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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. The Greek notion for religion *thriseia* (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 Testament 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

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2 Acts 26:5: “I [Paul] have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion [thriseia] and lived as a Pharisee.” Col. 2:18: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship [thriseia] 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). 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 adherents, and even more complex understandings. No single definition can adequately capture its meanings and implications fully.

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: a Christian kneels on a wooden cross, looks towards an open heaven, and worships

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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: “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” (*relegere*). But in all these cases, the common ‘re’-prefix underscores the divine reference point, whether recovering God, binding oneself back to God, re-binding 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.

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. 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. 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 religion and lived within their socio-political systems of varna (‘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). They know how their poets derided those who did not belong to their own religion as pittar (‘people of deranged minds’), vaṇcakar (‘deceivers’), acaṭar (‘fools, idiots’), avalar (‘useless people’),

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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.


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 murai prescribes the proper way of life, in which a person’s kaṭan (‘obligatory duties’) and vaḻipatu (‘worshiping a deity, following the rules of one’s varṇa and jāti’) play a decisive role.
pēytaṉmaiyar (‘devilish people’) and naṟṭiyarṟōr (‘ungrateful people’). Other Tamil people viewed the outsiders as puṟaccamayattār (‘religious outsiders’) and aṉāṉikāl (‘spiritually ignorant people’). 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 Sanskritic Hinduism. 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. 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,

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12 The insiders of a particular religion considered the people of other religions as followers of a puṟaccamayam (‘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 puṟaccamayam, namely 1) ulakāyatam (atheism, materialism), 2. puttam (‘Buddhism’), 3. camanam (‘Jainism’), 4. mimāṅcai (Brahmā as the soul of the universe, as opposed to either Śiva or Viṣṇu), 5. pāṅcārattiram (i.e., that which Viṣṇu taught during five nights) and 6. pāṭṭacāriyam (i.e., that which Bhattacharya taught).


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, given to him by the King of Denmark in

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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. 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. 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. 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 Heydenthum (‘Malabarian Heathenism’ = South Indian Society, 1711), 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 sonst nichts vortragen. Und wie der Herr Jesus selbst sein Lehr-Amt mit der Predigt von der Busse und Bekehrung angefangen und seinen Discipulen beföhren zu predigen von der Busse und Vergebung der Sünden, so hat er sich gleichsam heimlich zu verhalten.”


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 pulōkattilē unṭāṇa nāṇku piratāṇa cātiyārutaiya varttamāṇankalai vaippatuttukiṟa 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 Heidenthum: 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," 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 deities, 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 Kāli, who protect their chastity


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.

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 Aiyaṇār, all village deities are
unmarried goddesses such as Māriyammaṉ and Ellammaṉ. 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. 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: akkiyāṇam ettigai āṟuvarukkapataṭṭakka kāriyameṟṟum atilē nikkira pērkal
yeppati retcikkappatṭuk karaiyēṟalāmēṟṟum velippattuttukiṟa vēṟappirammaṇām (“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,
of this tract see Sweetman, Will, “Heathenism, Idolatry and Rational Monotheism Among the Hindus: Bartholomäus
Ziegenbalg’s Akkiyāṇam (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
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 heathenism:

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. The found the attitudes and approaches of these Europeans so strange that they viewed them 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.

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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. 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.

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,’
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.”

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.

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

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earlier took for granted and began to own them consciously.  

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 unfailingy, and who pleases God by the way he lives. Such a person can be called a child of God, and is not a heathen.  

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 chapters 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


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 \textit{Tirukkuṟaḷ} not only with the teachings of the
apocryphal \textit{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 und therefore unreliable. He stated further
that God allowed them to proper 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, 15\(^{th}\) Continuation, pp. 15 – 16.

\(^{37}\) Ziegenablg, \textit{Ziegenbalgs Malabarisches Heidenthum}, pp. 234–235; \textit{A German Exploration of Indian Society}, 2006,
pp. 284–286.

\(^{38}\) Halle Reports, Vol. 2, 9\(^{th}\) 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 ķāṉattēḻtu ‘spiritual enlightenment’ and decreased their akkiyāṉam ‘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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