



Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies

Volume 27

Article 13

November 2014

Book Review: *Hindu-Christian Epistolary Self-Disclosures: 'Malabarian Correspondence' between German Pietist Missionaries and South Indian Hindus (1712-1714).*

James Ponniah
Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ponniah, James (2014) "Book Review: *Hindu-Christian Epistolary Self-Disclosures: 'Malabarian Correspondence' between German Pietist Missionaries and South Indian Hindus (1712-1714).*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 27, Article 13.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1585>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

theological issues that arise from his work unexplored. If the modern analytic concept of “religion” is a crypto-Christian theological projection without remainder and distorts non-Christian material, as Henn implies, wouldn't the more economical options have been either to abandon the category altogether or else revert to an arguably less problematic premodern theological concept of “religion”? This criticism is a quibble, and primarily of interest to Christian theologians. Henn's overall thesis is intelligent and well-argued, and should be persuasive for its intended audience. Henn's attention to ethnography and resolve to let the lived practice of Hindu

and Catholics inform scholarly representations of their traditions is noteworthy, especially in a work so dense in theory. Contemporary disciplinary interest in the world religions paradigm and the genealogy of particular “religions” within religious studies should make this an important, persuasive, and enduring work for its primary audience, as well as engaging reading for Christians and Hindus interested in learning from a painful moment of cultural encounter.

P.J. Johnston
University of Iowa

Hindu-Christian Epistolary Self-Disclosures: 'Malabarian Correspondence' between German Pietist Missionaries and South Indian Hindus (1712-1714).
Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Daniel Jeyaraj and Richard Fox Young. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013, xvi+349 pages.

THIS book is the product of research carried out by two eminent scholars: Daniel Jeyaraj from Liverpool Hope University (UK), and Richard Fox Young from Princeton Theological Seminary (US). Jeyaraj has been doing research on this topic for about two decades and has published two books, *Ziegenbalg's Genealogy of the South Indian Deities* (2003) and *A German Exploration of South Indian Society* (2006). Richard Fox is an acknowledged scholar in Hindu-Christian relations, both historical and theological, as evident in his work, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskritic Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (1981).

This book is all about the series of correspondences that took place between the

Tamil Hindus and Danish Christian Missionaries of Tranquebar in the early eighteenth century. Although this book is basically a work of translation, it is distinguished in many ways, making it uniquely different. 1) It is the very first complete English translation of all ninety-nine Tamil Letters along with authors' (Ziegenbalg and Gründler) footnotes. Other available works by Philipps (1717, 1719), Grafe (1972), Liebau (1997, 1998) are either paraphrases of select few letters or essays on the importance of Tamil Letters, and had left out the important corpus of the footnotes written by the European missionaries. Since the footnotes contain comments and assessments of the missionaries on the views and the worldviews of the Tamils, they bear witness to

the modes and moods of the inter-religious encounters and exchanges that took place between Christians and Hindus in 18th century Danish colony and its surrounding kingdoms. Every page of the book, in some way or other, bears witness to the conversations, controversies, interactions and inter-religious reciprocity that took place between the Hindu Tamils and Christian missionaries. 2) It contains a beautifully written lengthy introduction of eighty-two pages, nearly making one third of the book excluding appendices, glossary and bibliography. As the translators rightly observe, the book attempts “to situate them (the Letters) within a broad framework of contexts, historical and linguistic, religious and theological, in the belief that voices long unheard can now be heard again—imperfectly of course, but surely more distinctively and distinctly” (11). The introduction (27-32) takes the readers back to the historical period of early 18th century Europe and its intellectual currents and theological perspectives that would affect both the reception and the nature of publication of Tamil Letters sent by Tranquebar missionaries who, fortunately, were unaware of such developments. Not everyone in Europe was appreciative of missionaries’ project of correspondence with Tamil interlocutors. A former colleague of Ziegenbalg, Bovingh’s open attack on the project and Francke’s conditional support and critical role in publishing the Letters in German are all sufficiently covered (53-56) in the introduction so as to give readers a balanced picture of the problems and prospects that Tamil Letters faced in early 18th century. 3) The book also locates the significance of the Letters within the broad framework of Orientalism by drawing

our attention to the fact that they predate British Orientalism already in the early part of eighteenth century, and it was produced with the help of Tamil sources in South India nearly four decades before such initiatives were started by the British in other parts of India. 4) The initiatives of Ziegenblag and Gründler in getting Tamil interlocutors to write rather elaborate texts of self-representation underline an important principle of cross-cultural encounter which the missionaries had put into practice, namely, “if they were to have any hope of being taken seriously by the Tamils, they would have to allow their interlocutors to teach them who they thought they were in terms of their own respective self-understandings” (56). In this, as the translators rightly observe, what seems evident is a predisposition for dialogue of a reciprocal kind, “much ahead of its time, including a certain (limited) openness to learning from Tamils and not only about them” (56). This interaction was not always one-sided. There were also certain proactive steps on the part of Tamils to learn about the foreigners that arrived on their land. “Lutherans were as much an object of interest as Tamils were to the missionaries” (45). A famous case in point is the set of sixty-four questions, found in Letter 46 of Part Two (214-217), posed to the Danish missionaries by one of the famous interlocutors, Kanpati Pillai, who wanted to know about Christianity from missionaries themselves. But such a cross-cultural interaction cannot be valorized beyond a point, either. In spite of one’s curiosity to know the other and the openness to let oneself be known by the other, there were also postures of self-defence and pride (cf., 185, 278, 286, 290). At times, one wonders if some parts of answers given by the correspondents truly

represent the orthodox views of Tamil Hinduism or merely express a set of opinions of religious specialists who either idealized their tradition or did not want to make it look less significant or inferior to the Christian tradition they came in contact with. For instance, it is quite intriguing that there is no mention of the 'Theory of Karma' all through the Tamil Letters, especially in the answers to questions of 'liberation' (194, 200, 214) and 're-birth' (212, 218, 228). This shows that there were reservations about letting oneself be exposed to the other. "Both parties to the ensuing dialogue found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being scrutinized by the 'other,' of being asked questions that seemed to come out of nowhere without an intellectual handle on which to hang a conservative reply" (45). However, in answering the questions, the correspondents interpreted Tamil Hinduism as practiced by them or as heard from experts of religion but made it intelligible to Christian missionaries. Thus they produced new areas of engagement and encounter between Christianity and Hinduism in the sense that their interpretations brought about proximity of intelligibility between Hinduism and Christianity in the minds of missionaries that they began to value their views (footnotes a. in 286; c. & e. in 288; a. in 292), appreciate them at times (16) or comment upon and disagree with Hindu ideas and beliefs from a Christian point-of-view (Cf. footnotes: a. & c. in 85; k. in 86; m. in 87; b. in 124; n. in 127), notwithstanding the overtones of biases seen in some footnotes (b. in 121; a. in 124; k. in 127; a. in 134; a. in 149). 5) The book is appreciably insightful when it discusses the issue of missionaries' labeling of Tamil religion as *Akkiyanam* in the controversial

book 'Abominable Heathenism,' a Christian polemic of Tamil religious worldview but deftly responded to by the Tamil interlocutors, especially in letters II/26 and II/40 of part III of the book, not only by distancing themselves from the superstitious practices of the village-based low religion of the ignorant rural Tamils but also by doing creative hermeneutical interpretation of the term *akkiyanam* by shifting its emphasis 'from cognitive ignorance to moral ignorance' (61). Besides, by explaining idol worship within the framework of monotheistic *bhakti* (149-150, 274), they exposed Europeans' wrong conception of 'polytheism' in Hinduism, thereby effectively rejecting missionaries' labeling of the whole of Tamil religion as Heathenism. In such an ambience of inter-religious exchange, the project of Tamil Letters could have advanced into "a sustained dialogue, with a realistic hope of accomplishing more than mutual self-understanding and cross-cultural appreciation—of, say, doing theology inter-culturally or inter-religiously" (62); but, unfortunately, it never reached those heights.

A scrutiny of the contents of Tamil Letters reveals that Saiva Siddhanta played a major role, especially in religious matters, in the sense that its "theological perspectives brought to bear on pietism by a number of the missionaries' most interlocutors" (69). The missionaries also borrowed the phrases and words from Saiva Siddhanta tradition to transmit to the natives the teachings of Christianity. Nevertheless, in any cross-cultural communication, there is bound to be semantic gap in the concepts employed and the meanings communicated. This is also true of the interactions that took place between the Tamil interlocutors and the Danish

116 Book Reviews

missionaries. Though used by both parties, the word 'akkiyanam' (ignorance) did not mean the same for the Tamil interlocutors and Ziegenbalg. Similarly, the words 'bhakti' (devotion) and 'arul' (grace), whose meanings were located within the framework of agama theology, meant and implied one thing for the Tamil writers and another thing for the missionaries coming from Lutheran pietistic background. Nevertheless, the missionaries employed them in good faith to establish cross-cultural communication and wanted to use them as a medium to convey altogether a different set of meanings to the native Tamils, but perhaps they failed to achieve the desired goal.

These materials found in the book demonstrate that cross-cultural relations between people of two different backgrounds, be it religious or ethnic, are not pre-programmed or pre-determined in any given situation but rather constitute a dynamic reality in the making. As translators note (36) in the case of the relationship between Ziegenbalg the Danish missionary and the local Tamils, when one esteems the other with dignity, civility and openness, the advancing relationship can become a learning experience in that it makes it possible not only to appreciate and affirm the collective other in their richness and strengths (3, 37) but also to allow the other help to introspect into one's cultural ethos (151, 254, 286-288, 290). To get to know the other in their otherness, the missionaries no doubt had to develop their own language skills, and establish effective and reliable networks of communication with the locals so that the different cultural universes of the Tamils and the missionaries can be brought closer to each other and, thus, the other

becomes intelligent to oneself (37). This involved a two-way process of 'give and take' between Christians and Hindus. The Europeans who then initiated this process of inter-religious encounters were products of enlightenment and rationality. Hence they had them processed in rational terms and also took upon themselves the responsibility of representing to their own people back in their homeland the views of the unknown religious 'other' found in the neighborhood of a foreign land, and they did it in a manner feasible, accessible and acceptable to the eighteenth century Europeans who were very much under the sway of 'reason and enlightenment.' Thus the 'written and the documented forms' of inter-religious encounters became the most acceptable modes of inter-religious dialogue at that time. But it is also a complex process that involved an array of agencies, stake-holders, intermediates and interlocutors whose agendas, ideologies and interests did shape the architectonic of the project. And the complexity of such a process is sufficiently dwelt upon in the book.

While some might respect the translator's use of the expression 'Tamil' instead of 'Malabarian' as found in the original text, and their choice of words and meanings to render some Tamil and German words into English, there could be others—especially a few scholars in the field of 'translation'—who might contest such translationary judgments and interpretative decisions.

Nevertheless, for the common modern readers, the book effectively brings to life the forgotten voices of Hindu Christian self-disclosure that took place nearly three hundred years ago. It reproduces the forgotten site of intercultural interactions so vividly that it

invites the contemporary readers to learn lessons from our cultural past to become active agents in promoting an atmosphere of mutual trust and friendship with the religious other.

This book provides excellent resource materials for further research in the field of

Cross-Cultural Studies, Mission History and Hindu-Christian Dialogue.

James Ponniah

Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

The Ethics of Śāṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World.
Warren Lee Todd, Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2013,
220+xii pages.

THE difficulties of the eighth-century CE teacher Śāṅkara's ethics, and the moral consequences of non-dualism more generally, will be familiar to many readers of this journal. The so-called *tat-tvam-asi* ethic—contending that one serves others because of the same ultimate self in all beings—has been roundly criticised by interpreters such as Karl Potter and Paul Hacker. It generally founders on the Advaita insistence on the illusory or sublatale character of all phenomenal, individual selves. How is it possible to serve the interests of others, when there are—ultimately—no others to serve? At least in theory, the doctrine of no-self (*an-ātman*), such as that propounded by Śāṅkara's rough contemporary, the Mādhyamika Buddhist Śāntideva, would seem to complicate the non-dualist ethical quandary still further.

In *The Ethics of Śāṅkara and Śāntideva*, Warren Lee Todd seizes this dilemma by the horns in a more than figurative sense, insofar as he suggests that altruism can be sought and found in these non-dualist teachings only by placing their shared doctrine of Two Truths or two levels of understanding at the center of their respective worldviews. The realized sage and even more so the aspirant on the path, on

this reading, “flickers” back and forth between conventional and ultimate perspectives—either voluntarily, in the case of Śāntideva, or due to the residual effect of *prārabdha karma*, in the case of Śāṅkara (24-25, 139-40). From Auguste Comte (1798-1857), via the contemporary ethicist Samuel P. Oliner, Todd defines altruism as “1) the eradication of self-centred desire, and 2) a life devoted to the good of others” (37). Whereas “Western altruism” presumes the reality of self and others and then “demands a temporary ‘sacrifice’” of this self (143), the altruism of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* or Advaitin *jīvan-mukta* presumes instead the ultimate selflessness of all beings and then demands a temporary construction of other selves for the purpose of service or liberative instruction. “This is not a simple ‘other-regarding’ ethics; it is an ‘other-constructing’ ethics” (142-43). Or, as he restates the same idea in his conclusion, “The initial task [is] to deconstruct the self so as to become selfless. The further task [is] to then reconstruct the suffering other, so as to be capable of empathising with their confused condition” (199).

Taken only thus far, Todd's proposal is already worth serious consideration, pressing beyond simplistic truisms about these