PART ONE

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS: UNTIL 1800
CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIANITY IN PRE-COLONIAL INDONESIA

The South Indian Thomas Christians trace their faith back to the Apostle Thomas and sometimes also to S. Bartholomew. Scholars are divided on this issue. The possibility of relatively easy travelling from Palestine via Egypt to South India in the first century cannot be denied by any serious scholar. The defenders of an apostolic origin base their arguments on the apocryphal Acts of (Judas) Thomas (c. 200) and other third or fourth century documents, the living tradition of the Kerala Christians and also on the ancient tradition of S. Thomas’ tomb near Mylapore (Madras).

Some historians do not accept a voyage of one of Jesus’ disciples as far as India, but all acknowledge the presence of Christian communities in southern India at least since the fourth century. In 67 AD there was already a Jewish colony in Cochin. During the fourth century Persian Christians either reinvigorated the apostolic church, which had declined over the course of time, or they founded migrant communities on India’s coasts. The merchant Thomas of Cana and other saintly men are mentioned in old documents as preachers of Christianity in 345. Since these early times the South Indian Christians have been closely connected with the colourful Church of Mesopotamia and Persia. Naturally they followed the teaching, terminology, and Syriac liturgy of the Persians and therefore were regarded as ‘Nestorians’. The connections between the patriarch in Seleukia-Ktesiphon and the ‘bishop of the Indians’ had been quite close as far as the political situation under Muslim government permitted.

Persian Christians in South-East Asia

The southern or maritime Silk Road was already in use by merchants and travellers from Persia during Sassanid times, that is before (and certainly during) Umayad rule, beginning in 661. I-ching used a Posse (Persian) ship for his voyage from Canton to Palembang in 671. There were several Persian colonies in Canton and in Hainan.

The Persian or ‘Nestorian’ Church calls itself the ‘Church of the East’. Bishops from ‘India’ attended its synods in the years 820 and 893. Metropolitans of India are mentioned in Persian documents in the sixth and in the fourteenth centuries, and even ‘missionary bishops’ to the ‘Isles of the sea’, of Dabbag (Sumatra or Java?), Sin and Macin (China), who certainly got as far as South