A law is only effective if it is implemented, even as a church's position on theological issues does not further its mission if there is no corresponding practice. In 1986, the Mar Thoma Church officially stated that there is no theological barrier to ordaining both men and women to serve the church. However, there are currently no ordained females within the global Mar Thoma Church. Why is there such a dissonance between doctrine and praxis? To study this dissonance, it is important to compare and contrast the Mar Thoma Church with the Roman Catholic Church and Church of South India (CSI), two other prominent churches in India that also have a global presence.

The formation of the Catholic Church, the CSI Church, and the Mar Thoma Church has played a key role in the spread of Christianity in India, and each has a distinct view of women's roles within the church, specifically concerning female ordination. The global Catholic Church does not ordain women due to theological barriers. In contrast, the CSI Church doctrinally promotes female ordination and currently has over one hundred female clergy and a female bishop. The Mar Thoma Church has communion with the CSI Church, but since their practices regarding women's ordination do not align, one would question if their doctrine differs as well. Since the doctrine regarding female ordination is the same, the question arises why the Mar Thoma Church has not promoted equal representation for all believers. Egalitarian doctrine is the first step towards religious equality, but if it is not practiced on a regular basis, it is merely a trope and does not further the mission of the church.

It can be argued, furthermore, that a move towards equality is not happening quickly enough in Indian churches as compared to Western churches, but one must not disregard how Indian women have overcome unique barriers in their struggle for equality. Although equal treatment of women and men is still a work in progress, many positive changes have been made in political, social, and religious contexts. In light of women's advancement in all other sectors of society and Christ's views toward the relevance and dignity of women, men and women must intentionally engage in conversations about the specific barriers preventing women from pursuing ordination in the Mar Thoma Church. To make this argument I will begin with an overview of the Hindu landscape and two case studies of religious patriarchy in a Hindu temple and a Christian church. Then, I discuss the influence of Western female missionaries on slowly changing the perception of the role of Indian women within the household and community. Finally, I provide an overview of the Catholic Church, CSI Church, and the Mar Thoma Church to compare and contrast the doctrine and ecclesiological practice of each. The Mar Thoma Church shares practice with the Catholic Church regarding female ordination, despite different doctrine, while the Mar Thoma Church shares doctrine with the CSI Church, despite different practice.

### Cultural and Religious Overview of Patriarchy

The cultural landscape of India has contributed to a perception of women as subservient to men, both in the home and society. Understanding the depth of this history helps to situate the slow change in the Mar Thoma Church in the centuries of India's struggle for gender equality. After Muslims established their presence in India in the eighth century, there was a sharp decline in women's education, and segregation (purdah) was introduced to shield women from men. Purdah is not only physical segregation from males, but also concealment through clothing. Other Indian cultural restrictions toward women include widow burning (sati), child marriage, and female infanticide. Although these practices have occurred in several other Asian countries, the combination of factors plays a major role in gender inequality.

Sati implies that a woman's life is not valuable without her husband; therefore suicide within a religious context is acceptable because it is meaningless for her to live without him. Even in areas where sati was not practiced, widows were not allowed to remarry and could not wear clothing or jewelry that would call attention to their beauty. A widower, however, “is not affected by any taboos,” and his family will arrange another marriage for him within a year. Poorer families often conduct child marriages to avoid paying higher dowries for older girls, but it is also associated with higher instances of domestic violence, death during pregnancy, and lack of educational prospects for the girl. Since many young girls were married to men much older than them, they were subsequently widowed at a young age. A 1931 census report notes that nearly 200,000 widows were below the age of fifteen. The exact data on female infanticide is difficult to determine due to underreporting, but the male birth sex ratio has been noticeably higher than females for several centuries. Many practices that devalue women have long been unquestioned, but legislation has been changing since the nineteenth century in an effort to bar these practices and improve the rights of women. Except for sati, these practices still exist in more rural villages, where the laws are not as effective. These cultural norms play a major role in how women view themselves. Coupled with subjugating religious practices, much work still exists to raise women's standard of equality.

The last census, in 2011, recorded over 1.2 billion people in India, a population second only to China. Nearly eighty percent of the population identifies as Hindu, but not all Hindu beliefs are universally practiced. The textual diversity and lack of a standard holy book introduces challenges when trying to distinguish among widely differing religious and cultural practices regarding respect for women and their inclusion in Hinduism. For example, the worship of female goddesses and the allowance of women in temples is common in the eastern region of Bengal, but is not as common in the northern region of Punjab or the
of their husband’s character. Similar cultural practices exist within the Indian Christian communities; women are often made to suffer through a physically and verbally abusive marriage without reporting the abuse because the family discourages it.

**A Hindu Case Study: Overcoming Patriarchy at Sabarimala Temple**

Despite millennia of unequal treatment of women in its background, the contemporary Indian landscape is not without evidence that change in perception and religious doctrine toward women is possible. A current example of Indian women overcoming unequal religious treatment is the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. Until recently, Hindu women between the ages of ten and fifty were not allowed to enter the Sabarimala temple or partake in religious festivals due to impurity during menstruation. The rationale has also been offered that the Sabarimala temple god is celibate and would be tempted by fertile women. The Indian Supreme Court banned this practice in September 2018, with a four to one vote, as a violation of the right to equality and the right to worship. As part of the ruling, the *Times of India* newspaper quoted Chief Justice Dipak Misra on September 18, 2018, saying, “religion cannot be the cover to deny women the right to worship.” Cyriac Joseph, a retired Supreme Court Justice and a Christian, said the long-held practice was no different from the Catholic Church only allowing men to be priests. Due to the perceived impurity of menstruation, women do not serve as priests in the Hindu faith, but are viewed as religious leaders within the home. Similar to other court rulings promoting gender equality, the temple authorities refused to accept the legislation, and religious devotees violently prevented nearly a dozen women from entering the temple within the first three months.

To highlight the obvious barrier to implementation of the court ruling, over five million women engaged in peaceful protest by forming a 620-kilometer human chain in Kerala on January 1, 2019. The women who participated came not only for the court ruling, but also for gender equality in all aspects of life as evidenced by the unity that transcended caste or religion. In the early morning hours of the following day, police provided protection for Ms. Bindu Ammini and Ms. Kanakadurga to be the first women between ten and fifty to enter the Sabarimala temple. The presence of the women prompted the temple to close the holiest area for an hour to perform purification rituals, which was unprecedented. Once news of this event began spreading, Hindu religious activists issued a statewide strike, which lasted from dawn to dusk. The *Indian Express* newspaper reported on March 2, 2019, that 745 people were arrested and 628 were taken into police custody as schools and stores were blocked and roads were closed while protestors burned tires in the streets. The women who risked their lives to exercise their legal and religious right to enter the temple and the millions who peacefully protested for change, in contrast to their counter protestors, are a role model for those striving against inequality today.

When Ms. Kanakadurga returned home, she was violently attacked by her mother-in-law for entering the temple and required hospitalization. Both Ammini and Kanakadurga moved to an undisclosed location due to ongoing violent threats from those who opposed their temple entry; the state granted them continuous security. However, the threats and Hindu extremists have not deterred more women from attempting to enter the temple, and Ms. Ammini echoed the sentiments of many women by saying, “they may attack me, they may kill me, but I feel no fear.” Political and religious upheaval over gender inequality in Kerala has not been in vain, for the Sabarimala temple board reversed their long-held position on February 6, 2019, to agree with the Supreme Court ruling and allow women to enter the temple. The perseverance of women has proved that rulings in favor of gender equality are not sufficient without implementation and that the risk is worth taking, despite opposition. If such change has been demonstrated in a Hindu context, a parallel change can also be achieved in a Christian one.

**A Christian Case Study: Patriarchy at Work in the Mizoram Church**

Lack of cultural and religious freedom is not only present in Hindu communities but has been in Christian churches as well. The early church in the northeast state of Mizoram required married and unmarried women to face the wall to avoid looking either at the preacher or other men as a precaution against adultery. Male clergy believed that the patriarchal structures were divinely ordained and gave precedence to cultural norms over the gospel. This subjugation of women planted the seed for future churches to continue patriarchal dominance, disregarding the fact that both women and men are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). The patriarchal context allowed foreign Christian missionaries to use the gospel to begin reforms for women, especially in medicine and literacy. Since women and men were mutually excluded from many social spaces, missionary women had privileged access to certain aspects of Indian life that facilitated the spread of the gospel by and to women.

**Female Missionaries in Indian Christian History**

Female missionaries to India were instrumental in bridging the gap between Europeans and Indians through nursing. By using hospitals and schools as an avenue to preach the gospel, missionaries were undeniably a primary agent in social change, especially in northeast India. Many mothers died in childbirth due to ignorance about the delivery process and aversion to being treated by male doctors, so female medical missionaries supported in ways that were not accessible to their male counterparts. In 1870, the Methodist Episcopal Church sent Dr. Clara Swain as the first female missionary physician to India, where she started the first women’s hospital in 1874. The hospital allowed women to maintain their caste distinctions and had separate rooms for those observing *purdah*, which started the momentum for more hospitals to open. This in turn required more females in the medical profession. Even today, Indian families view medicine as a prestigious role and encourage their daughters to pursue medical careers whenever possible.

Female missionaries were the object of gender bias and were not allowed to preach or lead services, but their work toward advancing female education made significant inroads for the
Prior to this, education was not highly regarded for females and the traditional Hindu system only allowed education for those in the upper castes. Families historically viewed education for their daughters only as a means of furthering their marriage prospects, and too much education could even be a deterrent for marriage if a male prospect had less education. The rise of Christian education and hospitals provided females with career opportunities in medicine, which began to shift the overall perception of women. The overall literacy rate has been steadily rising and the 2011 census reported a literacy rate in India of 74%, with the highest literacy of 94% in Kerala. The 74% overall rate is not equally distributed between men and women, and female literacy is about 65% compared to the male literacy rate over 80% because many families in rural areas prioritize sending their sons to school. As Indian women began advancing in education, former taboos were questioned and political changes were implemented to promote equality. Education has fostered a growing awareness of freedom and justice that set the groundwork for present day conversations on the freedoms granted to women in the church.

Overview of the Three Predominant Christian Churches

It is important to understand the formation and long-standing relationships between the Catholic Church, CSI Church, and the Mar Thoma Church in order to understand the basis behind the spectrum of doctrinal positions on women’s ordination and their corresponding practice. According to the 2011 census, India has approximately thirty million Christians, comprising 3% of the total population, and four northern states of India has approximately thirty million Christians, comprising their corresponding practice. According to the 2011 census, the spectrum of doctrinal positions on women’s ordination and the Mar Thoma Church in order to understand the basis behind the spectrum of doctrinal positions on women’s ordination and their corresponding practice. The CSI Church has a growing assembly of females ordained as deacons, presbyters, and most recently, a bishop. The more progressive posture of the CSI Church compared to the Mar Thoma and Catholic Churches may be due to Western church influences. In 1862, the Order of the Deaconesses was revived in the Anglican Church, which ordained its first female in China in 1907. In 1976, after four years of debate, the CSI Church ordained Reverend Sister Elizabeth Paul and became the first church to allow women’s ordination in India. This notable event encouraged other women to seek ordination, and within ten years an additional ten female priests were ordained.

The CSI Church currently has 130 female presbyters ordained among 3,000 presbyters, and in 2013, the Rev. Eva Maitland joined the South India United Church (SIUC). In 1932, Eva as an ordained minister, her appointed congregation did not agree with her ordination, and Eva chose for her ordination not to be recognized in order to maintain the unity of the Church. The CSI Church was formed in 1947 as a result of the SIUC expansion to include Anglican and Methodist churches. A unifying factor of the CSI Church is the agreement to accept ordination from other denominations because ordination is a ministry of the universal church and only needs to be performed once.

CSI Church History

The CSI Church is the second largest church and the largest Protestant denomination in India. The CSI Church has roots from 1901 when two Presbyterian churches, the United Free Church of Scotland Mission and the American Arcot Mission, joined. Next, the Congregationalist churches in India followed the example for union and joined the Presbyterian churches in 1907 to form the South India United Church (SIUC). In 1932, Rev. Eva Maitland joined SIUC after she was ordained in the Congregationalist Church in London. Although SIUC accepted Eva as an ordained minister, her appointed congregation did not agree with her ordination, and Eva chose for her ordination not to be recognized in order to maintain the unity of the Church. The CSI Church was formed in 1947 as a result of the SIUC expansion to include Anglican and Methodist churches. A unifying factor of the CSI Church is the agreement to accept ordination from other denominations because ordination is a ministry of the universal church and only needs to be performed once.

CSI Stance on Female Ordination

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Mar Thoma Church History

Unlike other parts of India that converted to Christianity due to foreign missionaries, Christianity in Kerala is believed to originate with the Apostle Thomas’s arrival in AD 52. In 345, under the leadership of a merchant named Thomas of Cana, approximately 400 Syrian Christian families fled religious persecution in their homeland and joined the Christian community in Kerala. During the ninth century, a group of Nestorian Persian Christians brought their traditions, leadership, and East Syrian liturgy to the existing Christian community. St. Thomas initially converted upper caste Hindus, who maintained many Hindu practices with Christian modification. The Christians were described as “Hindus or Indian in culture, Christian in religion, and Syro-Oriental in worship.” This description is still true today, evidenced by the Mar Thoma wedding ceremony that has a Syriac-based liturgy with Christian doctrine, but incorporates modified Hindu cultural practices. These practices have sometimes been questioned but are not presently a doctrinal or political barrier for the Mar Thoma Church.

As the Portuguese established a larger Roman Catholic presence in India, they forced the existing church to adopt Catholic customs such as conducting communion with unleavened bread, beginning Lent on Ash Wednesday, and requiring priests to be celibate—all of which were strongly opposed. Due to the constant conflict, the Portuguese archbishop summoned the Synod of Diamper in 1599. The purpose of the synod was to censure supposed errors in the Nestorian traditions of the local church and force them to sign an agreement pledging allegiance to the pope in the presence of armed forces. Although many clergy did not attend in protest, 153 clergy and 660 lay representatives attended. The Portuguese confiscated all Syriac manuscripts and burned many regarded as heretical, which contributed to growing strife.

In 1653, the church rebelled against the Portuguese by assembling 633 clergy and 25,000 Christians to declare independence from Rome in what is known today as the Coonan Cross Oath. In the early nineteenth century, the church began reformations through interaction with the Anglican Church and other Protestant denominations to remove Catholic doctrine that had been introduced at the Synod of Diamper. Abraham Malpan led the reformation efforts by translating the Syriac liturgy into the local language of Malayalam and removing Catholic practices to refocus attention on the Bible. The reformed church that emerged in 1836 was called the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, an Aramaic name to honor St. Thomas and the Syrian heritage. Today, the Mar Thoma Church is the third largest Syrian Christian group and has over one thousand congregations throughout the world and 1.5 million members.

During the late nineteenth century, the Mar Thoma Church went through a series of spiritual revivals to transform the rituals and ceremonies with a renewed emphasis on Bible reading, mission work, and conventions. The most famous convention is the Maramon Convention, which has become one of the largest Christian conventions in Asia. The annual convention began in 1895 and has had an average attendance of more than 300,000 people over the last twenty years. Women have historically not been allowed to attend the evening service, and the rationale was originally due to safety because of poor lighting and bad road conditions. The rule has been challenged since 2017, but the Metropolitan resolutely said, “there are four sessions where women can enter, but it’s not possible in the night sessions and that’s not going to be changed.”

Due to the changing political and religious landscape around the Supreme Court verdict for the Sabarimala temple, the Mar Thoma Church addressed these concerns in January 2019, and changed the evening service time from 6:30 pm to 5:00 pm so women could attend. The Metropolitan was quoted by the Times of India on January 19, 2019, saying, “we don’t want to have a Sabarimala on Maramon sand bed;” implying that he did not want the issue of gender inequality at the Maramon Convention to rise to a level of protests and state involvement similar to Sabarimala. The decision to make a relatively simple time change for the evening service arguably could have been implemented when the gender issue was originally raised. The change has been widely praised for promoting women’s equality, but there is still much work to be done, especially regarding women’s ordination.

Mar Thoma Stance on Female Ordination

The Mar Thoma Church has not ordained any women, but this is not based on theological reasons. The Mar Thoma Church’s official response to the World Council of Churches (WCC) regarding their position on female ordination is based on the premise that since the NT calls all believers to a royal priesthood, it is not appropriate to address the clergy as priests because it implies the laity are not priests. If the whole church is sharing in the priestly ministry, then “there is no theological barrier” keeping women from being ordained and the barriers are due, instead, to culture and tradition.

It took about three months for the Supreme Court ruling on the Sabarimala temple ban to go into effect, but it took nearly thirty years after the Church’s response to WCC for a female Marthomite to assist as a lay leader during a communion service. In an interview with the daughter of a priest, I learned that her father had requested the Metropolitan to consider the topic of women’s ordination nearly twenty years ago during the annual general body meeting of the Church. The Metropolitan replied by saying the request was similar to “asking people to ride in helicopters when they were presently riding in bullock carts.” The position of the Metropolitan affects the bishops of each diocese, who in turn influence the parish level priests, and finally the congregation. If there is no sense of urgency to actively support gender equality at each level of the patriarchal hierarchy, men and women will continue to succumb to generational stereotypes and not realize the theological significance of equal representation of men and women during a service.

The Mar Thoma Church has its roots in reform, so neither leadership nor laity should dismiss opportunities to address how to effectively minister to both women and men in the present society. All bishops and priests of the Mar Thoma Church are male and there are no other paid positions within a local congregation other than the priest. As such, many theologically
trained women do not have an opportunity to work in the local church besides volunteering in the same ministries that were available to them prior to training. Marthomite women in India and other countries continue to enroll in seminary due to a strong ministerial conviction, despite knowing that ordination or having any guarantee of a job within the Mar Thoma Church is not presently available to them. It would behoove the Church to recognize the potential these women have to serve in greater capacities than the traditional role of a Sunday School teacher and to edify the entire body of believers before they leave for other organizations that can more effectively use their talents.

Women preach during Marthomite services and have served as lay leaders during special occasion conferences, but a landmark event took place in the Mar Thoma Church on January 4, 2015, when twenty-three year old Anitha Oommen served as the first female lay leader during a communion service at a Massachusetts parish. The bishop initiated this as a means of reform toward gender equality, in which he rejected the excuse of tradition to prevent women from standing in the holy altar traditionally reserved for men. Since that time, a few other women have overcome much resistance to assist during a service, but it usually only happens if a woman strongly advocates on her own behalf. To serve as a lay leader does not require ordination, so there is clearly a gap between the spoken faith of the Church and daily praxis. James 2:17 admonishes that, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (NRSV). Presently, the Mar Thoma Church has chosen not to initiate conversation about female ordination in favor of maintaining unity and allowing patriarchal norms to change at their own pace. Instead of this passive approach, action is needed to remove the gap that exists between doctrine and practice.

Conclusion

The lack of women’s ordination in the Mar Thoma Church cannot be viewed as an isolated issue but must be seen within the greater religious and cultural context of India. Maintaining unity is vital, yet female ordination should not be viewed as a divisive topic or one to be avoided. By acknowledging the absence of theological barriers to female ordination, the Mar Thoma Church should be sincere—let their yes be yes—and faithfully implement the core tenets of the Church (Matt 5:37, James 5:12). If any congregants disagree with these practices, it is the duty of the Church to educate them on the theology that supports the practices. It is not sufficient for women to serve as lay leaders for isolated events. The Mar Thoma Church must be congruent in both its faith and its practices, similar to the Catholic and CSI Churches.

The Mar Thoma Church defines itself as “apostolic in origin, universal in nature, biblical in faith, evangelical in principle, ecumenical in outlook, oriental in worship, democratic in function, and episcopal in character.” The apostolic roots are a reminder of humble beginnings, but the ecumenical and democratic aspects can continue molding the church by following the CSI Church example of embracing gender equality in leadership and listening to the concerns raised by the people. Change does not always happen overnight, but the Mar Thoma Church has the benefit of looking back to a long history of reforming and adapting practices to meet the needs of the community. As such, the Church must have the courage to promote the actual practice of gender equality in leadership, knowing that God is the ultimate sustainer for the future.

Notes

1. Previous work, in 1991, reviewed the role of women in the Mar Thoma Church, but the only note regarding women’s ordination was that no women were ordained. See Sakhi Athyal, “Women’s Roles in Ministries in Select Churches in India after Independence” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, 1991) 295.
15. Schulz, “Her Visit to the Men Only Temple.”
19. Athyal, Indian Women in Mission, 55.
22. Amareesh Dubey and Veronica Pala, “Role of Christianity in Fostering Literacy and Education in Northeastern Region: Statistical Evidence,” in Christianity and Change in Northeast India, 64.
32. Gill, Count Us Equal, 52.
34. Aruna Gnanadason, “We will Pour Our Ointment on the Feet of the Church: The Ecumenical Movement and the Ordination of Women,” in Feminist Hermeneutics, 65.
36. Athyal, Indian Women in Mission, 75.
41. Menachery, Thomapedia, 38.
42. K. Pathil, “Christianity in India,” in New Catholic Encyclopedia.
43. Thomas, Foundation and Vision, 135.
44. Menachery, Thomapedia, 89.
45. Thomas, Foundation and Vision, 89.
47. Menachery, Thomapedia, 90.
49. The Metropolitan refers to the location of the Maramon Convention, which takes place on the sandy bank of the Pamba River.

PUSHPA SAMUEL is an MDiv student at Fuller Theological Seminary. She has worked as a biomedical engineer and plans to pursue a career in chaplaincy. Pushpa is among CBE International’s 2019–20 Alvera Mickelsen Memorial Scholarship recipients, and this article was among the winners of CBE’s 2019 Student Paper Competition in Houston, Texas.

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