

Pedagogies of Prayer: Teaching Orthodoxy in South India

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The Lord gave his disciples the bread made of wheat that was unleavened. Whenever the Lord blessed this bread and gave it to us, it became the Body of Lord at the same time being bread made of wheat. [Similarly,] Jesus Christ was a complete man and at the same time a complete God. The Holy Bread that we consume in the Holy Qurbana is bread made of wheat which becomes at the same time the living body of Jesus Christ. This is a mystery!

“Stop! Repeat this once more!” the headmaster interrupted the girl, asking her to pay more attention on how she recited this part of her speech. “The emphasis should be on the unity of divine and human natures of Christ; it is a very important point,” he added. The girl started again, this time succeeding to finish her speech under the scrutiny of her mother sitting on the side. It was a regular Sunday morning at St. Mary’s Cathedral as thirteen-year-old Aleesha rehearsed her elocution speech for the forthcoming All-Kerala Sunday School competition in 2014. She had been preparing this speech for over six months now, successfully passing every stage of the competition leading to the upcoming finals. Her speech on “Jesus as the Bread of Life” drew on the ambiguous meaning of *Appam*, the daily “bread” in South India but also the Eucharistic bread in the liturgy (Holy Qurbana), to draw a parallel between the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ. Carefully prepared by the headmaster, the speech employed an elaborate language full of quotes from devotional literature and biblical references to illustrate the theme. Her performance, however, seemed to be more important: the right expressions and gesturing,

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correct pronunciation of old Malayalam terms, a passionate speech with carefully chosen modulations that seemed natural even though rehearsed many times. The headmaster's sudden shift of attention from the performative to a dogmatic element in Aleesha's speech took everyone by surprise.

Such moments reveal the underlying expectations that sustain the pedagogical effort to shape children into religious subjects and the religious worlds they affirm. Robert Orsi once remarked, "In exchanges between adults and children about sacred matters the religious world is in play" (2005: 77). These interactions are at once an attempt to substantiate and make meaningful a religious world and provide the frames that will guide and authenticate their experience. This paper focuses on religious pedagogies as an essential part of the practice and the making of modern religion. It examines how shifts in pedagogical models and practice redefine the meaning of religious knowledge, thus altering the relationship between the knowing subject and knowledge and the formation of religious subjectivities in the Syrian Orthodox churches of South India. While the term "pedagogy of prayer" encompasses discussions of prayer and ritual learning, my use of it here is much broader, addressing cultural models of religious transmission and ethical formation in Orthodox Christianity. Pedagogies of prayer attempt to model religious subjectivities in ways that reflect commonly shared ideas about how people should attend to God in their own life and worship. For this they draw on distinct models of ethical formation that tie together certain values, practices, and aesthetics to shape their becoming Christian. Religious pedagogies also articulate specific modes of knowing that tell not only what and how to learn but also what can be known and what remains unknown, such as the mysteries of faith proclaimed in Aleesha's speech. They shape the way people understand and experience God (Luhrmann 2012), how religious knowledge is transmitted, and authority or expertise established. Pedagogies of prayer thus reveal epistemic and moral claims about faith and people's relationship with the sacred, and define religious orthodoxies.

The dogmatic element emphasized by Aleesha's teacher referred to an orthodoxy that is foundational to their church, the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox church of India. A major point of contention in the history of Christianity, the doctrine of the unity of divine and human natures of Christ, led to the separation of Oriental or non-Chalcedonian churches from the rest of Christendom at the 4th ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 AD).¹ The teacher's remark, as well as Aleesha's speech, were meant as a reminder that their church belongs to this ancient Christian tradition which upholds the dogma to this day. Usually

¹ Oriental or pre-Chalcedon Orthodoxy did not recognize the 4th ecumenical Council of Chalcedon disagreeing on the dual nature of Christ incarnated as human and divine; they proclaimed instead the unity of the two natures (the myaphisite dogma). Oriental Orthodoxy includes the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Syrian Orthodox churches of India.

referred to as St. Thomas or Syrian Christians, their community, the oldest Christian community in India, claims its origins in the first century AD, when St. Thomas the Apostle is said to have converted a few Hindu families. It played an important part in the history and development of Keralite society being fully integrated in its social and religious structures as a higher caste that has maintained its distinct identity and social status to this day (Bayly 1990). Despite their rather unique position in South India, Syrian Christians remain marginal to an anthropological literature that has mostly concentrated on missionaries and converts to Christianity from among lower castes and their struggle for recognition. They distinguish themselves from the other Christian groups in India through their “Syriac” character, which represents at the same time their Oriental Orthodox faith, the Syriac heritage and language, and historical connections with the Oriental churches in the Middle East. Successive waves of colonization since the sixteenth century and encounters with Catholic and Protestant missionaries, as well as with visiting Orthodox bishops from the East, led to successive fragmentations of this community into eight different churches. Among them, two continue to profess the Orthodox faith: Aleesha’s church, the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, which claims allegiance to the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate in Damascus, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, an autocephalous church with its own Catholics.² These churches have been fighting over properties and members for over a hundred years, and that conflict has strongly affected the Syrian Christian community and their status in Keralite society.³

The history of intrareligious disputes, communal politics, and the intense competition that characterized twentieth-century Kerala forced Syrian Christians to mobilize and reposition themselves many times in relation to other religious and secular forces (Devika and Varghese 2011). Part of the politics of differentiation, the Sunday school teacher’s insistence on the unity of divine and human natures of Christ was a claim to their ancient origins and distinct caste (*jati*) identity. Sunday schools are at the forefront of this struggle since teaching the right faith to children has remained an imperative for them since colonial times. Children, Orsi observed in his study of modern American

² Historically, the term “Malankara church” refers to one part of the Syrian Christian community in South India that refused Portuguese Catholic authority in 1653, claiming allegiance to the Syriac Orthodox church in Antioch. The legacy of this church is now shared by several Syrian Christian churches of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant faith, including the present-day Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church that form the subject of this study. In this paper I will use the term Syrian Orthodox when describing the Jacobite and Malankara Orthodox churches and Syrian Christians when discussing the whole community indifferent of the rite.

³ According to the 2001 Indian census, three million Syrian Christians live in Kerala and up to four million if one counts the diaspora (Zachariah 2006). Yet churches estimate around eight million across India and the diaspora based on church records (Joseph, Balakrishnan, and Perczel 2014). Together with other Christians, they count for 18.38 percent of Kerala’s population, compared to Muslims (26.56 percent) and Hindus (54.73 percent), per the 2011 census.

Catholicism, are prone to become the focus of adults' preoccupations because they "signal the vulnerability and contingency of a particular religious world and of religion itself" (2005: 77). This is especially true in South India today, when anxieties about the future of the Syrian Christian community merge with their middle-class aspirations to sustain a remarkable pedagogical effort. Since their establishment in the nineteenth century, Sunday schools have taken up the task of transmitting the Orthodox faith and have become a true laboratory where their religion has been made and remade. The importance of schooling for Syrian Christians in India invites a broader comparison with the religious pedagogies that shape Orthodox Christians in other localities and the efforts these communities make to maintain an Orthodox core while adapting to different socio-historical realities. For this purpose, the history of this community, marked by colonialism and their encounter with Protestant missionaries, matters more than the theological differences underlined in Aleesha's speech. Their trajectory represents a different path to religious modernization than that of the Eastern Orthodox churches, whose evolution was closely tied to the formation of nation-states (Leustean 2014). Instead, Syrian Christians share the experience of other religious communities in colonial contexts where missionary education played an important role in how they have changed.⁴ Drawing on this historical-comparative background, I employ the case of the Syrian Orthodox churches in South India to explore how their colonial experience has shaped the practice and understanding of faith until this day.⁵

Much has been written about the role Western missionaries and modern education have played in the moral-material transformation of colonial subjects in India (Vallgård 2015; Raman 2012; Srivastava 1998). Indeed, as Sanjay Seth shows in his book *Subject Lessons* (2007: 2), the colonial project was in itself an "essentially *pedagogic* enterprise" and modern education was central to it. Established by Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century, the modern school aimed to replace local pedagogies with Western education, change the modes of knowing and ethical formation, and rationalize faith. This story about the role of missionary schools in the transformation of indigenous faiths, creation of modern subjects, and development of modern education in India is well documented. That said, the missionary impact is more complex than is often understood. There was a multiplicity of responses to this

⁴ While the Sunday school has been a well-established religious institution in the West since its foundations in eighteenth-century Britain (Laqueur 1976) and became global in the colonial period, its impact in the Orthodox world has been limited to the colonial context until recent times (but see Kan 1999 on the Russian Orthodox mission in nineteenth-century Alaska, another colonial setting).

⁵ This is what drove me to South India in the first place as part of a collaborative project on prayer in the Orthodox world, from Russia and Eastern Europe to the Middle East, India and North America; the findings are published in Luehrmann 2017. The comparison draws on this research project as well as my own work on Eastern Christian churches in postsocialist Ukraine and Romania (Naumescu 2007; 2016) and a growing literature on Eastern Christians around the world.

pedagogical project, not simply an imposition of colonial institutions on local subjects. Postcolonial scholars who challenged this view problematized the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity and the ways in which colonial intentions were rerouted into emancipatory projects of various kinds, both religious and secular (Kaviraj 2016; Seth 2007). For religious communities such as Bengali Muslims and Hindus (Sengupta 2011; Kaviraj 2016), modern education became a means to construct a new vision of faith and community. The question of how to transmit knowledge effectively preoccupied not only Christian missionaries but also local elites, especially during times when their religion was under threat.

Drawing on such insights, I examine here educational reforms in the Syrian Orthodox churches in South India with an eye to how changes in religious pedagogies have reframed their relationships with knowledge and God. This involved a shift from ritual pedagogy to modern schooling, which led to the textualization of ritual, a subsequent ritualization of texts in the Sunday school practice, and recurrent curriculum reforms that defined new orthodoxies in the church. What is at stake here is a better understanding of the shifting modes of knowing and the kinds of religious subjectivities they presuppose, as explored through issues of learning and pedagogy. The tension that emerged during colonial times between indigenous pedagogies and modern education surfaces today in the Orthodox Sunday schools, where the need for reform is articulated along the same lines of debates over what leads to “genuine” knowledge: rote learning versus understanding, memorizing versus reasoning. In this sense, my argument contributes to postcolonial debates on religion, education, and modernity, but also transcends them by highlighting more pervasive assumptions about what makes an Orthodox Christian and the modes of knowing and ethical cultivation in Eastern Christianity. It is this broader context that illuminates the lasting impact of colonial modernity that made the Sunday school central to the practice and ritual of modern religion, and educational reform the privileged means for religious renewal.

TEXTUALIZING RITUAL

A believer prays through the church.

———Sunday school textbook for the XII standard

Before her Sunday school rehearsals, Aleesha participated in the holy mass at St. Mary Orthodox cathedral. The service started at 7.30 a.m. with the Matins, followed by the Divine Liturgy (*Qurbana*; from Syr. *Qurbano qadisho*) in the Antiochian rite that ended around 10:30 after a lengthy sermon and the final blessing. The liturgy was followed by a communal breakfast in the parish hall, after which children moved upstairs for the Sunday school. The liturgical

service was long and tedious, with everyone in attendance standing, singing, and reciting collectively in response to the priest, an intense exchange that offered few moments of silence or rest on the church floor. Aleesha usually stood next to her mother and sisters in the women's section, somewhere behind the church choir.

The liturgy is in vernacular Malayalam and the modern rhythms of devotional songs resonate with popular culture. Beyond the language and style however one can recognize the basic elements that structure an Orthodox liturgy: the Antiphones and Troparies, the Small and Great Entries, the Trisagion, Anaphora and so forth. The roots of the Malankara rite are in the oldest liturgy of Eastern Christianity, that of Saint James, which is preserved today in the West Syrian rite of Syrian and Maronite churches.⁶ It is the liturgical heritage that makes this Christian community "Syrian" and gives them a strong sense of belonging to Oriental Orthodoxy. Across the world, Orthodox communities maintain a strong tradition of praying through the church and all devotion is geared toward liturgical worship. Rather than being attached to an infallible hierarchy that defines their faith and practice, like Catholics, or pursuing a more individualistic path to salvation as Protestants do, Orthodox Christians encounter a variety of practices and models legitimized by their spiritual tradition, and navigate through them in pursuit of orthodoxy, understood as right worship or belief.⁷ In their insightful analysis of this concept, Bandak and Boylston (2014: 29) remark that the "orthodoxy" of Orthodox Christianity emerges in the relations between people, experts, and exemplars, between local traditions of practice and Tradition as divine truth or revelation continuing in the church through sacramental practice. These relations are defined by deference and deferral, an attitude emphasizing not only the willingness to conform and follow others but also the acceptance that ultimate answers may remain a mystery. For Orthodox Christians, faith is to be found in this dynamic space between the aspiration to orthodoxy and the constant return to a liturgical heritage and community that shape their becoming Orthodox (Naumescu 2017).

This makes liturgical participation central to devotional practice, but also an ideal pedagogical context that orients their Christian formation through authorized forms. Keralite churches are full every Sunday and feast day, since Syrian Christians observe collective rather than individual prayer; that is, formal ritual mediated by the priest. Children and even small babies join their parents for the full length of the liturgical service, and are encouraged

⁶ The St. James liturgy is the basis of the liturgical tradition in the Oriental churches as well of the Byzantine liturgies of St. John and Basil the Great used in the Eastern Orthodox churches, the two great Orthodox traditions separated after the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

⁷ Orthodox Christianity does not follow a conceptual split between discourse and practice, between orthodoxy ("right belief") and orthopraxy ("right worship"). Indeed, the emphasis is on "ortho," the aspiration towards rightness or correctness of word and practice (Bandak and Bolyston 2014: 30–32).

to participate in various degrees, whether by simply sitting together at the foot of the altar, in their parents' arms or next to them, keeping quiet, or singing along with the adults. Through this routine, they become accustomed to the rite and learn the liturgical prayers and hymns well before grasping their meaning. The process of attuning to the rhythms of collective worship is at the heart of an Orthodox ritual pedagogy, which encourages experience before understanding, participation before explanation (Vrame 1999). This pedagogy of prayer takes root in the practice of sacraments (Qudasha in Syriac; Kudasha in Malayalam), the holy mysteries of Orthodoxy that are "revealed to our understanding, yet never totally and exhaustively revealed" (Ware 1991: 281). Mysteries are professed publicly but experienced liturgically, as Aleesha evokes in her speech inviting the audience to prepare and experience the "bread of life" in the Holy Communion. They share this experience every Sunday in the liturgical ritual and profess the mystery together by repeating the words of the Eucharistic song: "Mystery, mystery said Jesus, Mystery for me and my household! (Malayalam, *Rahasyam, rahasyam, udayo-naruli, Rahasya Enikkum en veettukaarkkum*)."⁸

Like everyone else, Aleesha first experienced the holy mysteries as a small baby at baptism. In Orthodoxy, unlike other Christian traditions, children's access to the sacraments is not conditioned to their understanding. They are reminded of this experience only years later in the Sunday school when the teacher asks whether they remember when they received communion for the first time? "Probably not, he continues, because you were small babies at the time. When you were about three months old your parents carried you to the church for Baptism and then you partook from the Holy Qurbana." This moment of retrospective signification is part of a sixth-grade lesson on the Eucharistic celebration that provides an exhaustive explanation on the origins of the liturgy from Passover to the Last Supper and the institution of Holy Qurbana, a history that invokes the whole liturgical heritage that makes them Syrian Christians. Only now are children reminded that their Christian life started with their symbolic entry into the Christian community, and invited to gain a deeper understanding of the history and meaning of their practice.

Aware of the ambiguous interpretive space generated by a mystery-centered pedagogy, the Orthodox church emphasizes the primary authority of liturgical experience, which extends beyond ritual into family and secular life. When the Sunday school textbook proclaims that a "believer prays through the church," it echoes the early Christian thought that all devotion is ultimately liturgical, meant to produce liturgical subjects (Krueger 2014). The liturgical formation of the self places emphasis on repetition and ritualization as an effective mode of shaping Christian subjectivities through the apt

⁸ This meditative song, *Rahasyam, rahasyam* (which means "secret" in Sanskrit) is sung on Maundy Thursday in preparation for the Eucharistic moment.

performance of the scripted ritual form.⁹ This embodied experience of an ordered ritual world tied to the tangible forms through which they are learned, felt, and remembered provides the kind of certainty that counts as knowledge.¹⁰ In her ethnography of the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox community, Susan Visvanathan observes how inner faith is made manifest through believers' correct posture and attitude: "The quiet that he maintains, the vigour of his discipline, the stance of his posture, and the alertness of his demeanor are all objective, easily perceivable statements about *kavanah* [inner devotion]" (1993: 207).¹¹ This observation on the embodied dispositions that attests to an authentic liturgical subject reveals similar expectations about ritual performance and Aleesha's well-rehearsed elocution. For both, the goal is to become the speaker-bearer of the script through its correct or proper performance, which is supposed to shape the speaker to the speech.

Reflecting on the salience of this ritual pedagogy, a Jacobite Orthodox acquaintance of mine once remarked how difficult it was for her to attend the liturgy in another Syrian church in a town she was visiting briefly. Even though they used the same (West Syriac) rite, she quickly felt out of synch with their worship because of the different rhythm of their prayer: "I could not finish my full prayer before they moved on.... For example, when I finish [reciting] the Lord's prayer, I [always] say Hail Mary. But they don't say it ... it's like it [the ritual] is chopped." Her observation reveals as much about the embodied dispositions of Orthodox Christians and the attunement of individual and collective rhythms as it does about the politics of small differences that run deep into the history of Syrian Christians. The liturgy she attended was a reformed version of the Syriac rite used in the Mar Thoma Syrian Christian Church, a group that splintered off from her own Jacobite Orthodox church. The absence of the intercessory prayer to Mary was due to Protestant-led reforms in colonial India. Like in other colonial contexts, the work of purification (Keane 2007) at the heart of the missionary encounter with Syrian Christians aimed to purge their faith of all the false beliefs, fetishes,

⁹ Ritualized repetition does not represent a closure but a way to skilled practice that allows for improvisation and individual pursuit (Luehrmann 2017: 121–128). In this, Orthodoxy is similar to Islam where Qu'ranic recitation and ritual practice have received more systematic attention not only in terms of orthopraxy and embodiment but also their creative, generative potential (Haeri 2013; Gade 2004).

¹⁰ Note that this certainty based on practical competence (Kormina and Luehrmann 2017) is different from the confidence of Evangelical Christians "being in the spirit," even though the body as primary site of knowledge is central to both (see Brahinsky 2012). It also lacks the individualistic pursuit of virtuosity present in piety movements, since individual acts are inscribed into a broader relational field where people act but are also acted upon, where human and divine agents are linked in "mutual relationships of care, intercession and patronage" (Kormina and Luehrmann 2017: 8).

¹¹ Visvanathan uses here the Hebrew term *kavanah* (intention or disposition of the heart), which expresses a different intentionality than that of Orthodox ritualism. Her observation, however, reveals the same embodied aptitudes that make an "apt performance" of the liturgy in Orthodoxy or medieval Christianity (Asad 1993: 62).

and “idoltrous customs” of Hindu and Catholic origin that tarred it. For even if this was an ancient Christian community, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) considered that only by purifying their rite could Syrian Christians rediscover their true Oriental roots and create a modern, rationalized faith. Soon after the first CMS mission was established in Kerala in 1816, Anglican missionaries set out to help Syrian Christians systematize their religious knowledge and education by introducing vernacular Malayalam in church, printing prayer books based on the Book of Common Prayer, and translating and making the Bible widely accessible to lay people.¹² The reform of the rite thus went hand in hand with the development of a modern educational system in the Syrian Orthodox church.

These reforms had a major impact on their community, leading to a religious awakening but also to a schism. Similar to the Coptic Church in Egypt (Sedra 2011) the Syrian Orthodox church in India embraced the missionary initiative as a means of reform and enlightenment of its subjects. Understanding that the modern school could be a *novum organum* for his flock, Indian metropolitan Joseph Mar Dionysius II, known as Pullikotil Thirumeni (1833/1865–1909), took an active role in establishing formal religious education, seminaries, and the Sunday school movement.¹³ In the new schools, children and adults were to be taught the common prayers, Oriental liturgy, and sacraments of the church, but also the Old Testament and the New Testament from the newly printed (reformed) Malayalam books. The collaboration was short-lived, however, since Syrian Christians became suspicious of CMS’s attempts to reform their rite and break their connections to the Middle East. Their concerns were related not so much to the new pedagogical practices and institutions established with missionaries’ help as to what they saw as the increasing Protestantization of their faith. Meanwhile a reform movement fueled by these changes was already underway in the church, which led to a schism and the formation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in 1888. The success of missionary-led reforms was most visible in the “new Syrian

¹² For the purification of the rite, missionaries produced lists of the “unChristian” rites and doctrines that Syrian Christians had to get rid of, including “the offering of prayers for the dead, the ‘worship’ of the Virgin and the saints with processions, fasts and supplications, prostrations before images of God the Father, the cult veneration of deceased bishops and their tombs” (Bayly 1990: 298). This, together with the new prayer books printed in Malayalam and the translation of the Bible (1841), accelerated the reform of the Syriac rite and the replacement of Syriac with Malayalam as the liturgical language, a process fully completed by the end of the nineteenth century.

¹³ His position closely resembles that of Patriarch Cyril IV’s role in the Coptic “awakening” and the modern educational reform that led to the emergence of the Great Coptic School in 1855 (Sedra 2011). Driven by the Church Missionary Society and their quest to rid Coptic Christianity of superstition, the educational reform had a similar impact as in the Syrian Orthodox church in South India. Coptic elites valued and adopted the new pedagogical methods with the purpose of modernizing their faith and maintained a more accommodating attitude toward missionaries than did Syrian Christians (ibid.: 111–15).

church,” which was Oriental in form but Protestant in spirit.¹⁴ The differences in the rite that bothered my Jacobite interlocutor were already visible a hundred years ago at the time the schism became embedded in their practice, and they continue to mark the boundaries between the two communities today.

The shift from ritual pedagogy to modern education affected not only the reformed church but the whole Syrian Christian community by shifting emphasis from liturgical to textual piety, from ritual practice to textbook learning. This transformation generated new forms of knowledge and authority, and institutions dedicated to its transmission that were meant to change people and their faith. As Sanjay Seth remarks in *Subject Lessons* (2007), the rationalization associated with modern education freed knowledge from the social context, separated the content from form, and made proficiency a matter of knowing rather than correct performance. This involved a major epistemic shift from indigenous pedagogies that were based on learning by doing, where form and content were indistinguishable and knowledge was essentially liturgical (*ibid.*: 35).¹⁵ Once knowledge became abstracted from practice and context, it could also be systematized and simplified to make it appropriate for classroom instruction. This created the expectation of a modern subjectivity, the reflective-active subject, set apart from the objects to be known and thus giving up fetishistic gods and idolatrous practices for the truth and abstraction of Protestant faith (or science, depending on whether these expectations were secular or religious).¹⁶ It presupposed that a modern subjectivity is achieved through reasoning and understanding rather than repetition and memorization.

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, the textualization of tradition turned the language of mysteries at the core of liturgical practice into the language of instruction of the Sunday school. This process involved the rationalization of their faith and spiritual heritage and translation of religious knowledge into concrete moral and social values that could be inculcated in the new generations. Education was thus meant to further moral and not “merely” ritualistic

¹⁴ Reflecting on this success, Rev. W. J. Richards, long-term CMS missionary in the region, compared the reformed Mar Thoma Syrian Christian Church with the Jacobites who “use the same devotions, but theirs are tainted with prayers to the saints and angels, and the ‘Hail Mary.’... In the book used by the Reformed Syrians there is, I believe, nothing remaining that an Evangelical Churchman could rightly call superstitious; at the same time it is Oriental” (Richards and Stock 1908: 101).

¹⁵ Indigenous pedagogies in South India were very diverse, from religious schools where knowledge (of the Vedas) was liturgical to popular village schools such as the Tamil *tinnai* (verandah) schools Raman describes in *Document Raj* (2012). These schools used texts and writing as aids to the arts of memory, embodied practices, and techniques meant to stimulate and cultivate memory. Their practice, based on the recitation and memorization of sacred texts, was a mode of learning and ethical cultivation embedded in existing religious traditions (Raman 2010).

¹⁶ In her discussion of “object lessons” in Bengali school, Sengupta observes how missionaries introduced the object lesson to teach children to think abstractly and shift from fetishistic gods and idolatry to rational faith. The upper castes, however, “saw it as an opportunity to teach rationality and science and rid the object lessons of their Christian content” (2011: 62).

ends, shifting from sacramental piety to an enlightened subjectivity. By redefining “religion” and standardizing the rite, this process has also tied religious identity and orthodoxy to modern schooling, a legacy that reemerges now with every educational reform. The practice itself has shifted from an embodied mode of collective worship carried on in rich symbolic ambiguity to the reading and recitation of printed texts. The concrete outcome of this process was the Sunday school textbook, imagined by the colonial power as an exemplary pedagogical tool for reforming conduct, but turned into a new mode of religiosity in the Syrian Christian community.

RITUALIZING TEXT

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

———Sunday school motto, Proverbs 22:6

For Aleesha, the final stage of the All-Kerala Sunday school competition in 2014 was very tense. The youngest in her age group, she kept preparing her speech till the very last moment. One after the other, children identified by numbers on their shirts stood in front of the audience with a Bible in their hands, ready to speak. They declaimed loudly, almost shouting and gesturing vehemently toward the audience during their passionate elocutions. The performative style followed closely the genre of charismatic preaching: expressive, rhetorical, directly engaging with the audience, with strong moral undertones. When Aleesha’s turn came, she stood in front of the jury slightly hesitating, with her head covered and open hands. It was the first time she had competed with the “seniors.” She spoke “a bit sweet and a bit harsh,” as she remarked afterwards, not sure whether it fitted the expectations of the judges. The guidelines for evaluation mark spontaneity, self-control, consistency, and fluency and purity of language (classical Malayalam), yet judges are aware that children’s spontaneity is well rehearsed. Like Aleesha, participants came with prepared speeches written by their teachers and rehearsed during months of practice and competitions. Addressing the annual theme of the Sunday school competition, “Jesus as the Bread of Life,” their elocution speeches were filled with evocative examples and quotes from the Bible and other spiritual literature deployed strategically to have an effect on the audience. The goal, advises Father T. J. Joshua, one of the most famous public orators of the Malankara Orthodox church, is for speakers to forget themselves and become one with their speech, the only way to win the hearts of the audience (2002: 65–67).

Aleesha did not win the final elocution competition that day, despite her excellent performance. Her perfect rhythm, amplitude, and tone, correct expression and gesturing, and proper pronunciation of literary Malayalam terms—all

made for a passionate speech with carefully chosen modulations that appeared spontaneous even though rehearsed many times.¹⁷

She was used to such performances from the many contests she had won throughout the years in the Sunday school, but also in her own school, one of Kerala's best public schools. She was a top student in both, and excelled in many subjects, but public speech was her greatest strength, an asset in a society whose public life is defined by political oratory and public speech, similarly to the neighboring Tamil Nadu (Bate 2009). Her success was facilitated by the fact that religious and public schools share the same textbook culture (Kumar 1988; Sarangapani 2003). Both cultivate text-based study that involves periodic rehearsals, evaluations, and competitions.¹⁸ Textbooks are central to the learning process and repetition is the primary mode of engaging with the text at every stage. Instruction revolves around the textbook, which greatly shapes the overall learning process, which stresses teaching, reading, memorizing, interpreting, and reciting from the textbook, but also evaluating students' knowledge in reference to it. Aleesha's Sunday school follows this model closely. On Sundays after the liturgy and common breakfast, all children gather in the church hall for the Sunday school. They start by praying together in the assembly, then separate according to age groups, each led by a Sunday school teacher. The teacher usually reads or asks one of the pupils to read out the text corresponding to the weekly lesson. While reading, they repeat the most important parts several times, and later rehearse them again by answering the questions proposed at the end of the lesson. Take for an example the following exchange between teacher and pupils in the third grade:

A child starts to read from the textbook at the indication of the teacher: "Jacob had twelve sons and a daughter. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. He was the eldest of the two sons of Jacob from Rachel. Joseph means 'May He add....'"

The teacher interrupts him to ask, "So what does Joseph mean?"

Students respond collectively: "Joseph means 'May He add'" (Genesis: 37, 39–46).

To ensure children understand the text, the teacher refers back to certain sections and reinforces repetition. This pedagogical method, called "guided repetition" (Moore 2006), involves an ongoing interaction between the expert and novice in a sequence that involves modeling by the teacher, imitation by the students, and rehearsal and performance. The correspondence between the teacher's questions and their answers establishes a pedagogical relationship

¹⁷ Aleesha's performance bears a certain similarity to the 'rehearsed spontaneity' of pious Muslim women described by Mahmood (2001) but her subjectivity is shaped by different, even contradictory moral forces and ethical practices rather than grounded in a single ethical tradition as we will further see.

¹⁸ In an excellent ethnography of a primary school near Delhi, Padma Sarangapani (2003) offers an in-depth analysis of Indian textbook culture, which exhibits strong similarities with the Orthodox Sunday school practice described here. While a systematic comparison is beyond this paper's purpose, my ethnographic description draws on an implicit comparison with her work.

between them via the text. Students learn by memorizing or “by-hearting” (Hindi, *ratna*; Malayalam, *kannathe patikuka*) formal prayers. This gives them the certainty of knowing the “right answer” by literally voicing the text. The technique is based on a strict pattern of interactions and repetitions that is highly formalized in the expert-novice relation. For students to give the “right” answers, right questions must be asked that indicate the precise content that needs to be reproduced.

This point came through quite unexpectedly in the closing session of the national Sunday school examination in the Malankara Orthodox church in 2014. This is a big event that lasts over a week and brings together teachers from all over Kerala to examine hundreds of papers. During this session, one of the evaluators, himself a respected teacher, challenged the way exam questions were formulated by pointing out one of the questions in the exam paper that required students to reproduce a specific prayer, “The praise of Angels.” The question itself was not out of place: every annual examination includes a similar question that asks students to reproduce by heart a particular prayer or church hymn. Moreover, the respective prayer, known as the Angelic Hymn or Hymn of St. Athanasius, is one of the most important prayers in the Syrian Orthodox church, part of the common prayers recited daily in most Orthodox families. However, the teacher argued, the question was not formulated properly since the students had to reproduce from the middle of the prayer instead of the beginning, so many were confused and failed to respond correctly.

The incident was relevant in as much as it revealed the same expectation from both sides: that right answers must be paired with right questions for a felicitous performance. While in traditional religious learning this practice is based on call and response, in the Sunday school it is through (right) question and answer. The teacher’s remark also shows how pervasive this type of pedagogical relation is and the commitment expected from both sides. Their trust is built in the countless encounters and preparations for Sunday school evaluations that make this method work smoothly. Take, for example, a small group preparation for the tenth standard annual exam, which is the final exam for most Sunday school students.¹⁹ In another Orthodox parish I used to visit regularly, I once joined a small group of students revising the last three chapters of the tenth standard textbook before their final exams. These chapters provide a model of Christian life for those about to leave the Sunday school system, each text suggesting one modality through which

¹⁹ Most Sunday school students drop out after the tenth-grade exam to concentrate on their final school exams. The next two levels, 11 and 12 (+1 and +2), are necessary only for those who want to become Sunday School teachers, so despite the dropout rate, numbers remain high (around 20 percent of them would finish +2). In 2014, 2,300 students were enrolled in +2, 3,000 in +1, and 5,400 students were writing exams in 10th standard in the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Sunday School Association.

they could reach “Christian fullness” in their own lives: through suffering (29); through meditation of the Word of God (30); and through sanctification of the spirit (31) (Unit VIII: 94–104). Their teacher, a retired public school teacher, started talking about how suffering is essential for becoming true Christian by echoing the text in front of him. To answer the questions raised at the end of each lesson, he returned to the text once more and re-read the respective paragraphs slowly. For instance, to address the meaning of the statement “the meditation of the word is spiritual food” he went back to a specific passage from the textbook: “The author of the Letter to the Hebrews gives a clear explanation on the word of God. ‘For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12)’” (10th standard: 97).

Every time students had to answer such questions, they adopted the recitation voice to indicate that they were repeating the words of the textbook rather than using their own. This quotation mode, characteristic of Indian textbook culture, singles out the “right answer”—the one reproducing the text—from their own answers and interpretations. The complicit relationship between the spoken and written text gives the illusion of a secure reference point in the textbook similar to the way the Bible represents the ultimate, inerrant authority in American Fundamentalism (Crapanzano 2000: 59) Once the referential chain with the text is established, students become more assertive in their replies, a certitude derived from the circularity of the process in which the textbook (itself referencing the Bible) becomes the ultimate source of meaning and authority.²⁰ Beyond a literalist interpretation, however, the recursive acts of reading and reciting have a sacralizing function that is meant to shape the speaker to the text. It denotes a pedagogy of prayer centered on guided repetition that merges religious instruction with ethical cultivation.

Guided repetition has been for centuries a privileged mode of learning and ethical cultivation in religions centered on sacred texts. In Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and medieval Christianity, “the memorisation and recitation of sacred texts have been valued as acts of piety, discipline, personal transformation, and cultural preservation, whether or not the individual understands the literal meaning of the text” (Moore 2001: 212). Moore observes that the underlying ideology of this religious pedagogy is that “the achievement of verbatim oral mastery of sacred texts through rote learning is an appropriate and effective way to instill religious orthodoxy and good moral character” (ibid.). Protestant

²⁰ The textbook remains the ultimate reference even for the standardized annual exams where evaluators receive an answer key that indicates the correct answers along with the corresponding points. Despite this, evaluators always check back with the textbook or the Bible when in doubt. The student’s capacity to quote relevant biblical quotes for each answer is marked separately on the evaluation form.

missionaries and other advocates of modern education in India dismissed this indigenous tradition of learning based on guided repetition, what they called “rote learning,” by arguing that genuine knowledge is based on reasoning and understanding (Seth 2007).²¹ To achieve this, they changed the method through which people approached the written word and thus also the relationship between reader and text. In an astute reflection on the role of reading in Christian culture, Engelke remarked that “a religion of the Book” is not necessarily “a religion of readers” (2009: 151), pointing to the different semiotic ideologies that underlie Christians’ relationship with text and language.²² In contrast with ritual pedagogies, the rational semiotics of Protestant missionaries offered referential fixity, semiotic transparency (against the semiotic opacity of Orthodox mysteries), and a universalizing system of signs abstracted from social context. As Bate (2010) describes in his discussion of Tamil ethics of textuality, this shift from an iconic to an indexical relation to the text, from an aesthetic of listening to an ethic of denotational rationality (*logos*), produced new modes of religiosity, modern subjectivities, and the modern public sphere. Despite the success of this enterprise, though, vernacular aesthetics and language ideologies remained immanent within Tamil culture and they continue to shape its oratory and politics.

While the missionary reforms in Kerala actively produced this kind of Protestant textuality to be disseminated through the newly established educational institutions, the “old” ritual pedagogies and aesthetics resurfaced in the textual practice of the Orthodox Sunday schools.²³ The embodiment of knowledge through the memorization and recitation of text became the primary goal, supported by a language ideology that privileges text over speech, which becomes a means for articulating it. The ritualized interactions with the textbook instill the text with an aura of “sacrality” similar to the sacred texts. As

²¹ Seth provides an excellent example in the address of Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India, at the convocation of Calcutta University in 1902, in which he expounds at length on distinguishing “real learning” from “rote learning” through a series of well-chosen dichotomies amounting to the difference between understanding something on your own account rather than being “stuffed” with other’s ideas (2007: 27–31).

²² The growing emphasis on literacy, textual authority, and reading practices in contemporary ethnographies of Christianity (Crapanzano 2000; Engelke 2009; Keller 2005) has proven the centrality of the Word for Christian cultures and the role of language and text as constitutive factors of religious subjectivities. Still, most of this work has emphasized the Protestant model, in which language and formalized speech (creeds, sermons, conversion testimonies) are the main conveyors of faith, and are privileged semiotic forms that serve to render the transcendence of God immanent and inner faith visible through the normative ideal of sincerity (Keane 2008). The present paper’s first section describes a different semiotic ideology that is more pervasive in the Orthodox world (see also Naumescu 2017), but also how this model traverses distinct religious pedagogies.

²³ Raman also notices that mission schools in Tamil Nadu adopted the bodily techniques of the traditional *tinnai* schools but adapted them to memorizing text—in their case catechism and sermons—a practice supposed to assure the accurate transmission of doctrinal knowledge. This changed the epistemic relation from text serving the cultivation of memory to memory serving the reproduction of text (2012: 113–15).

I observed in classroom interactions, guided repetition maintains ritual speech at the center while ritualization keeps the text disconnected from an active engagement with the content, and emphasizes instead the centrality of correct performance. In this system, geared toward “right-answerism” (Keller 2005: 95), students and teachers surrender their epistemic authority to interpret and filter the content of the textbook in class. Those who engage more actively with the text tend to adopt the testimonial style of charismatic or Evangelical preachers, enhancing but also personalizing the text with their own testimonies. For the majority, however, the authority lies with the textbook as a mundane manifestation of existing hierarchies and the authority of the church and tradition.²⁴ This process is obscured by multiple mediations: the teacher mediates the text, and the textbook mediates the experts who wrote it or the social institution that legitimizes it. In deferring the authority to the text, students and teachers are not encouraged to reflect or question the knowledge it provides, but only to assure its correct performance. This position reflects what Bloch (2005) defined as the “ritual stance,” based on ritualized repetition and conscious deference towards an ambiguous and often unclear source.²⁵ Ritualized interactions with the textbook maintain semiotic opacity and uphold a system based on deference and deferral that sustains Orthodox practice. This epistemic stance is further enhanced by a religious pedagogy that claims that one cannot fully know the mysteries of faith, such as Orthodoxy’s apophatic theology, while it encourages their experience in ritual.²⁶

Aleesha’s speech on the *Bread of Life* illustrates this paradox entertained in the Sunday school and in ritual practice: she quotes the words of Christ that established and perpetuate the act of communion in every liturgical performance while upholding its mystery. In doing so, she consciously defers the authority and meaning of the text she recites and concentrates exclusively on the “right” performance. The teacher’s remark on the content surprises her for a moment, before she carries out her performance. While her enactment of the text reflects the broader textbook culture of the Sunday school with its ritualized textual practices, it also shows how this culture feeds from and

²⁴ Kumar (1988: 453) makes a similar point in relation to Indian secular textbooks tying their authority back to the state. By way of contrast, the authority of the textbook is more characteristic of the product itself than its producer or productive processes in the Egyptian context of mass-mediated literacy (Starrett 1998: 155).

²⁵ In ritual, Bloch (2005) argues, the intention and meaning of action are separated as the formalized speech and acts involve a series of “quotations,” repeating someone else’s words or gestures. One does not need to understand the words or reflect on their meaning but rather follow others in conforming to the script. This practice encourages an epistemic attitude based on conscious deference to authority and deferral of exegesis.

²⁶ Compare this semiotic ambiguity with the literalist reading of the Bible among American Fundamentalists (Crapanzano 2000), for whom the original intention and authorship are clear: these are Christ’s words as written down by Paul the apostle. As Crapanzano remarks, “Fundamentalist hermeneutics is intentionalist; that is, meaning is what the authors, ultimately the author, of Scripture intended” (ibid.: 66).

supports the orthopraxy of ritual. Her elocution referenced several times the key liturgical act and “mystery” of the Eucharist together with the corresponding Bible verses, as well as a full liturgical song she sang toward the end of the speech. Usually chanted during the Eucharistic celebration, the song *The Lord Said: I Am the Bread of Life* was reproduced here in a non-liturgical text and context. This practice of entextualization is pervasive in the Sunday school curriculum and impacts ritual participation. Liturgical songs and canonical prayers are taught in every class from the first grade and are used in Sunday school textbooks, evaluations, and competitions. Students memorize liturgical songs and prayers “with optimum perfection and precision,” as a Sunday school teacher remarked. They are able to faithfully reproduce them in the liturgical context but also beyond the church in more “secular” contexts such as school competitions or family events—another reminder that Orthodox life is liturgical.

The convergence of Sunday school textual practice and ritual pedagogy in cultivating an Orthodox epistemics and liturgical subjectivity offers a different perspective on the well-rehearsed narrative of missionary encounters in the colonial context. Despite their distinct histories and orientations, these two sites of learning and ethical formation are based on similar practices of repetition and skilled performance of a “script” that make the text part of the child and the child part of the textual community behind it.²⁷ Even though missionary reforms radically altered the goals and methods of religious instruction intended to transform both knowledge and the knower, the “new” pedagogy was bent toward local orthodoxies, especially in places where more “authentic” Christian traditions were already in place.²⁸

REFORM AS RENEWAL IN THE MALANKARA CHURCH

Rituals are meaningful.

———OSSAE textbook XII standard

For a contemporary observer, the thought that the Sunday school fosters Orthodox ritualism may seem ironic given the CMS missionary efforts to rationalize faith and knowledge. The longstanding critiques of the “blind ritualism” or “empty formalism” of indigenous faiths provided a justification for missionary projects in various colonial contexts (Kan 1999; Sengupta 2011; Sedra 2011). In these encounters Protestant missionaries criticized their ritualistic practice, semiotic opacity, and the lack of preoccupation with meaning, contrasting it

²⁷ This is what Gavin Flood has termed “the entextualisation of the body,” a ritualized formation of the self in accord with tradition and the sacred texts (2004: 225).

²⁸ Sedra (2011) tells a similar story for the Coptic Church in Egypt, but his argument focuses more on the appropriation of the missionary model by Coptic elites to forge a modernizing project for their own community.

to their own spiritual models, whether the pious interiority of Dutch Calvinists (Keane 2007), the emotional fervor of German Methodists (Scheer 2015), or Seventh-Day Adventists' intellectual engagement with the Bible (Keller 2005). Such ideas, in turn, influenced religious and secular elites to reform religion as a way of enlightening the masses in various historical contexts. Putting religion to work for political projects that aimed at a total transformation of society was part of colonial and postcolonial states, but also of socialist regimes to the extent to which they brought about a secular state religion (Luehrmann 2011). Across historical contexts, pedagogy as method accommodated different modernizing projects and ideologies and cultivated both secular and religious subjectivities (Bryant 2001; Cody 2013; Starrett 1998). But the adoption of a modern pedagogical repertoire did not guarantee the creation of a "modern subject," and gave rise to different, often contradictory responses (Kaviraj 2016: 169–70).

Soon after the missionary reforms were completed, both Western and Indian reformists began to decry the failure of the new pedagogy. Noting that the practice of "by-hearting" continued in both religious and secular schools, they denounced the salience of rote learning that made students approach the new material with the "old" method (Seth 2007: 32). Since rote learning was closely associated with indigenous pedagogies and religious traditions, they perceived its endurance as a failed transmission of modern knowledge and by extension of a modern subjectivity. They saw in this "failure" a moral crisis and the instrumentalization of the school by Indian students and teachers who subverted the pedagogical process toward different ends. Nevertheless, as Seth argues, one should not rush to assume a specific intentionality to this process by turning it into an example of local resistance to or resilience in the face of colonial modernity. The supposed failure to become modern subjects rather suggests the persistence of a "different" subjectivity presumed by the indigenous pedagogies, such as the liturgical subjectivity I discussed in the first section. This perspective, Seth argues, plays into a particular, Western vision of modernity that not only measures "other" subjectivities in relation to "the modern" one, but provides pseudo-universal categories for apprehending the world and a specific hierarchy of knowledge. While acknowledging Seth's attempt to deconstruct Western knowledge, I want to pursue here a different point about the role education came to play in shaping a vernacular modernity. As Seth observes, the desire to be "modern but different" defined the nationalist pursuit of Indian modernity and education seemed to be the path to achieve both: the skills of the modern and the Indian character (ibid.: 176–77). Religious elites realized its potential early on, as can be seen in the swift adoption of missionary education in the Syrian Orthodox church discussed earlier. From their perspective, the nineteenth-century CSM reform offered an opportunity to produce modern subjects *and* a collective religious identity, promoting a new vision of their faith in a community confused and

divided by the changes.²⁹ Shifting from missionary reform to today's Sunday school reforms, I want to argue in what follows that educational reforms remain a privileged mode of infusing new meanings into religious practice and shaping new orthodoxies, especially under the threat of heterodoxy.

Such initiatives resurface regularly in the church, revealing that the Sunday school is a central part of religious practice, transmission, and renewal of their faith. Every educational reform starts by acknowledging a failure of transmission, proposing instead a new pedagogy that redefines the meaning of knowledge and modes of relating to it. Each reform carries on the language and strategies used by reformers and missionaries to distinguish between the "old" and the "new" pedagogy, between rote learning and critical understanding, memorization and reasoning. This distinction, which lies in the expectation of a different subjectivity—the reflective subject—points not so much to their failure to become "modern" as early reformers concluded, but rather to their desire to be "modern but different," as Seth put it. The ongoing process of reform, as a form of purification, is triggered by Syrian Christians' determination to harness the promises of modernity while remaining true to a spiritual ideal, which generates a tension that is mediated through education.

The most recent educational reforms I observed in the Orthodox Sunday schools may have been inspired by broader reforms in Indian public education, but they carry on the same strategies that led to the nineteenth-century textualization of religion.³⁰ Curriculum revisions are focused on functionalization and reinterpretation, two processes that redefine, consolidate, and scaffold religious knowledge and create a new framework through which religion is to be read.³¹ In this way, the meaning of beliefs and practices is reconsidered and church history is rewritten in light of current concerns and fixed into the revised textbooks to produce new orthodoxies and crystallize identity. This practice

²⁹ The religious modernization worked for the reformist movement that became the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, but also for the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, which rejected the missionary reforms. The declaration of the Jacobite church at the Mulanthuruthy synod (1876), which confirmed this split, formalizes its relationship with the Antiochian Patriarch, reaffirms the Oriental rite, and establishes the Sunday school as the main instrument of religious education (Visvanathan 1993: 31).

³⁰ I refer here mainly to the 2009 curriculum revision in the Jacobite Sunday School Association (MJSSA) and the 2015 revision in the Orthodox Syrian Sunday School Association of the East (OSSAE), as reflected in the new textbooks and related articles and interviews with clergy and teachers. One can also see these as late reactions to the reform of public education started in Kerala in 1994 and later extended to other Indian states (the District Primary Education Program), but, as I argue here, these revisions follow closely a pattern that was established much earlier with the nineteenth-century missionary reforms. In this sense, the pedagogy proposed by today's reformers is "new" and "old" at the same time.

³¹ In his work on modern education in Egypt, Starrett (1998) describes four textual processes—functionalization, reinterpretation, consolidation, and grading—that are similar to the ones used by CMS missionaries in India and Egypt. These processes turned the Islamic tradition into textbook knowledge for use in public schools and later in social and political projects.

continues a longstanding tradition of apologetic histories in the Syrian Christian community that helped them create spiritual lineages and political alliances throughout centuries (Perczel 2009; Varghese 2004). Each revision also tries to make the text and language more accessible while adding more subjects and information to it. Today's Sunday school textbooks are broadly separated into five categories: Old Testament, New Testament, Faith, Church History, and Liturgy, teaching children about their rites, saints, and past deeds together with elements of Christian doctrine and moral values. The consolidation of religious knowledge that stems from the need to systematize and simplify a complex, controversial heritage brought the Sunday school textbooks closer to the secular textbooks.

Even though public education in India evolved from the missionary schools, nowadays it is the Sunday schools that observe the same cycle, structure, and pedagogical methods of the public schools. Their curricula, textbooks, pedagogical methods, and examinations are all similarly structured and delivered. Both public schools and Sunday schools provide a set of overlapping competences aimed at enhancing children's prospects in today's globalized economy while maintaining attachment to Indian traditional values (Sancho 2015: 97–98). With the advent of modern education, schools became essential means for social mobility (Shetty 2008; Raman 2012) and their role in the (re) production of a middle class increased in the wake of India's economic liberalization (Sancho 2015; LaDousa 2014). Being good children in India corresponds to performing well in school, being self-disciplined, ambitious, and competitive and thus eventually succeeding in getting a government job (a more traditional path) or becoming competitive professionals on the global market. Schools reflect the aspirational regimes of the parents and their active involvement in children's success (Sancho 2015: 223). Their constant preoccupation, intense coaching, and long-term investment are well reflected in the Sunday schools, too, but also in family and social life. Behind Aleesha's success was not only an ambitious headmaster but also her middle-class parents, who were accomplished professionals whose own Sunday school achievements set a high bar for she and her sisters. By her side during every rehearsal and contest, Aleesha's mother closely monitored her performance and was directly involved in her study and coaching for Sunday school competitions and school exams. The drive to preserve a religious world is here overshadowed by the ambition to succeed that fuels such endeavors.

Given the overlapping of these educational fields, activities meant to further religious knowledge and develop moral character also play into the individualist logic of secular education, with its inherent contradictions.³²

³² In his ethnography of secondary education in Kerala, Sancho (2015) provides a more nuanced view of the tensions that shape secular education in India between a globalized, cosmopolitan model and inherent Hindu nationalism, between capitalist and traditionalist values, social mobility,

This tension between Christian morality and secular values is reflected in the ongoing debate over the goals of Sunday school education. Today's reformists argue that the Sunday school has become devoid of its moral mission and an ancillary of secular education. "What [is] the main aim of Sunday School training?" asked a priest, a former director of the Malankara Sunday school association on the occasion of the eightieth Jubilee of Fr. T.J. Joshua (Mathew 2008: 133). "Is it just to fill up the vacant neurons of the child with religious knowledge? Is it to teach him Bible verses as much as possible and to train him as true son/daughter of St. Thomas Christians?" Indicative of a pedagogical crisis, these questions echo those of the nineteenth-century reformers who saw a moral crisis in a similar pedagogical failure. By posing such questions, contemporary reformers acknowledge that Sunday school education separates the act of knowing from the Christian virtues they work to instill in children. Unlike the "old" pedagogies, where ethical cultivation was inseparable from worldly learning, the Sunday school abstracts knowledge from virtuous practice and provides instead a set of abstract moral values shared with secular schools.³³ Concerned with this moral crisis, some voices within the church argue for a return to a religious pedagogy grounded in the Orthodox vision of *theosis*—human fulfillment in the image and likeness of God (see Naumescu 2017). "The process of the Sunday school is to transform a child into a divine man by uplifting his moral and spiritual status," claimed the late Metropolitan Mathews Mar Barnabas in his reflections on moral education in the Malankara Orthodox Sunday School Association (2008: 23–27). Concretely, reformers aimed to achieve this goal by reconnecting knowledge and moral conduct in the annual Sunday school evaluations. To assess children's moral character, Sunday school evaluations were supposed to also account for church attendance, frequency of communion, and voluntary participation in church-related events. In this way, reformers hoped to balance textbook knowledge with liturgical participation and recenter the pedagogical model toward a liturgical subjectivity. Attempts to implement these ideas in the Sunday school have for the moment failed, since pedagogues noticed that the new evaluation system has a negative impact on children's final results. In the highly competitive environment of Keralite education, the pressure to perform supersedes concerns about children's moral education in Sunday school.

and the reproduction of class and caste. These tensions, also reflected in religious education, play out in the Syrian Christian community at large (Devika and Varghese 2011).

³³ Public and private schools offer Value Education classes based on secular textbooks that follow the National Curriculum Framework. While these lessons promote moral and national values, Christian values remain prominent in secular education given the Christian domination of the educational field in Kerala (see Sancho 2015).

The gap between this Orthodox vision of ethical formation and Sunday school pedagogy seems further enhanced by the latest curriculum revisions. In criticizing rote learning, the “new” pedagogy emphasizes a religious subjectivity that can be achieved only through critical appraisal. It claims, once again, that “real learning” requires personal reflection and understanding rather than correct performance and memorization. In this vein, the revised textbooks propose a new relationship between reader and text that presumes a reflective subject. Children are encouraged to actively engage with the rite and doctrine for a better understanding of their faith. With every lesson they are prompted to explore and discover the meaning of prayers, symbols, and practices rather than memorizing the content of textbooks. The gist of this endeavor is captured in the encouraging title of the new Sunday school reader for XII standard that opened this section: “Rituals are meaningful.” The textbook, published in 2013, addresses teenagers or adults who aspire to become Sunday school teachers. It covers the mysteries of faith (sacraments) and the most important feasts related to Jesus’ life (Malayalam *Moronaya perunnals*), thus bringing together textual knowledge and ritual practice into their apprehension of the Orthodox faith. This model, pursued systematically in all textbooks from lower to higher grades, combines prayers, Bible quotes, and liturgical songs with frequent notes such as “stop to think,” “think over,” or “let us stop for a while and think.” These prompts to personal reflection that turn up on every second page are meant to draw attention to the book’s content, encouraging pupils to engage with it and reach an understanding of the issues under question by their own means. This method, which resembles the type of Socratic learning described by Eva Keller in another colonial context (2005: 87), represents a major shift from the earlier textual practices of Sunday school students scrutinizing their textbooks in hope of “right-answerism.”

The invitation the new curriculum extends to engage with the text encourages the student to take a more active stance towards the textbook and the knowledge being taught and offers teachers the possibility to probe their comprehension. It also requires a broad institutional effort, teaching Sunday school teachers how to teach, reconsidering the evaluation system and teaching methods in the class, which implies the further professionalization of religious education. In the long run, it may actually lead to a pedagogical shift from performative competence to critical inquiry and intellectual engagement with the text of the sort Keller (*ibid.*) observes among Adventist converts in Madagascar. Yet the end goal for the Malagasy converts is different, since Bible study is an intellectual quest and the process itself, “the road to clarity,” is more important than the actual knowledge acquired. For the Sunday school reformers, the new method is supposed to replace people’s “ignorance” with a deeper understanding of their rite, leading ultimately to a better liturgical participation. The newly acquired knowledge should be liturgy-centered, meant to enhance the liturgical experience by bringing meaning to people’s ritualized acts and

words. Fr. O. Thomas, priest and director of the Malankara Orthodox Sunday school association at the time of this curriculum revision, stressed in an interview, “Students should be able to explain the [liturgical] experience or understanding of Orthodox spirituality in intellectual terms ... [but it is] not the intellectual understanding or the theological understanding of Orthodoxy; it is the participating experience that is very important.” His view exposes a hierarchy of knowledge that remains grounded in an Orthodox pedagogy of prayer that sees the liturgy as the essential mode for shaping Christian subjectivities.

This reveals an inherent tension within the Syrian Orthodox community between the increasing rationalization of faith and their mystery-based liturgical culture. The tension is most visible in the current efforts to revive the Syriac language in the church, which have come at the same time as the latest curriculum revisions. The move toward linguistic sacredness (Handman 2014) is part of their strategic repositioning and reaffirmation of Syrian Christian identity, but it also impacts ritual practice and education. This move, which started as a preoccupation of elites with the authenticity and antiquity of their faith, spread out into the Sunday school and church services thanks to the new curriculum revision.³⁴ Now children have to learn Syriac words, prayers, and songs in the classroom, while Syriac phrases and songs are increasingly mixed with vernacular Malayalam in the church. Sunday school competitions introduced dedicated sections in which children perform liturgical songs and prayers in Syriac, individually or in groups. Since they do not understand Syriac, the texts are transliterated into Malayalam for them to learn by heart and accommodate to the rhythms and tonality of this exotic and yet somewhat familiar language.

The return to Syriac in the church is also an attempt to bring back the “mystery” proclaimed in Aleesha’s speech.³⁵ While the introduction of modern education transformed the mystery into a service by making it available to everyone through formal instruction in vernacular Malayalam, the reintroduction of Syriac today reframes the role of language and the relationship with the divine in line with a language ideology prevalent in the Orthodox world. In ritual, speech is to be understood less for its denotative content but valued for its familiar forms, inhabited rather than comprehended. Thus, Orthodox Christians tend to preserve and cherish sacred languages that embody the spirit of ancient traditions and give an aura of authenticity to their prayer. The antiquity of liturgical languages such as Syriac, Greek, or Church Slavonic denotes not only the great liturgical traditions but also the “Orthodox Tradition”

³⁴ The revival of “classical” languages is part of broader restoration processes in postcolonial and postsocialist states, which feed various political and cultural processes ranging from Tamil Dravidianists (Bate 2009) to Russian neo-paganism (Bennett 2011).

³⁵ This, as Kaviraj shows in the example of nineteenth-century Bengal, can also be seen as a counter-effect to rationalization as “elites tried to compensate for the loss of the enchanted with re-enchantment,” what he calls a “disenchantment deferred” (2016: 170).

that unites them. For Syrian Christians in India, Syriac stands for their historical roots in the St. Thomas tradition and for the language of God through its association with Aramaic. It is thus a privileged means for accessing the divine by embodying the Word of God and church tradition. As one of the teachers and co-author of the new Sunday school textbooks remarked, “Teachers feel that learning a holy language is necessary to establish proximity with God. Students are convinced that it is a matter of privilege to master Syriac, ‘the language of Jesus,’ to enjoy the liturgy and this would make the prayer more powerful.” The re-enchantment of religious practice through linguistic sacredness compensates for the critical reading promoted in the Sunday school textbooks, and points instead toward a religious pedagogy that privileges embodied experience to rational understanding.

These contradictory drives reflect competing pedagogical models, with their distinct forms of knowledge and subjectivity that shape the current religious landscape and children’s growing into their faith. They generate a confusing ethos of prayer because children are encouraged to pursue liturgical spirituality while being prompted to think through the words they recite and rituals they perform; they are socialized in collective worship but made to compete with peers for the most perfect rendition of textbook knowledge. This motivates some, but leaves others confused if not indifferent to the things learned despite the intensive pressure and studying they go through. After the final performance of her speech, Aleesha admitted, quite innocently, that she could not relate to it as she had with previous ones. It was too abstract, using a difficult language and lacking any connection to real life. If our repeated attempts to extract the meaning of her speech have failed, the same could be said about her knowing the text in the Vedic sense of “placing it in the heart” (Graham 1987) that Father T. J. Joshua, the famous church orator, advised. The language itself is telling of the struggle to find her own voice among the many scripts she rehearses: the Sunday school speeches are in literary Malayalam, while her entire education is in English, the language of the aspirational middle-class in India. And yet she usually speaks and prays in “Manglish,” mixing not only words but distinct registers of class and caste, of the secular and the religious.³⁶

The Orthodox Sunday school provides the basis for children to gain religious merit and general competences, cultivate practical skills, and develop a sense of belonging to a community of faith. This is further reinforced by the fact that their parents, teachers, and friends have been part of this community and many continue to play a significant role in it, not least in supporting the Sunday school reforms. Those among the laity who argued for reform were

³⁶ Pandian (2010) makes a similar argument reflecting on the moral forces that shaped the ethical subjectivity of an old man in neighboring Tamil Nadu between colonial rule, vernacular traditions and ordinary ethics.

also the first to read through the texts and look for the meaning of their practice, as well as engage with and interpret church rituals and traditions. They entertain a pleasure of study akin to Keller's Adventists, but are deferential to the church and tradition. They dedicate time to read spiritual literature and sometimes write their own contributions, whether short histories of the church, more theological reflections on sacraments, or popular guides to the Orthodox liturgy and faith. Such tendencies, which one encounters not only among Syrian Christians in South India but also in Orthodox communities in Russia, Romania, or Greece, reflect individual projects of self-cultivation that seek to retrieve the mysteries of faith in everyday life (Engelhardt 2017; Pop 2017). They testify to a broader, revivalist movement in the Orthodox world that seeks to actualize tradition and push people back to church in response to challenges of heterodoxy, secularity, and religious diversity. The way they do it, however, is not always the same, manifesting different historical experiences and religious pedagogies.

CONCLUSION

Aleesha's speech on the "Bread of Life" used a play on words to illustrate the role of mystery in Orthodox faith: *appam*, the ordinary "bread" in Kerala, becomes the "bread of life" in the liturgy. We must trust this mystery and experience it in ritual, she tells us. This move pervades all attempts to bridge the gap between everyday life and the mysteries of faith, a question of presence that all religions must deal with. From the ritualism of Orthodox Christians to the sincere speech of Protestant missionaries, people are searching for the evidence that they are getting it right. Pedagogies of prayer are there to grapple with this question and provide the means to authenticate and cultivate such certainties. They prescribe distinct regimes of knowing and ethical formation that define what counts as knowledge and the corresponding subjectivities. By studying religious pedagogies, one can thus grasp the entangled processes of knowing and becoming in particular histories or traditions of practice. Such study engages questions of learning and education, but also of mediation and authority, the linguistic and semiotic ideologies that enable and at the same time expose the limits of religious knowledge and experience. In this sense, it can bring together domains we rarely consider jointly, like modern schooling and religious ritual and distinct ideologies that converge in the pedagogical practice of a particular community.

The case of Syrian Christians in South India is meaningful beyond its context for showing the importance of formal education in the making of modern religion. It offers an important contrast to not only the liturgical pedagogies still prevalent in the Orthodox world, but also dominant views of the missionary encounter with indigenous faiths. Like others in the colonial context, Syrian Christians worked out the modernizing project in a slightly different process than how it was imagined, a process that continues to change

people and their faith today. While in the eyes of CMS missionaries Sunday school was meant to replace the opacity of Orthodox ritualism with the transparency of Bible reading, the Protestantization of their faith was not really completed in this way, even if it provoked a lasting schism. The new institutions carried on the “old” pedagogy in their textual practice, cultivating deference and deferral in children’s interactions with textbooks. Though they were ideologically competing, both “old” and “new” pedagogies generated knowledge through ritualized interactions and repetitions that entailed apt performances rather than inner belief or rational faith.

This convergence could have been strategic, as in the case of the Coptic Church, or unintended, but it certainly matched deep-rooted expectations about learning and belief fostered through ritual and textual practices. Both remain grounded in an epistemic “mystery” despite recurrent attempts at rationalization from both within and outside the community. Meanwhile, the ethics of textuality have shifted from ethical cultivation to moral education, from shaping a liturgical subject to shaping a modern one, a change that remains incomplete due to competing visions of what it means to be a good child or a Syrian Christian in India today. In this respect, the functionalization of religion worked better than the rationalization of faith, fostering social rather than spiritual pursuits. The worldly concerns of Syrian Christians are not simply a matter of increasing secularization, but are an outcome of their fragile minority position, with their always having to forge strategic alliances and reposition themselves in precolonial Kerala. These concerns are as much as a condition of modernity, of turning themselves into industrious, good citizens in the modern state (Devika and Varghese 2011: 111). No wonder, then, that monasticism, the quintessence of Orthodox Christianity, never took root in this community or became the driving force that it is in other Orthodox churches. Debates about contemplation versus social engagement have a long history in Orthodox Christianity, and the nineteenth-century modernizing projects inclined the balance toward the social in other countries too (see Kenworthy 2008). Nonetheless, throughout the Orthodox world monastic asceticism remained central to the life of Orthodox Christians and it continues to shape their church and faith in important ways. Orthodox revivalist movements are inspired by monastic ideals they aim to recreate in secular life and an intensification of devotional practice modeled on the monastic virtuosos. Reform in the Orthodox churches is pursued through a deeper engagement with tradition and ritual, a form of liturgical charismatization meant to foster commitment and the interiorization of faith (Pop 2017: 226). Syrian Orthodox followers in India share the drive to church tradition, but their pedagogical reforms testify to a different legacy that made the Sunday school central to the practice and making of their faith.

While the distinct religious pedagogies are rooted in different historical trajectories, they are also shaped by the fears and hopes of each community

and have to be anchored in a shared past and tradition of practice. From an Orthodox perspective, the changes they bring are not innovations but rather opportunities to renew and articulate the orthodoxy of faith. This is where the missionary efforts, channeled through Sunday schools, later encounters with secular and religious modernizers, and the recent reformist movements seeking to restore (yet again) the “authentic” Syrian Christian faith, converge in reinforcing their pursuit of Orthodoxy.

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Abstract: This article focuses on religious pedagogies as an essential part of the practice and the making of modern religion. It takes the case of the Syrian Orthodox communities in Kerala, South India to examine how shifts in pedagogical models and practice have reframed their understanding of knowledge and God. The paper highlights two moments of transformation—the nineteenth-century missionary reforms and twenty-first-century Sunday school reforms—that brought “old” and “new” pedagogies into conflict, redefining the modes of knowing and religious subjectivities they presuppose. For this I draw from historical and pedagogical materials, and ethnographic fieldwork in churches and Sunday schools. The paper diverges from widespread narratives on the missionary encounter by showing how colonial efforts to replace ritual pedagogies with modern schooling were channeled into a textbook culture that remained close to Orthodox ritualism. The “new” pedagogy turned learning into a ritualized practice that continued to emphasize correct performance over interiorized belief. Contrasting this with today’s curriculum revisions, I argue that educational reforms remain a privileged mode of infusing new meanings into religious practice and shaping new orthodoxies, especially under the threat of heterodoxy. This reflects a broader dynamic within Orthodox Christianity that takes moments of crisis or change as opportunities to turn orthopraxy into orthodoxy and renew the faith. The paper engages with postcolonial debates on religion, education, and modernity, and points to more pervasive assumptions about what makes Orthodox Christianity and the modes of knowing and ethical formation in Eastern Christianity.

Key words: pedagogy, subjectivity, Orthodox Christianity, South India, Sunday school