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A Study of Christian Terminology in Tamil

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A phase of the influence of Christianity, although only in part in contrast with the culture in which the faith was set, was its chief effects on language. This was seen in a variety of ways. One which was little short of revolutionary was the new meaning which Christianity gave to certain words, some of them in familiar use. In attempts to express deepest convictions and central beliefs, Christians sometimes coined new terms.¹ This is quite true in the case of Tamil. The pioneer missionaries had innumerable difficulties in expressing Christian conceptions into Tamil. They were struggling with the problems of unfamiliar thought-forms and with the recalcitrance of the Tamil language that has grown out of Hinduism. At times the translators took over certain Sanskrit terms, Tamilized them, emptied them of the old content and endeavoured to fill them with distinctively Christian meaning. When such a solution was not possible, they coined new terms. The following Tamil Christian terms are but a few examples to illustrate the above-mentioned facts.

(1) *God*:—In the very early translations of the Bible and other books, both in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the term *sarva īvara* (Sanskrit, meaning God, the Lord of all) was used. Later on, in the 'Fabricius Version' (1796), *parāparan* (Sanskrit, meaning God, the Most High) was introduced, as *sarva īvara* means the God Siva in Hinduism. The term *parāparan* also is found in Hindu literature as a neuter noun. It was changed into the masculine singular by the addition of the Tamil masculine singular suffix to signify a personal God.

In the 'Union Version' (1871) the term *devan*—a Tamilized form of the Sanskrit *deva*—was introduced. The Sanskrit *deva*, the Greek *theos*, and the Latin *deus* are all from the same root, the basic idea being shining, then, shining sky, day, sky-god, god. Even as in the Septuagint the word *elohim* is translated by the Greek *theos*, in the 'Union Version' it is translated by the Sanskrit *deva*, emptying it of its former content.

In Hinduism *deva* is used both in the singular—to mean one God, and in the plural—to mean the various gods, objects of

¹ Latourette, K. S., *A History of Christianity*, p. 250.

worship and celestials. The celestials are of four classes. There are thirty-three thrones or principalities, each chief being at the head of ten million *devas*. There is also a conception that human souls, in their stage, attain the status of *devas*. So this term *devan* does not signify in Hinduism the one true God, as it does in Christianity.

In the 'Revised Version' (1936) the Tamil word *kaḍavuḷ* is used. It means He who transcends speech and mind. This word is void of specific Hinduistic conception.

(2) *Incarnation* :—The Sanskrit word *avatār* is used to denote incarnation. The root meaning of this word is descent. It is used in Hinduism to denote the different descents of God. In Hinduism there are vague notions of God becoming man. In Śaiva Siddhānta the God Śiva is said to appear in human shape to help his devotee. This, however, is not incarnation, according to Christian conception, but only an appearance in human shape, a theophany.

Nearer to the Christian doctrine of incarnation comes the Vaiṣṇava idea of *avatars*, descents of God. The aim of such *avatars* is given in the Gīta, IV-8. 'For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of the law, I am born from age to age.' Apart from the *puranic* idea of non-human *avatars*, there are a number of differences between the idea of *avatars* and the Christian doctrine of incarnation. *Avatars* are mythical; they appear from age to age; they are limited in respect of place and time; whereas the incarnation of Jesus Christ is universal, unique and historical. Hence this term is not only inappropriate, but also misleading, if used to denote the incarnation of Jesus Christ. To avoid this difficulty, some Christian authors have used a Tamil expression, *mamuda-urpavam*, meaning 'becoming man'.

(3) *Satan* :—The Hebrew word *satan* is denoted by a similar word in Tamil, *sāttān*. Evidently this is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *satan*. In Urdu it is *shaitān*. There is, at the same time, a pure Tamil word, *sāttan*, the only difference between this and the transliterated word, *sāttān*, being that the second 'a' in the former is short. The Tamil word *sāttan* means Ayanār, Arhat, Buddha, a chastizer or punisher. Moreover, in Hinduism there is no conception of the enemy of God who tempts man to sin. Therefore this term *sāttān*, the transliteration of the Hebrew word, *satan*, is intelligible in its Christian connotation to the Christians only, and hence it affords a handicap to the evangelists.

(4) *Life* :—This is rendered by the Sanskrit word *jīva*. It is Tamilized into *jīvan*. This word has the meaning of life, the breath of life, in common usage. It also means soul in Śaiva Siddhānta. In Hinduism there is another word for soul, namely *ātman*. This is used in Tamil Christian literature to denote the soul. To the non-Christians the word *jīvan* does not convey the Christian connotation life, life eternal (John 1:4).

(5) *Vanity* :—The Sanskrit word *māyā* is used to signify

vanity. *Māyā* is a specific Hinduistic term. In Hinduism, among the various concepts of *māyā*, we can see its two main facets, namely the world, negatively; and God or reality, positively. *Māyā* in its negative sense stands for the illusory character of world-life and of the empirical universe; and in its positive sense it stands for the reality of the *ātman* (soul) and the mysterious workings of God's power, or creative energy.¹

Vanity in the Bible refers to what is impermanent and unsubstantial (Ps. 62:9; Rom. 8:20). It has another Biblical sense, namely emptiness (Eze. 13:8).² The religious idea of the world as a baffling mystery is very well known to every ordinary Hindu. So when the Tamil Christians use this term, referring to the world as *māyā* world, it is ambiguous.

(6) *Righteousness*:—This is rendered by the Sanskrit word *nīti*. This word means equity, justice, right conduct, morality and law. In these usages it is found in Hindu literature. In court language it means equity or justice. In common usage it means justice, as well as right conduct.

In the Tamil Bible it is used in all places where *dikaios*, *dikaioma*, *dikaiosis* and *dikaiosune* are used. The expression 'righteousness of God' (Rom. 1:17) was difficult to be understood even by Luther at first. 'He himself says, "I laboured diligently and anxiously, as to how to understand Paul's word in Rom. 1:17", where he says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel. I sought long and anxiously for the expression of "justitia dei", "the righteousness of God", blocked the way.'³ So it is no wonder that the Sanskrit word *nīti* in the Tamil Bible, with its various shades of meanings, does not help the Tamilian to understand the Biblical concept of righteousness of God. But it cannot be helped.

(7) *Faith*:—This is rendered by the Sanskrit word *viśvāsam*. This is a typical example to substantiate the fact that the pioneers have given new meanings to certain familiar words, after struggling hard to find the exact equivalents. They took this Sanskrit term, emptied it of its old content and poured into it the Christian conception of faith. This word commonly means faithfulness, trust. Though the Tamil Bible underwent about half a dozen revisions, this is left unchanged. In the Christian connotation it is still a Christian-Tamil word.

(8) *Hope*:—The Tamil word *nambikkai* is used to mean hope. The verb *nambu*, from which this verbal noun is derived, has the following meanings: (i) to long for, to desire intensely; (ii) to trust, confide in, to rely on; (iii) to expect.

The Greek word *elpis* signifies, in the New Testament, not simply an expectation of something future, as in classic Greek, but a well grounded expectation, and a gladly and firmly held

¹ *The Concept of Maya*, by Devanandan, P. D., pp. 11-12.

² *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, by Richardson, A., pp. 273-274.

³ *Commentary on Romans*, by Bp. Nygren, p. 90.

prospect of a future good. The Tamil word *nambu* is very commonly used in spoken Tamil in the sense of trust and expect. Though the idea of time is connected with the sense of expectation, it need not necessarily be well grounded or firm, nor that what is expected should be only good. Hence the inadequacy of this word as an equivalent for *elpis*. *Nambikkai* was used in the Fabricius and Union Versions for *elpis* (1 Cor. 13:13). In the Revised Version it was changed into *nan-nambikkai* (good hope). It is definitely an improvement; but it has to be a firm good hope!

(9) *Circumcision*:—This is rendered by a newly coined Sanskrit term, *virutta-sēdanam* (*virutta*, circle; *sēdanam* cutting). This is a literal translation of circumcision. This is unintelligible to the non-Christians, a fact which can easily be ignored.

(10) *Gospel*:—This is translated by a newly coined word from Sanskrit, *suvisēcham*. The literal meaning of this compound word is good news, and thus it is a literal translation of the Greek word for Gospel.

(11) *Cross*:—The Syriac word, *slibo*, was transliterated into *sliba* (Malayalam) and *siluvai* (Tamil) to mean cross. The origin of this word is to be traced back to first century A.D., when the cross was brought into South India. It has now become a well-known word throughout the Tamil country.

Besides the above-mentioned few examples of the new vocabulary, brought by Christianity into Tamil, there are some more transliterated words. *Apōsthalar* (apostles), *pariseyar* (pharisees), *sathuseyar* (sadducees) are some of them. With its special vocabulary, Christianity has, on the one hand, enriched the Tamil language. On the other hand, Christian Tamil has achieved its own particularity.

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The Cross is the symbol of eternity in the midst of history, but it also signifies the unconcealed rejection of eternity by history. It symbolizes God's love for man, but at the same time it portrays man's hatred of God. . . . Viewed from the side of God it is the symbol of 'It is finished', but viewed from the man's side it is meaningless and defeat.