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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

2013

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Cover Illustration: Map of peninsular India, i.e., Malabar as Ziegenbalg and Gründler understood it to be. The Danish Colony of Tranquebar is shown in relation to other European coastal enclaves (Dutch, French, Portuguese) as well as the British Fort St. George (Madras, nowadays: Cen_nai). From the Preface of Jenkin Thomas Philipps, *An Account of the Religion, Manners, and Learning of the People of Malabar* (London: printed for W. Mears, 1717).

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To
Sheela Jeyaraj
&
Alison Young

With heartfelt thanks for their unwavering support of our research
over the years!

CONTENTS

Dedication.....	V
Editorial.....	IX
System of Transliteration.....	XI
Acknowledgements.....	XIII
Preface.....	XV
Introduction.....	1
0.1 Tranquebar as a Venue for Cross-cultural Communication.....	2
0.2 Why a new English Translation is Needed.....	4
0.3 Translation and Translatability.....	12
0.4 How this Volume Unfolds.....	18
Part One: The <i>Tamil Letters</i> in their Contexts.....	19
1.1 Tranquebar's Origins as a Danish Colony.....	19
1.2 Origins of the Royal Danish Mission.....	22
1.3 Consolidating the Royal Danish Mission in Denmark.....	25
1.4 The Copenhagen-Halle Connection.....	27
1.5 The Royal Danish Mission and Its London Supporters.....	32
1.6 Origins of the Royal Danish-Halle Mission in Tranquebar.....	34
1.7 Historical Background of the <i>Tamil Letters</i>	39
1.7.1 First Attempts and Early Failures.....	40
1.7.2 Gründler's Contacts with the Brahmins of Tiruvorriyūr.....	42
1.7.3 Identification of the Tamil Correspondents.....	43
1.7.4 The First Set of 58 <i>Tamil Letters</i>	50
1.7.5 The Loss of Three <i>Tamil Letters</i>	53
1.7.6 Francke's Editorial Role.....	53
1.7.7 Re-starting the <i>Tamil Letters</i> Project.....	54
1.7.8 On Learning <i>from</i> the Tamils: Its Theological Peril and Promise.....	57
1.7.9 The Second Set of 46 <i>Tamil Letters</i> and the Unexplained Loss of Two ..	62
1.8 Social and Theological Dimensions of the <i>Tamil Letters</i>	65

1.9 Historiographical Questions	70
1.9.1 Historical Accuracy and Inaccuracy	72
1.9.2 Epistolary Etiquette	73
1.9.3 Transliteration Methods	75
1.9.4 Intertextuality and the <i>Tamil Letters</i>	76
1.9.5 Tropes of <i>Bhakti</i>	77
1.9.6 Gender and Patriarchy	78
2 'Religion': Good and Bad, and the Asymmetries of Colonial Society	79
Part Two: The 55 <i>Tamil Letters</i>	83
Part Three: The 44 <i>Tamil Letters</i>	227
Appendix 1: Titles of the 55 <i>Tamil Letters</i>	301
Appendix 2: Titles of the 44 <i>Tamil Letters</i>	307
Glossary	309
Bibliography	333
Manuscripts on Palm Leaves and Paper	333
Printed Sources	335

Editorial

This volume presents for the first time a complete English translation of all 99 *Tamil Letters* gathered and translated into German by the early Lutheran Pietist missionaries to India, namely Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) and his colleague Johann Ernst Gründler (1677–1720). They attempted to help their European readers to engage with what Tamil people said of themselves, their history, literature, religions, women, children, agriculture and the like. The missionaries disclosed their theological and missiological intentions to the Tamils. The Tamils, in turn, did not accept them uncritically. They sent written responses to their inquiries in which they disclosed their deepest loyalties and practical priorities that gave them meaning, purpose, and satisfaction. The missionaries believed that the more European readers would familiarize themselves with the worldviews and customs of the Tamil peoples, the more appreciation, care, and concern they would have for their own religious institutions and cultural symbols. This kind of cross-cultural impact has very few parallels in the 18th century. These *Tamil Letters* are now nearly 300 years old; yet they have retained their authentic freshness. Modern readers can still discern, though faintly, Tamil voices and interactions with Europeans and European attitudes towards the Tamils. Even today, this kind of Hindu-Christian self-disclosure, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and friendship, may have relevance for the ways in which we try to promote better understanding between people of different faith communities living and working in our own neighborhoods.

This volume provides a reliable first-hand source material that fulfills the purpose of the series entitled *Dokumente zur Außeuropäischen Christentumsgeschichte (Asien, Afrika, Lateinamerika)*, i.e., *Documents on the History of Christianity in Asia, Africa and Latin America*. Christianity in these parts of the world plays within the global scene an increasingly important role. Its history cannot be simply understood as a mere appendix to Euro-American history of mission and church. Therefore, this new series publishes original source materials that deal with the history and presence of Christians in the Global South. In addition to documents written by (Euro-American) missionaries, special attention will be paid to early works by indigenous Christians and to materials that will throw light on a wide variety of interactions between Christian faith and regional cultures. Transcontinental perspectives of Christianity will be documented as well. Scholars in different fields of study, especially researchers in history of Christianity, religions, local and global mission and culture studies, and general history are cordially welcome for cooperation.

Munich
November 2012

Klaus Koschorke
For the editors

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

Tamil Vowels

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ	ஐ	ஒ	ஔ	ஃ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē	ai	o	ō	au

Tamil Consonants

க	ங்	ச	ஞ்	ட்	ண்	த்	ந்	ப்	ம்	ய்	ர்	ல்	வ்	ழ்	ள்	ற்	ன்
k	ṅ	c	ñ	ṭ	ṇ	t	n	p	m	y	r	l	v	ḷ	ḷ	r	n

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our work on these Tamil Letters has a long history. In October, 1991, Daniel Jeyaraj saw them for the first time in the Mission Archives of the Francke Foundations in Halle (Saale), Germany. From then, he began collecting material that would help situate the text of the letters into their larger context. Subsequently, his archival research in India, Europe, and North America, dovetailing with his translations of Ziegenbalg's *Genealogy of the South Indian Deities* (2003 and 2005) and his writing of *A German Exploration of South Indian Society* (2006) added depth to his linguistic and historical understanding of the letters. While serving at Princeton Theological Seminary as its Mackay professor of World Christianity, he and Richard Fox Young began a collaboration on the letters that would make use of the latter's background in Sanskrit and his familiarity with Hindu-Christian interactions, both historically and theologically, in the era of Europe's overseas expansion. Together, we feel that we have accomplished much more than would have been the case if either of us had worked in isolation.

Special thanks go to Liverpool Hope University for its provision of a generous research grant to defray the travel and other expenses incurred by this project. During the summer of 2011 in Liverpool, an especially intensive period of work, we were much gratified by the unstinting support we received from this University at all levels. Deeper in the past, but still appreciated, is the role played by Princeton Theological Seminary in bringing us into proximity in the first place, in the early 2000's. Last but not least, we cannot repay the debt of gratitude we owe our families (spouses, children, and grandchildren), for their interest and indulgence as we immersed ourselves in the project.

We thank Professor Klaus Koschorke, the editor of the series on the *Documents on the History of Christianity in Asia, Africa and Latin America*, for accepting this work for publication. Likewise, we are also grateful to Harrassowitz Verlag for their help in bringing this volume into print.

Needless to say, all errors of translation and interpretation in the volume that follows are most likely our own, even though in no small part the same errors or others may actually have begun to insinuate themselves back in the early 18th century on the littoral of Tamil South India when the first transla-

tion (from Tamil to German) was originally made by Ziegenbalg and Gr ndler. However that may be, they are the two named individuals we most wish to honor, along with their anonymous Tamil correspondents.

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PREFACE

The meaningful communication of complex ideas (whether religious or otherwise) across cultural borders and boundaries not only requires a formidable expertise in a minimum of two languages and cultures. It also demands a principled commitment on the part of indigenous informants who must be willing to reveal a society's 'character' at its (perceived) source (even though, of course, no society emerges from a single source). As cultural intermediaries, the parties involved in this kind of reciprocal process will struggle—mightily—to convey and comprehend such disclosures. Locally, at the point of tangency between cultures, the problems will be enormous. Imagine, though, what the process would look like once an attempt is made to translate what has been disclosed and (partially or imperfectly) understood to an audience living a world away in an (alien) socio-historical context such as Western Europe or Southern India. Naturally, the recipients in those societies would decode whatever they hear in their own ways as well, and on their own terms. In this process of encoding and decoding, ideas are (mis)constructed, (mis)translated and (mis)interpreted in a variety of ways as complex as the 'originals' in the background. Intermediaries, who are adept in the protocols of the source culture as well as the target culture, are surely indispensable to the effective cross-cultural communication of ideas.

On the Christian, European side of the reciprocal process of self-disclosure and cross-cultural learning that this volume reconstructs from South India in the 18th-century, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) and his colleague Johan Ernest Gründler (1677–1720) exemplify how this complex process works. As translators of Tamil religion and society, they achieved renown among their Lutheran Pietist readers in Western Europe in general, and among a wider, ecumenical circle of friends and supporters in Germany, Denmark, and Great Britain. They first of all constructed an extraordinary network of communication involving Tamil informants with whom they corresponded, if they did not already know them personally. As time passed, they also began to function as conduits of long-distance correspondence between these same parties and Christians back home in Europe (Halle, for example, and Copenhagen). Naturally, their self-perception influenced how they functioned as cross-cultural intermediaries, for they under-

stood themselves to be “Servant[s] of the Word of God,” who happened also to be Royal Danish Missionaries in Tranquebar as well as *Pātiris* (“priests”) of the Christian Tamils. And in the beginning they brought with them to India a good deal of cultural baggage. When, for instance, they reached the Danish colony of Tranquebar in 1706 and 1709 respectively, they subscribed to the commonplace European perceptions of ‘Hindu’ Indians as ignorant polytheists, inferior to Jews and Muslims who were at least monotheists with recognized sacred texts of their own. Whether the Tamils had any or not, Ziegenbalg and Gründler did not yet know, although it would not be long before they did, and—what is more—made themselves impressively literate in them.

During their work in South India, Ziegenbalg and Gründler experienced a dramatic change of mind and attitude, with a far-reaching impact on their approach to the Tamils. The Tamils, they realized, were not the people whom their European contemporaries claimed the ‘heathen’ were, an uncivilized and underdeveloped people. Instead, they encountered individuals among them who were exemplary in every conceivable way and rightly proud of their religions, their cultural heritage, and their society. To their surprise, the missionaries realized that to achieve anything of enduring value, they would have to live among the Tamils on their terms and conditions. While there were Tamils who did not regard the missionaries as their friends, the ones with whom they did have good relations proved to be remarkably willing to disclose to them the deep meanings of being Tamil and Hindu. Despite the asymmetries of power in a colonial context, often they did not hesitate to register their frank opinions about the European Christians living in their midst, no matter how unflattering. More often than not, they thought of the Europeans in Tranquebar as an irreligious lot, selfish and greedy, violent and cruel, whose lifestyle violated Tamil codes of ritual purity and physical hygiene, caste exclusion and gender separation. Religiously, Europeans behaved themselves in ways that seemed a poor match for Tamil expectations. So puzzling were these reactions that Ziegenbalg and Gründler decided that they would simply have to enter into dialogue with the Tamils for whom they had a special respect. Fortunately for us, these were not ephemeral efforts. 99 letters survived, translated from Tamil into German, opening up a window on Tamil-European and Hindu-Christian interactions in early 18th-century South India.