

Mahakavi K. V. Simon

The Milton of the East

VARGHESE MATHAI



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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in the United States of America 2024

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Cover design: Eleanor Rose
Cover image: Noah releasing the dove. Detail from a mosaic in
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mattāyi, Vargis, 1953- author. | Saimaṅ, Ke. Vi., 1883–1944.
Vēdavihāraṃ. English.

Title: Mahakavi K.V. Simon : the Milton of the East / Varghese Mathai.

Description: New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. | Includes
bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The first English
study of poet K. V. Simon (1883–1944), with sample translations,
including of his 12,000-line epic Vedaviharam, and a critical
biography" – Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023009991 (print) | LCCN 2023009992 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781501388491 (hardback) | ISBN 9781501388538 (paperback) | ISBN
9781501388507 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501388514 (pdf) | ISBN
9781501388521 (ebook other)

Subjects: LCSH: Saimaṅ, Ke. Vi., 1883–1944–Criticism and interpretation.
| Saimaṅ, Ke. Vi., 1883–1944–Translations into English. | Malayalam
poetry–20th century–Translations into English.

Classification: LCC PL4718.9.S313337 Z795 2023 (print) | LCC
PL4718.9.S313337 (ebook) | DDC 894.8/121–dc23/eng/20230510

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023009991>
LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023009992>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-8849-1
ePDF: 978-1-5013-8851-4
eBook: 978-1-5013-8850-7

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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*Dedicated to
Raj & Ash
Two lights to whom much is lent*

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Foreword

Mahakavi K. V. Simon: Kerala's Reformer Laureate

A. J. Thomas

Epoch-making visionary poets, polemicists, apologists, and philosophers rise in certain cultural milieus at specific historical junctures. They potentially set in motion a restructuring process of existing belief systems, marking a clear departure from long-established, outdated, or ossified ones. The towering figure of John Milton is an example of this truth with little contest. At the height of his poetic and political career, Milton was the guiding light for the Puritans who wanted stricter discipline in life through the scriptures than what the English Protestants (members of the Church of England who had broken away from the Catholic Church under King Henry VIII)¹ were inclined to settle for.

The early Puritans had advocated Presbyterianism, and non-Episcopal congregations thrived as an expression of the spirit of nonconformity, and independence from an overarching structure. Milton idealized the individual's liberty. His political, social, and religious writings paved the way for the upholding of the ideals of individualism and liberalism which became the cornerstones of British, and gradually, Western culture.

Professor Varghese Mathai's book, *K. V. Simon: The Milton of the East*, introduces to the world another revolutionary poet-reformist who came up in Kerala's Christianity during the period between the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. He was a Mahakavi (translated as "the Great Poet") in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, the southernmost Indian state. Simon was

¹ To illuminate this historical context, allow me a little digression. The Head of the Church of England was the English Crown. From the reign of Elizabeth I who presided over the flowering of the arts and literature during the English Renaissance, her successor James I took up her enlightened policies that brought in the humanistic loosening up of society; the next one in line, Charles I, despite being more authoritarian, had pursued the loose-rein-on-social-life policy of his predecessors. The Puritans were highly critical of the moral and ethical decline in high society, including that of royalty and the courtiers. Even the commoners were no exception. The Puritans believed that the dynamics of the Reformation had been derailed in England under the royals. They grew in so much strength as to stage the Puritan Revolution, execute King Charles I, and set up a republic. Milton took their side after his initial neutral stand.

by all means a Miltonic figure, both in his poetic achievements and his reformist impact. Born in a land half the way around the globe from England, exactly 275 years after the birth of John Milton (1608), his English counterpart, the trajectory of Simon's life was also filled with struggles in nonconformity to the orthodoxy of the Syrian Christian denominations of Kerala.

When considering the revolutionary restructuring of belief systems, what comes to my mind first in the historical context of Indian spiritual traditions are movements such as Jainism and Buddhism in the *Śramaṇa* tradition that made a clean break from the existing Vedic religion of about two and a half millennia ago.² The *Śramaṇas* initiated a changeover from Vedic Sanskrit scriptures to vernaculars like the Prākṛits and Pāli. This fact is to be specially taken note of, to see how the reformatory action was carried out through the translation or writing of scriptures in people's tongues. Later, the Bhakti (devotional) movements of India—beginning with the Shaivite spiritual revival in Thamizhakam (the present-day state of Tamil Nadu forms a major part of it, with the adjoining Telugu-speaking regions included) between the seventh and ninth centuries—reinvented the ways in which one sought a relationship with the Self, bypassing the structured religion.³ At the same time, the Sufi movement, which infused spiritual content (through devotional songs and dance leading to trance) into the mostly ritualistic Islam of that period, swept across India. Both the Bhakti and Sufi movements were complementary in many aspects. These movements restructured and reformed the religious aggregations of each era, transcending the existing value systems and social mores.

² As would be commonly known, Vedic religion was predominantly ritualistic and in the exclusive control of the priestly Brahmins who were at the apex of the *chāturvarṇya*, or the Four Castes. They conducted *yāgās* and anointed kings, establishing their permanent sway over the ruling class, and, power-drunk, had eventually sunk to evil practices. A millennium later, as Buddhism and Jainism began to decline, the Brahminical religion, revived by Adi Shankaracharya, regained sway, and over the next few centuries, it became oppressive through its caste system and marginalization of women and socioeconomically oppressed sections, as evidenced in the *Manusmṛiti*.

³ This movement spread to the adjoining Kannada-speaking regions (which now include some of the Telugu-speaking regions as well), as manifested in the Vachana movement (writing of verses that cut through straight to the spirit) of the eleventh century. From there, the Bhakti movement traveled to the neighboring Marathi-speaking regions in Western India, with Jñaneswar and his sister Muktabai, Namdev, and Janabai in the thirteenth century; Chokkamela, in the fourteenth century; Kanhopatra in the fifteenth century; Eknath in the sixteenth century; Tukaram in the seventeenth century; and others keeping the trail ablaze. The Bhakti movement in the Vraj regions across the Gangetic plains of North India found expression in the mystic poet Sant Kabir, Sarala Dasa of Odisha, and Sant Ravi Das in the fifteenth century and the latter's disciple, the celebrated saint poetess Meerabai, a Rajput princess in the sixteenth century. There are many more saint-poets in this stream, such as Jayadeva of Odisha writing in Sanskrit in the twelfth century), Guru Nanak of Punjab and Sankara Dev of Assam in the fifteenth century, Ezhuthachchan and Poonthanam Namboodiri writing in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, in the sixteenth century.

The most important feature of the Bhakti and Sufi movements and the related religious renaissance was that the scriptures were translated into vernaculars, and in the process, contributed to the development of modern Indian languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Rajasthani, Punjabi, Odia, Assamese, Bengali, and Urdu. Amir Khusrau's devotional compositions were instrumental in developing Urdu, which was the main language of Indian Sufi literature. He mixed words and phrases of Persian, the grand language of the court and literature, and Arabic and Turkic (the languages which were strongly in use in the region), with the proto-Hindustani known as Dehlavi/Khari Boli, in creating Urdu, also known as Hindustani and Rekhta (written both in Devanagari and Nastaliq scripts). In other words, religious revolutions were set in motion through translation and writing of scriptures in common peoples' languages.

Dante Alighieri, who shaped the modern Italian language from the synthesis of Tuscan and other existing vernaculars in direct challenge to Latin—the language of Papacy, the state and of high literature of the time through his poetry—could be the first one to be reckoned in this line in the Western world. The sixteenth-century Protestants such as John Bale and John Foxe had termed Dante as a proto-Protestant because of his opposition to the Pope.

The popularization of the Bible, hitherto existing only in Latin and Greek, made available in German by Martin Luther's translation and followed by other European languages, sufficed to propel reformation in Western Christianity. Gutenberg's printing press ensured the mechanized production of the Bible in large numbers, which laypeople could now have access to without clerical mediation.

The translation of the Bible, however, did not happen in Kerala until the nineteenth century, when, as Professor Mathai points out, Claudius Buchanan (1766–1815), the author of *Asian Researches*, visited Malabar as a state guest twice during 1806–08 and urged the Patriarch of the Syrian Christians, Dionysius I, to have the *Estrangelo* (early Syriac) version of the whole Bible translated into Malayalam. The patriarch arranged the translation through his clergy, starting with the gospels printed at the Courier Press of Mumbai, followed by the translation of the Syriac–Malayalam Bible in England by 1823. Within another two decades, Benjamin Bailey and his Anglican colleagues in Travancore brought forth the historic translation of the whole Bible. Now, Malayalee Syrian Christians could read the Bible in their own language and get into its soul and see for themselves what the scriptures really said.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, Professor Mathai gives a rather detailed historical background of Kerala around two millennia ago. That was the time of the supposed arrival of St. Thomas the Apostle on the Malabar Coast (the ancient name of Kerala), the beginnings of the formation of the St. Thomas Christians, and the eventual development of the Syrian Christian community of this land. He sheds light on this community's standing among the predominantly upper caste Hindu society of the times, how they enjoyed exclusivity and privileges almost on par with the higher castes, how their ritual worship and outward ceremonies reflected their sharing of the elitist Hindu practices, and how all this had cast them in a tight cell, resistant to change and evolution.

Professor Mathai devotes the major portion of this chapter to a biographical narrative, tracing Simon's childhood, education, and the eventual development of his genius. A poetic prodigy who proved his mettle in versification at the tender age of seven to nine, Simon who grew up into a deeply erudite young man had captured the admiration of almost all the leading literary figures of his time, including the great scholar poet Mahakavi Ulloor S. Parameshwara Iyer, Sarasakavi Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, and a whole array of creative writers, scholars, and academicians.

Simon studied the scriptures in their source versions of Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin, in each of which he had gained proficiency by personal study. Being the autodidact that he was, Simon composed the grammars of these languages first in his own verse. Added to these was his reading of the Bible in the Malayalam translation, which aided him in leading the laity who also had by now begun the widespread practice of Bible reading, inspired by reformist leaders visiting from the neighboring Tamil Nadu in the preceding decades.

Christianity, which is believed to have taken roots in Kerala two millennia ago, had remained by and large a faith-based monolithic belief system hardly amenable to timely change, as already seen. Simon, who belonged to the Mar Thoma (The Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church) denomination in Kerala, proposed a scripture-based approach to faith rather than a tradition-based one. For example, he argued that baptism should be administered to a volunteering, fully-grown individual by immersion in a waterbody, like Jesus Christ did in the river Jordan during the baptism-drive of John the Baptist, and not to an infant who is not able to make a conscious choice to join the church through this ritual. Simon took a second baptism as an adult, through immersion. He was also convinced that there was no place for an ecclesiastical hierarchy, as was instituted in episcopal Christianity. Simon saw, like the European Reformers,

that a formal office of priesthood was not necessary in the church since it was a home of sacred equality. “All believers are priests of the Most High, Luther declared,” notes Mathai; therefore, rather than considering priesthood an inherited or elected office, it was to be understood as universalized (Chapter 1).

Simon met with opposition from the Mar Thoma Church establishment regarding his convictions and his act of undergoing voluntary adult baptism. For this departure from the Church’s traditional practice he was excommunicated in 1915 after a summary ecclesiastical trial. However, instead of stopping Simon in his tracks, this event only thrust Simon into a public career of Miltonic strengths. Native orthodoxy held the conviction that the Reformation in Europe was only a European matter with which Indians did not have to have any concern at all. Simon who knew what it was now chose to do for Kerala what Luther did for Germany, and even beyond. His affiliation with the Mar Thoma Church ceased with the aforesaid trial in 1915. Within the next three years, Simon founded a fully indigenous congregation called the “Viyojitha Sabha,” which I would translate as “The Dissenters’ Assembly.” This movement merged with the Brethren Assembly in 1929. Though comparatively still small in numbers as a denomination, Simon’s leadership turned it into a powerhouse of knowledge with its steady output of verse, prose, debate, oratory, and organized dissemination of historical and scriptural learning.

A born poet of high literary caliber, Simon established himself as a Mahakavi through his Mahākāvya titled *Vedaviharam* [A Sojourn through the Divine Scripture]. This title of honor is comparable to the “Poet Laureate” in the Western tradition, a close equivalent to the position of “Āsthāna Kavi” in the Sanskrit tradition. In Kerala, there are Mahakavis in all the prominent communities—Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. Other than Simon, the Mahakavis in the Christian communities are Kattakayam Cherian Mappilai, Pravithanam P. M. Devasia, Puthencavu Mathen Tharakan, Edayaranmula K. M. Varghese, and Mary John Thottam (Reverend Sister Mary Benigna the celebrated devotional poet), and a few lesser-known ones as well. All of them lived in the twentieth century. Kattakayam wrote *Sreeyeshu Vijayam Mahākāvya* [The Triumph of the Exalted Jesus]. Devasia wrote five Mahākāvya, of which *Israel Vamsham* [The Lineage of Israel] and *Rājākanmār* [Kings] are rated as his best. All but two of these Christian Mahakavis followed the dogmatic line of the Catholic Church, which the majority of the Syrian Christians of Kerala subscribe to. There was nothing revolutionary or reformative about the works of these poets.

Simon stood apart even among the Mahakavis. Technically he was in the classical Protestant stream through his membership in the Mar Thoma Church, an episcopal entity far removed from Catholicism and leaning more toward Anglicanism. The *Gorgias Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* describes the Mar Thoma Church as that section of “the non-Roman St. Thomas Christians, which has undertaken a degree of liturgical and doctrinal reform under the influence of Church of England missionaries in the nineteenth century.” The “agenda” of its reform was very much determined by the issues that had dominated the English Reformation in the sixteenth century. Simon’s revolt within this reformed Syrian Church corresponds to Milton’s joining the Puritan Movement, disillusioned by the Church of England’s policies that strayed from the spirit of reformation.

Simon’s forte was epic and lyric poetry and bhajans or hymns, which he set to classical music of the Carnatic tradition. His epic, *Vedaviharam* (1931) came out as a masterly work of 12,000 lines in fourteen different Dravidian meters, offering his own interpretation of the scripture, further promoting the cause of reformation within the Kerala Syrian Church. Both *Vedaviharam* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* have their source story in the book of Genesis. At the release of *Vedaviharam*, *The Guardian* (Calcutta) hailed Simon the poet as “India’s Veritable Milton.” Dr. K. Raghavan Pillai, a leading Malayalam literary critic of yesteryears evaluates *Vedaviharam* as a Malayalam classic embedded in immense learning. He places Simon’s poetic output in the tradition of the Bhakti poets of India, in general, and of Ezhuttachchan, in particular. He further analyzes the outward form of the epic and appraises the use of different meters, most of which were popular Dravidian ones (and wherever there was a Sanskrit meter used, it was one infused with Dravidian sentiments). Moreover, his selection of meters was very judicious because it was determined by the demand of the particular themes he was working on and in consonance with the content. Pillai concludes his essay making a thorough study of the inner structure of the epic—the way descriptive, narrative versification is used and how the various *Rasas* are deftly employed in the epic.⁴ Several other eminent critics, scholars, and academics of Malayalam, such as K. Ayyappa Panicker, Sukumar Azhikode, Koduppunna, Mathew Ulakamthara, M. Leelavathi, B. C. Balakrishnan, T. Bhaskaran, K. M.

⁴ “Vedavihaarathhile Rachanaathalangaal” (Dimensions of Composition in *Vedaviharam*), *Mahakavi K. V. Simon Janma Shathābdi Smaranika* (Souvenir of Mahakavi K. V. Simon Birth Centenary).

Tharakan, and a few others have made insightful comments on *Vedaviharam*. There are also acclamations heaped on *Vedaviharam* by the leading figures of Malayalam literature of the time, the most important among them being Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon, P. K. Narayana Pillai (Sahitya Panchanan), Punnassesri Nambi Neelakanta Sharma, Sarasakavi Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, Chitramezhuthu K. M. Varghese.

Simon's creative prose contributed to the polemical literature of Malayalam to a great measure. It appears in a wide array of essays, pamphlets, treatises, histories, philosophical disputations, scripture commentaries and apologetic works. He also ran a journal called *Malankara Viyojithan* [The Malankara "Separatist" or Dissenter, 1919–35], which drew the attention of objective critical minds of all faith streams of Kerala in the early part of the twentieth century. Although we have thirty volumes of Simon's prose writings available or accessible, hundreds more of his articles and lectures of huge public interest await rediscovery, which if attempted can potentially be successful. A seven-part series on Renaissance scholar Erasmus or a series of literary lectures delivered on his Madras Tour or at the University of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram would be quick examples of such.

In Chapter 3, through the translation samples of Simon's verse genres—lyric, ode, hymns, and excerpts from the epic *Vedaviharam*—Professor Mathai provides a glimpse into the oeuvre of this great poet. His translation is innovative and sensitive, making sensible coinages to correspond to specific Malayalam word-combinations. Let us consider a small assortment of examples: Simon's term "*manujasuthan*" meets a matching construct of "ManSon" in Mathai's rendition. It correctly recalls Jesus' own self-identification in Malayalam as "*Manushyaputhran*" or "Son of Man." Proper nouns of reverence like "*Po-ttie*" [Liege of life] and "*Sat-guru*" [the true Master], or Simon's profoundly theological Sanskritic kennings like "*Aadi veda nada*" [the sound of the primeval Vedic Syllable] appear as Christological synonyms that complement the meaning of the Word—become *ManSon*. Professor Mathai shows how retaining Simon's word sequences like "*vandan*" [laudation], "*chandan*" [the fragrant wood in presents of worship], *muni* [the revered one or Seer], *sani* [the destroyer of evil], *dwani* [the holy sound or echo], or *kani* [the fruit], in the place of their English equivalents produce greater elegance and radiate deeper allusive powers. In the rapid switches between languages, Professor Mathai valiantly keeps up with the beat-base of Dravidian meters.

In his overview of Simon's literary contributions in Chapter 4, the author begins with a comparison of Milton and Simon and their works *Paradise Lost* and *Vedaviharam*, respectively, with extensive passages from both works covering more than half the chapter. Further analysis of Simon's works and his mission shows the types and tropes he employed in his poetry, his versification of the Bible other than of the book of Genesis, his didactic and mystical poems, his occasional poems, the millennial songs and the pervasive dynamics of his music and metrics.

Professor Mathai sums up the life and work of Simon solidly, observing that he was a pioneer in all his contributions. Simon shaped for Kerala his own era of the native version of Europe's foregone Renaissance and Reformation. He came formidably equipped, like Milton, with every talent necessary in his calling as a revolutionary reformer, poet and prose writer, a polemicist and publisher, a scripture commentator and orator, a hymnodist and musician. If the Viyojithas or the Brethren had the practice of canonizing their apostles, we would be reading today of Simon as a doctor of the church. After all, he was a sage of letters with a massive following, a favorite peer to the likes of St. Augustine, St. Chrysostom, or St. Ambrose who addressed the whole world rather than a small eponymous village or town that took pride in him as its native son.

I heartily join the global readership that has the pleasure of hailing Mahakavi K. V. Simon, "the Milton of the East" into their midst.

Acknowledgments

“They are all good in themselves, and cannot fail to please but by the fault of the translator,” said William Cowper about his own translation of John Milton’s Latin poems of his college days. Cowper was no ordinary poet or translator. Within the first fifty-five years of the publication of the first volume of his verse, one hundred editions of Cowper’s poems appeared in England. He was the foremost of the generation of poets between Alexander Pope and William Wordsworth, says Poetry Foundation. That said, the kind of respect he showed for Milton’s verse applies in my case to Mahakavi K. V. Simon’s. Let me be the first to say that there is no pretense of any translator talent in which to take pride here. Nonetheless, this is the first known effort to bring an assortment of specimens from Simon verse through translation in some form of English, as far as I know. The flaws the reader may notice would not be Simon’s, but the translator’s.

As would be true of Milton, it is impossible to exaggerate Simon’s genius. His life was a massive movement of inspired acts in unison, producing historic outcomes. Like the teenager Blaise Pascal among the Parisian intellectuals was the early Simon among the literati of the Pampa Delta. In his autobiographical verse narrative “*Ente Grandhasala*,” Simon unwittingly seems to show that he let his childhood slip by, leaping into adulthood and the world of advanced letters. He mastered multiple languages like Milton or Herman Gundert and put them all to high practical use; he wrote a 12,000-line epic in metrical verse in record time of less than two years, in the midst of a heavy public life; he created and established a tasteful genre of native Christian hymnody, corresponding to Ezhuthachan’s *bhakti* verse in the Hindu culture and religion; not only did he compose inspired *bhajans* and hymns by the hundreds but also sang them as a gifted musician; his “puissant prose,” as Valson Thampu puts it, changed the thinking of his age; his debates trained the public to achieve intellectual independence as much as they enlightened them; the magazines he founded, co-founded, or contributed to, brought the “ample page of knowledge” within access to all; as a publisher and chief editor he was a Renaissance man of letters; there is no determined count of the scholars who lived in his home as his disciples or as seekers of help, but treated like sons; those “sons” in turn, taught an entire younger generation; his translations, both vocal and scripted, surpass and yet

elevate their originals. Simon did for Kerala what Wycliffe, Calvin, or Wesley did in Europe; when Kerala had no knowledge of Europe's Reformation, Simon's teaching showed them what it was. He challenged people to examine their faith through the critical study of the scriptures as modeled by his own organization of the Viojithas. As well-read as he was, he was also capable of delivering his knowledge with instant effectiveness.

Nonetheless, K. V. Simon's works still await greater scholarly labors than what present literature offers. The scholar and the lay person find equal hospitality in his writings. Interpretive studies and research on Simon remain a highly promising area for exploration. Simon is a goldmine for dozens of dissertations and critical books. What is commonly known of him today are only his epic, *Vedaviharam*, and a handful of songs, which comprise only a small portion of the corpus of his output. Though "hidden" by the limits of the language he mostly writes in, the polyglot Simon is richly poised to engage a global audience. Like the four lepers of Israel in 2 Kings 7 who found food and spoils in the deserted camp of the Syrian forces and reported the discovery to their starving compatriots, I stand compelled to direct my literary kindred to the epic gains from the Miltonic mind and career of K. V. Simon.

I sincerely appreciate Bloomsbury's warm response to my proposal for this book on Mahakavi K. V. Simon for a worldwide audience. It has been a pleasure to work with my commissioning editor Amy Martin and her assistant Hali Han every step of the way.

My good friend, poet and publisher Prabhu Guptara, had as much excitement with the idea of this book as I did. He has been a powerful resource with practical wisdom for me from start to finish. Prabhu tracked the progress of the manuscript making sure that I kept good pace with the timeline.

Author and educator Valson Thampu took strong interest in my work. He was quick as he was also kind enough to write an Introduction for the book. Professor Thampu knows Simon's native surroundings. I am honored to have his perceptive essay welcoming Simon readers worldwide.

Equally favored am I with the kindness of Dr. A. J. Thomas, the former chief editor of India's *Sahitya Akademi* journal, a leading scholar, poet and translator. May his support for my work be well justified, as it reaches a happy audience.

It was a joy to see the numerous names of Simon enthusiasts and lovers of Malayalam literature, especially in the Diasporic communities, welcoming this book. Leading that train was Mr. John Mathai Panikkamatt of Toronto, Canada, who had been longing to hold the very first available copy of this book. He

even offered me financial support, should I need it, for this project. Much to my grief, this venerable elder suddenly passed on, despite his excellent health and active life. I use this moment to pay my respects to him and to thank his family, gratefully acknowledging their investment in Simon's legacy. The names that follow are of Professor Donald R. Davis, Chair of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin; Professor Heiki Oberlin, Head of the Department of Indology, University of Tübingen; Professor Blesson Varghese, St. Andrews University, Scotland; Professor Stanley John Valayil of the Alliance Theological Seminary; Dr. James Kurichi of the Department of Malayalam at the University of Pennsylvania; and journalist–author Dr. Babu K. Verghese for their cordial offers of help whenever sought.

I acknowledge Ms. Tirza Habeeb, an outstanding Simon reader, for her service to his verse. Tirza came across the poetry of Simon four decades ago. A poet herself, she read the complete verse of Simon, more keenly the songs and hymns in his *Sangeetha Ratnavali*. Though possessing only extremely modest material means, Ms. Habeeb took it upon herself to find qualified musical talent to produce 250 of Simon's songs in five audio volumes, a sample set of which should be available on most media platforms. Broadcast journalist Koshy George Mylapra was co-producer and presenter of the project. Readers of this book will find Ms. Habeeb's audio collection a solid complement to the book. I thank Ms. Habeeb and Koshy George for their sacrificial labors of resource building in Simon studies.

I go on record as the grateful recipient of the round the clock support in all things I do, including the shaping of this book, from my wife, colleague, and consultant pro bono, Rani Mathai.

I hand this book over to the lovers of letters who would have the privilege of receiving Mahakavi Simon into houses of knowledge and faith all over the world.

Varghese Mathai
Judson University

Timeline

- Feb 7, 1883 K. V. Simon is born in Edayarammula, in the Pampa Delta of Kerala, India, as the youngest in a family of ten children.
- 1894 Simon's father dies at age fifty-seven.
- 1895 Attends the globally traveling revivalist Tamil David's evangelistic meetings and elects to follow Christ; Simon's older brother and revered "guru" K. V. Cherian also attends the meetings with much interest.
K. V. Thomas, a brother employed, and engaged in English studies, dies of an abdominal illness.
- 1896 Simon completes formal schooling as a twelve-year old, earns a teaching license at the age of thirteen and starts teaching at the Mar Thoma School, under K. V. Cherian, the school's headmaster.
- 1898–99 Simon trains in music under D. James, a Tamil maestro; the Brethren mission commences its work in Central Travancore.
- 1900 K. V. Cherian dies of a sudden, undiagnosed internal ailment. After a period of intense grieving, a thoroughly shaken Simon steps forward to fill the position that his venerable brother left vacant, as the new headmaster; later in the year Simon marries Pantholil Rahelamma.
- 1902 Takes "Believer's Baptism" under the hand of lay preacher Varkey Upadeshi; the Mar Thoma Bishop Titus I, who controls the denomination's schools, dismisses Simon from employment. Nonetheless, the bishop hires him back with the help of mediators within a few weeks because no one wanted to assume Simon's place.
- 1905–10 Simon opens *Sahitya Darshini* [The Literary Forum]; a free academy of lay scholars of all faiths, its active membership goes over 100.
- 1907 Polemical writings and debates between Simon and *Sabha Tharaka* editor K. N. Daniel of the Mar Thoma Church run for a decade hence.

- 1913 Thalappil Narayana Pillai, a disciple of Simon and a leading member of his Sahitya Darshini, dies of a sudden illness. Deeply saddened, Simon writes a hundred-stanza elegy titled *Nishakalam* [The Spell of the Night].
- 1915 Rev. Iype Thoma Koor, the Vicar General of the Mar Thoma Church puts Simon on what turns out to be an aborted trial. The resulting “Circular #83” of Metropolitan Titus II excommunicates Simon from the Mar Thoma Church.
- 1916 Revives P. E. Mammen’s *Suvisesha Kodi* [The Gospel Banner] with a new name, *Suvisesha Deepika* [The Gospel Beacon], Simon himself contributing the majority of its future articles.
- 1918 Simon launches the *Viyojitha* [Separatist or Nonconformist] movement. Resigns from school employment.
- 1919 Simon starts the *Malankara Viyojithan*, the official magazine of the Viyojitha movement. The publication runs till 1935.
- First World War ends.
- 1921 Volbrecht Nagel, a German missionary and co-worker of Simon who joined the Brethren in Kerala, mastered the Malayalam language, and wrote 120 popular hymns in the language, dies of a stroke. Nagel’s wife Harriet Nagel carries on Nagel’s work in Northern Kerala.
- 1925 *Sangeetha Ratnavali* (first edition), a collection of the first two hundred of Simon’s songs and hymns, is published. Other collections and editions of his verse follow, over the years.
- 1926 Simon debates P. Krishnan Nambiathiri in multiple towns around Aranmula which result in the latter’s withdrawal from the campaign against Christians. The transcript of a select set of these debates is published under the title *Satyaprakashini* [The Illuminator].
- 1927 Daughter Chinnamma (Simon’s only child) is born.
- 1929 The Viyojitha congregations merge with the Brethren assemblies.
- 1930 Writes the 12,000-line *Vedaviharam* in one year. Poet Ulloor S. Parameswar Iyer invites its presentation at the annual *Sahitya Parishad* [Literary Conference]. Simon reads chapter 19 of the poem at the urging of I. C. Chacko. The work is placed first among the presented entries.

- 1931 *Vedaviharam* is published. The Pan Denominational Christian community of Kozhenchery East presents him with a citation. The Plenary Conference of the Christava Samiti awards Simon a celebratory gold medal.
- Simon's close friend and mentor Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker dies of smallpox. Simon had visited Mooloor ignoring the deadly risk of this much feared pandemic of that period. He also presided over the ensuing memorial gathering.
- 1932 Simon delivers a two-hour public lecture on religion and literature at Kottayam. The audience included K. C. Mammen Mappilai, newspaper owner and great literary patron.
- 1933 Travels to Madras to deliver a series of literary addresses at Madras Christian College, Women's Christian College, Memorial Hall, Wesley College, and Broadway Hall. Additional literary gatherings and poetry readings occur at Keralaya where Simon is the guest of philosopher Nataraja Guru of the Advaita Vedantic school and the founder of Sri Narayana Gurukula. Simon also visits the tomb of Apostle St. Thomas who was martyred in this city in the first century. *Vedaviharam* enters the Travancore school curriculum.
- 1934 *Nalla Samaryan* [The Good Samaritan], a canto, is published; delivers a series of literary talks in Trivandrum.
- 1935 Publishes *The History of Christian Churches*.
- Nov 12, 1936 The Maharajah of Travancore issues the Temple Entry Proclamation which abolishes the caste restriction that had traditionally prohibited the lower caste Hindus from entering the temple grounds, even to the roads leading to the temples.
- 1937 Simon speaks opposing salaried ministerial work. Many of his co-workers are unhappy and part ways with him.
- 1939 *The History of Brethren Assemblies* is published.
- 1941 Simon's only daughter Chinnamma is married to Kochumuriyil Mathew George of Simon's own town.
- 1942 Simon's faithful associates organize their own annual conference in Arattupuzha, which runs until the year of Simon's passing.

- 1943 Bishops Abraham Mar Thoma and Yuhanon Mar Timotheus, both of the Mar Thoma Church that excommunicated him, visit Simon during his last days. Simon preaches his final sermon at the Arattupuzha Convention.
- 1944 Simon dies on February 20, the closing day of the Arattupuzha Convention. The Mar Thoma Church has been continually requesting Simon's family to accept their parish cemetery as Simon's final resting place. Simon had instructed his wife and daughter to bury him only at the designated site adjacent to his home, and it was so done.
- 1947 India secures independence from Britain. Native rajahs [kings] surrender their power to the Indian union of states. Simon lived his entire life in colonial India.
- 1952 T. A. Kurien publishes Simon's biography, first edition.
- 1980 Simon's wife Rahelamma dies.
- 1983 The State of Kerala celebrates the centenary of Simon. The organizing committee publishes the *Janma Satabdi Smaranika [The Centenary Essays on Simon]*.
- 2018 June 23, Chinnamma, Simon's daughter, dies at 92 years of age.
- 2020 As of this date, the Brethren movement that Simon led has 600 congregations in Kerala and 2,200 assemblies nationwide in India, and a hundred more abroad. Organizations like the Indian Pentecostal Church with thousands of congregations (10,000 congregations) have also been demonstrably impacted by Mahakavi Simon.

Introduction

Mahakavi K. V. Simon: A Prophetic Legacy

Reverend Valson Thampu

Introductory articles can be of two kinds. The first kind seeks to motivate the reader to engage with the work in question with informed involvement. The second seeks to incentivize the reader vis-à-vis what the work points to beyond itself. Books too are of two kinds. Those that “passivate” as against those that “activate” their readers. Reading books of the latter kind does not end when the reader reaches their last pages. They impel readers to stay engaged by taking off from the springboards they are. Varghese Mathai’s *K. V. Simon: The Milton of the East* belongs to that category. To me, such works make more rewarding reads.

What I propose to say here is envisaged accordingly. Ideally it should be read after, not before, the main text, paradoxical as this might sound. Despite the painstaking scholarship and protracted labor that the author has invested in this work, he effaces himself from it. It is rarely that the reader comes across a work of scholarship from which the author is so comprehensively absent as in this instance. So, knowledge does not have to “puff up,” after all. The proof that the author carries his scholarship “self-denyingly” is that he trusts, indeed expects, his readers to take off from where he leaves, and to undertake their own investigations. Mathai rediscovers Simon, so that the readers may discover him after their own fashion. He trusts that others may want to and, further, that they can. This work is, it seems, envisaged as a Simon-revival catalyst.

The author’s vignette of Simon reminds us of poet M. P. Appan’s eulogy of this Christian literary genius of Kerala. The voice that resounded around the Pamba, says Appan’s poem, crosses the oceans, even as we, here, continue to enjoy the nectar of its devotion. Appan attributes the greatness of Simon’s poetic achievements to his rootedness in the spiritual–philosophical richness of *Arsha Bharat*, or India. He praises the *Vedaviharam* for its consummate polyphony of

rasas (emotional states). To him, Simon would have merited literary immortality even if he had written only this epic poem, and nothing else. Mathai has rendered a stellar service to Kerala Christianity by offering the first comprehensive account of the life and works of one of its leading lights.

Mathai introduces the reader to the manifold expressions of Simon's genius: scholar, polyglot, preacher, pamphleteer, debater, poet, and so on. I am richer for reading this well-conceived, pioneering work. Till I did so, Mahakavi Simon was, for me, a vague presence in the oeuvre of Kerala Christianity. Through this work, Simon has become a present help for me, especially in understanding the larger reaches of my own calling as a follower of Jesus Christ at the present time.

Chapter 3 of this work deserves a special mention. It affords the reader an ensemble of Simon's works. The author offers us the Malayalam texts together with their English translations. The selections admittedly represent a critically limited range in comparison to Simon's vast and varied output, but they suffice to grant the global reader a taste of the spiritual-literary banquet that reading Simon could be. As one acquainted, somewhat, with the thorny path of translation, it is with trepidation that I read Mathai's renderings. It is a daunting task to translate poetry. Translating Simon compounds this inherent difficulty because of the Sanskritized and technically sophisticated character of his poems. The task becomes even more problematic when it is fitted into the straitjacket of the meter-and-rhyme schemata as contrasted to the easy-flowing fluidity of the blank verse. This problem would have been acute, had the author not provided the Malayalam texts in close proximity for ready reference and comparison. As regards the Diasporic reader, the order of difficulties could be reversed. The barriers of obscurity that occur in Simon's Sanskrit-heavy Malayalam in the Simon texts are thoughtfully foreseen in their translations by the author.

In relation to Simon's spiritual lyrics, however, it needs to be emphasized that lacunae remain that no translator can make up for. These intractable difficulties issue from the fact that lyrics are meant to be sung. The music of the original texts cannot be transported to *readers* in the target language. Reading can never be the same as listening when it comes to lyrics set to music. To the Malayalee reader, the Simon lyrics assume a life and vitality of their own when sung. It is apt to be missed when only read. The difference could be analogous to reading a play and seeing it performed.

There is a further, and even more complicated, issue. That issue pertains to translating the "indigenization" or "acculturation" markers that Simon allows into his more literary poems, *Veda Viharam* being the obvious example. Already

Simon is “translating” the Judaeo-Christian material into the warp and woof of the Malayalee-Hindu linguistic, literary, and philosophical apparatus. A language is the repository of a people’s experiences and aspirations accumulated over the millennia. Literary Malayalam, as against *padre* Malayalam, is laden with Hinduisms, so to speak. How is this translated material to be translated, this time by Mathai, into English without losing the original sense and flavor, sparing the reader the strain that this aggravation of distance from the original entails? The author tries to overcome this formidable difficulty by retaining several of the key registers of the original text and offering, additionally, adequate footnotes. Perhaps that is as far as an author–translator could go.

A further issue emanates from this, which needs to be noted if only for the reason that it is taken for granted, which it should not be. Scholar and historian of Malayalam literature Sooranttu Kunjanpillai hailed Simon as a shining light of religio-cultural amalgamation. He likens Simon’s *Veda Viharam* to Ezhuthachan’s epic, the *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu*. He alludes, besides, to the skepticism that prevailed in Simon’s days about whether Christian poets could write epics, even though a Christian epic—*Sreeyeshu Vijayam* by Kattakayam Cherian Mappilai—was already extant. To Kunjanpillai, Simon’s characteristic strength comprised his being an ardent Christian and his felicitous at-home-ness in the linguistic, literary, cultural, and spiritual–philosophical heritage of Kerala. Kerala Christians, on their part, entertained the prejudice that it was impermissible to Christians to associate themselves with the Hindu cultural and literary heritage.

That prejudice survives to this day and it works to the impoverishment of Kerala Christians. It has bred the reciprocal prejudice that Christians are culturally passé and intellectually poor. This makes Christians feel uneasy, in sophisticated contexts, in upholding their religious identity in public. The last instances I can think of Christians who had wider appeals were Metropolitan Paulo Mar Gregorio (1924–97) of the Orthodox Church and Metropolitan Philipose Mar Chrysostom (1918–2021) of the Mar Thoma Church: the first for his erudition and philosophical genius, and the second, for his genial spirit and unmatched sense of humor. But none comparable to K. V. Simon has been seen on the landscape of Kerala Christianity in the last eight decades.

The issue that Simon adumbrates in his works, rather than pose rhetorically, will be understood better if we consider the notion entertained by many a Kerala Christian that Christianity is a Western religion. As sociologists of religion like Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber maintain, Christianity poised itself so completely in the Western culture that it is impossible now to understand it in isolation from

that process. If it was legitimate for the Asiatic biblical faith to be one with the European culture, why should the same be anathema vis-à-vis a religio-literary context of the Asiatic pedigree? Simon was, hence, not apologetic about being in an osmotic relationship—*aadan-pradhan*, or give-and-take—with the Kerala cultural matrix. It comes to us as no surprise that Simon is the only Christian evangelist-lyricist who is celebrated in Malayalam literature with a poem in his honor. Also, Simon's merits as a man of letters are better acknowledged by Hindu scholars.

This brings me to Simon's special significance for Kerala Christians in Diaspora. Mathai's painstaking, mnemonic sacrament of gratitude to Simon can cater to their need for spiritual renewal. Non-Malayalee readers, though, need to exercise greater degrees of perseverance in accessing the spirit of this work for the reason that they face the added burden of coping with the linguistic and cultural markers that cannot be excluded from a work of this kind. I have no doubt at all that, general and global readers who are willing to "walk this extra mile" with the author will benefit much from this book.

At the heart of all that Simon did was his fervent faith and his passionate sense of mission. He did not write an epic to carve out a niche for himself in the literary pantheon of Kerala. Nor did he write puissant and persuasive prose to leave his signature on Malayalam prose. Or, compose poems and lyrics to showcase his musical talent and poetic genius. He did these, and much else besides, as integral to his spiritual calling. He was, quintessentially, a disciple of Jesus Christ. To him, the lamp of his faith life had to shine on the lampstand of wider belonging; giving, as Jesus said, light to all in his homeland and beyond (Mt. 5:1-16).

That brings us to Simon the poet, whom our author likens, not without justice, to John Milton. Poetry is the mode in which the light of a language shines purest and brightest. Poets know language as light. That light is also the measure of their "authority." The authority of Jesus, keenly felt by all around him, was the authority of light, though in popular perception it might have been in his mighty deeds. Perhaps the greatest service that K. V. Simon has rendered to the Kerala Christian community is that he endeavored, as best he could, to reflect the light of Jesus to the soul of Kerala during a significant phase of its evolution.

The author acquaints us with that context, the details of which need not be duplicated here. Suffice it to say that Simon lived at a time of literary, philosophical, and spiritual vibrancy. I need to add little to what Mathai provides except, perhaps, to note that Simon breathed a spiritual ambiance shared by Sree