

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Tranquebar Then and Now*

H. W. GENSICHEN

Tranquebar Then and Now is the title of the little historical guide which most of you may have in your hands. 'Tranquebar Then and Now' may also be a suitable heading in order to guide us in assessing the significance of this Quarter-Millennium Jubilee of the Tranquebar Mission for the Church and its mission at large. Jubilees are land-marks set up here and there beside the path of the pilgrim church in this world, and they convey a dual message. First, a jubilee is a mark of exclamation: 'Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all His benefits.' Secondly, it is a question-mark: 'Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?' Thus this present Tranquebar Jubilee, too, should not just be a commemoration of past events but also a challenge, an occasion for thanksgiving as well as for stock-taking and heart-searching. We are not supposed to take history for granted. It is part of our Christian freedom to put questions to our past. At the same time it is part of our Christian obedience to listen to the questions which the past may have to put to us.

'Tranquebar Then and Now'—this subject, then, would suggest a dialogue rather than a mere description of historic events, and it is my intention to point to certain issues which may profitably be discussed in the course of such a dialogue on the occasion of this Tranquebar Jubilee.

The very church building in which we are meeting stimulates thought about the first issue. It was not the first mission church in Tranquebar. But it stands even today as a symbol of Ziegenbalg's determination to make the Church the aim of the mission, a determination which he had to maintain not only against violent opposition from the ultra-Pietistic mission secretary in Copenhagen but also against certain criticisms from the fathers in Halle. In this respect Ziegenbalg was certainly not a genuine Pietist. For as a rule Pietism was emphasizing the idea of the Kingdom of God rather than the idea of the Church. Count Zinzendorf, the leader of the Moravian Community, who as a youth had seriously thought of joining the Tranquebar Mission, has later clearly defined the aim of a mission work which is centered in the idea of the Kingdom of God: His missionaries should strictly confine themselves to what he called 'gathering individual souls for the Lamb'. Since then we find a Pietistic type of mission work which maintained this individualistic emphasis and strove to build the Kingdom rather than the Church. But later on, when at last the churches as such discovered their missionary responsibility, there was a shift of emphasis from the individualistic to the corporate aspect, from the Kingdom to the Church, and the two tendencies

* An address given at the New Jerusalem Church, Tranquebar, on January 13, 1956.

have since co-existed in the history of missions but never been fully reconciled.

The early Tranquebar missionaries were well aware of the problem. But they were able to find a constructive and workable solution. As a Pietist Ziegenbalg had learned in Halle that to win one single soul among the non-Christians was as good as winning a hundred at home, and he was always conscious that ultimately he was labouring for the cause of the Kingdom. Yet as a Lutheran he was no less certain that those who had been won should be gathered and incorporated in the church. For to him it was the church in which the sinner received forgiveness and Christ exercised his lordship in this world. It literally worried him to death that the secretary of the Copenhagen home-board tried to eliminate this church-consciousness from the Tranquebar Mission, and he knew full well that the opposition which he encountered when building New Jerusalem Church was just a symptom of the underlying conflict of principles. But neither Ziegenbalg nor his successors were willing to give in. In the Tranquebar Mission Pietism and Lutheranism, the emphasis on individual conversion and the emphasis on the church, have joined forces, and it is of lasting importance that here the painful alternative of both principles, which later on caused so much unnecessary friction, was from the beginning converted into the kind of alliance of both which alone is true to the testimony of the Scriptures.

This leads immediately on to another issue which may be summed up in the alternative, 'Denominational or Ecumenical'. If the Tranquebar Mission was to grow into a church, what kind of a church was it to be? It was the Lutheran King of Denmark, Frederick IV, who sponsored and patronized the Tranquebar Mission, both by his personal initiative and through the influence of his Lutheran court preacher Luetkens. The missionaries received the Lutheran ordination. In Tranquebar itself catechumens were instructed according to the Lutheran catechism, and the order of worship followed the pattern of the Lutheran Church of Denmark. It was never doubtful that the church which was to grow out of the mission was to be of a Lutheran character. When soon after Ziegenbalg's death one or two missionaries attempted to introduce the Book of Common Prayer or the Anglican catechism, their colleagues protested in no uncertain terms.

One may deplore that the very beginnings of Protestant mission work in India and, for that matter, in the whole world were thus associated with a particular denomination, and we may even be inclined to frown on what may look like a spirit of confessionalism in the Tranquebar Mission. However, confessionalism is one thing and confession another. When in the early years of the mission some friends in England were afraid of what they described as 'sectarian Lutheranism' in the Tranquebar Mission, their suspicions were soon dispelled to such an extent that they did not hesitate to send gifts in cash and kind to Tranquebar, among them the first printing press (1712). In fact, this support from England was only the beginning of a truly harmonious co-operation of Anglicans and Lutherans of which the encouraging letters of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the English king to the first missionaries give impressive evidence. Obviously not denominational propaganda was intended by the Tranquebar missionaries but, in the words of one of the fathers in Halle, 'a common evangelical effort of conversion', in which, by the way,

also the Calvinistic Dutch in India and Ceylon were to have their share.

To be sure, Ziegenbalg and his successors did never mean to discard their Lutheranism like a worn-out garment. They knew that India with all its leanings towards syncretism was specially in need of a clear and definite truth, and they were convinced to have such a truth to offer in the message of the Bible as interpreted in the Lutheran confessions. Yet for them it was the message that mattered, not the confessional appearance as an end in itself. Therefore they were able to think and act in a truly ecumenical broad-mindedness, without yielding the solid ground of their Lutheran convictions—an attitude which even now deserves respect though it can hardly be expected to offer a definite solution of the complex ecumenical problems of our age.

Today the old Danish Lutheran Zion Church, just opposite Ziegenbalg's New Jerusalem Church, belongs to the Church of South India after having been turned over to the S.P.G. when in 1845 Tranquebar was sold to the British. Ziegenbalg would never have dreamt that the divided state of Protestantism would appear in such a way even in his beloved Tranquebar. Just for that reason the Indian church of today might derive new inspiration from the attitude of the old missionaries who, with all their unflinching loyalty to the truth as they had come to know it, never lost sight of the oneness of the Church of Christ and of its Great Commission.

All this may raise another question: Can an indigenous church of our age at all be expected to take advice from a mission of the past whose work may appear to be hopelessly bound up with a completely outmoded 'mission station approach' in which there seems to be no room for the idea of an integration of the church and the mission? Indeed, if there has ever been a mission enterprise which was pioneer work in the strict sense, it was here, and that would imply that at least in the beginnings all the initiative rested with the missionaries. They had no examples to follow, no patterns to copy, in the earliest years also no native co-workers to whom to delegate their authority, and that alone would be sufficient reason to be cautious in applying the standards of our age and insight to their work. It would be unreasonable to expect an indigenous church to emerge from such a mission as Pallas Athene emerged from the head of Zeus. But even then the problem remains: What about the integration of the mission and the church in Tranquebar? Is there any indication that the early Tranquebar missionaries were at least aware of the issue and, if so, that the development of our indigenous Indian churches can be said to be in line with what the pioneers intended?

The answer to this question must be in the affirmative. There is no room here to describe the various ways and means in which the Tranquebar missionaries deliberately worked for an Indian church as the desired fruit of their mission work. But it should at least be recalled that the early history of the mission in itself offers the most striking evidence, though it has often been neglected by historians whose eyes were fixed on what the Western missionaries accomplished themselves. For almost half a century the latter could work in the narrow limits of the Danish territory and in the two rather isolated outposts of Madras and Cuddalore only. Nevertheless there was a steady growth of the

work also to the west and to the south, in regions which remained closed to Europeans for a considerable period. This was due exclusively to the faithful work of the Indian helpers and to the spontaneous witness of the native Christians. The names of most of them have long been forgotten, and no accurate statistics allow us to assess the extent of that expansion. But the great history of Protestant work in the districts of Tanjore and Tinnevely still stands out as a lasting memorial of the fact that the road on which the Gospel went out from Tranquebar into large parts of South India was in those early days not marked by mission stations but rather by the humble meeting places and mud chapels of the unknown village Christians. This was perhaps a more lasting contribution to the integration of the mission and the church than many a deliberate strategical move on the part of the missionaries, though the latter certainly deserve credit for encouraging and promoting this process of the growth of a church to the best of their ability.

The fact that the early Tranquebar missionaries were not working under the rigid directions and regulations of a home-board in Europe was another important factor in this development. One may perhaps even say that much of the modern ideal missionary team work was already anticipated and put into practice in the rather loose organizational structure of the old Tranquebar Mission.

All this does not mean that all the problems of the relation of mission and church had been solved. The training of Indian workers was never adequate to the demands of the field. Rajanaiken, one of the ablest catechists in the early period, did not receive ordination because of considerations of caste, and not before 1733 the ordination of the first Indian pastor was held. We may have our doubts whether the missionaries should not have shown less hesitation and more determination in building up an indigenous ministry. But considering the enormous difficulties which they had to face it is remarkable that they never lost sight of the aim and pursued it steadily, even in a period when the 'mission station approach' by necessity dominated their strategy. Today Tranquebar is no longer a mission station in the old sense. Not only here but also elsewhere the emphasis has indubitably and irrevocably shifted from the mission to the church, and we may confidently say that this development has taken place not against but in accordance with the real intentions of the pioneer missionaries.

If one speaks of an indigenous church one would do well to make it clear what is meant by that term. Everybody would agree that the Church in India cannot possibly be just a branch of Western Christendom on Indian soil. The Danish congregation in Tranquebar was such a branch, and the early missionaries could not but regard it as an example of the wrong way. They were determined to have an indigenous Church in the sense that it was 'in India's life and part of it'. But how to let it take root in Indian soil? There could be no doubts about the programme outlined by the apostle, 'to become all things to all men in order by all means to save some' (I Cor. 9:22). One had to meet the people on their own ground in order to win them. Robert de Nobili, the great pioneer of the Jesuit Mission of Madura, had gone to the extreme. He had posed as a Brahmin and proclaimed the Gospel to be the Fourth Veda that had been lost for many centuries. But was not that a kind of accommodation which sacrificed the truth to false pretences? Even

Protestant missions have occasionally yielded to this temptation. When Ziegenbalg wrote his book on the Genealogy of the Hindu Gods and sent it to Halle for publication, the venerable fathers there felt that he had already gone too far. Should he not rather fight Hinduism than study and describe it so that innocent souls in Europe might be misled? Consequently the manuscript remained unprinted for 150 years.

Obviously Ziegenbalg had shown more perspicacity than Francke and his colleagues in Halle. They were so afraid of an accommodation at the expense of the truth that they would not even allow for the necessary adjustment to the surroundings without which no missionary can work successfully. The Tranquebar missionaries had learned that there was a world of difference between the two. They were resolved to follow Paul in seeking and finding the people where they were, and in letting them hear the call of God right in the context of their real lives, without altering or compromising the Gospel message as such. Therefore they deemed it their obvious duty to acquire the fullest possible knowledge not only of the Tamil and Portuguese languages but also of the whole religious and social environment of the Hindus. In this they have set an example which has often been emulated but perhaps never really been excelled.

The first Protestant missionaries to India have indeed been the first Indologists—not because they were in need of a hobby for their spare time, but exclusively for the sake of their evangelistic commission. By the grace of God they have been able to lead the way to a kind of indigenization which, far from the dubious compromises of a syncretistic accommodation, allows the church to enter into the real life of the people. Neither they nor, for that matter, their successors up to this day have fulfilled this task which can probably only be completed by the Indian Church itself. But as initiators of this tremendous process they deserve not only respect but also attention even today.

To be sure, Ziegenbalg and his co-workers wasted no time in dreaming of posthumous fame. They were never desirous of the praise of men. If they ever allowed their imagination to travel ahead into the unknown future they envisaged their successors reaping a harvest for which they had done the sowing. This confidence was not rooted in an extravagant assessment of their own achievements but in the Biblical promise that a harvesting with joy will follow on a sowing with tears. If the early Tranquebar Mission had a secret it was certainly this that in all aspects of its work it corresponded to the spiritual law of growth under pressure; in other words, that it was a mission under the Cross.

If seen in this light, the 23 years of Ziegenbalg's life before his departure to India appear as a preparation for the path of the Cross through which the whole mission was to pass later on. Even the boy, orphaned in the early years of his life, had continuously to struggle with adversities from without and vexations from within. Hardly would any missionary society today be willing to accept such a candidate for overseas service—very young, without a completed training of any kind, of frail health and a somewhat ill-balanced frame of mind. But what he was to become he became in the school of the Cross. In Tranquebar there were the long and painful years of harassment by the Danish commandant—which, incidentally, saved the Tranquebar Mission from becoming a mission in the tow of colonialism—the lack of co-operation on the part of the secularized European congregation, including the

Danish pastors, and the open hostility of the Roman Catholics. No less disconcerting were the opposition from ultra-orthodox circles in Germany and, later on, the attacks launched against the mission by the secretary of its own royal home-board in Denmark. Finally, even in the inner circle of the missionaries tensions and frictions could not altogether be avoided, and time and again set-backs in the work and disappointing experiences with converts or even helpers threatened to paralyse the initial enthusiasm. If the work went on none the less it was, next to the grace of God, due to the patience and obedience of the pioneers with which they bore their cross and accepted all adversities as the 'fiery ordeal' which, according to the apostle, will inevitably come upon any Christian work to prove it. The later history of the mission in which eventually external decline and far-reaching hidden effects were strangely blended provides a confirming commentary to the experience of the pioneers.

But the Tranquebar Mission was a mission under the Cross also in another sense—not only in bearing the Cross but also in proclaiming it as the sign of salvation for all. It is interesting to note that the early missionaries were rather cautious in using the symbol of the Cross in their churches and otherwise. They knew that in India the Cross, and especially the crucifix, might only too easily be misinterpreted as an object of magic veneration. But the more determined were they to make the message of the Cross the centre of their life and work. They preached the Cross as the sign which, though inevitably spoken against in this world, is the sign of the hidden lordship of Jesus Christ, also in India. Whatever factors we may discover in which we gratefully find ourselves in continuity with the work of the pioneers—what ultimately matters is the continuity in the proclamation of the Cross in which all generations of the Church of Christ are one. However much we may feel compelled to go beyond their patterns and policies of mission work—they have pointed to the Cross also for our sake, and they could have left no better heritage. The words of one of the missionary leaders of our day, M. A. C. Warren, provide a fitting summary for our commemoration of the pioneers of the Tranquebar Mission: 'The roads which the missionaries of former generations built were not always straight or accurately cambered. But they were buried beside the road. And the road was built.'