

The Impact of International Migration on Home Churches: The Mar Thoma Syrian Christian Church in India

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Based on qualitative, multisited research, this article examines the impacts of short- and long-term international migration to the Middle East and the West on the Mar Thoma Syrian Christian denomination of Kerala. Migrants and their foreign-born children have new demands and expectations, and significant financial contributions have led to adjustments in the orientation and functioning of the denomination and its clergy. Large-scale emigration has also had indirect effects. International networks and the economic affluence of the population, along with a rise in social problems caused by migration and consumerism, have led to the rise of evangelical and charismatic transdenominational churches in Kerala that challenge the functioning of established Christian denominations such as the Mar Thoma. Church leaders have been trying to bring about changes to address these developments, but are constrained by the tradition, structure, and the mission of the churches. I draw on theories of organizational religious change and theories of transnationalism to explain the process of social change in Kerala, also addressing some limitations of these theories.

Keywords: *migration, transnationalism, home communities, religious change, Mar Thoma, Syrians, India.*

INTRODUCTION

In *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins makes the case that the “center of gravity” of global Christianity has swung to the South (2011:2). While agreeing with this argument, Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offut (2008:210) contest Jenkins’s claim that the religious dynamism of the global South is a result of the churches in those regions “flourishing entirely on their own.” They argue, instead, that the tremendous growth in southern Christianity is also a consequence of transnational religious connections of these churches with the global North, particularly the United States. Wuthnow and Offut (2008) examine a variety of agents of transnationalism, but place particular emphasis on the role that international migrants play through their networks and remittances, and through forging connections between churches in the North and South. As Meyer points out in her 2010 SSSR Presidential Address, “the recognition of global processes challenges how we think about and analyze religion” and may require the development of new theoretical concepts and frameworks (Meyer et al. 2011:241). This article contributes to such an endeavor. I examine how short- and long-term emigration of Indian Christians to the Middle East and the West has had a major impact on traditional Christian churches within home communities in Kerala, India. I also assess theoretical frameworks to understand these changes. I focus on

Acknowledgments: Research for this project was made possible by funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Louisville Institute, the American Institute for Indian Studies, an Appleby Mosher award, and a summer project assistant award from Syracuse University. The author is grateful for the research assistance provided by Laurah Klepinger-Mathew and for feedback provided by Yasmin Ortiga.

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one particular Syrian Christian denomination based in Kerala that now has branches around the world: the Malankara Mar Thoma church.

The literature on international migration and transnationalism documents profound social, economic, and political transformation in sending countries as a consequence of migration (Kurien 2002; Vertovec 2004). However, few studies have examined the ways in which religious institutions in sending countries are impacted by the international migration of their members. In this article, I show how migration has spawned both direct and indirect effects that have been transforming the context within which the Mar Thoma denomination functions. First, migrants from Kerala and their foreign-born children have new demands and expectations of the church. Migrant members have also made significant financial contributions to the Mar Thoma churches, which have led to a change in the orientation and functioning of the denomination and its clergy. Second, the international networks and the economic affluence of the population as a result of large-scale emigration, along with a rise in social problems caused by migration and competitive consumerism, have led to the rise of evangelical and charismatic transdenominational churches in Kerala that challenge the functioning of established episcopal Christian denominations like the Mar Thoma. Leaders of the episcopal denominations have been trying to bring about changes to address these developments, but they are constrained by the tradition, structure, and mission of their churches. Paradoxically, however, they have done a better job of meeting the demands of their diasporic members overseas than of responding to issues in their home base in Kerala.

This article also assesses whether theories of religious change and of migrant transnationalism are able to provide explanations for these changes within the Mar Thoma church. Theories of religious change use organizational frameworks derived from business firms to focus on how leaders of religious organizations respond to opportunities or constraints in the environment. However, they largely focus on national contexts and also ignore changes brought about due to the “shifting desires, perceptions, and circumstances of religious consumers” (Finke and Iannaccone 1993:27) such as those caused by large-scale migration since they do not view consumer-driven changes as significant. Theories dealing with the impact of transnationalism on home communities on the other hand, focus on the ways in which financial and social remittances of migrant members have been responsible for the introduction of new religious practices in the home communities. However, in the Mar Thoma case, most of the changes in religious practices took place outside the home base. The transnational perspective also cannot explain why leaders of religious institutions in home countries are not responsive to some concerns of migrants and why they sometimes bring about changes that were not demanded by their members. My article draws on theories of religious change and of migrant transnationalism and also points to some of the limitations of these theories. Specifically, it examines the impact of international migration and global networks on traditional churches and provides a better understanding of the circumstances under which religious leaders in such churches are able to make organizational changes and when they are not. It also demonstrates the complex relationship between the agency of laity and of leaders in bringing about religious change.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theories of Change in Religious Organizations

The religious economies theory is based on the rational choice paradigm. Scholars like Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone believe that people’s religious needs and demands remain constant, and they focus primarily on supply-side factors, i.e., religious entrepreneurs as spurs of change and state regulation of religion as a restriction on change (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Stark and Finke 2000). Despite critiques (Chaves and Gorski

2001; Smith 2008), this paradigm continues to be viewed as a dominant theory of religious change and the behavior of religious institutions (Wilde et al. 2010; Yang 2012). According to the religious economies perspective, competition posed by new religious suppliers encourages religious dynamism by forcing religious leaders to work harder to attract and maintain members (Stark and Finke 2000:201; Warner 1993). However, not all religious organizations are able to thrive in a dynamic religious environment. Religious institutions that are unable to maintain the commitment of their membership eventually start to decline (Stark and Finke 2000:151–54). This could take place as religious institutions become institutionalized and become more similar to secular institutions. In such cases, the rewards of professional clergy increase and their religious motives decline, diminishing their ability to inspire their congregations (Stark and Finke 2000:165–66). The high levels of education and theological training of ordained clergy can also hinder their connection with the laity since their intellectual messages may not resonate as well as the emotional messages of lay preachers (Stark and Finke 2005:86). Established religious institutions are also more resistant to change (Stark and Finke 2005:252). In such situations, Stark and Finke (2000) argue that fresh religious suppliers arise and newer clergy and church members who desire a more intense spiritual experience leave established churches for vibrant religious groups, or sects, seeking religious rewards (Stark and Finke 2000:216, 260–64). Stark and Finke (2005) argue that this dynamic explains the rise and growth of many “upstart sects” and the decline of many established denominations over the course of U.S. history.

Neo-institutionalism is another general paradigm of organizational behavior that has been applied to understand changes in religious institutions (DiMaggio 1998). Like the religious economies theory, it focuses on the role of professionals and managers in making crucial decisions that shape institutions (Brint and Karabel 1991:356; DiMaggio and Powell 1991:31). Contrary to the religious economies theory, however, scholars in this tradition believe that institutions do not merely express the preferences of particular leaders but instead reflect collective outcomes that are not the simple sum of individual interests (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:9). They also recognize that leaders are constrained by the structures and conventions of institutions. As a result, they argue, leaders of long-established organizations are often more interested in stability and legitimacy than in efficiency and growth. Consequently, neo-institutional theorists believe that institutions do not respond to changes quickly but instead change “glacially” (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:10), often in unanticipated ways.

Spickard (2004), who discusses problems faced by transnational religious organizations based in non-Western countries, provides a final perspective. He points out that theories of religious organizations have generally focused on “national religious markets” (2004:48), but that organizations that cross national borders face unique organizational challenges. He argues that hierarchical and centralized transnational organizations are often not effective because they find it difficult to deal with cultural differences between the home country and the locations where the religion has been transplanted.

Theories of Migrant-Induced Religious Change

Some scholars of immigration and transnationalism have examined the role of international migrants in bringing about changes in religious institutions and practices in their home countries through changes in their economic position. For instance, Ebaugh and Chafetz (2002) and Levitt (2001) document the substantial financial remittances that U.S. immigrants from a variety of countries sent back to religious institutions in their homelands; these institutions were thus able to undertake new mission and social service activities, and to organize more elaborate religious functions. Guest’s research (2003) shows how financial remittances of Fujianese in the United States to relatives and religious organizations in their hometown in China resulted in the growth of local Christian communities, and led local bureaucrats to adopt a more deferential attitude toward the religious community.

International migrants were also able to initiate religious changes through their “social remittances” (Levitt 2001); through ideas and practices imbibed from their new environments that they subsequently transmitted to family and friends at home. For instance, Levitt (2001) shows how Dominican emigrants introduced new ideas about religious identity and faith to their home village in Miraflores to turn villagers away from popular religious practices toward more church-sanctioned traditions. Similarly, Gardner (1995:239) found that the encounter of Bangladeshi migrants in the United Kingdom and the Middle East with Muslims from a variety of other countries led them to construct “a universal, purist Islam” emphasizing the five pillars and the Qur’anic texts and caused them and their home community of Sylhet to turn away from local forms of Islamic practice and Sufi saint worship. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2002:177) show that Vietnamese immigrants in the United States who participated in “community center” Buddhist temples put pressure on Buddhist temples in Vietnam to expand their purely religious focus and to use their financial remittances to provide social services for the needy. These and other studies of transnationalism focus on the agency of migrants but there is little analysis of the role of church leaders in instituting or resisting particular changes.

In sum, religious economies theory expects to see changes in religious organizations as a result of leadership attempts to deal with religious competition from other organizations. Neo-institutional theory expects leaders of religious organizations to be more interested in maintaining stability and to face impediments to change. Consequently, it predicts that change, if and when it takes place, will be slow and possibly unexpected. Finally, Spickard (2004:61) emphasizes that “culture matters” for transnational religious organizations. In contrast to theories of religious change, transnational theories focus on how international migration can bring about changes in the resources and demands of the members, which can have an impact on religious institutions. As we will see in the Kerala case, each of these theories provides an important lens to understand the impact of large-scale migration on the Mar Thoma church and its membership, but each focuses on a different aspect. The primary motivators of change are consumer led, as described by theories of transnationalism. However, the religious economies and neo-institutional theories, together with Spickard’s (2004), stress the role of culture in helping us understand why some changes have been implemented while others have not. By bringing these perspectives together we gain a better appreciation of the complex process of religious change triggered by international emigration.

BACKGROUND

Kerala is a small state on the southwest coast of India with the highest rates of outmigration, both to other parts of India and internationally.¹ Despite being largely agrarian and rural, it is one of the country’s most densely populated regions, with very high unemployment rates. Kerala is also the most literate state in India, with a literacy rate of 93.91 percent in the 2011 census (compared to national literacy level of 74 percent). Lower caste and class mobilization beginning in the colonial period resulted in the first general elections in 1957 bringing a communist government to power in Kerala. Ever since, communists have been an important influence in the state, both in and out of elected office. Due to the tradition of leftist politics and high educational levels, Kerala is known for its highly assertive and mobilized citizenry.

¹According to the National Sample Survey Report No. 533, “Migration in India: 2007–2008,” data from Tables 6.1.1 and 6.2.1, Kerala had the highest proportion of international emigrants (53/1,000) of all states in India. The next highest rate of international emigrants was in Punjab (16.2/1,000). However, this survey did not capture cases where the entire family had migrated, which is common in Punjab and it is consequently likely that emigration out of Punjab was greatly underestimated.

Kerala's religious composition is unique among Indian states, with large proportions of Muslims and Christians in addition to Hindus. In the 2001 census (2011 figures are not yet available), Muslims composed 25 percent, Christians 19 percent, and Hindus 56 percent of the state's population (compared to 13.4 percent, 2.3 percent, and 80.5 percent, respectively, at the all-India level in the 2011 census). Christians in Kerala can be divided into two broad categories, Syrian and Latin Christians, each constituting about half of the population of Christians in 2001 (Zachariah 2006:10). Syrian Christians in Kerala are called Malankara Syrian Christians and follow the Syriac rite in their religious services, while Latin Christians follow the Latin rite. Both Syrian Christian and Latin Christian denominations follow episcopal traditions.

Syrian Christians in Kerala trace their origin to the legendary arrival of Apostle Thomas in India in 52 CE and his conversion of some local upper-caste Hindus. Whether or not this legend is true, historical evidence indicates that a Christian community, originating from trade contacts with the Middle East, existed in Kerala as early as the third century CE. During the course of its history, the Malankara church split several times, and there are now 10 different denominations—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—that claim an upper-caste, Syrian Christian heritage. Since religious and even denominational affiliation is traditionally by birth and not by personal choice in India, the liturgical services and rituals of each denomination are not easily accessible to the uninitiated. In other words, until recently, traditional Indian Christian denominations have had a virtual “monopoly” over their membership (Stark and Finke 2000:201–02). This is beginning to change, as India has become the target of aggressive evangelical Christian proselytizing efforts funded by American groups (Baldauf 2005). Concerned Hindu groups have mobilized against such proselytization, giving rise to state regulations on foreign evangelists, and against conversion with monetary inducements or coercion (Fernandes 2011).

The Mar Thoma is the third largest Malankara Syrian Christian group (Zachariah 2006:13). With 1,166 parishes² and dioceses all over India and in many parts of the world, the denomination is estimated as having almost a million members. Under the influence of British missionaries from the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), the denomination “reformed” and split from the Oriental Orthodox Syrian church in the late 19th century and currently describes itself as an “Eastern Reformed” church. Mar Thoma Christians are largely concentrated in the central Travancore Christian belt of Kerala, an area that was the center of Christian missionary activity and Christian educational institutions during the British colonial period. Their location and Anglican missionary connections gave them an educational advantage: Mar Thoma Christians are the most educated group in the state next to Brahmins, who constitute a very small group in Kerala (Zachariah 2006:207).

Migration and Religion in Kerala

The combination of high population density, scarcity of land, and high unemployment and education levels in Kerala led to outmigration from the early decades of the 20th century to Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). By the post–World War II period, there was also a migration to countries in Africa. Initially limited to only a few migrants, outmigration to the Middle East picked up from the 1950s. In 2007, the overwhelming majority, 89 percent, of Kerala emigrants went to the Middle East (on a strictly short-term basis since there is no possibility of permanent settlement in those countries), and 5.7 percent to the United States (Zachariah and Rajan 2007:17). The Kerala Migration Study conducted in 1998 estimated that there were 33 international migrants for every 100 households (Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 1999:4). By

²This included 131 parishes outside India: 86 parishes in North America and Europe, 27 parishes in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand, and 18 parishes in the Middle East. The majority (764 out of 1,166) of the parishes are in Kerala.

2007, this proportion had declined to 24.5 per 100 households (Zachariah and Rajan 2007:8). About 17 percent of Kerala households received money from abroad as remittances in 2003 (Zachariah 2006:212). Based on 1998 figures, Muslims in Kerala had the highest proportion of international migrants (49 migrants per 100 households), with the overwhelming majority going to the Middle East. Christians had the second highest proportion of international migrants, 25 migrants per 100 households (Zachariah 2006:166). Around 15 percent of Christian emigrants from Kerala went to the United States (Zachariah and Rajan 2007:21) and Christians comprised more than three-fourths of the emigrants to the United States (Zachariah 2006:187).

Probably as a result of their educational advantage and missionary connections, Mar Thomites had an early start in their migration and consequently had the highest migration rate (combining internal and external migration) of all groups in Kerala—148 migrants per 100 households in 2004 (Zachariah 2006:211–12). Of Mar Thoma households, 31 percent received remittances (compared to 17 percent of Kerala households as a whole), with an average of 22,000 Indian rupees in 2004 (compared to 8,000 rupees for the average Kerala household). A large Mar Thoma migration to the United States began between the late 1960s and the early 1970s that was mostly composed of female nurses and their husbands, as well as some men who went as students for higher studies and their wives.

Among Syrian Christian denominations, the Mar Thoma is known for its unity and strong organization (Williams 1996:136–37). Although the denomination has parishes around India and the world (131 of its 1,166 parishes are outside India and another 271 are outside Kerala), its administration is centralized, with its headquarters in Tiruvalla, Kerala. The metropolitan (head of the church) and the synod of Mar Thoma bishops based in Kerala maintain control over the global network of Mar Thoma parishes. However, the church also has a *Prathinidhi Mandalam* (representative assembly), currently numbering 1,431 members from all dioceses with three-year terms, of which 65 percent are from the laity (including representatives from every parish) and 35 percent from the clergy. The Mandalam meets annually in Kerala to approve the annual report and budget and also “decides all spiritual and temporal affairs of the Church” (Mar Thoma Church 2013). A consequence of the centralization of the Mar Thoma church is a remarkable uniformity among the ritual and organizational practices of Mar Thoma parishes in different countries, all of which maintain its ancient St. James liturgy³ (translated into Malayalam, the language of Kerala state). As a concession to the children growing up outside Kerala who are often not fluent in Malayalam, parishes in other parts of the world and in many parts of India now offer services in English on alternate Sundays, with a translated liturgy.

METHODS

This article draws on a larger project on Mar Thoma Christians focusing on the transnational dynamics of the church, based on multisited research in the United States and India (see Kurien 2004, 2012, 2013). Between 1999 and 2003 and then between 2006 and 2009, I carried out field research and interviews for this project in various parts of the United States. Since I am of Kerala Christian ancestry (from a different denomination), I was able to participate in and understand the Mar Thoma service. In addition, I have interview data from Mar Thoma members and pastors (*achens*) in four more parishes in the Midwest and eastern regions. I also attended three national Mar Thoma American conferences in 2001, 2007, 2008.

To understand the functioning of the Mar Thoma church in India, I conducted three months of research in central Travancore and in a metropolitan area in India (Bangalore) over the summer

³The St. James liturgy is the oldest surviving Christian liturgy. James was the first bishop of Jerusalem; the Apostle Paul describes him in the Bible as the “brother of Jesus.” For both these reasons, maintaining the liturgy is particularly important for the Mar Thoma church.

of 2006, attending worship services and interviewing achen, wives of achen, and lay members. These interviews, conducted in English or Malayalam, helped me to understand the similarities and differences between the functioning of Mar Thoma parishes in different contexts in India. In addition, I interviewed the Metropolitan, a bishop who had been in charge of the North American diocese for a long time, several achen who had served in parishes in the United States, and some members who had been members of the Mandalam. In total, I have data from 84 interviews from the United States and 49 interviews from south India.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE MAR THOMA CHURCH

New Demands from the Diaspora and the Impact on the Church

In 1936, the Mar Thoma church sent its first achen overseas to serve a diasporic Mar Thoma church in Malaysia. Subsequently, achen were sent to Singapore and the Middle East. Mar Thoma members in Africa did not form Mar Thoma congregations but instead, as instructed by the Mar Thoma leadership, obtained a temporary membership in the Anglican churches in the region (since the Mar Thoma church was reformed by Anglican missionaries). The first Mar Thoma congregation in the West was formed in Queens, New York, in 1972. Members sought permission to become an officially recognized parish since they felt marginalized culturally, linguistically, and racially in mainstream American churches and wanted to maintain their community and liturgy (Thomas and Mattackal 2008). However, the Mar Thoma leadership at the time opposed the formal development of Mar Thoma parishes in regions where there were Protestant churches with which the church was in communion, and wanted Mar Thoma members to become members of an Episcopal church (the American branch of the Anglican church) or to join Methodist or Presbyterian churches. The 1973 letter of the Metropolitan, Dr. Juhanon, written in English, conveyed this decision to U.S. Mar Thomites:

We appreciate your loyalty to the mother church, and the desire to take part in our Liturgy which only brings us complete satisfaction. [But] [w]e felt that it would be a very undesirable thing to organize ourselves as a parish. To establish ourselves as a separate worshipping community in such centers where there are a few communions with which we are in contact, would be developing divisive tendencies. (Thomas and Mattackal 2008:232)

Mar Thomites in the United States protested this decision strongly. The leadership finally yielded, and U.S. Mar Thoma parishes were officially established in 1976. The North America and UK diocese (now the North America and European diocese) was formed in 1988.

Theories of transnationalism focus primarily on how financial and social remittances from migrants affect religious institutions in the home communities. However, religious institutions in the homeland undergo tremendous transformations, not merely as a result of remittances but also as a consequence of the very process of developing overseas branches for their diasporas. The formation of parishes and dioceses around the world meant that the Mar Thoma church had to develop a formal system to assign and rotate achen across the globe, each serving, at present, three-year terms. The church and the achen also had to meet the needs of Mar Thoma emigrants and their foreign-born children, who were living in cultural and social contexts that were very different from central Travancore in Kerala. The Mar Thoma achen, posted abroad for relatively short terms, faced several demands for which they were poorly prepared. These included living and working in a new environment, driving long distances, coping with different accents, dealing with the hectic schedules of their members, and understanding the problems of immigrants. In the diaspora, the Mar Thoma church becomes more important in the lives of its members since it is the primary location where members have contact with co-ethnics. Consequently, it becomes an arena for establishing status for downwardly mobile individuals and a refuge from the racism and cultural misunderstandings that members face in their work lives. Church events and general

body meetings often tended to be emotional and conflict-ridden, requiring the skillful mediation of the achen. In the diaspora, families were also more likely to turn to the achen and his wife with problems (which they did not do in Kerala since they had families and friends nearby), and achen found themselves having to provide counseling services for which they were not trained.

Probably the biggest challenge that the achen who had been brought up in Kerala faced was relating to children and youth who had grown up in a very different cultural and religious context. Unlike Kerala, and even the Middle East and Malaysia, where the Mar Thoma church existed in a non-Christian environment where it was relatively insulated, the U.S. church had to confront the issue of how to retain the allegiance of the second and later generations in the face of intense competition from local American churches. Mar Thoma American youth were attracted to large nondenominational evangelical churches, and many left the Mar Thoma church for such churches. Even those who stayed imbibed many evangelical ideas: for example, they were against the long liturgical services of the Mar Thoma church and preferred nonliturgical praise and worship. While the church tradition is that the intergenerational Mar Thoma community worships together, the second generation was asking for separate youth services. They also tended to be quite critical about how “India-focused” the church was and the fact that Mar Thoma achen from India did not have strong English-language skills and the knowledge of the American context to understand their lives (Kurien 2012). Some of the achen who were serving or had served in North American parishes confessed to me that their training to cater to “sacramental questions” had not equipped them to deal with the many challenges they faced during their foreign posting.

Although many members of the immigrant generation wanted to preserve the traditions of the Mar Thoma church, they also felt that the church and the achen needed to acknowledge how their lives were different from that of their co-ethnics in Kerala and try to meet their needs. Susan Chacko, an immigrant and the mother of a teenager, summed it up this way:

The Mar Thoma church in the United States is trying to be like the Mar Thoma church in India and that won't work here. The generation gap is very different. Many families have a lot of problems and I don't think that the Mar Thoma church has awoken to that situation. The achen are not really prepared. They come here and try to run the church like they do in India but this is a totally different environment, and they are not really equipped.

A related topic that came up in my interviews with immigrants in the United States and with Mar Thomites in India, as well as on some Mar Thoma Internet forums, was the change in the way members perceived and treated achen, and in the way they in turn wanted to be treated by the clergy. In the past, achen in Kerala had commanded a great deal of reverence and authority because they were seen as “men of God” and because they were also more educated than most members of society. Due to the increase in the educational levels of Mar Thomites, their international exposure and enrichment, and the spread of egalitarian ideals in Kerala due to the communist influence, this attitude had changed, and achen and even bishops were often viewed as “employees of the church” (not the “owners of the church,” as in the past), accountable to the membership. Mar Thoma members in Kerala and in the diaspora were also calling for more democracy and egalitarianism in the church, and were pushing back strongly against the traditional hierarchical and autocratic style of functioning of the church's clergy and bishops, demanding to be treated with “respect.” Consequently, one of the major issues the Mar Thoma church faced was how to make the church, its practices, and its administrative structure relevant to Mar Thoma members living and growing up in other countries.

The Mar Thoma church modified some of its practices to respond to the needs of its foreign-born generations; many of these changes were also implemented in Indian metropolitan areas outside Kerala. This included requiring two services a month in English (with a translated and shortened liturgy). In addition, many parishes had praise and worship sessions led by youth before the service and also had a youth praise and worship service on the fifth Sunday of the month. The church developed booklets in English about the history of the Mar Thoma church

and its liturgy. They split the youth fellowship into two: one for the English-speaking group and another for the Malayalam speakers, and launched a young couples' fellowship. They organized annual national and regional youth conferences and, from the early 2000s, sent "youth achen" (immigrant Mar Thoma achen who had good English skills and showed a special expertise in working with youth) to regions of the United States that had a large number of Mar Thoma parishes. The U.S. church also developed its own Sunday school curriculum with input from second-generation members (earlier they had followed the American curriculum of David C. Cook). Finally, following complaints from the second generation and some of their parents that the church should support projects in North America, the diocese initiated a mission to fishing communities in Mexico and a Native American mission in 2002; some parishes had also begun local outreach efforts spear-headed by the second generation.

New Financial Resources and Impact on the Church

Although the global spread of the church posed many challenges, it also provided an unexpected financial windfall since most of the revenue of the church now comes from the diaspora, particularly from North America (Lincoln 2008). Achen who obtained overseas assignments benefited the most from this development. While their salaries abroad were modest in terms of the local currency, it was a substantial amount in Indian rupees. Furthermore, the church met most of their expenses (housing, utilities, phone, transportation, and health insurance). The achen's wife (who was not allowed to pursue employment abroad due to visa restrictions and church policy) obtained a small monthly stipend, and achen were given a generous "purse" of at least four months' salary at the end of their term. In addition, they received lavish tips from the members of the congregation for the house visits and services that they provided to individual families. As a result, most achen were able to save enough from one assignment abroad to buy a nice house and a car on their return to Kerala, and sometimes even to fund their children's higher education. Thus, overseas assignments were highly coveted, prompting the Mar Thoma leadership to shorten rotation terms (both internal and external) from five, to four, and finally to the current three years, to make sure that more achen were able to obtain foreign postings.

While the rapid growth and enrichment of the Mar Thoma church materially benefited achen, older members of the Mar Thoma church in Kerala and in the United States felt that it negatively affected their orientation and motivation. These Mar Thomites recalled an earlier period when achen had been highly educated (at a time when educational levels were generally low) and had chosen to forego lucrative and secure government positions to live a life of poverty out of a commitment to what they believed in. Over and over, interviewees commented on how the priesthood had transformed from being a "calling" or "vocation" to becoming a commercialized "profession." Consequently, Mar Thomites believed that many present-day achen were less committed than achen in the past and that they went into priesthood, not because of a desire to serve God but for money and status.

Many Mar Thomites in Kerala said that achen in the contemporary period received a good dowry when they got married (one man mentioned that the "going rate for achen these days" was 10 lakhs or 1 million rupees, enough at the time to build a house in rural Kerala), in contrast to an earlier period when parents were reluctant to marry their daughters to achen due to the financial hardships that the wife of an achen would have to endure. People now recognized that being a Mar Thoma achen was a well-paid, secure position and that an achen's wife would be given preference for a position in one of the Mar-Thoma-run educational or social welfare institutions. An older Mar Thomite in Kerala, Thomas Iype, who was on the Mar Thoma selection committee for the Bachelor of Theology (locally called BT) course in the seminary, told me an anecdote to illustrate this change. An achen he knew had contacted him to ask for his support to get his son into the BT program. When Mr. Iype asked the achen why he was going to the extent of canvassing selection committee members for a BT course the achen had replied:

This is one profession where you get a job immediately. You don't even have to lose one day after getting your BT. Very few professions are like this. Also, if he [the son] marries a woman who has or will get a B.Ed., she is guaranteed a post in one of the many Mar Thoma schools [this selection is decided by the bishop]. He will also get a good dowry and job security.

Mr. Iype concluded that people had now become very cynical about Mar Thoma achen. Since I had noticed that the church services I attended had been full, I asked why people would go to church in such large numbers if they did not respect the achen. Mr. Iype replied: "People come to church because their minds are full of problems and they want to place them [the problems] before God, not before the achen." He meant that spiritual reasons, and not the qualities of the achen, were responsible for people's church attendance.

While foreign postings proved to be a boon for achen, the Mar Thoma church as a whole benefited from the remittances that flowed in from its overseas members. These remittances allowed the denomination to substantially expand the number of institutions it owned and the projects it funded. At the time of writing, the denomination's website indicated that it owned 41 social welfare institutions, 14 homes for the destitute, and eight hospitals in Kerala, in addition to 10 colleges and four training centers. It also had several mission fields in various parts of India and the denomination also undertook several special projects each year. Special monthly offertory collections were taken in Mar Thoma parishes around the world to support the denomination's various projects. Overseas members also provided generous donations to their home churches for renovation activities. Since Mar Thomites received public acknowledgment for their donations, this was one way to obtain status and prestige within their home communities.

Mr. Chandy, one of the middle-aged Mar Thomites I interviewed in Kerala, mentioned another reason for the large contributions:

People have money now and they pour out a lot in support of the church and various charitable causes as a way to be absolved of their sins. For example, there is a large orphanage nearby. It costs 5,000 rupees⁴ to sponsor a lunch there but it is always booked way in advance. People fall over each other to sponsor such events, but not because they have any special feeling for orphans!

Mr. Chandy meant that the substantial donations people made to charitable causes were not because of their interest in charity per se. Instead, the money was given in the hope that God would overlook their shortcomings and ensure their continued success. With the large amounts of money flowing into parish projects, Mr. Chandy talked about how achen tended to start on some kind of construction (such as renovating the church or building a parsonage) when they received a posting. Like Mr. Iype, Mr. Chandy said that people had become cynical about achen and believed that they used building projects as an excuse to say they were too busy to go on house visits, or to try to siphon off some of the money (Mar Thoma parishioners abroad often sent money in the achen's name and they did not always ask for receipts).

Mar Thomites had also introduced several new ceremonies in Kerala at which they gave donations to the church. According to Mrs. George, an elderly parishioner: "Now there is a ceremony at the start of the school year when children go up in front and get blessed and parents give covers [envelopes] with money." Similarly, events like baptisms, confirmations, birthdays, and the launching of new businesses were ostentatiously celebrated with the involvement of several achen and possibly even a bishop. All of this meant that achen and bishops traveled a lot as part of their priestly duties. Due to their travel and administrative responsibilities (a result of the rapid expansion of Mar Thoma institutions and projects), congregants complained that achen hardly got to know the members of the parish during their three-year terms. A middle-aged

⁴In 2006, 5,000 rupees would have been around one-sixth to one-third of the monthly salary of a mid-level white-collar employee.

woman in Kerala gave me two personal examples. She said that a family member had been sick and she had called and asked the achen to pray for her. He did that, but she said that he did not “even bother to come and visit.” When her mother died, she informed the achen, and he said that he would “try and come” for the funeral (he did not). She said that she had not made an issue of it but had been upset. Mar Thoma bishops were even busier, and Mar Thomites in Kerala said that it was hard for lay people to meet them since they were always rushing around from one appointment to another. In the past, when the bishop would come for a function in a locality, he would interact with all the members of the parish, trying to get to know them personally. But now, when bishops attended a function, they would leave even before the function finished to attend another one. Consequently, Mar Thomites felt that the clergy had lost the “personal touch” that the denomination had been famous for earlier.

To summarize, as a consequence of the international migration of its members, the Mar Thoma church had to set up parishes and dioceses around the world, and achenes were sent to take charge of parishes in foreign countries. To deal with the competition the Mar Thoma church faced from nondenominational churches in the United States and in other parts of the world, the church made several changes targeting its foreign-born youth who were most likely to be drawn to alternate churches. However, the three-year terms of the achenes did not provide much time to familiarize themselves with their new contexts, with the result that many achenes found it difficult to address the challenges they faced. Members were also resisting their traditional, authoritarian leadership styles. At the same time, international migration brought significant new financial resources to achenes and the denomination as a whole. Overseas assignments resulted in substantial financial rewards for Mar Thoma achenes; international remittances and the enrichment of Mar Thomites in Kerala also led to a tremendous growth in the number of projects run by the church, and an increase in the scale of the life-cycle celebrations performed or presided over by Mar Thoma clergy.

International Migration, Mar Thoma Leadership, and Theories of Religious Change

All of the above developments can be viewed as an outcome of the economic and social changes of Mar Thoma members due to their international migration and is understandable through the lens of transnational theories. Spickard's (2004) discussion of cultural differences is also important since several of the changes that the Mar Thoma church made were in an attempt to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between its Kerala-born and foreign-born members. According to the religious economies theory, when faced with competition, religious leaders make changes to retain their members (Stark and Finke 2000:201). Neo-institutional theory argues, however, that leaders are constrained in many ways and are often more interested in maintaining the stability and legitimacy of their institutions than in growing them (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Both theories can be applied to the Mar Thoma case. The Mar Thoma leadership has tried to make changes to keep up with the demands of its members in the diaspora and the competition from foreign churches for their members. The leadership has been constrained, however, by many factors: the cultural differences between the Kerala-born generation and those born outside Kerala as well as the fierce opposition to change by its immigrant members, the structure of the Mandalam and decision-making bodies, the background of the achenes, and the mission of the church. These factors are discussed further below.

Although the Mar Thoma church did try to bring about modifications to deal with the needs of its foreign-born members, it was constrained by its need to be responsive to the demands of its primary constituency in the diaspora: the Malayalam-speaking migrants who were its most loyal members and its financial base. Since migration is ongoing, the first generation continues to comprise the dominant group in the parishes in the Middle East and West. As international migrants, this group also tended to guard its traditional practices more fiercely than co-ethnics

in India. The control this group had over the Mar Thoma leadership became clear to me at an annual U.S. Family Conference that I attended in 2008. In his address, the bishop of the North American and European diocese said that he felt that the churches in the diocese should increase the number of English services to three times a month (from the current two). But he mentioned that if he tried to implement this, there would be *behalam*—an uproar—in the parishes (i.e., among the immigrant generation). He also chastised the immigrants saying: “Why don’t you entrust more responsibility on the second generation instead of holding onto committee positions? They will do a better job than you.” He continued, stating that he had advised the youth that they should attend the general body meetings and express their opinions, since the church would be able to change only with their active participation, when they “own the [Mar Thoma] church.” But, he said, the problem is that the second generation “still thinks of it as their parents’ church.”

Another constraint was the structure of the central decision-making bodies of the church, the Mandalam and its Sabha Council or executive committee, which comprised all the Mar Thoma bishops as well as elected members. The Mandalam is very large, consisting of over 1,400 members, and meets once a year for a three-day period. One prominent Mar Thomite, Dr. Samuel Paul, wrote an article (in English), published in the church’s Indian magazine in 2004, which suggested changes to the Mandalam meetings. In the article, Paul critiqued the “unwieldy” size of the Mandalam, and the fact that most of the three days was spent on the “ritual” of presenting annual reports from the multitude of organizations run by the church and on discussing local issues and operational matters. The article concluded: “The end result of an overcrowded agenda is that the time available to discuss serious church-wide policy issues gets squeezed” (Paul 2004:15). Several other Mar Thomites who had attended the meetings as Mandalam members also told me that the bishops “dominated” the sessions and that there was little opportunity for lay members to talk. Moreover, the Sabha Council that implements and oversees Mar Thoma policies is composed of members who are largely from central Travancore, as the council meets regularly. In our conversation, Dr. Paul pointed out that this was an additional “constraint” on the operation of the Mar Thoma church, since these members could not relate to the issues faced by parishes outside Kerala (currently 402 out of 1,166), which meant that many of the concerns of such parishes were not addressed. Consequently, even though the Mar Thoma is a global church, he said, “it still functions as though it is a central Travancore church” and is reluctant to change.

The Mar Thoma leadership had not publicly commented on the perceived commercialization of its clergy, but individual Mar Thoma leaders that I spoke to argued that since the clergy had families to support (only bishops are celibate in the Mar Thoma church), they needed to keep up with the changing economic environment. They said that it was unreasonable for members to expect achen to live in poverty when everyone else was living in luxury: earlier achen had lived very modestly, but so had most others around them. Again, some clergy were children of Persian Gulf or other international migrants who had grown up in comfort in Kerala.⁵ While such individuals had not turned to the priesthood for economic reasons, they took a middle-class life for granted.

In a discussion on the culture of the achen, part of wide-ranging conversations with two Mar Thoma scholars that was compiled into a book (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002), the Metropolitan of the church, Philipose Mar Chrysostom, however, seemed to agree with some of the complaints by Mar Thoma members (both in the diaspora and in Kerala) about the achen’s lack of attention to the needs of the congregation and authoritarian style of functioning. The Metropolitan

⁵When both parents were working in the Middle East, children often were sent to live with relatives and attend schools in Kerala. This was particularly true in the 1970s and 1980s when there were no good English-medium schools in many places in the Middle East.

admitted that the church needed to review its pastoral ministry and make it a central concern, since “meeting people, entering into their needs is not a priority today” for achen (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002:67). Instead, “an Achen’s capability is assessed by how many church buildings and parish halls he has built. If there are no churches to be built, old ones are pulled down to build bigger ones! That is considered as the main ministry of an Achen. This is true about the bishop too . . . all of us have become victims of this building culture” (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002:131–32). To a question about obstacles to change in local congregations the Metropolitan replied:

The basic problem is that our Achens are not ready for any changes in the traditional patterns of liturgy and worship . . . The fact is that many of our present Achens are trying to build up the traditional images of leadership; that is, the image of the patriarch who demands unquestioning obedience from his children . . . Times have however changed; the people have now come of age. They have questions and they are not prepared to give anyone unquestioning loyalty. (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002:131)

In other words, while the Metropolitan showed that he recognized the need for change, he made it clear that neither he nor the Mar Thoma bishops had much control over the achens or even the culture of the church. Since Mar Thoma achens have to be fluent in Malayalam, almost all have grown up in Kerala (which, as mentioned, is largely rural). Consequently, they may not have had much exposure to other types of environments. This is yet another limitation on the ability of the Mar Thoma leadership to bring about change.

In the Metropolitan’s discussions with Athyal and Thatamanil (2002) about the diaspora church, he also reiterated what an earlier Mar Thoma Metropolitan had written in 1952, when there was an attempt to create a unified Indian church: that in the interests of its mission of ecumenism, the Mar Thoma church must be willing to lose itself. Consequently, Metropolitan Chrysostom maintained that he wanted the “diaspora community to become the local community” (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002:116–17) and that he would be “very happy to see that there is no Indian church in America. That is what we want. The people should become part of the land” (Athyal and Thatamanil 2002:125).

In short, while the Mar Thoma leadership has tried to bring about changes in the church to meet the demands of its global dispersion, the leadership, even the Metropolitan of the church, did not have the freedom to bring about all the changes they would have liked to see. Nor did they desire to change in order to meet short-term developments, or to deal with competition if this would compromise the mission of the church. The leadership was even willing to “lose the church” in the interest of its larger ecumenical goal. Right from the inception of its diasporic dioceses, particularly in the West, the Mar Thoma leadership had made it clear that it wanted its members to join and merge with local denominations with which the church was in communion, rather than trying to maintain a separate identity. In this respect it appears that the religious economies theory of Stark and Finke (2000) overstates the extent to which religious organizations are focused on retaining a market niche and consumer base. The neo-institutional perspective seems to be more on target in recognizing the constraints on leaders, including that they may be more interested in meeting the mission or goal of their organization than in efficiency and growth. However, the religious economies theory is helpful in understanding the impact of the financial resources on the Mar Thoma church. As Stark and Finke (2000) argue, the bureaucratization of the church’s administration and the professionalization of the clergy brought about due to increased affluence changed the culture of the church. The clergy and bishops became more like secular administrators, which diminished their personal connection with members and their religious influence over them. Consequently, people in Kerala were becoming increasingly disillusioned with established churches like the Mar Thoma and were turning to new religious options.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, NEW CHURCHES IN KERALA, AND MAINTENANCE OF TRADITION IN THE MAR THOMA CHURCH

The Rise of New-Generation Churches in Kerala

A series of developments linked to international migration and financial prosperity transformed the social environment in Kerala and also created new problems and anxieties. The separation of family members due to international migration led to tensions within migrant households, while the competitive consumerism and material expectations unleashed by a remittance economy increased the strain on middle- and lower-class households of both nonmigrants and migrants. Among both migrants and nonmigrants it was common for both spouses to work outside the home, which resulted in changed gender and parent-child dynamics. Perhaps not coincidentally, rates of alcoholism (Biswas 2010; Harikrishnan 2011), suicide (Kerala State Mental Health Authority 2010; Sauvaet et al. 2009), and divorce (Scaria 2010; Shanavas 2012) in Kerala were among the highest in the country in the recent period. Lay Mar Thomites and aches recounted these developments to me and, like Mr. Iype and Mr. Chandy in the previous section, opined that these problems were responsible for a rise in religious fervor.

While the services of the traditional denominations continued to be well attended, foreign networks (together with the recent restrictions on foreign evangelists), the enrichment of the population, and the increase in religiosity led to the rise of new evangelical and charismatic transdenominational churches in Kerala that challenged the functioning of established episcopal Christian denominations like the Mar Thoma. These transdenominational churches were locally called “new-generation” churches. Some were independent, others had affiliations with international evangelical or Pentecostal churches. Many other churches were led by individuals who were not ordained or even trained in theology. Most targeted a Malayalam-speaking audience, but some focused on a younger, primarily English-speaking group who had studied in the elite English-medium schools and colleges which had become the rage in Kerala after the large-scale migration was institutionalized.

The rise of charismatic and Pentecostal churches is a global phenomenon (e.g., Miller, Sargeant, and Flory 2013; Miller and Yamamori 2007) and can be seen all over India.⁶ Several Indian newspapers and magazines have recently reported on the growth of independent churches in Kerala (Bhattacharyya 2008; Lakshman 2010) and around the country (Rahman 2011). In the central Travancore Christian belt, new-generation churches were attracting non-Christians but were also drawing away adherents from traditional churches (Bhattacharyya 2008; Lakshman 2010; Rahman 2011). Although there are a large number and variety of new-generation churches in Kerala, some of the first were initiated by return migrants. Many of the new churches in Kerala and around the country are also believed to be thriving due to the contributions coming in from evangelicals in the West, particularly the United States (Bhattacharyya 2008; Rahman 2011). Consequently, as Wuthnow and Offut (2008) argue, international migrants and foreign connections have played an important role in initiating and sustaining these churches.

One of the earliest of new-generation churches in Kerala is the Sharon Fellowship Church (SFC) founded in Tiruvalla in the early 1950s by a Syrian Christian man, P. J. Thomas, who had completed a Master's degree in comparative religion at Wheaton College in Illinois. While working in Illinois he felt a calling to return to Kerala and serve the Lord. After establishing the Sharon church, P. J. John also started a Sharon Bible College in Tiruvalla. The SFC now has several affiliated churches in other parts of Kerala and in several U.S. states (Sharon Fellowship

⁶In metropolitan areas of India like Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai, churches affiliated with the Vineyard Christian Fellowship and other U.S. evangelical churches are drawing away English-dominant Mar Thoma members from Mar Thoma churches.

Churches 2013). The largest and most noteworthy new-generation church in Kerala established by an international migrant is the Believers Church, also headquartered in Tiruvalla and formed under the auspices of Gospel for Asia (GFA). It was founded by a Syrian Christian man, K. P. Yohannan, who went to Texas for theological studies in 1974, founded GFA there in 1979, and then returned to Kerala to focus on mission work in India. GFA currently operates 67 Bible colleges in South Asia to teach and train “national missionaries” to proselytize co-nationals without the cultural barriers and the state restrictions faced by foreign missionaries (Gospel for Asia 2013). The Believers Church received large foreign contributions—10.44 billion rupees over a period of 15 years—that it used to buy 2,880 acres of land in Kerala. Since land is scarce and expensive in the state and land holdings are limited by strict laws, this purchase was reported to be under investigation by the state government in 2008 (Bhattacharyya 2008). Parra (Rock) was another new-generation church in the Tiruvalla area founded by the son of Middle Eastern migrants, who, according to locals, was wealthy enough to be able to devote himself to starting a church without having to give up a comfortable life. Parra targeted English-speaking youth who had studied in English-medium schools and colleges in Kerala or who had grown up abroad (usually in the Middle East or Africa). Doulos Theological College, established in 1996 in Alwaye, Kerala was also founded by return-migrants: a husband-wife team who had studied at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and felt called to plant churches in India (Doulos Theological College 2013). Another well-known church in Kerala, Heavenly Feast in Kottayam (where 15,000 people worship together on Sundays), was not founded by a migrant but still had international connections. The founder indicates that he was inspired to form the church by the visit to Kerala in 1998 of Rev. Reinhard Bonnke, a German Christian evangelist with an international following (Heavenly Feast 2013). This church received large foreign donations and was also being investigated by the Kerala government for possible misuse of these funds (Bhattacharyya 2008).

Although there were differences among the new-generation churches, they were all characterized by “spirit-filled” worship, with clapping, dancing, ecstatic singing, and sometimes faith healing, in stark contrast to the solemn liturgical services of the episcopal churches. Many subscribed to a “prosperity theology” that was attractive to the upwardly mobile and those aspiring to upward mobility. Most importantly, they provided the kind of “personal service” for members that the more established churches with their bureaucratic structures were no longer able to provide, reaching out to the poor, those who were sick, and the psychologically needy (Bhattacharyya 2008; Rahman 2011; see also Miller, Sargeant, and Flory 2013).

New-Generation Churches and Impact on the Mar Thoma Church

Mar Thoma members in Kerala brought up several factors to explain why the new-generation churches posed a challenge to churches like the Mar Thoma. One evening, I talked with four middle-aged Mar Thomites (two men and two women) who had attended some services and revival meetings of these other churches. They indicated that a powerful draw was the faith-healing claims of individual preachers, and they told me of some of the faith healing they had heard about, seen, and experienced personally. But even in cases where there was no faith healing, they mentioned that the homilies of the preachers had been far more powerful than those of the Mar Thoma achen. Mrs. Abraham extolled the preaching at an all-night meeting that she had attended the previous week. “My, what a message that was! It was forceful and moving! I took notes and then came home and read through the notes” (but she could not give me any specifics, despite my probing). Apparently, the preacher had focused on the same verses that the local Mar Thoma achen had used for his sermon a few days later that past Sunday, a sermon that had been rather tepid, from what I gathered. The group also told me that people found the singing and dancing in the churches to be therapeutic. As Mrs. Varghese put it: “Now people have money,

but don't have peace of mind so these churches provide the intense spiritual experience that they crave."

Another theme that came up in every discussion about the new churches was how leaders and members of these churches would come and spend a long time praying for those who were sick, had an addiction, or were in psychological distress. In the words of Mr. Thampu, another middle-aged Mar Thomite: "They come regularly, and in large groups to provide support. So this is attractive to those who have problems. In the Mar Thoma church, the achen and some others will visit once, but that is about it. But the new churches have people to do this outreach work full time." Over and over, the individuals I talked to mentioned that people in Kerala had a large number of problems (financial or health issues, but most often family tensions) and did not have "peace of mind." The search for mental peace led them to turn to the new spiritual providers.

The churches in Kerala oriented toward the English-dominant speakers (mostly young adults) were similar to evangelical churches in the United States, and their attraction seemed to be the informality of the worship, the "singing from the heart" with the use of drums and guitars, and the longer, practically-oriented sermons that the youth found more relevant to their lives. Like the older Mar Thomites, the younger, English-speaking group mentioned that the youth had a lot of problems (such as "boyfriend-girlfriend issues") but no one to talk to since they could not bring these questions up in the Mar Thoma church or with parents. But in the evangelical churches they could talk to any of the leaders, and they would provide guidance and counsel. These churches also had wider discussions of issues that were important to youth.

Although several Mar Thoma members attended the services and meetings of the new-generation churches, only a small proportion officially left the Mar Thoma church. They still wanted to have baptisms, marriages, and funerals conducted by an ordained priest (Kerala Christians in episcopal denominations have a high regard for the ordination ceremony since they believe that the ritual of the laying on of hands transmits an unbroken line of apostolic succession), and to be buried in a Mar Thoma cemetery (the new churches did not have cemeteries of their own). Given the difficulty of obtaining local jobs, positions in Mar Thoma institutions were greatly valued and individuals needed recommendation letters from achen indicating that they were active in the church to get these jobs. For all of these reasons, many people who were drawn to the new-generation churches still maintained a formal relationship with the Mar Thoma church and continued to attend services at least occasionally and to make some financial contributions.

Despite the competition from the new-generation churches, Mar Thoma parishes in Kerala have maintained most of their traditional practices. The one exception that was discussed during the time of my fieldwork had to do with the participation of women in the church (and from what I understand, this change had nothing to do with the new-generation churches). Although the church does not permit the ordination of women—the leadership maintains that this is for cultural and not theological reasons—in the early 2000s it passed a rule requiring that women should hold at least 20 percent of the seats in the Mandalam. It also required that if a parish was allotted two Mandalam memberships (this depended on its size), one had to be a woman. Consequently, more than 20 percent of the Mandalam members were women after the rule was passed, whereas earlier there had been very few. The reservation of seats for women in the Mandalam may have been in response to long-simmering discontent on the part of some of the activist Mar Thoma women's groups; however, it did not seem to have been the direct result of any mobilization but was, from what I gathered, a top-down initiative to bring the church into compliance with local (and national) rules regarding reservations for women in representative democratic assemblies. Mar Thoma parishes were also asked to make sure that one of the two Bible lessons for the Sunday service was read by a woman. These rules were applied in Mar Thoma parishes around the world.

While achen and bishops privately acknowledged that new-generation churches were drawing away some of their members, the Mar Thoma church had not officially addressed the issue at the time of my fieldwork. However, I know that individual achen tried to provide information

to Mar Thomites to counter the claims of these churches, for instance, by explaining the Mar Thoma churches' rationale for infant baptism (most of the new-generation churches practiced a "believers" adult baptism), and the importance of clergy training and ordination. They also emphasized that new-generation churches did not have a constitution, financial or accounting structures, or democratic oversight by members, in contrast to the Mar Thoma church.

New-Generation Churches, Mar Thoma Leadership, and Theories of Religious Change

Two propositions of the religious economies model can be examined in the context of the rise of the new-generation churches in Kerala. First is the question of how and why such churches developed in such large numbers. Proponents of the religious economies paradigm take the stability of people's religious needs for granted and argue that the increase or decrease in the supply of religious providers is a result of opportunities and constraints created by state regulation policies. In the Kerala case, we see that large-scale migration had brought about major shifts in the circumstances of religious consumers, increasing the demand for religious and therapeutic goods, and their financial ability to support such efforts. Consequently, the rise of the new-generation churches was at least partly due to these demand-led changes. However, state regulation policies, which increased restrictions on foreign evangelists, and transnational resources, which helped to subsidize the start-up costs of new religious institutions, were also important in stimulating the supply of a large number of domestic religious entrepreneurs (Rahman 2011).

The second issue concerns the relationship between long-institutionalized churches and newly established religious groups or sects. The religious economies theory helps us understand why individuals might turn to new religious organizations in search of greater religious and therapeutic rewards and why the messages of lay preachers may be more inspiring to ordinary members than those of professional ecclesiastics. However, we also see that while many members of established denominations were attracted by the new-generation churches and attended their events and services, only a small proportion of members of churches like the Mar Thoma actually "left" the Mar Thoma church for the new-generation churches. They wanted the respectability and legitimacy that the mainstream church provided when they needed to mark life-cycle events and its resources when it came to jobs. This is the advantage that established churches have over "sects," an advantage that has not been adequately recognized by the religious economies paradigm.

Theories of transnationalism emphasize the changes that immigrants were able to bring in the home church, but in the Mar Thoma case, most changes had taken place in churches outside Kerala. Why was the Mar Thoma church willing to make some changes to respond to the demands of overseas members but not to the needs of its local membership? The transnational cultural differences preventing the Mar Thoma church from being responsive to the needs of its foreign-born generations were not a barrier at the local level. Neither was the opposition of the older generation an issue since the new-generation churches were attracting a wide age range from the middle-aged to the youth. Both the religious economies theory and neo-institutionalism argue that long-established institutions are relatively resistant to change. However, the influence of the global charismatic movement has led many Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches worldwide to incorporate charismatic elements into their services (Miller 2013). Why then has the Mar Thoma church been so resistant to doing so?

Certainly, since Mar Thoma services in Kerala are well attended and the church is financially strong, there is probably no compelling need for the leadership to bring about change. However, there are additional reasons for the church's unwillingness to make modifications in response to the rise of new-generation churches. For one thing, the Mar Thoma church, like other episcopal churches in Kerala, still largely operates on a (caste-like) "monopoly" model (Stark and Finke 2000:201), where individuals remain in the church that they are born and baptized into as infants and switch denominations only as a result of marriage (a woman adopts her husband's

denomination). This model is reinforced by the fact that few of their Kerala members actually “leave” the church. Consequently, while new-generation churches might be genuine competitors for Mar Thoma members, most Mar Thoma leaders prefer to view the turn to the new churches as a temporary fad that people pass through before returning to the Mar Thoma church.⁷ This is particularly the case since the Mar Thoma church (and other Syrian Christian churches in Kerala) deem Pentecostals to be “upstarts” (since they do not have the long history of the Syrian Christian church), lacking in theological legitimacy because their clergy are often not theologically trained or ordained. As the line between Pentecostals and new-generation churches is slippery (see Miller and Yamamori 2007) this perspective is extended to the latter as well (Rahman 2011).

Finally, the Mar Thoma church is constrained by its tradition and mission. Due to its nearly 2,000-year history, as well as its Oriental Orthodox liturgical traditions and theology, it is difficult for the church to include significant charismatic elements into the service: the church cannot change to such an extent that it loses its fundamental identity. Metropolitan Chrysostom made this clear in his discussion with me in an interview on June 14, 2006:

The church is very slow in changing. It has to be . . . Church is the institution where people are defined . . . [so it cannot] keep on changing like people change their fashions. The stability of the church is necessary . . . The world changes very fast. As Alice in Wonderland said, you have to run very fast to stay where you are. That is true. But we cannot change like that . . . it would be dangerous . . . the church becomes very unstable. Therefore church changes will be very slow and should be very slow, I would say. But unless it changes, the church ceases to be the church.

Author Prema: Yes, so how do you decide [when to change]? Is there a critical mass that you need?

Metropolitan: Two things. First you wait on the Lord and you listen to God.

The second criterion, he went on to say, was that the church needed to be “future” or “telos” oriented and should only change to reach a definite future goal, not to keep up with the competition or with every worldly circumstance.

In short, it appears that the Mar Thoma church was more resistant to change in its central Travancore home base because the leadership continued to operate with traditional paradigms regarding the nature of its identity, its membership, and that of its competitor churches, unwilling to recognize the new developments that were affecting Christians in Kerala. The leadership seemed to be more open to acknowledging that the church had to make modifications (however limited) in dioceses formed in cultural contexts outside Kerala.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that it is crucial to study religion from a global perspective to appreciate the variety of ways that transnational processes affect religious organizations and the lives of the members of such organizations. Since most religious organizations in the contemporary period operate within global fields and are affected by international migration (Meyer et al. 2011:243–44), it is important to ensure that theories of religious organizational change are not just focused on national processes but take transnational and global dynamics into account. There is currently little literature on how religious institutions are impacted by the international migration of its members, in other words, how the transnationalization of a religious organization is felt and practiced on the ground. Through the use of bifocal, global ethnography, this article shows the profound effects of migration on the Mar Thoma, an ancient, Eastern Reformed church based in Kerala. Some of these effects were due to the leadership’s need to accommodate the needs of

⁷Even in the United States the Mar Thoma leadership claims that the youth who leave the church generally return when they have children. However, I have noticed that they tend to overstate the extent to which this takes place.

its international membership, others were the unintended consequence of the church developing the infrastructure to manage and use the inflow of remittances. Yet others were due to larger transformations caused by migration and rapid social change.

There has been much discussion of the role of global linkages in the rise of charismatic, evangelical churches around the world, as well as the vibrancy of churches in non-Western countries; this article shows how these phenomena are related in Kerala since the theological training and financial resources that many new-generation church initiators received in the United States was crucial in enabling them to introduce new types of religious institutions in their home communities. As the new-generation churches become more established and institutionalized in the region, they could potentially have major impacts on older Christian denominations as in other regions of the world, and on interreligious relationships between Christians and other groups. The aggressive proselytizing strategies of these churches already are being blamed for some incidents of Hindu violence against Christians (Baldauf 2005).

Based on the Kerala case, it appears that the religious economies model overstates the power of religious leaders and their ability and desire to bring about change. Leaders of churches are limited by the constitution, structure, and tradition of their organizations, but also by their dependence on pastors and lay members. The religious economies model is also based on the assumption that denominational affiliation is a matter of personal choice (Stark and Finke 2000:114). However, in many parts of the world it is viewed as an ascribed characteristic, determined by family of birth. The neo-institutional paradigm recognizes constraints on religious leaders in bringing about change, particularly their interest in legitimacy and stability. These issues are of particular concern to leaders of traditional religious institutions. In the Mar Thoma case, the legitimacy of the church rested on its believed apostolic origins (from Saint Thomas), its episcopality, the maintenance of its ancient liturgy, and its Oriental Orthodox traditions. As the Metropolitan made clear, stability is also important for religious institutions because the church is the anchor for people's identities. At the same time, in its emphasis on the constraints faced by religious leadership, the neo-institutional paradigm might actually have the opposite problem from the religious economies perspective in underestimating the agency of leaders. For instance, the reservation mandate for women in the Mandalam was a radical change introduced by the Mar Thoma leadership, which was passed without opposition.

Theories of religious change have emphasized transformations initiated by the leaders of religious institutions, maintaining that the demand for religion stays constant. However, as we have seen, not only have individuals shown more need for the church as a consequence of the changes initiated by large-scale migration and rapid social transformation but they also have had new demands for the type of religion and the type of leadership that they wanted. Theories of transnationalism focus on the impact of economic and social remittances on religious institutions and practices in the home communities. The article shows that the financial remittances sent by migrant Mar Thomites greatly increased the social service projects of the Mar Thoma church and the size of its administrative structure and that the social remittances, or the theological resources received from church-planters from overseas, was crucial in kick-starting many new-generation churches. However, transnational theories underestimate the agency of religious leaders in the homeland in determining what types of changes to make in response to these remittances.

Theories of transnationalism discuss the ability of migrants to create change through their remittances; the religious economies model emphasizes the agency of leaders in bringing about changes in religious institutions as a response to competition; the neo-institutional theory highlights the constraints on leadership that prevent changes; while Spickard (2004) points out how cultural differences can undermine centralized transnational religious organizations. Each perspective focuses on an important dimension, but looking at them together allows us to see the interaction between demand-driven and supply-driven factors, the agency of the laity versus the leadership in bringing about or resisting change, and the constraints on organizational

development. We need more studies that examine the multifaceted process of religious transformation to understand the dynamic relationship between the various forces of change.

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