Prophetic Participation:
The Life and Theology of M.M. Thomas

Matthias Phurba Sonam Gergan

Introduction

The edited volume *The Life, Legacy and Theology of M.M. Thomas* has the subtitle – "Only Participants Earn the Right to be Prophets."[1] The subtitle is an apt summation of Madthiparampil Mammen Thomas – the man, his life, and work – characterized by a deep and active involvement in the context within which he theologized. M.M. Thomas was born on May 15, 1916, in a small village in Kerala in a family that was part of the Mar Thoma church in the princely state of Travancore. He died on December 3, 1996, on a train near Madras.[2] Adrian Bird notes that after an "evangelical experience as a student in Trivandrum, Kerala (1931-32), M.M. Thomas became a devoted follower of Jesus Christ."[3] Bird points out that later in his life, "the renaissance of Hinduism in India and the emergence of secular ideologies"[4] were key in shaping his theological direction that sought a "dynamic, living theology relevant to India's quest for a new society."[5] While Thomas' journey had spiritual experiences that leaned towards the pietistic as its beginnings he was also a man that continued to develop as he encountered different lived realities. Hielke Wolters aptly notes, "His pietistic faith and social involvement got increasingly integrated through his reflections on the meaning of the cross."[6] Thomas' attraction towards the Marxist analysis of society even while disagreeing with its totalitarian approach is indicative of a man who was keenly analytical, willing to learn from diverse voices, while critiquing each from his theological foundation, all the while being formed and reformed in the process. This paper will seek to present the life and work of Thomas from the primary lens of his theological thought; particularly relating it to the theology of mission.

Key Theological Contributions

The following sections will focus on three key areas from Thomas' theological thought that can be directly related to theology of mission in contemporary contexts – mission and ecclesiology, Christianity and culture, and Christianity and dialogue. This examination will be

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[1] Jesudas Athyal, George Zachariah, and Monica J Melanchthon, eds., *The Life, Legacy and Theology of M.M. Thomas: Only Participants Earn the Right to Be Prophets* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[2] Ken Christoph Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia: A Comparative and Contextual Study of This-Worldly Holiness and the Theology of Missio Dei in M.M. Thomas and C.S. Song* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), 113.

[3] Adrian P. Bird, "M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology" in *Contextualization: A Re-reading of M.M Thomas* (Bangalore: Christava Sahitya Samithi Christian Inst for the Study of Religion and Society (2007): 9-41, p. 10.

[4] Ibid., 12.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hielke Wolters, "Dr. M.M. Thomas' Theology of Prophetic Participation in Salvation and the Struggle for Humanisation," n.d., 4, http://marthoma.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Address-on-MMThomas-theology-of-prophetic-participation-Tiruvalla-01-09-2015.pdf.

oriented towards gleaning insights for a theology of mission that are relevant in an increasingly interconnected, pluralistic, and globalized world.

Mission and Ecclesiology

Thomas writing in *Salvation and Humanization* stated – "Salvation remains eschatological, but historical responsibility within the eschatological framework cannot but include the task of humanization of the world in secular history."[7] This statement is key to understanding Thomas' approach and contribution to the theology of mission. It was built on an eschatological hope centered on "the light of the Cross of Christ"[8] but also sought out a here-and-now realization and impact "however partial it may be."[9] Thomas' conception of humanization was not based on humanistic utopianism but on the hope offered through the cross. Thomas acknowledged that "[m]ission is essentially evangelistic mission or mission of salvation"[10] but sought to widen the church's understanding of what mission, evangelism, and salvation entailed, especially framed within tangible and historically situated issues. As Miyamoto notes for Thomas "humanization was a *sign* of Christ's saving presence in history."[11] This point is clearly seen in Thomas' comments on the relationship between salvation and humanization – "Is not the ultimate salvation an 'eschatological humanization' where sin, and principalities and powers, and death will be removed and humanity will find divine fulfillment in the kingdom (1 Cor. 15:20-28)?"[12] The resurrection of Jesus and "its humanizing power this side of death" are characterized by Thomas as the "first fruits of the ultimate salvation."[13] Thus, Thomas' view presents salvation and humanization tightly coupled in and through Christ wherein ultimate eschatological humanization has entered present history through the resurrection of Jesus and humans are invited into this through the salvation he offers.

Due to his inclination to see the ultimate salvation of humankind coupled with the inaugurated process of humanization, Thomas also formed an ecclesiology that engaged with the context, holding ultimate destiny in tension with the present. Pluralism being an ever-present challenge within Thomas' primary context in India, he wrote – "the Mission of the Church in the pluralistic context must be considered primarily in relation to the common human challenge which pluralism in a technically unified world brings to us and all."[14] Thomas, in his ecclesiology, saw the church engaged in mission, calling for it to engage deeply with the context (pluralism) despite the tension it may cause with its eschatological hope.

This leaning of Thomas is exemplified in his famous debate with Leslie Newbigin. A key issue in the debate was Thomas' growing discomfort with Newbigin's "essential minimum of the Christian faith"[15] and Thomas' desire "to gather a wider circle"[16] Perhaps, being closely engaged

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[7] M M. Thomas, "Salvation and Humanization: A Crucial Issue in the Theology of Mission for India," *International Review of Mission* 60, no. 237 (January 1971): 28-38. p. 30.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 26.

[11] Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia*, 166.

[12] M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 113.

[13] Ibid.

[14] M. M Thomas, *The Church's Mission and Post-Modern Humanism: A Collection of Essays and Talks 1992-1996* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1996), 132.

[15] George R Hunsberger, "Conversion and Community: Revisiting the Lesslie Newbigin-M M Thomas Debate," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 3 (July 1998): 112-117, p 115.

with pluralism in the Indian context while seeking to find common ground for humanization – which connected all of humankind while finding its culmination in Christ – led to Thomas' desire to define the church's boundaries in a more fluid sense than Newbigin. Responding to Newbigin, Thomas wrote, "Church must become the bearer of Christ in all Indian communities, and Christians should not become a separate judicial political community."[17] Thus, he saw the gospel, Christ, and Church as capable of transcending socio-religious barriers in pluralistic contexts. As Wolters notes, "exposure to the wider reality of Asia and engagement in ecumenical conversations, urged Thomas to rethink his theology."[18] This approach led to some like Peter Beyerhaus to accuse Thomas of "leading the ecumenical movement into a direction that replaces theology by anthropology."[19] However, in hindsight, it is evident that Thomas' approach was indeed ahead of its time and a precursor to the growing interdisciplinary nature of missiology as a discipline.

This brief examination of Thomas' contribution to mission and ecclesiology reveals a methodology derived through engagement that was not afraid to tangle with and work through tensions and seeming paradoxes between lived realities and the eschatological hope in Christ. It reveals a living theology of mission and ecclesiology that sought to learn and understand through diverse disciplines while attempting to keep the cross at the center.

Christianity and Cultures

An edited volume produced by Thomas with Paul Devanandan notes three tasks of the church in its relationship to culture – "Firstly, to acknowledge Christ's presence in the cultural renaissance of India… Secondly, to make an evaluation of India's renaissance… Thirdly, to present the Crucified and Risen Christ as the source of power that redeems cultures."[20] Thomas' understanding of Christianity's relationship with culture involved an acknowledgment that God was at work in culture; yet called for the Church to evaluate and engage culture with Christ as the source and framework.

A key element in Thomas' thinking on the church and engagement with culture is the "essential truth of struggle."[21] Allan Boesak notes that for Thomas, this concept was based primarily on "the truth that emerges from Scriptures."[22] It is this truth that aligns the Christian (and the church) with God's justice and his "righteous activity."[23] Their relationship and alignment with God are what causes Christians to see the struggle for social justice as "the essential truth of struggle" making them "from an instrument of God to being an agent of God's love."[24] Thus, the struggle for social justice formed a crucial part of Thomas' thinking on Christian engagement with culture as agents of God's love. This is a helpful insight to ground

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[16] Ibid.

[17] M. M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues* (Madras: Publ. for the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion & Society, 1977), 115.

[18] Wolters, "Dr. M.M. Thomas' Theology of Prophetic Participation in Salvation and the Struggle for Humanisation," 6.

[19] Ibid., 7.

[20] M. M Thomas and Paul David Devanandan, eds., *Christian Participation in Nation-Building: The Summing Up of a Corporate Study on Rapid Social Change* (Bangalore: National Christian Council of India, 1960), 266–67.

[21] Athyal and Melanchthon, eds, *The Life, Legacy and Theology of M.M. Thomas*, 172.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 172–73.

holistic mission in the present – engaging the world from a theocentric foundation. Thomas' comments in *Response to Tyranny* an essay he wrote in response to the national emergency imposed in India by the central government (1975-77) characterizes his position's political outworking – "It is sheer immaturity which concentrates on Christian minority rights without reference to the issue of civil liberties and democratic rights of all citizens."[25] Thus, Thomas sought to expand the gamut of theological conversation and engagement such that the church actively participated in socio-political realities and worked for the welfare of all.

Thomas' contribution in understanding Christianity and cultural engagement was to take a theocentric starting point but expand it to show its relationship to the dynamic contemporary socio-political realities of the surrounding culture calling for the church to deeply and actively engage with the same.

Christianity and Dialogue

Thomas, referencing C.F. Andrews wrote in *Man and the Universe of Faiths* – "the final test of faith and acknowledgment of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is seen in men's participation in the work of the Holy Spirit in building tissues of genuine 'human' community."[26] For Thomas dialogue was an essential part of being Christian. This was based on the work of the Holy Spirit that continued to work to bring people together under the reign of the risen Christ. Like other aspects of Thomas' theology, the here-and-now was engaged deeply in-light-of the ultimate eschatological hope. Mohan Chacko in *Interpreting Society* notes Thomas' view on the Eucharist as the "basic pattern of Christian spirituality"[27] wherein the sacrifice and self-giving of Christ is remembered and connected to "the Church offering itself as a living sacrifice."[28] Dialogue, when seen in-light-of this, becomes part of the body's (Church's) self-giving founded on the sacrifice and self-giving of its head (Jesus Christ).

Wolters characterizes Thomas' model of participation and dialogue as "a theology of prophetic participation."[29] This approach was not dialogue for the sake of dialoguing but was driven by a teleological emphasis based on the eschatological hope in Christ while acknowledging the Church's shared humanity with all others and a common quest for humanization (a concept examined previously). Such an emphasis led to what Miyamoto notes as Thomas' idea of "a 'Christ-centered Hindu Church of Christ,' not only expressing Christ in terms of contemporary Hindu thought and life patterns but also transforming them from within."[30] While this approach had its critics, it offered the possibility of opening dialogue with other communities by finding common ground while still retaining the prophetic nature of the Church in dialogue, based on the revelation in Christ. Thomas' own words exemplify the underpinnings of this approach when he writes – "dialogue [was] carried on with the recognition that the insight of the doctrine of sin and salvation in Christ remains an essential basis for a

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[25] M. M Thomas, *Response to Tyranny: Writings Between July 1975 and February 1997* (Tiruvalla, India: Christava Sahitya Samithy : Distributed by C.S.S. Book Shop, 2000), 116.

[26] M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1975), 139.

[27] Mohan Chacko, *Interpreting Society: A Study of the Political Theology of M.M. Thomas and Its Implications for Mission* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2000), 79.

[28] Ibid., 79–80.

[29] Wolters, "Dr. M.M. Thomas' Theology of Prophetic Participation in Salvation and the Struggle for Humanisation," 7.

[30] Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia*, 168.

realistic philosophy of liberal humanism."[31] Thus, Thomas' approach to dialogue was based on the acknowledgment of two key aspects. First, the common human striving towards truth (tied to humanization). Second, salvation through Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of this quest. This allowed him to engage in dialogue while retaining pietistic elements of Christianity.

A key element of Thomas' thought related to inter-religious dialogue was "Christ-centered syncretism." He saw it as the "goal of interfaith dialogue"[32] wherein the "other realities of the world and life [other religious traditions in dialogue] … need not be denied validity so long as they can be redefined or transformed in the light of the centrality of Christ."[33] Thomas presents his approach as a response to Hendrik Kraemer's approach to other religions found in *The Christian Message in the Non-Christian World.* Kraemer's approach took a strong stance against syncretism which he defined as the "illegitimate mingling of different religious elements."[34] Thomas agreed with Kraemer's position that the gospel "should ever remain centered in the Christ of God" but also juxtaposed it with Arend van Leeuwen's perspective that "the gospel is for the human person and, therefore, divine truth should not be divorced from human values and social ideology."[35] Thomas thus retained the Christ-centeredness of the gospel that undergirded Kraemer's position but sought to avoid the danger of the gospel being abstracted from human realities and situatedness through his proposal of Christ-centered syncretism. This is evidenced in Thomas' words – "All Christians are pagans in parts."[36] Thomas' approach, especially in an increasingly pluralistic world, opens opportunities for interfaith dialogue, which Christians can engage in, centered on Christ but also with the humility and a greater sense of mutuality with the other. This comes through the understanding that this side of the eschaton "we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12, ESV). Additionally, it also realized the situatedness of Western Theology thereby opening the possibility of global intra-ecclesial dialogue on a more equal footing.

Thomas' Theology of Mission: Considerations for Contemporary Conversations

The previous sections have given a glimpse into key areas of Thomas' theological thought that are especially significant for understanding his theology of mission. They reveal an approach that beginning from a Christological foundation and eschatological hope sought to engage lived realities in contextual ways while trying to find common grounds for dialogue. Thomas' comments in *Church and State* provide a useful key to understanding his methodological leanings – "It is in the interaction between the general and the concrete that we can arrive at a common language of discourse."[37] Thomas was not afraid to push for discourse and engagement while holding orthodoxy and social activism in tension, all the while striving for orthopraxy. This did lead to criticism by others and even changes in his own understandings and

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[31] M. M Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (Madras, Pub. for the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore by the Christian Literature Society, 1976), 34.

[32] M.M. Thomas, "The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centered Syncretism," *Ecumenical Review* 37, no. 4 (October 1985): 387-397, p. 387.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 389.

[35] Ibid., 390–91.

[36] Ibid., 392.

[37] World Council of Churches, *Church and State: Opening a New Ecumenical Dicussion*, Faith and Order Paper No. 85 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978), 19.

emphases during his life. However, one cannot deny the sincerity of the man and his effort and his centeredness on Christ.

Thomas's work may be critiqued for framing Christianity within the modernist discourses of secularism and the nation-state. A key contemporary critique that could be brought to bear on Thomas' work is his seeming assumption of secularism and pluralism as overarching frameworks and realities under which religious dialogue was possible. Recent writings like Bryan Stone's have called for an alternate "ecclesial social imagination"[38] which reframes secularism and pluralism as alternatives among many social imaginations. It would be worthwhile to reexamine Thomas' concepts of salvation and humanization, and Christ-centered syncretism from such an ecclesial social imagination.

Thomas was critiqued by some for his use of anthropology in theologizing and accused of using an overly humanistic methodology. While this critique of Thomas may be true to a certain extent it was most certainly not his intent. This is evident when he writes, "we have to move beyond looking at religion as a function of society and looking at society as a function of religious truth."[39] This is a prevailing tension in Thomas' work that he continued to work out throughout his life.

Thomas' work finds striking resonance with recent works on the theology of mission like Jonathan Tan's theological propositions that call for a movement towards *missio inter gentes,*[40] orthodoxy centered on the *missio Dei* seeking to bring the universality of God's reign in dialogue with pluralistic contexts, and mission inspired and empowered by orthopathos and orthopraxis that engage pluralistic realities with empathy and solidarity with the people. What Tan theologically proposes, Thomas lived and exemplified through his theological thought and socio-political engagement. Thomas' life and work reveal a theology of mission that remains highly theocentric, keeping the cross and the hope of salvation through Christ at the center. However, it engages in prophetic dialogue with the world around not only through *kerygmatic* means but seeks to dialogue and speak truth in *koinonia* with all. This approach has the potential to yield engaged and contextually relevant theology that holds orthodoxy, orthopathos, and orthopraxis in tension. Communities formed through this methodology would have similarities with the dynamic nature of Thomas' life – intimately engaged in dialogue with the other, finding common ground for dialogue, speaking prophetically in dialogue, and being transformed themselves through the process.

Conclusion

Like Thomas, those who follow his approach to theology of mission and engage in mission formed by this theology would need to have the courage to engage at the risk of criticism, the humility to backtrack their position, and the willingness to live with the discomfort that comes by holding eschatological hopes and present realities in tension. Thomas truly tried to contemplate and engage in the new creation through Christ holistically without dichotomizing the sacred and the profane. This paper has only scratched the surface of Thomas' theology of mission. In a post-modern world where not only mission, but all areas of life tend towards a holism, perhaps it is time to revisit Thomas' thought and seek new insights for the present.

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[38] Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2018), 7.
[39] Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, xi.
[40] Jonathan Y Tan, *Christian Mission Among the Peoples of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 1.