

SABBATHKEEPING AMONG CHRISTIANS IN INDIA: A BRIEF NOTE

AECIO E. CAIRUS, PH.D.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, PHILIPPINES

In Sabbath apologetics, many authors maintain that ancient Christian communities in India kept the seventh day holy. A statement by a 19th century Anglican clergyman figures prominently in those works. However, the Armenians to whom C. Buchanan is referring are unlikely to have observed Saturday holy and his context suggests that the "seventh day" phrase actually refers to Sunday worship.

Key Words: Sabbath, India, apologetics, church history

1. Introduction

Many evangelistic and apologetic works of Seventh-day keepers (including Adventists) mention the Thomas Christians in India as having observed the biblical Sabbath from ancient until relatively recent times.¹ So does also the information on the Internet about a Syrian Malabar "Nasrani" (Christian) community.² All these sources cite a passage from an early 19th century book, often as the chief (or even the only) testimony directly related to pre-modern seventh-day keeping in India:

The Armenians in Hindostan are our own subjects. They acknowledge our government in India, as they do that of the Sophi in Persia; and they are entitled to our regard. They have preserved the Bible in its purity; and their doctrines are, as far as the author knows, the doctrines of the Bible. Besides, they maintain the solemn observance of Christian worship, throughout our empire, on the *seventh day*; and they have as many

¹ In Seventh-day Adventism this has found its way, for example, into Mark Finley, *The Almost Forgotten Day* (Siloam Springs: Concerned Group, 1988), 59, 75. However, a Web search using the terms "Thomas Christians" and "seventh day" will reveal hundreds of other entries with similar information, many by non Seventh-day Adventist groups.

² See "Syrian Malabar Nasrani" in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Cited 27 July 2007. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasrani>.

spires pointing to heaven among the Hindoos as we ourselves [emphasis added].³

2. Historical Difficulties

Thomas Christians do not observe the biblical Sabbath today. This is explained in these apologetic works by making reference to the Portuguese invasion of Kerala, which “wiped out” the peculiar traditions of Thomas Christians.⁴ It is a fact that, in 1599, a Synod in Diamper (Udiamper, Udayamperur) directed censors to check and correct or (if not practicable) to destroy all the books of the Syrian Christian community. This would explain why no other evidences of ancient Sabbath-keeping have survived.

However, such an explanation is unconvincing and anachronistic. First, as Vyhmeister observes, it is unlikely that this procedure would have obliterated all evidences,⁵ and in any case it does not authorize us to speculate about the content of the destroyed books.⁶ More importantly, the statement of Buchanan describes the situation in the early 1800s, at a time when those Armenians still “maintain the solemn observance of Christian worship, throughout our [British] empire, on the seventh day.” They had a flourishing community in India vying with the imperial Anglican Church in the number of “spires pointing to heaven.” By that time there were no more religious persecutions in the Catholic countries of Europe, let alone in the British colonies of Asia. If in the 19th century these Christians in India still kept the biblical Sabbath, when and how could such a peculiar observance have subsequently disappeared from their strong community without leaving a trace? A contextual study of this single piece of evidence therefore seems necessary.⁷

³ This passage is from Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia. With Notices of the Translation of the Bible into the Oriental Languages* (London: Ward & Co., 1849), 137. The volume was first published in 1811.

⁴ Cf. “Syrian Malabar Nasrani” in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Cited 27 July 2007. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasrani>.

⁵ Indeed, Buchanan reports that the churches in the interior of Kerala “hid their books” rather than submitting them to the censors. Cf. Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 54.

⁶ Werner K. Vyhmeister, “The Sabbath in Asia,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (ed. Kenneth A. Strand; Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1982), 160.

⁷ Vyhmeister is aware of that statement (footnote 120), which he quotes from the 1813 edition, and considers it as the only evidence for Sabbath-keeping in India before the arrival of SDA missionaries. However, he does not analyze the phrase.

3. The Armenians in Buchanan

The first fact to be noted is that Buchanan's statement does not refer to ancient Christian communities in India, but to Armenian businessmen who have dispersed throughout western and southern Asia. Buchanan was a priest of the Anglican Church, born in Scotland but living in India, and is here discussing the widespread presence of Armenian traders. The point of the discussion is to plead with the readers for British collaboration with the Armenian Church by printing the Bible in their language. There is no possibility of Buchanan confusing the modern Armenian businessmen and the ancient "Syrian" (Thomas) Christian community in India (which is often represented as involved in ancient Sabbath-keeping practices),⁸ among other reasons because he discusses these two communities in different sections of his work.⁹ The reader may also notice that he is speaking of the Armenians as present throughout the far-flung British Empire and Persia, while the Thomas Christians were more or less confined to Kerala in South West India. A second fact to be noted is that the Armenian Church is not known for giving any special honor to the biblical Sabbath, either in the 19th century or today, beyond what is usual in Orthodox and other Oriental churches.¹⁰

4. Thomas Christians in Buchanan

Buchanan does discuss elsewhere the synod of Diamper and enumerates the opinions at the time which distinguished the Syrian (Thomas) Christian community from the Roman Catholic Church:

"That they [the Syrian clergy] had married wives; that they owned but two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's supper; that they neither invoked saints, nor worshipped images, nor believed in purgatory, and

⁸ Such possibility of confusion may also be dismissed because he explains, for instance, that those Armenians in India are led by a patriarch in Erevan. In contrast, the medieval Christian church in India was led from a patriarchate in Iraq, which Buchanan correctly traces back to the patriarch Nestorius in Antioch (cf. Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 53). Though both churches oppose the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's dual human-divine nature, they do so for theologically opposite reasons, Armenians being Monophysite in contrast to Nestorianism.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-73 and 135-38, respectively.

¹⁰ Saturday is not a day of rest or the chief day for meeting in the week but, in contrast to Roman Catholicism, it is considered a feast day and not a day for fasting. On this see Vyhmeister, "The Sabbath in Asia," 168, n. 130.

that they had no other orders or names of dignity in the church, than bishop, priest, and deacon" [quotation marks are original].¹¹

All these points are characteristic of Nestorian (Assyrian) churches, and most of them are also present in Orthodox and other Oriental churches. Note that there is no mention of any distinctive practice among Syrian Christians involving the day of rest. Since the Portuguese at the time considered Saturday-keeping a punishable Judaizing offense among their Mar- ranos,¹² it is not likely that they would have passed over such a practice in silence if present among the Nestorians in India. Indeed, "no Sabbath- Sunday tension is detected in any of the many decrees" of the council.¹³

5. A Different Interpretation

Since neither the Armenians Buchanan described from personal acquaintance nor the Thomas Christians of earlier times, as described from the documents he knew, seem to have possessed unusual days for rest or worship, the "seventh day" phrase on p. 137 is probably his peculiar way to refer to more usual worship practices in Christendom. This is indeed the case for the same phrase when it occurs in his book a few pages later:

It is not the giving the Christian religion to the natives [of India] which will endanger our empire, but the want of religion among our own countrymen. ... That memorial [a report presented to the British governor general] referred to the almost total extinction of Christian worship, at the military stations, where the *seventh day* was only distinguished by the British flag [emphasis added].¹⁴

Buchanan is here complaining of insufficient chaplains and army chapels which might remedy the complete lack of religion among British soldiers, as he saw it, by providing worship services. Obviously he was not concerned with providing such men with special Saturday services, but with the basic Anglican weekly service on Sunday. In Great Britain, a Christian country, Sunday differed markedly from other days of the week. Work- places were deserted; and people flocked to churches, a difference even sharper than the more lax "continental Sunday" of other Christian coun- tries. By contrast, in the pagan India of Buchanan's time, Sunday was a day like any other. Unfortunately, this difference between pagan and Christian environments did not exist among the military in India. To them also Sun- day was a day like any other, so one would think that military stations were

¹¹ Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 53.

¹² See Vyhmeister, "The Sabbath in Asia," 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 142.

pagan areas, were it not for the presence of the British flag, according to his complaint.

6. Conclusion

Though Sunday worship may not be described biblically as “the seventh day,” this is what Buchanan seems to have in mind on p. 142, and therefore in all probability what he meant also when he praised Armenian worship a few pages before. It may be difficult to see why a learned man such as Buchanan would call the first day of the week the “seventh.” Perhaps this is related to the high esteem in which the Decalogue is held in tradition-conscious churches, such as the Church of England. While the Roman Catholic Church uses a summary form of the Decalogue for the instruction of the laity, the Anglican liturgy employs the full biblical form, in which the “seventh day” phrase appears prominently in the fourth commandment. Probably, in Buchanan’s mind, Sunday worship, conceived as a fulfillment of this commandment, was in a figurative sense also a “seventh day,” since, after all, it recurs every seven days. But whatever reasons he had for this peculiar phrase, it is difficult to see in his context any other meaning than Sunday worship.

Authors who discuss the history of the Sabbath would do well in checking their information with Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1982); for India see the section in Vyhmeister, “Sabbath in Asia,” 160–62.