. 22-24 indicates what was already entailed in the wordless scene of v. 20b.¹⁸ In the details, we understand that Chavara recalls this story through the eyes of the father.¹⁹

- i. Father welcomes the son to his embrace.
- ii. Tells the son that he is a loving father, and repeats the invitation.
- iii. Gives courage to the son to face the father.
- iv. "I have descended from my throne to meet you."

¹⁶ The mystic of Chavara identifies Jesus and God the Father to make this argument. But we see in Mt 6:9-13 that Jesus told us to call God 'Father', not to call himself as 'father'.

¹⁷ Brown et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 707.

¹⁸ Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," 785.

¹⁹ Elias, *Cāvarayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtikā*, vol. III, 26.

After this address of the father to the son, Chavara goes to an elevated reflection. He explains the descent of the father from the throne²⁰ on the backdrop of three biblical narratives, namely, incarnation, good shepherd, passion narrative and the institution of the Eucharist.

2.2.3.1. The Descent of the Father on the Backdrop of Incarnation

The father in this parable pictures to us the attitude of our Father in heaven.²¹ The evangelist John presents the mind of the Father in sending Jesus, which is the love towards the whole creation²² and clarifies that the words of Jesus shows that he and the Father are one.²³ This is the starting point of the reflection of Chavara regarding the descent of the father in the parable, on the backdrop of incarnation. Here, we have a mystical dialogue where the 'Father' speaks to the 'younger son' who is Chavara.

- i. "I have born as one of the creatures like you so that you may not get afraid"
- ii. "You and your mother had a good house, mat and pillow, when you were born"
- iii. "You and your mother had servants to assist"
- iv. "But, when I was born, my poor mother and I had only a cattle shed"
- v. "... as well as, rock instead of bed, and borrowed hay instead of mat and pillow"
- vi. "In this manner I was born"

Here, the subjective and relational mode of seeing the Scripture is well evident. We also witness a profound blending of Christology, incarnation theology, contextualized reflection seen in the use of household materials of the Keralite culture such as *pāyurṁ talayinayurṁ* and a personalized interpretation of the Scripture.

2.2.3.2. The Descent of the Father on the Backdrop of Good Shepherd, Passion Narrative, and Eucharistic Mystery

We have the descent of the father first on the backdrop of the imagery of the good shepherd illustrated in John 10:16. It is one of the major Johannine mission texts that shed significant light on Jesus' messianic

²⁰ Elias, *Cāvarayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtikāḷ*, vol. III, 26.

²¹ Wiersbe, "The New Testament," 235.

²² Jn 3:16 "God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

²³ Jn 10:30 "I and the Father are one."

consciousness during his earthly ministry.²⁴ This mission of the good shepherd giving his life²⁵ gives us an image of the passion of Jesus.²⁶

The genius of Chavara blends these two imageries with the parable in Lk 15:11-32 in *Dhyānasallāpanṇaḷ*.²⁷ This search of the father indicates the motive of Jesus presented in the fourth gospel of preparing rooms in the dwelling place of the Father.²⁸ Chavara proceeds this to the suffering that the good shepherd has to undergo which is linked to the prophecy of the suffering servant whose wounds would heal us.²⁹ Following this, his reflection culminates in the fullness of life achieved through the Eucharistic mystery.³⁰ This is presented as the continuation of the 'father's' talk to the 'younger son' Chavara.

- i. "I wandered in search of you in the forest, fields, oceans and hills." (Ref. Jn 10:16)
- ii. "I came in search of you out of the love for you, so that I may take you to my palace and make you joyful." (Ref. Jn 14:6)
- iii. "This became known by your enemies under whom you were in slavery"
- iv. "Your enemies caught me, beat, wounded, and killed me." (Ref. Jn 10:18)
- v. "Using that wounds and bruises as medicines for your sickness, I healed you." (Ref. Is 53:5-6)
- vi. "To nourish you, I fed you with tasty food and drink, made of my sweet blood." (Ref. Jn 6:55)
- vii. "Why are you afraid to come to my presence even after seeing all these?"

²⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd Who Will Also Bring Other Sheep (John 10:16): The Old Testament Background of a Familiar Metaphor," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12.1 (2002), 67.

²⁵ Jn 10:18 "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

²⁶ Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd," 68.

²⁷ Elias, *Cāvarayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtikaḷ*, vol. III, 26.

²⁸ Jn 14:6 "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

²⁹ Is 53:5 "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed"

³⁰ Jn 6:53 "So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

In addition to the relational aspect, here we see a theological interpretation of the parable. The descent of the father in the parable reflects the salvific motive of God the Father which was accomplished through the suffering of Jesus. The son in the parable represents the whole of humanity, and Chavara presents himself before the Divine as a corporate personality representing the whole of the people of God. The 'father' here is a motherly figure who gives life, provides medicine through suffering, and nourishes with nutritious blood.

3.1. Characteristics and Uniqueness of the Chavara Approach

Chavara's subjective mode of textual analysis, relational way of presentation, solid reflection with inter-testamental references, mystical as well as intuitive reading, rooted in and blended with theological doctrines, and a tasteful way of articulation in the culture and context, reflects a person who truly interiorized the Sacred Scripture in the history of then and now. His approach has similarities when it is compared with the scholarly Scripture analysis of today, even though St Chavara wrote not with an academic intention.

3.1.1. Radical Interiorization of the Sacred Scripture

The radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture here refers to a deep, personal, and transformative engagement with the biblical text. It is an approach to the Sacred Scripture that asks us to go beyond the surface-level understanding and to seek a more profound understanding that touches the heart and transforms the inner person as we learn from the life and works of Chavara. It can be seen as the result of two factors, as enumerated below.

3.1.1.1. Lack of Availability of the Sacred Scripture in the Vernacular

Chavara's acquaintance was not restricted to any one of the books of the Bible, but to the whole Bible. We also must see that it is very unlikely for Chavara to have constant touch with any of the Malayalam versions of the Protestant Bible available at his time. The reasons to be pointed out are:

- i. There is a significant difference in the vocabulary used by Chavara to quote the Biblical references³¹ with that of the Ramban Bible, Benjamin Beyli's Bible, and Gundert's Bible.

³¹ A clear example is the designation of the younger son. Ramban, Gundert as well as Beyli used *mutiyanāya* (മുട്ടിയനായ) whereas St Chavara uses *dhūllicc* (ധൂളിച്ഛ).

- ii. Catholic missionaries were hostile towards the Protestant Church of that time. Hence, the education provided by the Protestant missionaries was denied to the Catholics.³² Chavara, working under the Catholic missionaries, there is less chance that he was using the Bible provided by the Protestant missionaries.
- iii. During Chavara's time, Protestants did not translate the complete Bible. But Chavara quotes in Malayalam even from the books that were not yet translated by the Protestants.³³

This points to the radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture that he had based on the versions available in foreign languages. His interiorization of the Scripture verses is radical, in that it was easy for him to switch spontaneously in context to the vernacular, that too from various books of the Bible.³⁴

3.1.1.2. Other Contextual Exigencies

On the other hand, the contextual exigency is not restricted to the lack of availability of the text. The illiteracy of the people whom he served³⁵, the presence of misleading leaders in the Church,³⁶ and the inability of the clergy to guide the people³⁷ also add to the exigency he faced. This can be seen as pressure from outside urging the 'good shepherd' in the heart of Chavara to radically interiorize the Sacred Scripture to provide spiritual nourishment for all under his care.

3.1.2. Threefold Identification

About the parable of the 'Younger Son', we can point out a three-fold identification of Chavara, namely, with the Biblical characters, vulnerable in the society and the listeners. But, these identifications are not restricted to this parable alone. We see them elsewhere also in the *Dhyānasallāpannaḷ*.

³² Fr Emmanuel TOCD, 17.

³³ In comparison with the Ramban Bible, Gundert Bible and Beyli's Bible.

³⁴ In *Dhyānasallāpannaḷ* we can find more than 40 references from 17 books of the Bible.

³⁵ Mathias Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 28.

³⁶ Gregory Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra sankṣēpaṁ*, Trichur: St Joseph's IS Press, 1970, 38.

³⁷ Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 220.

We see that he identifies himself with the younger son, attributing himself as the prodigal one³⁸ in the passage dealt with in the previous section. In the other instances of *Dhyānasallāpanāḷ*, he identifies himself with the Patriarch Jacob,³⁹ the soldier who beat Jesus,⁴⁰ the good thief,⁴¹ Zachaeus,⁴² and John who stood beneath the cross.⁴³

While being identified as the younger son of the parable, he describes his appearance as a member of the agrarian society. The areca leaf cap⁴⁴ and the wild stick, typically symbolize a farmer. It goes in hand with the historical fact, that the then society in which Chavara lived was primarily an agrarian society.⁴⁵ They were vulnerable to natural calamities, and exploitation from the landlords, uneducated, and had a life that was considered at the lower strata of society.⁴⁶

The vocabulary he used give some indications about his audience. It is a sign of effective communication.⁴⁷ Even though it is necessary for every communication, it was all the more necessary at a time, when the audience was illiterate. Furthermore, this identification is seen in his choice of mode of articulation. To articulate the 'sublime' matters of

³⁸ Elias, *Cāvaraṃyaccante Sampūrṇakṛtikāḷ*, vol. III, 16-17.

³⁹ "I will not leave your feet as Jacob told to the angel."

⁴⁰ "It is your hands that beat on his cheeks." He uses here second person singular as a reflective personal pronoun.

⁴¹ "Being crucified on the cross of the thief who was crucified on your right, I plead with the fervent voice of that noble man."

⁴² "You came to my home of heart, which is full of dirt of sinfulness and cruelties, without considering that I myself am more unclean and sinful than Zachaeus."

⁴³ "You entrusted this poor Kuriakose as son to your mother, by telling her that 'Here is your son.'"

⁴⁴ In the vocabulary of St Chavara we read *toppippāḷa* (തൊപ്പിപ്പാള). This protective hat on head was in use till recently in Kerala among the farmers. Refer O.K. Santhosh, "Politics of the Studies on Folklore," *Malayāḷappacca*, 01 (2015), 15.

⁴⁵ Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 412.

⁴⁶ Sophy Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 40.

⁴⁷ More light on this can be found in the deliberation on the *Form of Life* in the *Philosophical Investigations* of Ludwig Wittgenstein where he discusses fundamentals of communication. Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 50.

spirituality, Chavara did not go for the 'sublime' language of that time, Sanskrit. P.K. Rajasekharan states:

His poems and sermons represent the interventions he made in the life of his community in particular and in the life of his society in general. While he insisted with an almost divine obstinacy that every church should have a school attached to it and went on to start a school for teaching Sanskrit more than a hundred and fifty years ago. In his poetry and prose, he chose to make his way through the bylanes of poetry, rather than along the highway of Sanskrit.⁴⁸

This is clear in the *Dhyānasallāpanna!* where we scarcely come across a Sanskrit word, making it possible to read the work legibly even after one and a half centuries of its creation. He follows a diction that the common people of that time followed. Rajasekharan continues:

His poems [*Compunction of the Soul, Martyrdom of Anastasia and Dirge*] were written in an age when neo-classical traditions in poetic diction reigned supreme. Yet these poems were written in a diction which was closer to the spoken idiom than to the highly ornate, Sanskrit-riddled neo-classical style.⁴⁹

3.2. Impact of the Scripture-Based Reformation: Re-birth of a Society Conscientized of its Identity

Chavara's recognition of the true identity was in the context of ambiguous identity. This illusionment of identity was a result of various factors such as a life in a pluralistic religious society, caste system, foreign invasion etc., that characterised nineteenth century.⁵⁰ When society was craving for an identity, we find Chavara, as one with the conviction of his identity. His first poem in *ātmānutāpaṃ* clearly shows how one person and society get their identity from the Divine⁵¹ which he explains through the Genesis account of creation.⁵² He could find all

⁴⁸ P.K. Rajasekharan, "The Grace of the True Vernacular," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara, Kochi: Viva Books, 2015, 45.

⁴⁹ Rajasekharan, "The Grace of the True Vernacular," 45.

⁵⁰ E.R. Hambye, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. III: *Eighteenth Century*, Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1997, 22.

⁵¹ Z.M. Muzhoor, *Ātmānutāpaṃ: Chavarayachan*, Thevara: Janatha, 1990, 1.

⁵² Chavara Kuriakose Elias, *Cāvarayaccanre Sampūrṇakṛtikā*, vol. II: *Sāhityakṛtikā*, ed. Z. M. Muzhoor, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1986, 1.

men and women as the sons and daughters of one God and treat them as his own tracing his origin back to the Genesis account, and not to that of Matthean. This is reflected in the Chronicles he wrote, where people of other religions and especially the lower castes are mentioned with utmost gratitude about the cooperation they rendered with the construction of the monastery at Mannanam.⁵³

The apprehension that, the society was well informed of their identity through him, is gathered from the fact that of the tedious efforts they rendered to remain to the truth. Chavara's conferrers rendered a commendable job under the successor of Chavara, Fr Kuriacose Porukara TOCD⁵⁴ in eradicating a schismatic trend that arose in the community. As well, the Congregation had the pain of losing its seven beloved members due to the ex-communication they faced for the request for an indigenous bishop.⁵⁵ Even though the Thomas Christians of Malabar had a heritage of nineteen centuries, we see that it emerged as a *sui iuris* Church within some decades after the death of Chavara.⁵⁶

The all-India jurisdiction,⁵⁷ sprouting of a number of indigenous congregations, and a huge number of vocations to religious and priestly life that the present Syro-Malabar Church enjoys, trace back its root to her identity that was re-established through the person of Chavara. The reunion movement which was very well coordinated and guided by the spiritual sons of Chavara could add the Malankara Church to the Catholic communion.⁵⁸

All these point out the deep-rootedness and strong conviction of the person of Chavara with regard to the identity that one has with relation to the Divine, evolving from the Sacred Scripture.

⁵³ Valerian, *Viśud'dha Cāvāra Kuryākkōs Ēliyās Accan*, rev. ed. Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 245-259.

⁵⁴ Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra saṅkṣēpaṁ*, 40.

⁵⁵ Mani Pius, *daivavum manuṣyaruṁ ivarkk svantaṁ*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 155.

⁵⁶ Paul Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage of the Syro Malabar Church*, Changanassery: HIRS Publications, (2019), 280.

⁵⁷ With the document, *Tamquam viti palmitis* by which Pope Francis erected the Diocese of Shamshabad on 9 October 2017. Cf. Joseph Antony, *Hierarchical Authority in the Indian Church*, Kottayam: Paurastya Vidyapeedam, 2022, 14.

⁵⁸ Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra saṅkṣēpaṁ*, 50.

3.3. Radical Interiorization as the Scope for the Modern-Day Pastors

As *The Interpretation of Bible Today* asks to complement the Historical-Critical Method with the contextual meaning of the Sacred Scripture,⁵⁹ this reading looks forward to its implication for today. Even though the radical interiorization that Chavara is not a New Age movement in the strict sense, it has the feature of personal experience which is not at the cost of dogma or the practice of religion.⁶⁰ Before Indians become seriously infected by the European trend of embracing the new-age movements,⁶¹ modern-day pastors can take, adapt and introduce this experiential approach of Chavara, to the mainstream in an attractive manner.

It is a paradigm for modern-day pastors who are entrusted to seek and find the lost sheep to bring them to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10), also, a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

4. Conclusion

The hermeneutics of Chavara is rooted in the radical interiorisation of the Sacred Scripture. It is not restricting the interpretation to the realm of mere intellect. On the other side, it shows that hermeneutics is more experiential, as well as a ground for inspiration. The life of Chavara shows us the co-relatedness of his hermeneutics and the *ortho praxis*.

It is beyond words to describe the genius of Chavara, who could articulate the scriptural passage in a truly interiorized manner. His hermeneutical and exegetical approach is unique. It is imaginative as well as intuitive, since his intertwining of the Biblical verses and theological concepts is fusing with the history of salvation and the mystery of divine-human encounter. He, who was courageous enough to confess that he never lost his baptismal innocence, presents himself in the position of a repentant son⁶² showing that he represents before God in prayer as a corporate personality, representing the people under his care and the weak human nature.

⁵⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1994, 24.

⁶⁰ Chris Crews and Bron Taylor, "Religion, COVID-19, and Biocultural Evolution: Introducing a Special Issue focusing on Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 415 (2022), 6.

⁶¹ Crews and Taylor, "Religion, COVID-19, and Biocultural Evolution," 7.

⁶² Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light*, 112.

THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE IN *CHAVARUL*

Jipson Joseph Edappulavan[♦]

Abstract: Kuriakose Elias Chavara was the first Vicar General of the Thomas Christians of Kerala after the period of Archdeacons. He was a strong defendant of the original identity of the Thomas Christians which later came to be known as Syro-Malabar Church. His visionary approach could be easily known to the present generation through one of his most inspiring literary contributions, *Chavarul*. It is his last testament particularly addressed to the people of Kainakari symbolising the entire Thomas Christians of Kerala. Most of the researchers try to identify it in connection with the family life in general. But it seems to be a practical manual for the married persons than addressing family in general. This nineteenth century work is still relevant due to its in-depth scriptural foundation, theological articulation, and practical framework. It invites the spouses to focus on mutuality for a meaningful marital life.

Keywords: Theology of Marriage, Spouses, Covenantal Love, Procreation, Mutuality, Celebration, *Chavarul*, *Mar Thoma Marga*, Paradigm of Mutuality

1. Introduction

*Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul (The Last Testament of a Loving Father)*¹ is a noteworthy contribution of Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) to the

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¹ It is an 'instruction manual' wrote in Malayalam on 13 February 1868.

Kerala Christian families. He is undoubtedly one of the most noble and holy personalities of the Syro-Malabar Church (SMC). His contributions to the Catholic Church do not confine to the foundation of indigenous CMI and CMC congregations for men and women religious respectively, but extends to a broader horizon of his loving commitment to the life and mission of the Church. He was the first vicar general of the St Thomas Christians after the period of the Archdeacons. He was also one of the most prominent social reformists of the Kerala community. He was a visionary with the zeal of an apostle, a revolutionary with the heart of a priest, and a reformist with the spirit of a prophet. Besides all other contributions, his commitment in preserving the original identity of the Thomas Christians is to be acknowledged and appreciated. Chavara was a staunch promoter of the indigenous customs and traditions of the Kerala Syrian Christian community even when he affirmed his spiritual and liturgical affinity with the Syrian liturgical tradition.

Chavara's literary contribution to the growth of *Mar Thoma* tradition inspires many. *Chavarul* is the epitome of his fatherly concern for the Christian families in Kerala. It was a testament of a loving father to his family, mainly addressed to the people of Kainakari. The people of Kaiankari were chosen as an image of the entire Thomas Christians. It was a testament of the first vicar general of the Thomas Christians to the families entrusted to his spiritual care. His awareness of the issues and difficulties of the then Christian families and his interest for their renewal is explicit in this short and beautiful epistle to the families. It is not merely a spiritual advice of a pastor to his people, but rather, a testament of faith, hope, and service of a man of divine inspiration and blessings. It is a testament of his spiritual conviction presented in the form of practical knowledge for the revival of the marital and family life of the people of God strongly based on the apostolic tradition. Most of the authors and researchers on *Chavarul*² try to identify its contributions only to family life in

² Mathew Ulakamthara, "Vision of the Family in Chavara Testament," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*, 16, 1 (2005), 73; George Kaniarakath, "Chavara's Vision of a Christian Family according to his Epistle to the Community at Kainakary," *Christian Orient* 8, 3 (1987), 124; Jossy Maria, "The Spirituality of Marriage and Family," *Herald of the East* 14, 1 (2018), 19-34; Thomas Kallukulam, "Appropriation of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara's *Chavarul*: Testament of a Loving Father to Families Today," *Encounter* 10, 1 (2019), 86-87.

general. The present article is an attempt to expose the theology of marriage depicted in this testament to the families.

2. Spouses, the Primary Addressee of *Chavarul*

Chavarul consists of two parts. The first part deals with certain precepts for the orderly life in the family and the second part is an instruction to the parents consisting of the guidelines for the upbringing of their children. In the first part, Chavara focuses on the essentials of family life; and in the second part, he emphasizes the importance of good parenting. According to him, the family is the most essential and decisive element of the Church.³ At the very beginning of the last testament, Chavara defines family with clarity and understanding. Family is a community of some people joined together either by blood relation or bond of love.⁴ Family is identified with two kinds of relationships: blood relationships and love relationship. The intimate and covenantal love-relationship (marriage) is the very source of blood relationship. Children are born through the love-relationship of the spouses. Procreation marks not only the birth of children but also the birth of parents. While marriage points to the birth of covenantal love-relationship, procreation pinpoints the birth of blood relationship. In sum, relationship is the central element of any family and all the relationships in the family is centred on the spousal relationship.

Chavara's definition of family/spousal relationship surprises the readers. He defines it as the community of love. It is evident in the Vatican II's definition of marriage, '*communitate amoris*'.⁵ It shows that Chavara was a man of divinely inspired knowledge and foresight. He tried to see marriage and family as a community of love. He proposed a theology of *koinonia* and love to the marital and familial life of the Thomas Christians, which, later on, the Vatican II highlighted as the core of Christian marriage. Procreation was the main thrust of the theology of marriage before Vatican II and the 'ethic of love' was not properly celebrated in the discussions of marriage. But Chavara took the courage to define family from the spousal point of view as it is the community or bond of love refurbishing the horizon of spousal

³ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 389.

⁴ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, 150th anniversary, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2018, 9.

⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 47 (AAS 58:1067).

relationship from the traditional procreational perspective to the biblical perspective of love and communion. His background of *Mar Thoma Marga* (Way of St Thomas) which affirmed the communion dimension of the disciples of Christ and the typical Indigenous understanding of family also prompted him to develop such a theology of marriage. While defining marriage as a communion of love, he enlarges the horizon of spousal relationship from the procreative dimension to all the aspects of their intimate relationship. It helps to understand marriage not from a restrictive perspective but from a wider perspective of love and communion.

Blood relationship originates from the love-relationship of the spouses. The intimate covenantal love-relationship of the spouses motivates them to partake in the creative work of God and they become parents originating the blood relationships. Procreation is the point wherein the love-relationship gives birth to the blood relationship. Love-relationship remains intact even after procreation, but at the same time, it gives birth to another beautiful relationship of parents-children. Thinking in this line we can say that the primary addressee of *Chavarul* is the spouses who are united in love. Husband and wife are the head of the family and the precepts of the family are given to them to transform the entire family into the image of heaven. Upbringing of the children is primarily the responsibility of the spouses, and hence, Chavara in his testament also entrusted this assignment to them. His primary focus was on love-relationship than blood-relationship because the second revolves around the first. He tried to convince his spiritual children that the spousal intimacy and their mutual understanding are the real inspiration for the entire family.

3. Practical Theology of Marriage

Chavara did not intend to develop a logical or systematic theology of spousal relationship and it was not the aim of *Chavarul* either.⁶ It was purely a practical instruction manual wherein a loving father desiring to empower his children to face the problems and challenges of marital and family life instructed them in a language understandable to them and in a manner acceptable to their way of life. Before leaving this world, Christ instructed his disciples and also assured his continuous guidance.

⁶ Kaniarakath, "Chavara's Vision of a Christian Family," 119.

Biblical tradition affirms the practice of last blessings and instructions of the fathers to their children. Thomas Christian tradition also attests to this rich ethos of last advice and blessings of the father to the children assuring the continuance of divine blessing. Chavara being a spiritual father realized his responsibility to remind the perils of this world that may challenge the marital life of the Thomas Christians, and so, he took up the initiative to advise them appropriately. He discerned the lack of educational and religious training of the Thomas Christians, which may force them to disorient themselves from fully grasping a systematic theology in depth, and hence, he tried to convey his scriptural, theological and spiritual depth in simple terms. But at the same time, he tried to present these practical guidelines well founded in Scripture, Fathers, and theologians intending to give them a sound theology in coherence. He applied all the precious sources that were available to him. He enriched the Thomas Christians with the rich biblical and theological tradition in simple terms. Instead of the sophisticated medieval theological approach, Chavara tried to incorporate the simple scriptural theological approach. Simplicity was the *modus operandi* of his practical theology of marriage enshrined in *Chavarul*. It was pastoral than doctrinal. Accordingly, every person could easily understand the intention of the author and make changes in their marital life of love.

Chavarul's theology of marriage is purely practical than theoretical or systematic. Though Chavara was a man of great wisdom and extensive reading, he was a practical man who knew well the audience. He tried to speak and write in a language that was understandable to them. He tried to conscientize about the importance of practicalities of a successful marital life to enrich their marital ethos. The following points enlist the various elements of Chavara's practical theology of marriage depicted in *Chavarul*.

3.1. Mutuality of Love and Respect

Love and Respect are the two substantial elements upon which every marital relationship grows into perfection. St. Paul exhorts the married to model their intimate relationship grounding on the mysterious Christ-Church relationship. He wants them to follow the love-respect model of divine relationship in their human relationship.⁷ The husband is instructed to love his wife just as Christ loved the Church. He is given

⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston: Pauline Books, 1997, 351.

an assignment to follow Christ in loving his wife. He is given the highest of all the models of love to be followed. In loving his wife, the husband should imitate Christ's love towards the Church, wherein there is no limit for love. A limited human person is asked to practice limitless love in his relationship with the wife. The wife, on the other hand, is exhorted to obey her husband just as the Church obeys Christ. A wife should respect her husband as the Church respects her Lord. The conditions and peculiar demands of human persons with regard to marriage become meaningless in this surprising novelty of divine-human comparison and Paul's terming it as mystery (Eph 5:24-32). The patriarchal mindset of Paul forced him to demand love from the husband and obedience/respect from the wife. But in reality, his Christian spirit demanded that both love and respect should be mutual in marriage. It is visible when Paul speaks of mutual subjection in 5:21.⁸ Hence, it can be said that just as Christ loves the Church both husband and wife should love each other without any limit and just as the Church respects Christ both husband and wife should respect each other without any gradation. Mutual love and mutual respect thus become the key principles of marriage in the Lord.

Building in this Pauline line of thought *Chavarul* affirms that 'the mother should set an example to the children in respecting and honouring the father; so shall the father teach the children by his example to love and respect the mother'.⁹ Chavara wanted the husbands and wives to become exemplars of love and respect in their family life. They should not compromise their love and respect for each other. They are asked to transform their human love into covenantal love. Their children should learn from them the essentiality of marital love and marital respect. Marriage is proposed as a practical lab wherein the children should learn the depth of love and respect from their parents. When the parents through their life-model teach the children the value of love and respect, they in turn, will love and respect their parents and their siblings. It will become a strong inspiration for their future marital life too. Hence, this love-respect model will continue like a chain of divine blessing coupled with human initiative. Chavara does not confine himself in

⁸ Xavier Edayodil, "Theology of Marriage and Family in St Paul," *Kristujyoti* 24, 1 (2008), 234.

⁹ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2:9.

demanding love from husbands to wives but explicitly affirmed the duty of the father to respect the mother. It was a novelty in those times. At that period of history no one dared to instruct the husbands to show respect towards their wives. Husbands were considered 'lords' of the wives than companions. But Chavara realising the biblical ideal exhorted that respect also should be mutual in spousal life. Both husband and wife should love and respect each other. Mutuality of love and respect helps them to foster their relationship into the real image of Christ-Church relationship.¹⁰ Mutuality of love cannot substitute mutuality of respect. Both are equally important to transform one's intimate spousal relationship into the image of divine relationship.

Love is 'a basic good of marriage'¹¹ but it was largely used with the individualistic and instrumentalist mentality so as to endanger its real nature. It needs to be altruistic and mutual. Spousal love should transcend all the egoistic boundaries of both the husband and wife leading them to communion. When the love is mutual, the spouses realize their innermost calling to come out of egocentrism. It helps them to become protagonists of 'the logic of the sincere gift of self'.¹² The true and meaningful gifting of one person to another in its full sense 'requires that it should be reciprocal, and should exist at least between two equals'.¹³ Equality needs to be the hinge upon which the paradigm of mutuality of marriage should function. *Chavarul* promotes the paradigm of mutuality of love and respect in marriage grounding on the equality of both the partners. It suggests a model to be followed in the contemporary marriages where the pillars of love and respect should be built on the foundation of equality for an inspirational marriage.

¹⁰ Jipson Joseph Edappulavan, *Celebration of Mutuality in the Sacrament of Covenantal Love-Relationship: A Study Based on the Syro-Malabar Liturgy of Matrimony*, Bangalore: Omega Book World, 2022, 149.

¹¹ Karol Wojtyla, *Fruitful and Responsible Love*, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1978, 18.

¹² John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, 11 (AAS 86:884).

¹³ Thomas J. Gerrard, *Marriage and Priesthood: The Catholic Ideal*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1911, 70.

3.2. Celebration of Forgiveness

Chavara was well aware of the main challenge faced by many marriages and families during his life-time. According to him, unforgiveness is one of the important issues that troubles the peaceful living of many marriages. Unforgiveness causes the silly issues to grow to such an extreme level as they become difficult to handle. In the absence of forgiveness spouses try to win over the other without even considering the feelings and thoughts of each other. Instead of addressing the issue at hand, they desire to subjugate the spouse. When they try to win over the other, unfortunately they lose the depth and meaning of spousal oneness. Such a mentality of winning over the spouse than celebrating the uniqueness of love and forgiveness is active in the present times also. Accordingly, the instructions of *Chavarul* have great relevance even for the present generation couples.

Forgiveness is a virtuous attitude of the spouses to consider each other's failures and emotional imbalances with an open-mind. It is the willingness to show love than hatred towards the shortcomings of the spouse. It is a positive attitude wherein they understand the weaknesses of each other with the compassionate heart to excuse them.¹⁴ 'Readiness to mutual forgiveness is indispensable for the stability of the marriage bond'.¹⁵ The patriarchal society could not think of a wife who forgives the mistakes of her husband, for she was considered inferior to the husband, who only had the power to forgive. The ascription of mutual forgiveness in marriage was an appreciable move from the part of *Chavarul* as it tried to enhance the position of women in the society. While establishing the forgiving role of wives it affirms the mutuality of forgiveness. Without having the readiness to forgive the mistakes of each other, the stability of marriage bond will be doubtful.¹⁶ Marital forgiveness insists that the 'thirst for vengeance' should be substituted with the desire for love and communion for a peaceful living of the sacramental marital life.¹⁷ Once the couple shows the willingness to forgive the mistakes of each other, they affirm their divine call to be positioned in the image of Christ. Through the act of forgiveness they share the Christ-experience with each other.

¹⁴ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 105 (AAS 108:353).

¹⁵ Mathew Vellanickal, "Family Life in the Bible," *Biblebhashyam* 3, 3 (1977), 201.

¹⁶ Vellanickal, "Family Life in the Bible," 201.

¹⁷ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 105.

Chavara warns that a marriage which experiences discord and fight among the spouses will perish without any delay.¹⁸ There may be differences of opinion and small conflicts in any marriage but that should not become grave as to trouble marital love. Unwillingness to forgive forces the spouses not to compromise and accommodate each other. The continuance of fighting spirit and discords will ruin the beauty of marriage. Chavara thus exhorts them to 'forgive the mistakes and shortcomings of each other'.¹⁹ Mistakes and shortcomings are part of any person's life but when the spouses show the capacity and disposition to love and respect each other than those undesired elements of one's personality and help each other to correct them, then those marriages will become exemplars of mutuality. The most essential thing in any fruitful marriage is the capacity of the couple to overlook the faults of each other with the mind of Christ.²⁰ Christ is always ready to forgive others and we experience it in the sacrament of reconciliation. When both the husband and wife accomplish the forgiving-mind of Christ, they become Christ-like-husband and Christ-like-wife. This is how a marriage becomes the image of Christ-Church relationship in its practice.

Chavara further notes that 'woe unto those who cause quarrels in families'.²¹ Marriage is a God-made relationship. God is the author of marriage. From the very beginning God planned human nature in such a way that the male and female counterparts should be joined as one for a life of love and communion. But at the same time, Christ reminds us that 'what God has joined together, let no one separate' (Mk 10:9). The human nature, after the fall, is under the clutches of sin and so it can take the control of human behaviour. It may even cause discord in relationships. Hence, the words and deeds and even the presence of some persons can cause quarrels in marital relationship. Spouses need extreme care and attention to avoid such kind of persons who can cause damage in their love-relationship. Shakespeare in his Othello cleverly presents how a jealous friend can cause damage to a beautiful marriage. *Chavarul* in this same line exhorts the Thomas Christians that they should not cause quarrels in any marriage, and at the same time, it also demands the spouses to be cautious against those persons who may

¹⁸ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:1.

¹⁹ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:1.

²⁰ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:1.

²¹ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:1.

cause disturbance in their spousal relationship. There is no place for quarrels in spousal relationship and no person should ever try to cause such a scandal in any marriage. It implies that everyone has a God-given responsibility to protect the serene atmosphere of family.

3.3. Disciplined Economic Life

Discipline in economic matters is the cornerstone of a successful marital life. Many families lose their peaceful living and meaningful celebration of marriage due to economic mismanagement. Chavara says that 'both extravagance and miserliness are sinful',²² and so, he instructs not to spend beyond one's means.²³ Spending beyond one's capacity is an attempt to catch up with the wealthy persons of the society. They try to show that they are also rich sacrificing the future of their family. Extravagance is a self-imposed burden at the cost of life. It is nothing but an 'extra-thing' added to the inferiority-superiority syndrome of certain human beings. They try to upturn their economic inferiority by living a luxurious life without having proper means. They unnecessarily borrow money and finally will reach to a point where they even fail to satisfy the necessities of life. Debt not only troubles the economic life of family, but it also affects and confuses its every aspect. *Chavarul* thus states that the 'wealthiest family is the one which is not in debt'.²⁴ Wealth was identified with debtlessness. Unmanageable debt may even force persons and families to anguish and suicide. Debt-free family was the aim of Chavara for giving such a beautiful instruction.

Chavara realized that the economic mismanagement and luxurious life of many families cause issues to their existence. Economic mismanagement creates unparalleled issues among the spouses. Mostly, the wealth of the family was handled by the husband as the head of the family and if he is not strict in financial matters then it will ruin the entire family structure and will cause pain and mental agony to the wife. It disturbs the day-to-day functioning of the family. It will affect their love-life. *Chavarul* instructs the spouses that there should be a disciplined economic life for the survival of marriages and families. Economic discipline echoes the discipline in the family. Chavara counsels them that debt causes tension in marriage, and hence, the absence of debt is the real asset for a successful marital life.²⁵ Proper and prudent

²² Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:15.

²³ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:6.

²⁴ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:4.

²⁵ Edappulavan, *Celebration of Mutuality*, 150.

management of wealth and the daily life is an essential requirement for celebrating marriage in its depth.

Chavarul though written in the nineteenth century is still relevant where the management of money has become so precious in every step of life. It suggests developing a new lifestyle of openness and simplicity in economic matters as the hallmark of Thomas Christian families.²⁶ Christian spouses should be known not by their luxurious lifestyle but by their simplicity and modesty. In the present world the Thomas Christian families are known for their big houses, costly weddings, luxurious vehicles, precious ornaments, and delicious food habits. Baptism, first communion, marriage, and Holy Orders have become celebrations of luxury rather than celebrations of faith. Millions are spent unnecessarily for many family functions. Even the poor families try to compensate many of their basic wants to have a luxurious function for the marriages of their children. Status has become the catchword of the Thomas Christians than faith in the contemporary world. But unfortunately, this 'thirst for status' compels them to compensate their desire for happy life. Wealth cannot bring happiness to any marriage if it is not properly managed. The appropriate management of wealth and modest way of life enhances the couple's mutual understanding and sharing leading them to perfect communion.

3.4. Beware of Trespassers

Trespassers can fabricate confusion and damage any relationship. Trespassers are the intruders into the specific zone owned by others. They enter the valuable possession of others without availing proper permission, and slowly, they try to own them and their space causing serious issues for the real owners. In many unoccupied properties in cities and towns we see boards with the reminders: "trespassers are prohibited" or "trespassers will be prosecuted." These reminders affirm that trespassers are not lawful persons, and they should not enter the zone occupied by others. The most valuable possession of a couple's life is the sacrament of marriage received at the altar of Christ and the family created in love for life, and so, they must protect it with utmost care from all trespassers. Chavara thus reminds the spouses that they should

²⁶ Josin George Kaithakulam and Thomas J. Parayil, "St Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Vision of the Family in *Chavarul*," in Shaji George Kochuthara, ed., *Vocation and Mission of the Family: Reflections on Chavarul and Amoris Laetitia*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 92.

'accept only those who are well-mannered and God-fearing'²⁷ into their home. If they permit all sorts of people to enter the sanctity of their marital relationship and family, then there is every possibility of having troubles. Every spousal relationship has its own rhythm and when someone trespasses into it then there is high chance for unintended and undesired incidents causing unpleasant noises in marital bond. Once the rhythm is lost then it also damages their harmony of life. *Chavarul's* instruction is noteworthy, if the spouses permit only well-mannered and God-fearing people into their families, their presence can help them to grow in love and communion; and if the indecent persons are allowed into the families, they may cause disorder in their space of love and life.

3.5. Do not Peep into other Marriages

Comparison with the other pairs is one of the serious drawbacks of many marriages. Each marital relationship is unique in its own kind, and it cannot be compared with other marriages which are unique in their own nature. Two different personalities through the sacramental grace of marriage become one in body, mind and soul, and this union of two is different in its substance and nature from the other union in another marriage. Hence, it will be a meaningless attempt to follow the other pair's way of life in one's own marriage. Each couple has its own unique way of marital life. But they can incorporate good things from the other spouses. Chavara thus instructs that the spouses should not 'go from door to door seeking news about others'.²⁸ A couple should focus more on their relationship, and instead, if they peep into the affairs of other couples that will blight their marital intimacy.²⁹ Peeping into other marriages will ruin the uniqueness of one's own marriage and it will disturb their attention. As a loving father Chavara instructs the spouses to focus on their own marriage than the positives and negatives of other marriages. They should not be so much interested in other marriages than their own. They can be inspired by other couples, but they cannot be confused by their way of life. Chavara tries to affirm a culture of sacredness of marital and family space wherein the spouses should have the freedom and focus to live their life of love without any deviations and perversions.

²⁷ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:9.

²⁸ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:7.

²⁹ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:7.

3.6. Unfailing Relationship with Christ

Christian marriage is a union of male and female in the Lord. This union is given the capacity and blessing to become the image of the divine covenantal relationship of Christ and the Church. Human marriage thus must be continuously inspired by the divine covenantal relationship. Christ is the *sine qua non* element of both the divine and human relationships. Christ is the bridegroom of the divine relationship whose bride is the Church. Christian marital relationship is nothing but a relationship of man and woman in Christ. The divine marriage is a Christ-Church union, and the Christian marriage is a union in Christ, which is the replica of the divine marriage. Since Christian marriage is a relationship of a Christ-bearing-man with a Christ-bearing-woman in Christ, its endurance depends on their relationship with Christ. Chavara thus says that 'the most valuable possession of a family [marriage] consists in fear of and devotion to the Lord'.³⁰ He exhorts them to depend on God when they 'are faced with trials and tribulations, disease and difficulties' of life.³¹ These are the moments wherein they feel troubled and confused and if they rely on Christ, they will be able to overcome those uncertainties in mutual love and God-given-hope. Divine providence will continue to instill the required strength in the God-fearing couple, so that, they will be able to face and sort out any difficulties of life. Chavara instructs them to participate in the Eucharistic celebrations on Sundays and on the days of obligation and advises them to participate fruitfully in 'the virtuous act of family prayer' daily.³² Fruitful celebration of the holy Eucharist and the daily participation in family prayer will enhance the Christ-awareness of the spouses. He tries to communicate 'the capability and the naturality of family prayer in inculcating lasting values'³³ in spousal relationship. Only when the spouses show the willingness to unite themselves and their love-union with Christ in Eucharistic celebration and prayer, their union lasts forever.

³⁰ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:19.

³¹ Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:20.

³² Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1:22, 24.

³³ Paulachan Kochappilly, "The Ethical Legacy of Chavara for Our Times," in Paul Kalluveetil and Paulachan Kochappilly, eds., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal*, CMI, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 245.

4. Conclusion

Chavara's *Chavarul* is a unique contribution to the Thomas Christians as it expounds the practical theology of marriage strongly rooted in Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. It tries to present the depth of the essentials of Christian marriage in simple terms realizing its necessity for the indigenous people. But at the same time, its vision is universal in nature. The presentation of marriage as a communion of love is its core and it extends beyond time. *Chavarul* enriches the couples to face the uncertainties of marital life with a positive mind and faith in Christ. The key principles of *Chavarul* are applicable to any generation in any part of the world as they are closely connected with the daily life of married people. A torchlight is given to the spiritual children by a visionary father in faith with the conviction that marriage and family are the very base of the Church (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*).³⁴ These guidelines are given to strengthen the marital relationship of the Thomas Christians desiring to transform their families into the images of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Nevertheless, these guidelines can be incorporated into the daily life of any couple in any part of the world as these are specifically pastoral and practical in its nature and spirit.

Spouses are the primary addressee of the *Chavarul* than the family in general as Chavara was very much aware of their primordial role in forming a culture of love and communion in the family. Marital relationship is the cornerstone upon which all other relationships in the family is built on, and hence, the celebrative functioning of marital union will fortify the entire family structure. According to him, love and respect should not be one-sided in marriage but mutual reinforcing their communion. The virtue of forgiveness is to be celebrated as the essential quality of marital wellbeing. He motivates them to focus on a disciplined economic life as its absence will endanger their peaceful living. He warns them to be cautious of the trespassers and further exhorts them not to peep into the life of others. Unnecessary interference into the life of others and permitting others to trespass the boundaries of one's own marital space are perilous for the beauty and sanctity of marriage. Besides, he advises them to be focused on love of God to live an ideal Christian marriage.

Chavarul's visionary positioning in proposing a practical and pastoral theology of marriage enriches not only the married persons but also the

³⁴ Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family*, New York: Paulist Press, 2014, 23.

theologians and other specialists who actively engage in the discussions and marital enrichment programs. The couples need to be enriched with the practical steps that originate from a pastoral approach of the Church leaders. The Church must come close to the fundamental situations and issues of the married. A sound theology of marriage necessitates to concentrate on and address the practicalities of marital life within a scriptural and theological framework. Both these elements are necessary for developing a real theology of marriage and they are presented in this outstanding work of Chavara.

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Panthaplackal CMI, *Agonies and Ecstasies of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 9), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2022. Pages 312.

The book under review is the ninth number in the series of the Theological Studies on Saint Chavara (TSSC), which is a joint effort of CMI and CMC Congregations under the auspices of Chavara Central Secretariat to promote and publish the spirituality and devotion of Chavara in the form of monographs. The book is so unique and special which stands out in the contemporary world as it presents the beauty and meaning of suffering from the life account of Chavara where people try to negate and alleviate suffering as a necessary evil. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the father of Kerala Church and society had to face many trials and tribulations on the path of liberating the Church and society from the spiritual blindness and social inequalities. But, relying on the providence and will of God he turned every such moments into the moments of blessings and grace. A deep investigation into his magnificent life would tell us that it was a wonderful mosaic image of agony and ecstasy. It is invigorating to see that Fr Thomas Panthaplackal exposes a theological perspective on the life of Chavara, especially on his agonies and ecstasies which reflects the real depth of his spirituality.

The author in the present work identified and delineated uncommon and exceptional insights from the life and personality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Besides the general introduction and general conclusion, the book is composed of 33 chapters narrating 33 instances of agonies and ecstasies from the awe-inspiring life of Chavara, beginning from his childhood to the end of his days. A few of the heart-wrenching incidents narrated in the book consist of the rejection by his own parishioners of Chennamkari during the function of tonsure, death of his parents and only brother at a very young age due to pandemic, the obstacles and difficulties emerged in the path of building 'Beth-Rauma' especially the unreasonable transfers from the authorities, death of his collaborators, unnecessary interference of the authorities in the affairs of the CMI Congregation, the Roccas schism and the following chaos, extensive suffering from rheumatic fever and eye diseases, painstaking journeys

for the people of God and the sufferings of his last days. These events may fall into the categories of physical, mental and spiritual suffering of the Saint, though it is not a strict compartmentalization. The rheumatic fever, arthritics, eye diseases and the last days of ailments may be counted among the physical suffering of Chavara. Rheumatic fever was a companion all throughout his life. Whenever he had long lasted rheumatic fever, his legs will be swollen and sometimes it bursts with puz oozing out which left him with excruciating pain. His mental and spiritual sufferings were more intense than his physical sufferings. Death of his beloved ones and collaborators, rejection from his own parish during the function of tonsure, unreasonable transfers from the authorities and the Roccas schism and the following chaos in the church left deep wounds in the mind of Chavara. Furthermore, he had many experiences of dark nights of the soul throughout his life.

The most striking feature of the work is that it not only elucidates the physical, mental and spiritual sufferings of Chavara in details but also enumerates the ways in which the Saint converted all those gut-wrenching moments into saving graces. He was a man of deep spiritual experience, creatively and positively approached the moments of suffering and turned them into the moments of blessings and graces. Therefore, the book *Agonies and Ecstasies* is indubitably a spiritual guide for the suffering humanity.

The author takes strenuous efforts to produce for the first time a work so unique and special presenting Chavara a great saint who converted the sufferings of the ordinary life into extra ordinary graces than merely qualifying him as a social reformer, literary figure or a religious leader. He carefully analyses the sufferings of Chavara from a theological perspective and claims that Chavara as an icon of suffering developed a theology of suffering in his life.

The work features the 'Agonies and Ecstasies' from the remarkable life journey of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and acts as a catalyst to guide people during the moments of sufferings and torments. The introductory words of the author at the beginning of the book places it in the context by saying that "it is an attempt to provide a handbook for all people who have to walk through this life into the midst of suffering of all sorts" (p. 25). Most of the chapters are framed with a quotation from the Holy Bible, *Compunction of a Soul*, a brief note on the chapter and narrative. The author skillfully crafted the chapters that each piece of suffering is followed by a moment of ecstasy. It makes the content and

title of the book more meaningful and coherent. The bibliography at the end of the book establishes the fact that the work is well researched and grounded on reliable sources. The book addresses many criticisms on Chavara especially he was a puppet of the missionaries (p. 105, 152). Sometimes it goes an extent to compare the experience of Chavara to the sufferings of Jesus on several grounds (p. 43, 53). The text provides an appreciation on the 19th century Kerala Church and society and clearly states that the history of 19th century Kerala Church is nothing but the history of Chavara and the CMI Congregation (p. 74, 75, 84, 138, 157, 164). The author skillfully employs his narrative instinct with a realistic touch. Hence the readers are captivated by the narrative as if he/ she is an eyewitness to the events. The minor language errors (p. 39, 48, 85, 219) and printing errors (p. 176, 197, 217, 231) do not diminish the value of the text. Though there are some such limitations, the book deserves a wider readership. I congratulate the author of the volume for bringing into light the *Agonies and Ecstasies* of Chavara which were unnoticed for years by the biographers, for some or other reason.

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BOOK REVIEW

Josy Maria CMC, *Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Pioneer of Social and Ecclesial Reform*, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 13), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2024. Pages 172. ISBN: 978-93-92996-48-1.

The latest book in the series of Theological Studies on Saint Chavara (TSSC) is *Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Pioneer of Social and Ecclesial Reform* and it is the mature fruit of Dr. Josy Maria CMC's determination, devotion and dedication to highlight the life and contributions of the founder of her congregation Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. She presents him as a person who was on a "mission to reach out to the poor and the oppressed, the lost, the last and the least" (p. 17). She explains why she has undertaken this task as follows, "It is sad to note that although Chavara worked for the unity and growth of the Church and for the integral development of the society, some do not recognize his contributions as a social reformer" (p. 17).

In order to substantiate her position, Josy Maria highlights in the first two chapters the deplorable situation of the Kerala Church at the time of Chavara and his role in recapturing the lost self-esteem and faith life of the St Thomas Christians. She also enumerates the inhumane social conditions of the nineteenth century and how Chavara's social vision and the resultant programmes and projects he initiated led to the integral development of the Kerala society as a whole.

Chavara was fully convinced that the family is the cornerstone of a prosperous society. A society that treats women as second-class citizens and treats them like subjects or even worse, as objects, denying their right to make choices is destined to be doomed. Chavara used education as an effective remedy to treat and cure this social ailment.

In the third chapter Josy Maria introduces Chavara's *Chavarul (The Testament of a Loving Father)*, as the Magna Carta for a happy and healthy family life. It reveals his awareness of the challenges the families of his time faced with. His dream was to transform the family into a reflection of heaven. These images were meant to awaken the desire to keep alive the dream of a heavenly home of brothers and sisters. He envisioned that

a family should be the arena, where life, the greatest gift of God, is welcomed and protected.

The fourth chapter spotlights Chavara's vision on education as well as his educational contributions. Jossy María states, "He began the popularization and reformation of education in the Catholic Church in Kerala by executing the motto, namely, the vernacular Malayalam phrase *pallikkoru pallikkoodam*, "A school for a church". The phrase became popular so that the succeeding generations could take it up to their hearts. He was the first to open a school for the dalits on 9 October 1864 at Mannanam" (p. 88). According to him, a society is integrally developed only when all the people are educated and become God-fearing. Chavara's broad mindedness led him to initiate the education of the marginalized which was unthinkable at that period. Thanks to this bold step taken by Chavara, the poor and the downtrodden could enjoy justice, equality, and freedom.

The women empowerment initiatives of Chavara are enumerated and substantiated in the fifth chapter. Jossy Maria earmarks the foundation of the first indigenous religious congregation for women and its ever broadening and continuing impact on the society as Chavara's clarion call to a renewed and egalitarian social order. Jossy laments, "In the nineteenth century women were kept in a state of utter subjection; they were denied the basic rights, suppressed and oppressed. Women were left economically, socially, educationally and politically dependent on men. Chavara instilled in the women of Kerala the conviction that they were born with potential, goodness, trust, ideas, dreams and greatness. Realizing the importance of women in shaping and guiding the society, Chavara initiated new ventures for their development for they are the agents of social change" (p. 18).

The concluding chapter presents the impact of the Chavara hegemony on the church life as well as the society as a whole. The ripples of the movements he initiated has surpassed their initial boundaries and like giant waves now make impacts on global scenarios offering hope and liberation to the downtrodden. With gratitude the author remembers that it was the first time in the history of Kerala that a Catholic priest worked for the empowerment of women by founding a religious institute for women, a boarding house and school for girls, vocational training, and income generating projects for women, and so on. Jossy Maria concludes her research work affirming as follows, "It is my firm conviction that it was Saint Chavara, who made it possible for

the Malabar Church to stand up against injustices by way of his teachings and actions.... Being an ambassador of peace and harmony, he extended his unique and outstanding leadership in the spiritual, pastoral, and doctrinal realms in the Syro-Malabar Church" (p. 157).

Jossy Maria deserves our appreciation and gratitude for dedicating her time and energy to explore and bring to light so many hidden facts and truths hitherto uncovered and unrecognized. Let her meritorious work be an eye opener and challenge to the ignorant and a matter of comfort to the truth seekers.

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