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European and Indian Discoveries, Definitions and Portrayals of Indic Religions:
A Case Study of 18th century

by Daniel Jeyaraj

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Clarifying basic concepts

Indic religions originated and developed in the regions, cultures, histories, and selective memories of India. Modern umbrella terms such as “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” conceal the vast diversities of these Indic religions. They hesitate to recognize the primal religious traditions of India and religions such as Sikhism as full-fledged Indic religions. The phrase ‘Indic religions’ does not apply to those Indian religions such as Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and others that are at home in India. This essay explores how early German Lutheran Pietist missionaries engaged with the traditions of Indic and Indian religions within the boundaries of the Danish colony of Tranquebar (1620–1845) on the Coast of Coromandel in southeastern India. These missionaries and the Tamil entertained different notions of what constituted an ideal religion and why those disagreed with them were false. Each group asserted that their beliefs, practices, experiences, and institutions were alone right and normative.

The religious notions of the German Lutheran Pietist missionaries had their roots in the cultures, thoughts, and institutions of the ancient Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Germanic peoples. For example, the Aramaic word *dah* (Daniel 6:6) closely reflects the meaning of the noun religion. It refers to an organized, routine way of believing and doing things. Another Hebrew way of referring to religion is the phrase “the fear of the Lord”. It stands for all aspects of life that express faith.¹ The Greek notion for religion *thriskeia* (θρησκεία), on the other hand, highlights more the trembling awe for the divine and respectful cultic observance than politics, economics, governance, military enterprise, and international relations. It inherently expresses the gap between the sacred and the profane in everyday life of the Greeks. This word occurs four times in the New Testament² and expresses not only ceremonial worship of a deity and piety, but also charitable deeds.

Apostle Paul, who was a second generation diasporic Jew, knew the religious traditions of the Hebrew and the Greek. He understood Christ-centered salvation as a rescue from the rule of darkness to the “Kingdom of the Son” (Col. 1:13) or from darkness to light (Eph. 5:7–14). He admonished his readers to follow God’s teachings and not to be conformed to the allures of the

¹ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell: *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, New York: Macmillan, 1963, p. 290.

² Acts 26:5: “I [Paul] have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion [*thriskeia*] and lived as a Pharisee.” Col. 2:18: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship [*thriskeia*] of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.” James 1:26–27: “If any think they are religious [*threskos*], and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion [*threskeia*] is worthless. Religion [*threskeia*] that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

material world. His emphasis on the spiritual aspects accentuated the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Jerome, however, translated the word *thriskeia* as *religionis* (Acts 26:5), *religione* (Col. 2:18), and *religio* (James 1:26–27).³ All European languages borrowed these Latin words, inserted their own nuances into them and adapted them to their socio-political situations. Hence, the word *religion* implies *re*-reading sacred texts, *re*-turning to a deity and through this deity to its adherents⁴, and even more complex understandings. No single definition can adequately capture its meanings and implications fully.⁵

The Jesuits, Dutch *Predikants* ('preachers'), English chaplains, and German Lutheran Pietists, who went to India from 15 to 18th centuries, knew the sacred and profane role of religion, i.e., their respective version of Christianity, in shaping their religious experiences, institutions, and ideologies. In their estimation there were only four religions: Christians, Jews, and Muslims were monotheistic. They also had their written scriptures. The fourth group constituted the heathens, i.e., those who lived outside of the towns and who had no role in public decision making. The images on the title page of Dimmock's book illustrate this preconception graphically:⁶ a Christian kneels on a wooden cross, looks towards an open heaven, and worships

³ Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 210.

⁴ Carlson, John D.: "Religion and Violence: Coming to Terms with Terms," *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy, West Sussex, John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2011, pp. 7–22:8: "Debates over the definition of religion go back to early antiquity. Cicero linked religion to reading (*legere*). The term *relegere* entailed either rereading or reading carefully or treating thoughtfully "all things pertaining to the gods." Lactantius and other Christians who disputed this etymology instead invoked *religare*, meaning to bind together (i.e., as a ligament binds or connects). Augustine, too, adopted this account, having flirted with the idea that religion involved "recovering" (*religere*). But in all these cases, the common 're-' prefix underscores the divine reference point, whether *recovering* God, binding oneself *back* to God, rebinding oneself to others through deities, or reading *again* matters involving the divine."

⁵ Ninian Smart (1927–2001) has grouped a religion around seven dimensions and enables us to see its complexity. See Smart, Ninian: *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley/CA: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 11–22: 1. Practical and Ritual Dimension to worship a deity regularly and to pray formally; 2. Experiential and Emotional Dimension to participate in rites (e.g., worship & prayer); 3. Narrative or Mythic Dimension to keep alive the memories of their founders; 4. Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension to teach their beliefs systematically; 5. Ethical Dimension to lead a morally acceptable lifestyle; 6. Social and Institutional Dimension to involve personal, interpersonal, and institutional relationships, structures, and organizations and 7. Material Dimensions using pieces of art, icons, buildings, gardens, instruments to promote one's religion.

⁶ Dimmock, Matthew and Andrew Hadfield (eds.): *The Religions of the Book: Christian Perceptions, 1400 – 1660*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, Cover Page. This cover page reproduces the title page of the following book: *True Religion Explained and defended against [the] Archenemies thereof in these times, In Six Bookes, Published by Authority for the common good*, London: Printed for Ri. Royston in Ivie Lane, 1632.

the true God (Matt 6:24). A Jew kneels before the tablets with Ten Commandments, closes his eyes and does not see God (Isa 29:10). A Turk carries a sword, wears a turban and a European coat, proclaims messianic liberation and misleads many (Matt 24:5 & 24). The heathen man resembles a Native American, who bears an oar and gives his wealth to the God of Justice (Psalm 72:11).

Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1683–1719), the first German Lutheran missionary to the Tamil, shared his worldview. One of his unpublished Tamil manuscripts, written on palm leaves, deals the triumph of his Lutheran Pietism over Judaism, Islam, and heathenism.⁷ This European worldview endured for a long time. William Carey (1761 – 1834), the first English Baptist missionary to Kolkata in 1792, also believed in the existence of these four religions. His famous writing entitled *Enquiry* divides the human beings into Christians, Jews, Muslims and Pagans.⁸ It states that 420 million of the 731 million people of the world were heathen and lived in spiritual “darkness” (p. 62), who should become the followers of Jesus Christ and enter into the life of light.

As these European missionaries interacted with the adherents of Indic religions and observed their socio-religious customs, they first used their European preconceptions as norms and filters. They noticed how most Indians practiced *dharma* as their religion⁹ and lived within their socio-political systems of *varṇa* (‘color, social category, class’) and *jāti* (endogamous ‘birth group,’ ‘caste’). Other Tamil people understood religion either as *camayam* (i.e., an established religious system) or *matam* (i.e., an institutionalized system of beliefs and practices).¹⁰ They know how their poets derided those who did not belong to their own religion as *pittar* (‘people of deranged minds’), *vaṅcakar* (‘deceivers’), *acaṭar* (‘fools, idiots’), *avalār* (‘useless people’),

⁷ In the Roman Empire, the Latin word *paganus* originally meant a person who lived in a rural place, refused to embrace Christianity and continued to worship ancestral deities.

⁸ Carey, William: *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, Leicester, Ann Ireland, 1792, p. 38.

⁹ Other notions of religion such as *sampradāya* (‘tradition, established beliefs, teachings’ of a particular group) or *sādhana* (i.e., individual or collective accomplishments) were not common.

¹⁰ Whenever people misunderstand and abuse *matam*, they resemble an elephant in rut. The Tamil word *muṛai* prescribes the proper way of life, in which a person’s *kaṭan* (‘obligatory duties’) and *valipāṭu* (‘worshiping a deity, following the rules of one’s *varṇa* and *jāti*) play a decisive role.

pēyṭṭanmaiyaṛ ('devilish people') and *naṇṛiyarṛōṛ* ('ungrateful people').¹¹ Other Tamil people viewed the outsiders as *puṛaccamayattār* ('religious outsiders')¹² and *aññāṇika!* ('spiritually ignorant people').¹³ They treated Europeans, who lived along the seacoast or in capital cities, as *milēccar* ('foreigners, non-Indians) and *paraṅki* ('Franks, violent Crusaders'). Thus, first the religious preconceptions of the European missionaries and the worldviews of the Tamil opposed each other. The more they learned to get along, the better they understood their religious beliefs and practices.

Clarifying basic contexts

European perceptions of Indic religions in 19th century changed a great deal. By 1858, the English established their colonial rule firmly and concentrated on drawing revenues from Indians. In order to raise more revenues, settle disputes on marriage and inheritance, to govern with the help of the local elites they needed deeper religious knowledge. Their representatives like Nathanael Halhead, William Jones, and Charles Wilkins studied and praised Sanskrit Hinduism.¹⁴ Their study re-established the old Greco-Persian word "Hindu" to such an extent that towards the end of 19th century, most Indians preferred to call themselves Hindus.

The second major group of Europeans who studied Indic religions consisted of Christian missionaries.¹⁵ They were not colonial administrators, who in cooperation with like-minded Indian elites were bent on exploiting Indian mind and natural wealth for the benefit of their shareholders in Europe. Neither were the missionaries (impartial) socio-religious ethnographers,

¹¹ 352nd poem of *Tiruppukal* by Aruṅakirinātar: "aṛivilāp pitta ruṅṛa ṇaṭitoḷāk keṭṭa vañcar, acaṭarpēyk kattar naṇṛi yaṛiyāta avalar". Likewise, the author of *Civavākkīyam* ('Civan's saying') in his poems 24, 107, 135, 248, 306, 401, 412 and 426 denounces image worshippers as *pittars*.

¹² The insiders of a particular religion considered the people of other religions as followers of a *puṛaccamayam* ('outside religion'). Winslow, Miron: *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary of High and Low Tamil*, Madras: P.R. Hunt, 1862, pp. 404 and 801: accordingly, the Śaivites considered six heterodox religions as *puṛaccamayam*, namely 1) *ulakāyatam* (atheism, materialism), 2. *puttam* ('Buddhism'), 3. *camaṇam* ('Jainism'), 4. *mīmāñcai* (Brahmā as the soul of the universe, as opposed to either Śiva or Viṣṇu), 5. *pāñcārattiram* (i.e., that which Viṣṇu taught during five nights) and 6. *pāṭṭācāriyam* (i.e., that which Bhattacharya taught).

¹³ *Tamil Lexicon*, Madras: University of Madras, 1924 – 1936, pp. 28 and 2805.

¹⁴ Marshall, P.J.: *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

¹⁵ For an earlier study of this theme see Gensichen, Hans-Werner: "Der Beitrag christlicher Missionare zur Erforschung des Hinduismus," *Der Missionar als Forscher: Beiträge christlicher Missionare zur Erforschung fremder Kulturen und Religionen*, ed. Johannes Triebel, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1988, pp. 70–86.

who as members of European academic or research institutions, reported their findings to interested European intellectual readers. Instead, the missionaries were mostly practicing and professing European Christians. They belonged to their local church congregations. Mission agencies deputed them for the express purpose of persuading Indians to critically consider their form of Christianity as an alternative means of making temporal and eternal meanings and organizing their life around these meanings. After their arrival in India, the missionaries learned Indian languages, lived and worked mostly among Indians, whom the adherents of dominant religions had systematically marginalized. These Indians appreciated the distinctiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ, weighed the consequences of following him, and consciously chose to become his followers. They also observed the lifestyle of the missionaries and imitated only those aspects of this lifestyle that suited them best. Thus, they reoriented their ways of thinking, learning, working, and living. In the course of time, they discovered, what it meant to be fully human. Their former oppressors, usually landlords, money lenders, political rulers, and religious fanatics, could not exploit them anymore. Hence, they accused the missionaries of destroying age-old cultures and social habits and misleading helpless and immature Indians, often against their will. In reality, the religious conversion entailed economic and political consequences. As the new Christians willingly accepted the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they became aware of their privileges, demanded their rights, and sought to fulfill their obligations. Gradually, they shaped their own destinies. Their regained dignity helped them to function as better citizens than they were before. These principles were evident in the life of the earliest members of *Jerusalem* (since 1707), the Tamil Lutheran congregation in the Danish Colony of Tranquebar (1620–1845), and other Lutheran congregations in Cudalore (1717), Chennai (1726), Tanjore (1728), Kolkata (1758), Tiruccirappalli (1762), Palayamkottai (1785), and the like. Most of these new Indian Lutherans turned away from the conditions of socio-religious and economic life, which the Europeans generally labeled as ‘heathenism’.

Religious heathenism: German perspectives

Ziegenbalg’s attitude and perception of heathenism changed to the extent of his discovery of its complexity. His job description,¹⁶ given to him by the King of Denmark in

¹⁶ Leipzig Mission Material on Tranquebar in the Archives of the Francke Foundation, Halle (Saale), Germany, Box 11, the order of King Friedrich IV dated 22 Oct 1708. It is a copy of the instruction that Ziegenbalg had received earlier. The third instruction of the job description reads as follows: “It is of great help if the missionary would find out the eternal knowledge of God that is still found naturally among the people, and lead them from that standpoint to the right knowledge of God, which God has revealed in his Word. It is left to the discretion of the missionary to find out the residual knowledge and use it appropriately, whenever it is necessary. However, the missionary should adhere to the Word of God believing firmly that God would not allow the power of his Word be without blessing among the naturally inclined [literally: wild] people.”

November 1705, required him to look for the residual presence God's image among the Tamil people, inappropriately termed as heathens, and then to persuade them to embrace Lutheranism.¹⁷ It reflected the popular categories, by which readers in early 18th century Germany perceived the religions of non-European peoples. The word *Heidentum* ('heathenism, paganism') referred to the living conditions of the people, who had refused to become Christians and to belong to a church.¹⁸ As a child of his time, Ziegenbalg too remained captive to these popular notions for a brief time. An imaginative dialogue, which he composed in 1709, reflects his preconception. A guru ('teacher') and his disciple discuss the merits and demerits of (nominal) Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and heathenism.¹⁹ Strangely, this dialogue names each religion a *cāti* (Skt. jāti, an endogamous birth group). Ziegenbalg's Tamil readers would have amused over this incorrect word for religion. The guru asks his disciple to accept the *Cattiyavētam* ('the true Veda,' i.e., the Christian Bible'). Ziegenbalg's another major work, namely the *Malabarisches Heydentum* ('Malabarian Heathenism' = South Indian Society, 1711),²⁰ carried this idea forward.

¹⁷ Leipzig Mission Material on Tranquebar in the Archives of the Francke Foundation, Halle (Saale), Germany, Box 11, the order of King Friedrich IV dated 22 Oct 1708. It is a copy of the instruction that Ziegenbalg had received earlier. Its 4th instruction reads as follows: "Soll er nichts {anders}, denn nur die heilige Lehre wie Sie in dem Wort Gottes verfaßet und in den symbolischen Büchern dieser Länder nach den Augspurgischen Confession wiederhohlet, daselbst in Ostindien predigen und sonsten nichts vortragen. Und wie der Herr Jesus selbst sein Lehr-Amt mit der Predigt von der Busse und Bekehrung angefangenen und seinen Discipulen befohlen zu predigen von der Busse und Vergebung der Sünden, so hat er sich gleichsam heirnach zu verhalten." August Hermann Francke, who helped Ziegenbalg spiritually and financially, advised him to teach nothing but Lutheranism. Leipzig Mission Material on Tranquebar in the Archives of the Francke Foundation, Halle (Saale), Germany, Box 1, August Hermann Francke's letter to the missionaries in Tranquebar dated 1 Dec 1718, page 2, point 4: "Glaubet nicht an die Wunderwerke von Xavier. Aber achteten Sie darauf: "Daß Sie desto mehr Fleiß anwenden, den Christlichen Glauben in aller Apostolischer Lauterkeit den Indianern zu verkündigen, und davon so viele nachdrückliche Zeugnisse, als immer möglich, auch im öffentlichen Druck zu hinterlaßen, damit dermaleins nicht auch könne gezweifelt werden, ob Sie den Christlichen Glauben den Indianern recht verkündigt haben, wie Francisus de Vitoria disfalls der Xaverii Arbeit in Zweifel gezogen."

¹⁸ *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, Vol. 10, Columns 807–808: "HEIDENTUM: *zustand, art, leben eines heiden. neuere definieren den begriff*: heidentum (paganismus) ist der wörterklärung nach der religiöse aberglaube des volkes in wäldern (haiden) d. h. einer menge, deren religionsglaube noch ohne alle kirchliche verfassung ist."

¹⁹ Archives of the Francke Foundations in Halle (Saale), Germany, Palm Leaf Manuscript in Tamil – hence forth AFSt/P TAM) – 37, Leaves 184 v – 187v. Its title reads in its modern form as follows: *inta pūlōkattilē uṇṭāṇa nāṅku piratāṇa cātiyāruṭaiya varttamāṇaṅkaḷai valppaṭuttukiṅṇa tarkacāstiram* ('A Disputation that reveals the four religions present in this world').

²⁰ For a more nuanced sociological and philosophical understanding of heathenism, based on this work, see Dharampal [-Frick], Gita: "Malabarisches Heidentum: Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg über Religion und Gesellschaft der Tamilen," *Missionsberichte aus Indien im 18. Jahrhundert: Neue Hallesche Berichte*, ed. Michael Bergunder, Halle:

This writing does not use the word *cāti* for religion; instead, it employs the appropriate word *camayam* and portrays heathenism as a far greater reality than Judaism, Christianity and Islam together. It explains the two main branches of Tamil Heathenism, namely *Civacamayam* and *Viṣṇucamayam*,²¹ and their deities, convictions, traditions, philosophies, institutions, and taboos. The devil confused the minds of all peoples, particularly of the heathen, misled them into destruction.²²

Ziegenbalg stated that in 1712 he had composed a special pamphlet on heathenism.²³ My repeated attempts to find it proved unsuccessful. However, his *magnum opus* on the genealogy of the Tamil deities²⁴, which he compiled in 1713, contains his refined notions of ‘heathenism’. It appreciates the residual knowledge of *Parāparavastu* (the most ‘Supreme Substance’), the unrevealed God, and compares it with the biblical teachings on the Creator God. When *Parāparavastu* chose to reveal its self for the benefit of humans, the Male Principle (*Īśvara*) and the Female Principle (*Īśvarī* or Śakti) emanated from it. Subsequently, *Īśvara* became the source for the *Mummūrttis* (‘Three Forms’), namely Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā. Likewise, all goddesses and female divinities came out of *Īśvarī*. Unmarried goddesses like *Kāḷi*, who protect their chastity

Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 1999, pp. 126–152; Sweetman, Will, “Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship,” *Religion*, Vol. 31, 2001, pp. 209 – 224, especially pages 215 – 218 where he discusses Ziegenbalg’s *Malabarian Heathenism*.

²¹ Ziegenbalg, *Ziegenbalgs Malabarisches Heidenthum*, p. 23; Jeyaraj, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, 2006, p. 72.

²² Ziegenbalg, B.: *Ziegenbalgs Malabarisches Heidenthum—Herausgegeben und mit Indices versehen von W[illem] Caland*, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1926, p. 9. For its English translation see, Jeyaraj, Daniel: *A German Exploration of Indian Society: Ziegenbalg’s “Malabarian Heathenism”: An annotated English translation with an introduction and a glossary*, Chennai: The Mylapore Institute for Indigenous Studies, 2006, p. 62. Henceforth, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, 2006).

²³ *Halle Reports*, Vol. I, 6th Continuation, p. 287: On 15 March 1712 Ziegenbalg began writing a German treatise entitled *The Abominable Ignorance of Spiritual knowledge [lit.: heathenism], how it originated in this world, and its present situation, written in East India by B. Ziegenbalg for mature thinking of the Christians in Europe*, and completed it on 13 April 1712. He thought that this manuscript would help his European readers to understand the need and possibilities of converting non-Christians in this world. My attempts to find this manuscript have not yielded any further evidence.

²⁴ For a critical edition of Ziegenbalg’s original manuscript see Jeyaraj, Daniel (trans. ed.): *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalgs Genealogie der malabarischen Götter: Edition der Originalfassung von 1713 mit Einleitung, Analyse und Glossar*, Halle (Saale): Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen, 2003. For a reliable English translation see Jeyaraj, Daniel (transl. ed.): *Genealogy of the South Indian Deities: An English translation of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg’s original German manuscript with a textual analysis and glossary*, London, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005,

against male chauvinist divinities or demons, are presented as ferocious, bloodthirsty, and revengeful. As consorts of male divinities and mothers of male children, they present themselves as beautiful, benevolent, and charming. The temples of these vegetarian deities stand along rivers and in towns. The Tamil people, who eat meat, have their non-vegetarian guardian deities, popularly known as *Grāmadevatās* ('village deities'). Except *Aiyaṅār*, all village deities are unmarried goddesses such as *Māriyammaṅ* and *Ellammaṅ*. All these divine and semi-divine beings play a central role in the life of the Tamil people. Ziegenbalg called these people 'heathen' because after he had introduced Lutheranism to them, they still upheld their ancestral religious traditions and refused to join his Lutheran congregation.

In the same year (1713), Ziegenbalg published a Tamil tract entitled *Abominable Heathenism*.²⁵ Of its eight chapters, the first three explain his notion of heathenism: its first chapter (pp. 8–16) states that heathenism, which damages the soul of human beings, flourishes among all peoples, including Christians. Their deluded mind (*puttimayakkam*) causes them to forget the one true God; they reject the one true Veda (the Bible) and worship many deities, whom they make in human and animal shapes. Though they are wise and skilled all other areas of life and achievements, their religious worship contradicts rational thinking. They disregard the salvation of their souls that are eternal. If they accepted the sin-atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross on their behalf, they would attain salvation (*mōṭcam*, 'liberation'). Otherwise, they would live in spiritual darkness and perform evil deeds. The second chapter (pp. 16–28) explains how the devil deceived human beings, spread heathenism in all parts of the world, and involved human beings in it. The third chapter (pp. 29–36) affirms the evidences of heathenism among the Tamil people: they worship and honor the metal and wooden images of deities with sacrifices. These people will land in hell (*narakam*). Apart from this religious aspect, the Tamil people had admirable evidences of achievements in the fields of literature, music, art, drama, agriculture, medicine, astronomy, and the like. Ziegenbalg's discovery of Tamil 'heathenism,' i.e., society, astonished him. As a missionary he could not appreciate polytheism; but he recognized the residual knowledge of God and used it in his translation of the Bible, composition of songs and

²⁵ Its Tamil title reads as follows: *akkiyāṅam ettiṅai aṟuvarukkappaṭattakka kāriyameṅṟum atilē nikkīra pērkal yeppaṭi reṭcikkappaṭṭuk karaiyēṟalāmeṅṟum velippaṭuttukīra vētappiramāṅam* ("A religious treatise that reveals how abhorrent spiritual ignorance is and how those who live in it can be saved and reach ashore"). For a full English translation, see Kumaradoss, Y. Vincent and David Prabhakar: "Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg: 'The Abomination of Paganism and the Way for Pagans to be Saved,'" *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India*, Vol III, ed. Andreas Gross, et al., Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2006, pp. 1453 – 1465. For an analysis of this tract see Sweetman, Will, "Heathenism, Idolatry and Rational Monotheism Among the Hindus: Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's Akkiyāṅam (1713) and Other Works Addressed to Tamil Hindus," *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India*, Vol. III: *Communication between India and Europe*, ed. Heike Liebau, et. al., Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2006, pp. 1248–1275.

proverbs. Above all, his respect for the Tamil people and their socio-cultural achievements increased. His analysis of the Tamil society guided his missionary successors such as Christoph Theodosius Walther, Johann Philipp Rottler, Samuel John, and others, who in turn discover additional aspects of the Tamil culture.

Religious heathenism: Tamil perspectives

The Tamil had their own perceptions of heathenism, which differed from that of the Europeans. Just like the Europeans defined heathenism from their ethnic and religious perspectives, the adherents of various Tamil religions maintained different notions of heathenism. For example, a Tamil Śaivite, who upheld the ethos of his agamic tradition, explained his perception of heathenism²⁶: a heathen was a person, who had no *bhakti* ('devotion'), did not visit a temple, and did not take a holy bath, led an immoral life (by gambling, stealing, drinking alcohol, telling lies, betraying trust, mistreating fellow human beings, and practicing witchcraft). This Śaivite considered the Buddhists and the Jains as heathen because these atheists rejected Śaivism along with these distinctive aspects (e.g., *vipūti*, 'holy ash', the five-syllabic mantra *Na-ma-ci-vā-ya*). They did not belong to Vaiṣṇavism and uphold its identity marks such as the trident-shaped mark on the forehead known as *Tirunāmam* ('the Holy Name'). Finally, this Tamil scholar concluded that all Indians, whose life differed from that of the Śaivites and the Vaiṣṇavites, were heathens.

Likewise, other Tamils considered the Europeans, whom they had met in Tranquebar, as heathen. They found the attitudes and approaches of these Europeans so strange that they viewed not only heathen, but also least-educated and foolish; in their opinion, these Europeans neither thought of God nor prepared for a better life after death. According to a report of 1708, the Tamil inhabitants of Tranquebar observed, how the Europeans attended their Zion Church thrice a week, sang songs and listened to sermons. As soon as they came out of their church, they were addicted to alcoholism, gluttony, gamble, and adultery; they did not hesitate to mistreat the Tamil people. These misdeeds led the Tamil people to conclude that the Danish Lutheran pastors of the Zion Church must have taught the Europeans to practice these vices.²⁷ The Tamil people

²⁶ Halle Report, Vol. 1, 7th Continuation, pp. 483–484. For an English translation of this letter dated 25 November 1712, see Jeyaraj, Daniel and Richard Fox Young (transl. eds.): *Hindu-Christian Epistolary Self-Disclosures: 'Malabarian Correspondence' between German Pietist Missionaries and South Indian Hindus (1712–1714)*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013, pp. 208–210.

²⁷ *Halle Reports*, Vol. 1, 1st Continuation, p. 49 also printed in Lehmann, Arno: *Es began in Tranquebar: Die Geschichte der ersten evangelischen Kirche in Indien*, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1955, pp. 66–67. Lehmann cites a passage from Ziegenbalg's letter: Die Tamilen sagen, "daß sie uns Christen bishero für das allerdummeste und ungelehrteste Volck gehalten hätten, das so gantz keine reflexion machte weder auf Got noch auf das zukünftige Leben. Ich [Ziegenbalg] fragte, wie sie doch solces gedenken könnten, da sie doch sähen, daß eine [Zion] Kirche unter

were careful to maintain the religious and socio-cultural traditions of their sages, ancestors, and kings. They believed that the sheer antiquity of these living traditions ensured their legitimacy; were they false or inadequate, their gods would have destroyed them long ago. Therefore, if it was necessary, they were prepared to spend eternity in hell with their ancestors; they rejected the heaven, which the European Lutherans spoke about. This heaven had no place for the departed ancestors of the Tamil people.²⁸ They also wondered how European Lutherans, who were given to alcoholism, gluttony, harlotry, adultery, dance, gamble, cursing and swearing, could ever enjoy heaven. If these immoral Europeans were certain of entering their heaven, the Tamil people were convinced that their calm and upright life would secure them a place in heaven. They did not mind, when the Europeans spoke of the Tamil religions as false or erroneous.²⁹

These views shocked Ziegenbalg. He came to preach Lutheran Pietism as the best alternative to Tamil religious beliefs and behavior. He believed that the cause of this misunderstanding lay not only in the lifestyle of the Europeans, but also in Danish and German, the languages of liturgy and worship in the Zion Church, which the Tamil people did not understand. They saw what these Europeans did outside of the church and formed their opinion about them. The more they discovered European Christianity, the more skeptical they became. In October 1712, a Tamil scholar disclosed to Ziegenbalg, what fellow Tamils thought of these European Christians:

“We abhor Christianity because [European] Christians slaughter and eat cows. They do not clean themselves after they have defecated. They consume strong alcoholic beverages. When a person dies, they do not perform those acts that assist the soul of the dead person to reach the place of salvation. Even when a person gets married, they do not perform any acts of joy. One should not reject the Christians’ *Vētam* [lit. Gesetz, ‘law,’

uns wäre, darinnen alle Woche drey mal gesungen und gepredigt würde, wobey sich denn alle Europäische Christen einfänden und des Gottes-Dienstes pflegten. Darauf sagen sie, daß sie solces alles zwar sähen und höreten, gleichwol hätten sie nicht anders gedacht, als daß unsere Prediger in der Kirche lehreten, wie man solgen Sauffen, Fressen, Spielen, Huren und ihnen, den Schwartzten, allerlei Böses anthun.”

²⁸ *Halle Reports*, Vol. 1, 1st Continuation, p. 49: Die Tamilen sagen: “sie wolten lieber mit ihren Vätern/ und mit ihrer Nation in der Hölen seyn/ als ohn[e] ihre Väter und Nation im Himmel.”

²⁹ *Halle Reports*, Vol. 1, 1st Continuation, p. 49: “So gewiß und wahrhaftig als ihr Christen bey eurem Sauffen und Fressen/ bey eurem Huren und Ehebrechen/ bey eurem Tanzen und Spielen/ bey eurem Fluchen und Schweren/ und bey eurem hösen sündhaftigen Wandel gedencket selg zu werden/ so gewiß und wharhaftig gedencken auch wir selig zu werden bey unserem stillen und eingezogenen Leben/ wenn auch unsere Religion auch gleich falsch und gantz erlogen seyn sollte.”

i.e., the Bible]. The *Vētam* they have is a holy *Vētam*. But they do not have deeds to correspond with it. Our [Tami] *Vētam* is not only holy, it tells us what works we should do.”³⁰

Thus, the Tamils saw Christianity as a religion of an institutionalized church that failed to impact the day-to-day life of Christians. Christians claimed to possess the greatest scripture with the best teachings on right relationships with God and fellow human beings. Paradoxically, their day-to-day life did not support this claim. Two years later, on 16 April 1714, another Tamil scholar revealed additional aspects of what fellow Tamils thought of European Christians:

These Christians “may possess the Ten Commandments and other good teachings, but no one follows them. They consume so much strong alcohol that they go out of their minds and lie around like babbling idiots. Some of their friends hate each other, beat one another, wound and stab one another, fight each other unprovoked, and even kill one another. In their common speech they swear on God and on their own soul. They indulge in adultery and gambling. While gambling, they assault and even kill each other. They slaughter cows and eat them. [...] They do not help either travelers or pilgrims. They do not perform meritorious deeds. They own wealth, but they do not give alms; they also do not do charitable works. The rich among them are merely concerned with eating and drinking, wearing fine clothing, and decorating their houses. Otherwise, they help none, not even their poor neighbors. In our opinion, these are the gravest sins of the Europeans who live [among us] in East India.”³¹

While the European Christians found fault with the Tamil cosmology, spiritual beliefs, religious rituals, expensive social customs, the Tamil people could not reconcile Christian teachings of God’s holiness and justice with their actual practices in private and public life. They hated greed, pride and anger of the Europeans, whom they had been observing. The same Tamil scholar reported that a Brahmin priest branded Europeans not only as *atarmars*, i.e., people of irreligion, injustice, and vice, but also as the children of *irāṭcatar*, i.e., demons and goblins.³²

The more the Tamil people observed European Christians, the more they became conscious of their own religion. Whenever the Lutheran missionaries asked their Tamil friends to clarify religious and theological issues, they invariably approached their local scholars for help. In this manner, they discovered several aspects of their own religions and societies, which they

³⁰ Halle Reports, Vol. 1, 7th Continuation, pp. 340–342. For an English translation, see Jeyaraj, 2013, pp. 87–88.

³¹ Halle Reports, Vol. 1, 11th Continuation, pp. 944–945. For an English translation, see Jeyaraj, 2013, pp. 286–288.

³² Halle Reports, Vol. 1, 7th Continuation, p. 487. For an English translation, see Jeyaraj, 2013, p. 186.

earlier took for granted and began to own them consciously.³³ They insisted that their ethical life was a result of their right religious beliefs. Therefore, they requested Ziegenbalg not to consider them heathen. A Tamil author wrote to Ziegenbalg the following information:

“You [missionaries] cannot consider a person a heathen who can discern true virtues, right worship, and good conduct, who recognizes the Supreme Being as the one Lord, God, and as the Creator of all, who lives blamelessly as commanded in his *Vētam* [i.e., scripture] is free of craving and worldly lusts, lives in faith and love [i.e., bhakti], commits neither evil nor sin, serves the wise and the learned by obeying them unflinchingly, and who pleases God by the way he lives. Such a person can be called a child of God, and is not a heathen.³⁴

Non-religious heathenism

Ziegenbalg admired the social and civil conditions of the Tamil people. His work on the Tamil Society, entitled *Malabarian Heathenism* (1711), contains two sections: the first section examines in 26 chapters the religious beliefs and practices of the Tamils. The second section consists of 18 chapters³⁵ and focuses on socio-cultural, intellectual and political histories, achievements, and conditions of the Tamil people. Ziegenbalg approached the non-religious aspects of the Tamil society from the perspectives of God’s activities in two interrelated spheres, namely the Book of Nature and the Book of Grace, which are interdependent and harmonious. The Book of Grace engages with the religious aspects of the Tamil people from the perspectives of Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching, as recorded in the Bible. On the other hand, the Book of Nature deals with the non-religious aspects of the Tamil people. Ziegenbalg illustrated his position in a conversation with a Brahmin and stated that the Tamil people developed their moral ideas, professional skills, and principles of governance from the Book of Nature. This development should have automatically led them to accept the teachings of the Book of Grace. The fact that the Tamil people did not embrace these teachings demonstrated their unwillingness. As a Lutheran, he believed that no human achievement, however great and noble it might be, would not merit spiritual salvation, which was available to human beings through faith in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and by God’s grace. The Book of Grace alone could show

³³ Halle Reports, Vol. 1, 7th Continuation, pp. 346–370. For an English translation, see Jeyaraj, 2013, pp. 92–112.

³⁴ Halle Reports, Vol. 1, 11th Continuation, p. 926. For an English translation, see Jeyaraj, 2013, p. 274.

³⁵ These themes include cosmology, chronology, epochs, caste, food, superstitions, agriculture, material world, medicine, alchemy, poetry, music, astronomy, ethics, oratory, divination, astrology and warfare.

the right way for salvation. Thus, Ziegenbalg insisted that all natural gifts and achievements of the Tamil people were insufficient to please God completely.³⁶

By contrast, one of Ziegenbalg's Tamil friends disagreed with him vehemently. For example, on 14 March 1714, he preached a sermon to a group of guests who had gathered for a wedding. This sermon upset a merchant, who replied that the gods of the Tamil people were pleased with their orderly worship and would grant them salvation. Like Europeans, the Tamil people too possessed necessary spiritual wisdom, rational thought, and material blessings. Therefore, he asked Ziegenbalg not to call them heathens. The fact that the Europeans came to trade with them and purchased their goods and services indicated their worth of not being heathens. He insisted that the Tamil people had a better lifestyle than the Europeans in Tranquebar. He wondered if their religions were so false and misleading, as the Lutherans claimed, why their gods would allow them to experience good things. Ziegenbalg responded that he truly respected the excellence of the Tamil people in all kinds of arts and sciences. For example, he admired the high standards of Tamil ethics. Unlike Aristotelian ethics, it was not systematized. He compared the teachings of *Tirukkura!* not only with the teachings of the apocryphal *Book of Sirach* but also with the writings of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE–65 CE). Tamil ethics did not come from the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, the foundation of all virtues. Therefore, it would not assist the Tamil people in gaining eternal salvation.³⁷

Ziegenbalg applied similar theological argument to the objections raised by the above-mentioned merchant. He explained why he could not endorse the religious beliefs and practices of the Tamil people. He thought of them as irrational and therefore unreliable. He stated further that God allowed them to prosper in arts and sciences so that they could have an opportunity to appreciate God's grace, when it was available to them, and obtain God's forgiveness for their sin. Ziegenbalg concluded his response by reminding the merchant of the approaching Day of Judgment,³⁸ which would not grant them either forgiveness of sins or any salvation. Therefore, in Ziegenbalg's opinion the Tamil people were heathen, because they had not yet embraced the Lordship of Jesus Christ and made it as the foundation for their daily life. Ziegenbalg's missionary successors carried on these ideas further. Christoph Theodosius Walter wrote on Tamil culture and its similarity to cultural life of the Jews in the Hebrew Scripture (i.e., Old Testament). Christoph Samuel John, Johann Philip Rottler, and others wrote about Tamil culture, geography,

³⁶ Halle Reports, Vol. 2, 15th Continuation, pp. 15 – 16.

³⁷ Ziegenbalg, *Ziegenbalgs Malabarisches Heidenthum*, pp. 234–235; *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, 2006, pp. 284–286.

³⁸ Halle Reports, Vol. 2, 9th Continuation, pp. 737–739.

and sciences. The nine large volumes of the famous Halle Reports and the subsequent series of publications are truly treasure troves of

Conclusion

European missionaries and the adherents of Tamil religions used their ethnocentric norms and theological values to discern each other's perceptions about God, human beings, world, sin, salvation, present life, and eschatology. They were aware of each other's religious teachings. However, the implications of their day-to-day life and interpersonal relationships influenced their mutual opinions more than their theological persuasions. Their discussions started from practical issues and moved on to means of their improvement. The missionaries invited the Tamil people to consider becoming sincere disciples of Jesus Christ, accepting baptism, joining the local Jerusalem Church as members, and serving their fellow citizens as Christians. Most Tamil people evaluated the risks associated with religious conversion and chose not to become Christians. They kept their socio-religious belonging and identity intact. Nevertheless, they learned to understand each other better and developed their mutual relationships of trust and discussion. Their reciprocal discoveries and portrayals increased their *ñāṇatteḷvu* ('spiritual enlightenment') and decreased their *akkiyāṇam* ('spiritual ignorance'). Few Tamil peoples embraced Lutheranism and formed the first Tamil Lutheran congregation in Tranquebar. Their courageous decision and actions based on this decision provided a meeting point for Lutheran missionaries and the Tamil people. Successive generations of Europeans and Indians enriched their mutual self-discovery, appropriation, and representation.

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