Introduction

*Indian American Christianity in Motion*

“We were being shot down by the congregation, left and right. Then Sam started talking about the importance of being a true Christian, of having a personal relationship with Christ. As he was talking, you could see the steam rising in church.” George, a second-generation Indian American, was talking about a showdown that occurred in his Bethelville parish, in a suburb in the United States, in 1999. The parish belongs to the Eastern Reformed Mar Thoma denomination based in Kerala, south India, part of the ancient Saint Thomas Syrian Christian church that traces its origin to the legendary arrival of Apostle Thomas on the shores of Kerala in 52 C.E. The tension between members of the first and second generations was about the meaning of being a Christian: “Finally, one of the uncles [in Indian culture men and women of the parent’s generation are addressed as ‘uncle’ and ‘aunty’] in the congregation jumped up and shouted, flailing his arms vigorously to make his point, ‘How can you imply that we are not Christians? We are all Christians in this church. My father was a Christian, I am a Christian. I was baptized by the Thirumeni [bishop] himself. My son was born a Christian and will be a Christian all his life.’”

This confrontation epitomizes the differences between the models of Christianity embraced by first- and second-generation Indian Americans. Those who immigrated to the United States from Kerala have generally interpreted being Christian as the outcome of being born and raised in a Christian family, sacralized by infant baptism into the church community. Second-generation Mar Thoma Americans, on the other hand, have imbibed several of the ideas of American evangelicalism and have tended to view a Christian identity as the outcome of achieving a personal relationship with Christ, often beginning with a “born-again” experience.
There were several other fundamental differences in the way the immigrant and second generations understood what being Christian meant. Consequently, disputes and misunderstandings were common between the two generations in the church. These disputes have continued over the past fifteen years, but they have taken new forms as the second generation has grown older, and as a new wave of immigrants from India has become part of Mar Thoma American congregations.

This book examines how a new paradigm of ethnicity and religion is shaping contemporary immigrant religious institutions and the intergenerational transmission of religion. Drawing on multisited research both in India and the United States, including interviews and participant observation, it examines the pressures church members have faced to incorporate contemporary American evangelical worship styles into their practice, often at the expense of maintaining the ethnic character and support system of their religious community. The role of religion in the lives of contemporary immigrants and their children is very different from patterns established by earlier immigrant groups in the United States. Classic assimilation theory was based on the assumption of individualistic adaptation, whereby immigrants and their children were expected to shed their ethnic identities, adopt the behavior of white, upper-middle-class Protestants, and become Americans—although in the sphere of religion, they could maintain their ethnic traditions within American denominations. In contemporary society, in contrast, multiculturalism, spiritual seeking, and postdenominationalism have turned this paradigm on its head. The prevalence of multiculturalism as a social norm means that immigrants and their children find a place in American society by remaining ethnic and group-identified. Religion, on the other hand, has become de-ethnicized and individualized, particularly among Protestant groups, in a seeker-oriented society. In practice, becoming religiously “de-ethnicized” in a postdenominational society means shedding ethnic languages, theologies, and worship cultures, and adopting the language, theology, music, and worship practices of white, upper-middle-class evangelicals. Indeed, some younger immigrants and most of the second generation are gravitating toward American evangelical Christianity, helping to fuel the growing rise of evangelicalism both here and around the world.

The integration patterns of post–1965 U.S. immigrants and their descendants have thus become a mirror image of those of earlier Euro-
pean immigrants, with the religious and secular dimensions reversed. The children of European immigrants were expected to assimilate by becoming de-ethnicized in the secular and public sphere, but were able to retain their ethnic communities, language, and traditions in the sphere of religion. Members of the contemporary second generation are incorporated in U.S. society by maintaining their ethnic identities in secular contexts, but they tend to adopt a de-ethnicized, individualized, religious identity and practice. Since the native-born children of immigrants are the pivotal generation shaping the incorporation patterns of ethnic groups, their behavior has wide-ranging effects on ethnic religious institutions and the wider society. This book examines some of these effects by focusing on a case study of Mar Thoma Americans and their struggles and dilemmas in the process of establishing themselves and their church in the United States.

Specifically, this book looks at the shifts in the understandings of Mar Thoma members regarding their ethnic and Christian identity as a result of their U.S. migration and the coming of age of the American-born generation. In India, the church is based in Kerala, has its own Metropolitan (head of the church), and emphasizes its Indian identity. Until the arrival of European colonists in Kerala, the church maintained connections with the East Syrian church in Persia, and its liturgy was originally in Syriac, which explains why the church and its adherents are called “Syrian Christian.” Syrian Christians are a well-established and respected ancient minority group in Kerala that is able to maintain its societal position and distinct subcultural identity based on religious affiliation.

In the United States, Indian Christians constitute around 18 percent of the Indian American population (Pew Research Center 2012). Syrian Christians from Kerala constitute the largest group of Indian Christians in the United States, and among Syrian Christian denominations, the Mar Thoma church is considered the best organized and most active (Williams 1996, 136–137). In India, Christians are a minority within a nation that is largely Hindu. Yet upon arrival in the United States they become religiously part of the Christian majority. This transition plays into their emerging identities as Christian Indian Americans and influences their religiosity in specific ways. In the United States, most Mar Thoma members identify as Protestant. In the postdenominational society of
the United States, where Christianity is the majority religion, it becomes difficult for Syrian Christians to use religion as the locus of their ethnicity. They have to deal with the U.S. population’s lack of familiarity with their ancient Indian Christian community—but more important, they have trouble transmitting the distinct liturgical, ritual, and ecclesiastical practices of the traditional church to their children.

There is a lot of literature on how nondenominational evangelicalism and the rise of American megachurches are “remaking” American mainline churches and American religious traditions (Ellingson 2007; Miller 1997; Roof 1999; Sargeant 2000). But American evangelicalism has also had a profound impact on the “ethnic” churches of recent immigrants. In the Mar Thoma case, the widespread prevalence and dominance of American evangelicalism created an environment in which the traditional practices of the Mar Thoma church seemed alien to its American-born generation. At the same time, parents and church leaders alike were finding it difficult to explain and justify their birth-ascribed, communal model of Christianity in the face of the personally achieved, individualistic model of evangelical Christianity that their children were being exposed to in their schools and colleges. Second-generation Mar Thoma Americans were influenced by nondenominational American evangelicalism and often rejected the “ethnic,” denominational worship practices of the Mar Thoma. They argued that being a “closed” ethnic church was “not Christian.” But their attempts to introduce nonliturgical praise and worship services in English, open to individuals of all backgrounds, were resisted by members of the immigrant generation for whom the church functioned as an extended family and social community. Consequently, many second-generation Mar Thomites have left the Mar Thoma church for large nondenominational churches once they reached adulthood. Others have attended both Mar Thoma and evangelical church services. Yet others have stayed in the Mar Thoma church, but worked to transform church practices to be closer to the evangelical church model.

Evangelical Christianity in the United States is not monolithic. Second-generation (and some first-generation) American Mar Thomites have participated in a variety of evangelical institutions including campus groups, Bible study fellowships, and an array of evangelical churches. Television, Internet, and radio ministries, Internet websites, and books