

# A Short Biography of Rev. Dr. V.C. Samuel

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**Sunny Kulathakkal**

## **FAMILY AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND**

**Rev. Dr. V. C. Samuel** was born into a middle-class St. Thomas Syrian Christian family, Edayil at, Omalloor, Pathanamthitta in Central Travancore, which now forms part of the State of Kerala, India. He was born on 6th April 1912 as the fifth of six sons and three daughters of Late E.I. Cherian and late Annamma Cherian, both of them were persons of sterling character and deep Christian dedication. Samuel did, not start his life at a high level. During the early years of his life, he was sickly, but gradually he regained his health. His growth to religious scholarship and prominence was due to his inner compulsions and efforts on one hand and the atmosphere of religious devotion and Christian commitment in the family and the motivation of his parents.

Late E. I. Cherian was by profession a school teacher and a recognized leader in the community. Conversant as he was with both the Sanskrit and Tamil languages, besides Malayalam, he had a collection of books in those languages which he used to read regularly as much as his Bible and other Christian

writings. While he was a young man, Cherian came to appreciate the interest which the government of Travancore was expressing for the spread of education in the country. That was a time - towards the end of 19th and the early part of the 20th century - when children in around his native village had very little facilities for schooling. Representing their cause, he got in touch with the top officials of the department of education and obtained the necessary sanction to establish schools for them. In implementing the plan, he organised popular support in a number of centres and started schools, about of fifteen of them, which he managed well so long as his health permitted him to carry on the work. Then some of the schools were given over to the government and some to competent non- governmental agencies.

Both the noble souls left, this life, the father in 1952 at the age of 82 and the mother six years later when she was 83 years old. May God grant them the share in life with all the saints in the world to come!

## **EDUCATION**

The young Samuel had his primary education in a school founded by his father in his own village Cheekkanal. Despite his ill-health, Samuel completed his high school studies with distinction. On receiving the English School Leaving Certificate (E.S.L.C.) in 1931, Samuel started learning Syriac language. That was the time when Patriarch Mar Ignatius Elias III of Antioch visited India. Samuel had a sincere longing for the success of the patriarchal mission, and he was deeply moved when the

spiritual head of the Syrian Church passed away at the Manjinikkara, in the neighbourhood of his home in 1932. However, the place where the Patriarch breathed his last soon grew into a centre of religious activities, including the Seminary for the teaching of Syriac and the imparting of Antiochene Syrian ecclesiastical learning. The presence there of the Syrian metropolitan Elias Mar Julius, the delegate of the patriarch, and the Syrian Remban Jacob Abdul Ahad (later Patriarch Mar Ignatius Jacob III (1950-19) attracted Samuel to the Manjinikkara Dayara, to pursue his Syriac studies. By the way, he had no plan to be ordained to the Church's ministry during the early days, but he was guided to that thought out of a desire to continue with his theological education effectively. Samuel did his academic work so well that in a few years he completed it successfully and began to share in the teaching as a colleague of the Syrian Ramban.

While learning and teaching, Samuel made it a point to keep up his private study of both the language and other subjects. Besides, he served as the secretary and translator of the Metropolitan, who knew only Arabic and Syriac. This called for his working with the Syriac, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Hindi and English. As regards English, he kept up his reading of books in it dealing with Church history, theology and Biblical and devotional subjects. Thus he learned Syriac well and gained a grounding in other subjects. As he moved on in this direction, he realized that he should equip himself further and more systematically in secular education and that he stood in need of more advanced theological learning.

In pursuance of this, though which gripped him deeply, he joined the Union Christian College, Alwaye, in 1944 as a priest,

thirteen years after he had completed his high school studies, to follow a regular university programme of academic discipline. He carried on the B.A. degree studies of the then Travancore University, with Philosophy and Psychology as his major field. In 1948 he passed the examinations, securing the first rank in the major field and qualifying himself for the gold medal due for the same. This, however, was for Father Samuels only the beginning of a plan he had set in his mind for his academic pursuit. He had, in fact, entertained the idea of proceeding further in his education, both secular and theological. Accordingly, he joined the Madras Christian College to continue his studies there. He completed the same 1950 and received The M.A. Degree of the Madras University.

With this background in secular education, Father Samuel moved on to the programme of theological studies provided by the Senate of Serampore College/University, at the United Theological College, Bangalore. On passing the B.D. degree creditably in 1953, he sought admission for post-B.D. studies in the Theological field in the United States of America, which he readily obtained, to begin with at the Union Theological Seminary, New York, and then at the Divinity School of the Yale University, New Haven, U.S.A. From the former, he secured the S.T.M (Master of Sacred Theology) degree in 1954, and from the Yale University the Ph. D. (Doctor of Philosophy) degree in 1957, both with great distinction. The field of his study was the History of Christian Thought, which he chose for his specialization at both these centres of learning the classical doctrine of the Person of Christ worked out in the 5th century, which led to the first division in the Church that continues to our times. Father Samuel's knowledge of Syriac and the ability to

work with texts in Greek made it possible for him to carry on this study effectively.

In choosing this area Father Samuel had a definite purpose in mind. The 5th-century division in the Church has been interpreted by Church traditions, each in its own way to make out that its acceptance or rejection of the councils in question was the result of a concern to conserve the Christian truth exclusively and that the others were really at fault. Father Samuel's sense of objectivity and impartiality led him to feel that this reading must be as much one-sided as it was superficial and that he should himself study the issues involved in the controversy. Thus his purpose was, in the first place, to find out for himself why the division arose, insofar as that was possible. Secondly, perhaps more importantly, to clarify to all concerned why the Churches exist in a divided state. In other words, Father Samuel's work was intended to be of service to the Churches and the cause of Christian unity. From this point of view, Father Samuel had a special concern for the Churches of the East, particularly those of the Oriental Orthodox family, which have continued in history without formally acknowledging the Council of Chalcedon on 451 A.D. These Church traditions have been referred to as "monophysite" heretical communities by the Byzantine or the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and all major Protestant Churches. In the face of this uncomplimentary labelling, Father Samuel felt interested in bringing out the real point of the division following the Council of 451 and the teaching of the fathers who opposed it. This was indeed a piece of work which had been overdue for a long time so that Father Samuel was taking upon himself the task of rediscovering Oriental Orthodoxy from centuries of

oblivion and misrepresentation. The doctoral thesis, later published, 'The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined: A Historical and Theological Survey' is the major breakthrough in this line. This book represents the true Oriental Orthodox perspective. (The term 'Oriental Orthodox' as distinct from 'Eastern Orthodox' began to be used in fairly recent times in Kerala. It was aimed at differentiating the Churches of the East that reject the Council of Chalcedon from those that accept it, acknowledging at the same time that both traditions are theologically sound. However, the classification has overtones which cannot all be admitted, with reference to the Indian Church from a historical point of view.)

Obviously, Dr. V.C. Samuel was a pioneer in this undertaking. This is not all, that he did. With special reference to the Indian (Syrian) Church his vision in two other areas deserve, reckoning. He was keen, in the first place, to promote the principle that the Church in India should be really Indian. Out of this concern, he had a deep interest in comparing at the roots the historic faith with the religious heritage of Hinduism. Secondly, he realized that the claim of apostolic origins by the Indian Syrian Christianity does not tally with its present standing either as part of the Roman Catholic Church or as that of the Antiochene Syrian Church. Though from this point of view both these sections of the Indian Syrian Christianity should see visions of their future, Father Samuel's interest lay primarily in the Orthodox body. Over the years he paid some serious attention to its history, foreign connections and present state of things, and he had sufficient opportunities to compare them with the reality of other Churches in the world, particularly of the East.

Father Samuel's concentration on the subtle nuances of the classical doctrine of the person of Christ during his post-B.D. studies did not leave him free to follow up on his studies in Hinduism. But on completing his Ph.D. work at the Yale University an opportunity opened itself for him and he snatched it. Dr. P. D. Devanandan of revered memory was launching the plan of establishing the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) in Bangalore. Now feeling that an association with the Institute would possibly enable him to combine the two plans, he joined the same in 1957 itself under an appointment sponsored by the University of Chicago for a period of three years. This arrangement was, of course, experimental, as Dr. Samuel was keen to pursue his theological work. However, it gave him an opportunity to acquire first-hand knowledge of the philosophy and the working of the Ramakrishna Mission as well as of several other contemporary modern social movements in Hinduism. On completion of the three year-periods, Father Samuel chose the teaching profession.

### **TEACHING WORK**

From June 1960 Dr. Samuel took up teaching assignment in theological colleges/ seminaries/Universities in and outside India.

These are as follows -

1. June 1960 to April 1963, the Serampore College, Serampore, India.

2. Sept. 1963 to June 1966, the Theological College of the Holy Trinity; the Haile Sellassie I University, (present Addis Ababa University), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

3. July 1966 to April 1968 the United Theological College, Bangalore, India.

4. Sept. 1968 to June 1978 the Theological College of the Holy Trinity, HSIU Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

5. July 1978 to April 1980 the United Theological College, Bangalore, India.

6. January 1981- ... 1991 the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

While studying and serving in the academic centres/institutions Dr. Samuel was involved in various extra-curricular activities. Thus during his study and research period in the USA he participated in the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Evanston, Illinois, USA, (1954) as one of the accredited delegates of the Orthodox Church of India. During his Serampore days, he worked for two years as Editor of the Indian Journal of theology and looked after the spiritual ministrations of the Orthodox Christian Community at the Barrackpore military station, across the river Hooghly. He participated in the New Delhi assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961. As an elected member of the Faith and Order Commission of WCC, he participated in the Montreal (Canada) World Assembly of the Commission in 1963.

Dr. Samuel had no plan to go back to Ethiopia where he had functioned earlier a second time. He did it, however, as a

submission to a persuasion of love from both the Ethiopian Church and the Haile Selassie I University. The Ethiopian Church appreciated his role as a theologian and spokesmen of Oriental Orthodoxy and the University had regard for his academic achievements. The latter expressed its recognition of and confidence in him by appointing him as the Dean (Principal) of the College of Theology in 1969 a position which he held till he left Ethiopia in July 1976. By that time Ethiopia had a new government, which closed down the University for Two years and showed no interest in the Theological College.

Three valuable services rendered by Father Samuel during his life in Ethiopia should be noted here. One, his spiritual ministry: In Addis Ababa and towns in its neighbourhood there were members of the Malankara Orthodox Church employed as teachers by the Ministry of Education of the Ethiopian Government. Their spiritual needs were fulfilled by Father Samuel and his priest-colleagues on both during his tenure.

Two, he was a member of the organising committee for two years responsible for the preparatory work of the Addis Ababa Conference of the Heads of Oriental Orthodox Churches, which was held in January 1965. At the end of the Conference, a Standing Committee was appointed to continue the work initiated by it, with two members from each of the constituent Churches. Father Samuel was one of the two members representing the Malankara Church. During this period several new important programmes and projects were established for the Oriental Orthodox Churches and he fulfilled his duties in this regard as long as the committee functioned.

Three, Metropolitan Methodios of Axum of Greek Orthodox Church initiated a programme, founding the Association of Ethio- Hellenic Studies. The main object of the association was as its name connotes, for enriching the Ethiopic and Hellenistic cultural and linguistic heritage. Archbishop Methodios and Dr. V.C. Samuel was the founder President and Vice-President respectively of the board of officers. He was also a member in the editorial board of the journal 'Ababa Salama': A Review of the Association of Ethio-Hellenic Studies. He published several important papers in this journal.

On his return from Ethiopia in July 1976 at the age of mid-sixties, Father Samuel had planned to retire completely from active service and settle down to a programme of writing on his own. But he could not stick to the plan, as he had a call from the United Theological College, Bangalore. Realizing the urgency, he accepted it for one year and continued for one more year. A few months later there came the call from the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, which he could not turn down. Thus from January 1981 Dr. Samuel the septuagenarian has been rendering his services out his love to his own Church and Seminary.

### **ASSOCIATION WITH THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**

Dr. V.C. Samuel was a delegate of the Orthodox Church of India at four of the general assembly of the World Council of Churches, those of Evanston, U.S.A., in 1954, New Delhi, India in 1961, Uppsala, Sweden in 1968 and Nairobi, Kenya in 1975. The New Delhi Assembly voted him as a member of the Council's Faith and Order Commission in 1961 and he held the post till 1984. Meanwhile, the Uppsala Assembly of 1968 had him

elected as a member of the Commission's Working Committee and later in the Steering Committee. During his 23 years of participation in the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, Dr. Samuel has taken an active part in a number of study projects of the commission, contributing several papers and taking a keen interest in discussing the issues raised from an Oriental Orthodox perspective. Most of such papers have been published under the auspices of the WCC. The Baptism Eucharist and Ministry Text or Lima Document was prepared after several years of study by many scholars from various member churches of the Faith and Order Commission and finally approved. As one of the prominent contributors in drafting and finalising the BEM document, Dr. Samuel was privileged to present the same in the Lima meeting of the Commission held in 1982.

The period of Dr. Samuel's association with the Faith and Order Commission synchronized with two other events of historic significance, in which he made a distinctive contribution. Those were unofficial theological consultations. The first of them which started in 1964 at Aarhus, Denmark, about a week before the world meeting of the Faith and Order Commission that was held at the prestigious University of Aarhus, was continued till 1971 in connection with subsequent Commission meetings. These were called "Unofficial Consultation between theologians of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches". Four consultations were held in this way. Dr. Samuel presented the main papers in them and helped the participants in arriving at the conclusion that the difference in Christological doctrine between the two families of Churches was only verbal and not substantial. All these papers also have been published in the

Greek Orthodox Theological Review, Brookline, Massachusetts, U.S.A. and elsewhere.

The second was a series of four consultations organized by the Pro-Oriente foundation of Vienna, Austria from 1972. These were called "Unofficial Consultations of Theologians of the Roman Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches (Vienna Consultations). Dr. Samuel participated in them as a theologian from the latter, presenting in the important papers, which were all published in WORT und WAHRHEIT under the auspices of the Pro-Oriente Foundation. The first three of these consultations discussed the doctrine of the Person of Christ, on which there was agreement among participants that the difference between the two Church traditions was not substantial. The last consultation concentrated on "The Petrine Office" which did not end in an agreement between the two sides.

Neither series of the dialogues brought about the unity of the Churches. Here the problem is not the same with reference to the Byzantine Orthodox Churches on the one hand and the Roman Catholic Church on the other. Whereas for the former the acceptance of the seven "Ecumenical Councils" is indispensable for the establishment of unity, for the latter the "Papal Doctrine" is a central point to be conserved.

Dr. Samuel has a genuine interest in promoting the cause of wider ecumenism, particularly in the Indian context. He has given expression to his views in this direction in his writings. What he apparently wanted to do was to minimize the areas of conflict and save the Church from splitting. He gave up his efforts to bring the two sides of the Orthodox Church in India together when he found that he would be compromising his

position and principle by not taking a firm stand. It was not as though he had no firm opinion about the relative positions of the two groups in the Orthodox Church. He has strong convictions and expressed them in unambiguous terms.

He admits that the Indian Churches have all of them inherited their respective traditions in worship, doctrine and life from abroad, namely from the East and the West Syrian Churches of the West Asian World, the Western Roman Catholicism, and the various other Protestant traditions. Although these have been evolved in social and cultural settings alien to Indian conditions, people have been born and brought up in them. Granting that some of them can be reckoned to have permanent value, it is to be admitted that the foreignness surrounding them should be transcended and that new forms that are genuinely Christian and Indian should be produced. In seeking to achieve this goal, Father Samuel feels, Churches can learn from each other and even co-operate, irrespective of their present standing. He is keen about the proper understanding of other India's religious heritages in general and particularly Hinduism.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

A list of most titles with publisher and date of publication is given at the end of this book. What is noted here is only a classification. Through what has thus been brought out Dr. Samuel has tried to promote his vision. Viewed in this way, his writings can be listed under three heads

- i. Numerous articles, papers, book reviews etc in newspapers like the Malayala Manorama, Deepika, Weeklies,

Church papers and journals. Some of them deal with the issues in a learned way and some in a more popular manner.

ii. A large number of Lengthy papers dealing with theological historical, contemporary religion, ecclesiological and ecumenical ideas in English and Malayalam published in India and abroad.

iii. Books: From 1959 to 1987 Samuel wrote and published Books five in English and seven in Malayalam. He is currently preparing the Kerala section in volume IV of the History of Christianity in India for the Church History Association of India and has plans to work on several other books as well.

### **SOME PERSONAL DATA**

Dr. V.C. Samuel who has done so much for the Indian Orthodox Church and represented it in a number of international and other forums is a married priest, but his wife Kunjannamma Samuel died in a car accident on August 16, 1968, after about fifteen years of an ideal wedded life. She has left behind their only child, Zachariah, who is now married. With his wife Ramola and their two children, Anna Deepthi Zacharia and Vinoo Zachariah live currently in Madras, being employed as a senior officer of the Hindustan Thompson Advertising Firm.

In deciding to marry at the age of forty-one, after being a Priest for about 16 years and all along leading unblamable life, he was led primarily to raise the issue to the conscience of the Church. Yet he took up the step only with the formal permission of his Bishop Alexios Mar Theodosius and His Holiness the Catholicos Baselius Geevarghese II himself. As he has himself written on the principle which he sees behind the action in Church Weekly and elsewhere in India and abroad, in

Malayalam and English, the points made there need not be repeated here. Only two points may be noted here in passing.

One, theological: the fact that a vast majority of priests in the service of the Orthodox Churches are married, living with their wives, is sufficient theological basis for insisting that the time as to when a person should marry, before or after ordination to priesthood, makes no difference to his standing in the Church as a priest.

Two, historical: this principle had been followed in the Church of Malabar in the past, and this is all that needs to be followed in the future. As regards the Malankara Orthodox Church, it had all through the centuries to our own times' priests marrying, or remarrying if any of them was widowed and wished to marry again. But prejudice against married priesthood was brought to Kerala by the Western Roman Catholics from the 16th century and against priests marrying after ordination by the Antiochene Syrian Church fathers, possibly from the 18th century. Yet we have a record that Patriarch Peter III and several other bishops, both Syrian and Indian, sanctioned several individual cases of priests marrying and even remarrying. Regularization of the practice was a need and Father Samuel felt that he should take up the challenge.

In conclusion, a word may be said about the domestic arrangement of Dr. Samuel. In 1961, while he and his wife were at the Serampore College, they decided to adopt someone as a member of the family. On enquiry, through trusted friends, they obtained K.P. Varghese, who came from a respectable Syrian Christian family in Kerala. With the approval of his people, Varghese joined the Samuels and has continued to

remain with them ever since. In 1975 Varghese married Gracey, a great-granddaughter of Dr. Samuel's father's sister. They have a daughter, Anu, who is studying in English medium school in standard three.

As early as 1966, while Dr. Samuel was serving on the faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore, he purchased an area of farmland at Ramohally on the suburbs of the Bangalore City. It was developed over the years with the help of Mr. K.C. Chacko of Bangalore and later under the personal attention of Mr. Varghese himself. Now it is a well-established estate with a residential house and other facilities needed for the fairly comfortable living of a family, away from rush and noise the City. Though Dr. Samuel is out of station most of the time and the property is being looked after by the Vargheses the quietness of the place attracts him to it.

There are many things in his life for which Dr. V.C. Samuel is thankful to God and indebted to his friends far and near●

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