

First Lutheran Missionary in India—Arrived 300 years ago (July 9, 1706)

Colleagues

“Lutheran Missionary’s Legacy Hailed at Tranquebar Tercentenary Celebrations in India Seminar, International Consultation, Look at Past and Post-Modern Mission Challenges”

That was the headline on the press release coming from the Luth. World Federation on Tuesday. Here is the full text.

GENEVA, 18 July 2006 (LWI) Tribute was paid to the legacy of the first Protestant missionary to arrive in India, in 1706, at a one-day seminar and a two-day international consultation, organized for July 4, and July 5-6 respectively, during the recent tercentenary celebrations held in Chennai (old Madras), India. Three hundred church leaders, delegates and scholars, including 100 international delegates led by Lutheran World Federation (LWF) President Mark S. Hanson and LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, attended the celebrations, which took place 3-9 July at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, and in Tranquebar (known as Tarangambadi in Tamil), 300 kilometers south of Chennai, where the German Lutheran missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg first landed on 9 July 1706.

An Unparalleled Contribution to Civil Society

In a keynote address to the seminar on the “Contribution of the Tranquebar Mission to Civil Society,” Dr S.P. Thyagarajan, vice-chancellor of the University of Madras in Chennai, praised

Ziegenbalg's "farsightedness" in bringing Indian and European cultures together. He had made an "unparalleled contribution" to strengthening the civil society, he said, and people should consider him as a "role model." The missionary had "valued existing religions and wanted to bring out societal harmony." He also had interpreted Tamil culture to Europe in portraying India's rich heritage through his translations, Thyagarajan, a Hindu scholar, added.

The former director of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archeology, Dr Ramachandran Nagaswamy, also highlighted Ziegenbalg's sensitivity to the Indian context in carrying out his work. He pointed to the pains taken by the missionary to introduce Westerners to the richness of Tamil culture and literature. Missionaries of the time were known to require obedience to their beliefs and customs, whereas Ziegenbalg had first made the effort to learn Tamil and Tamil philosophy.

Speaking on the Tranquebar Mission's contribution to education, Dr Bernard D'Sami of the Roman Catholic Loyola College in Chennai, observed that Ziegenbalg's entire life had been devoted "to the pursuit of true wisdom." For the missionary, the Roman Catholic professor said, school was an indispensable means for the development of the society. While Ziegenbalg had stressed "character formation" as one important component of education, D'Sami continued, Christians should also learn from him to make their schools more open to people of all castes and classes.

Dr Daniel Jeyaraj, a theologian and professor of World Christianity, in Newton, Massachusetts, USA, underlined the mission's contribution to Indology. "Ziegenbalg wanted to empower people," and was even prepared in the process to expose the misdeeds of the local rulers at the time, he said. According to Jeyaraj, who chose "inculturation in Tranquebar"

as the theme of his doctoral research, missionaries like Ziegenbalg had only enriched local culture and traditions. Any widespread prejudice against them, he continued, was due to the lack of study about their contribution. The uniqueness of Ziegenbalg's mission was to work with Indians, enabling them to articulate their fears and hopes, he affirmed.

Post-Modern Challenges to Christian Mission

The inaugural address of the July 5-6 international consultation on "Post-Modern Challenges to Christian Mission" was presented by Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The moderator was LWF Deputy General Secretary, Rev. Chandran Paul Martin. Hanson offered a description of what was meant by "post-modern," what Lutherans had to offer to Christian mission in the context of Ziegenbalg's contribution, and what themes emerged for study. In a pre-modern context, "Ziegenbalg's work is a powerful witness for the work that lies ahead of us," Hanson said. "More than anything, post-modern is a way of recognizing that the world is in a period of transition," he writes in his statement. "Ziegenbalg knew what it meant to be a theologian of the cross," standing with and living among the Tamil people of India.

"The roots of this church deeply planted 300 years ago continue to bear fruit as Lutherans in India remain steadfastly committed to being engaged in God's mission for the life of the world. You are clear that living the way of the cross calls you and the people of India to the liberation of all Dalits. Your absolute resolve that all Dalit people must be granted human rights, dignity, and liberation, is a sign to the whole world that your discipleship is centered in the cross," Hanson wrote. "As people of faith, we cannot be in service without being in pursuit of justice."

In her keynote address to the consultation, Bishop Dr Margot Kässmann, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Germany, noted that today, "The church that goes out and meets the people is a relevant church." She emphasized that amid a "rapidly secularizing context," not only in Germany, but also in India and other parts of the world, Christians should discern the spirit of the times. "We need to translate the Bible into the language of the secularized world so that faith becomes meaningful to the current generation," she said.

Concerns of Poor Should Become the Churches' Agenda

In the five panel discussions that followed, Dr William Stanley, director of the Integrated Rural Development of Weaker Sections in India (IRDWSI), pointed out that the "church has the duty to protect God's Creation," saying that environmental protection and conservation had to be a serious concern for the church. "The poor, the marginalized and the least powerful are those who suffer most from illness and pollution caused by environmental degradation," he said. As Christians we do have an ethical responsibility to "seek policy changes through advocacy and promote alternatives for sustainable initiatives."

Demanding greater recognition for women in church affairs, Dr Priscilla Singh, secretary for Women in Church and Society in the LWF Department for Mission and Development (DMD) said, "History has proved that mission becomes a success only when it starts to include women," who at times had served without even being acknowledged as missionaries, or when mission had made it a priority to empower them with knowledge and skills. To reiterate her plea, Singh urged the participants to pursue the model set by Ziegenbalg who gave women the opportunity to question and learn from him.

The church has an "impressive record" of developing human power

for health care, according to Dr K.M. Shyamprasad, director of the National Lutheran Health and Medical Board in India, but “we have not responded to the current needs of the health-care sector of the country.” Even though India has the largest number of HIV cases in the world, Shyamprasad said, “the very mention of HIV and AIDS is anathema to the church, which equates it with sexual sin.”

“Will the church dare to break new paths and new inroads to solve (the) issues related to poverty, caste and gender, which perpetuate this disease and many others?” he asked.

*In closing remarks at the consultation, Dr Kunchala Rajaratnam, executive secretary of the LWF National Committee in India asserted that: “The concerns of the poor should become the agenda of churches not only at the national and international levels, but at the local congregations also. *We need to revise the theological curriculum to make the pastors and others respond to new challenges.”*

Ziegenbalg died at the age of 36 on 9 July 1719 [Mistake. It was February 23, 1719]. He is buried at the New Jerusalem Church in Tranquebar.

[End of press release.]

SOME THOUGHTS

1. What a jolt for a closing line! He died 40 yrs younger than I am right now!
2. Equally jolting is the Gospel-less summaries of what all the important people said at the celebration. NEVER ONCE—neither in memory of dear “young” Ziegenbalg, nor in the mandates drawn for mission in the future – does the

term (or any of its synonyms) appear. Makes you wonder if any of these folks ever knew what Ziegenbalg himself thought he was doing as the first ever Reformation-rooted pastor to proclaim Christ and the Augsburg Aha! in India.

3. Could just be the blinders of the reporter. But I'm doubtful. For the items reported—even from the Lutheran speakers (my ELCA bishop included) – are the standard boilerplate of today's ecumenical mission theology. And Christ's explicit mandate about the Good News to be "preached in his name to all nations (namely) repentance and the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:46) doesn't make the cut. You might expect the first "secular" Indian speakers to eschew that, but the Christian voices follow suit.
4. Again, it could be the specs of the LWF reporter that filtered it out, if any such explicit Gospel got publicity in the festivities. In a few days we'll have a chance to double-check. Marie and I have a dear friend, a Baptist, Dan Nicholas, who was there for the hoopla. He's a colleague from our days at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (New Haven CT) back in 2002. Besides being on site for the Tranquebar Tercentenary, Dan also went the extra mile to visit and photograph people and projects in India's Manipur state, far to the northeast right up against Myanmar (Burma). God willing he'll be back in Connecticut this weekend. From him we'll get a second opinion. We think he knows what's Gospel, and what isn't, which the major speakers possibly don't know.
5. Look at the laundry list of this "Lutheran Missionary's Legacy HAILED at Tranquebar Tercentenary Celebrations."

"An unparalleled contribution to Tamil civil society." Dr S.P. Thyagarajan, vice-chancellor of the University of Madras in Chennai, a Hindu scholar.

"Ziegenbalg's sensitivity to the Indian context in

carrying out his work. He pointed to the pains taken by the missionary to introduce Westerners to the richness of Tamil culture and literature.” Tamil Nadu State Department of Archeology, Dr Ramachandran Nagaswamy

“Christians should also learn from him to make their schools more open to people of all castes and classes.” Dr Bernard D’Sami of the Roman Catholic Loyola College in Chennai

“Ziegenbalg wanted to empower people . . . enabling them to articulate their fears and hopes.” Dr Daniel Jeyaraj, a theologian and professor of World Christianity, in Newton, Massachusetts, USA,

“Ziegenbalg’s work is a powerful witness for the work that lies ahead of us . . . he knew what it meant to be a theologian of the cross, standing with and living among the Tamil people of India. [Speaking directly to Indian Lutherans] Your absolute resolve that all Dalit people [India’s 200 million outcasts] must be granted human rights, dignity, and liberation, is a sign to the whole world that your discipleship is centered in the cross.” [Ed: Theology of the cross is Gospel indeed, but the specifics that follow are not what it is.] Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

“The church that goes out and meets the people is a relevant church. Christians should discern the spirit of the times.” Bishop Dr Margot Kässmann, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Germany

“Concerns of the poor should become the churches’ agenda. The church has the duty to protect God’s Creation . . . to seek policy changes through advocacy and promote

alternatives for sustainable initiatives.” Dr William Stanley, director of the Integrated Rural Development of Weaker Sections in India

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“The concerns of the poor should become the agenda of churches not only at the national and international levels, but at the local congregations also. . . . We need to revise the theological curriculum to make the pastors and others respond to new challenges.”

Dr Kunchala Rajaratnam, executive secretary of the LWF National Committee in India

6. Why did no one (apparently) HAIL Ziegenbalg’s own prime reason for coming to India: To offer Christ as God’s healing for the God-fracture that afflicts Hindus too as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve—and then to encourage them to trust him? I called the items mentioned by the speakers the “standard boilerplate” of what widely gets

cited as the purpose of Christian mission in the 21st century. You've heard me grouse about this almost every time I report on a missiological conference somewhere in the world. Recently I found some Reformation rubrics to use here. All of the items in the laundry list above, all of them good stuff without a doubt, are "coram hominibus" realities, stuff on the human-to-human interface of our life in the world. But the Christic gospel is something else. It addresses the "coram deo" agenda, the God-and-sinner interface of our life in the world. Beginning with the opening chapters of the Bible, THAT interface is where the primal fracture is. If that doesn't get fixed, any fixing on the coram hominibus agenda is bound to be short-lived. The Gospel claims Christ as God's own offer to fix the primal fracture.

7. You would think that folks would start to notice that all the hype, all the drumbeat, to get busy fixing the coram hominibus fractures, is hype for a project that hasn't gotten better since humans began recording history. It hasn't improved in my lifetime, surely not the last few days since Haifa-Megiddo made the headlines. Nor since the New Testament era. Nor since Cain and Abel. Might it be that the coram hominibus agenda will never be really fixed until the coram deo agenda is? Yes, indeed. Just read the Bible. Stop-gap measures (God's operational law, said Luther) can minimize coram hominibus mayhem, but never cure it. Coram deo healing has to come first before coram hominibus healing can be real.
8. So if those Tranquebar celebrators were serious about the coram hominibus proposals they were making, at least the Christians among them should have hyped Ziegenbalg for what his own primal agenda was. Namely the coram deo interface. You can read it in his letter back home from Tranquebar. He thought that preaching Christ and getting

Hindus to trust that good news, was the generator for all the “good stuff” that also arose on the coram hominibus interface in and around the mission station. Yes, he did indeed initiate a whole raft of such coram hominibus projects and institutions there on the east coast of India, some of which are still running today. But for him, they were all second-order consequences of his first agenda, his prime reason for going there (an 8-month hellish sea voyage!), and for undergoing all the Sturm und Drang—and there was plenty, not from the locals, but from Europeans, both in the colony and back home—of “only” 12 more years before his death at age 36: To offer Christ to those who’d never heard the offer before.

9. To us his family name may sound “funny.” Ziegenbalg, literally translated, is “a goat’s hide.” Neither of those two nouns has much pizzazz in our culture. Not much glory there, but possibly fitting for a theologian of the cross – Christ’s spokesman in a goatskin. Not too different from John the Baptizer and his camelskin wrap-around. Too bad that correlation wasn’t noticed last week at Tranquebar tricentenary. Whether in goatskin or camelskin the real “legacy” was the same: “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” A.k.a. the Christian Gospel. Maybe for the 400th.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Entry under “Ziegenbalg, Bartholomäus (1682-1719)” in the BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS, Gerald H. Anderson, ed. Eerdmans, 1998:

“Pioneer German missionary in South India. Ziegenbalg, the prototype of German pietist Lutheran missionaries, was born in Pulsnitz, Saxony. He had a conversion experience while in high-

school, after the early loss of his parents. Repeated illness and inner conflicts interrupted his studies at Berlin and Halle. But under the guidance of the pietist leaders Joachim Lange and A.H. Francke, he underwent a demanding program of studies, including Greek and Hebrew, which was to stand him in good stead in India. When King Frederick IV of Denmark found little Danish interest in taking up mission work among non-Christian subjects overseas, he instructed his German court chaplain Franz J. Lütkens to find suitable candidates in Germany. After consultation with Lange, Lütkens was soon able to present Ziegenbalg and his fellow student Heinrich Plütschau, who were ordained at Copenhagen and arrived at the Danish trade establishment of Tranquebar, South India, on July 9, 1706.

“The mission depended in its formative years primarily on Ziegenbalg’s creative vision and ability. There was no end of difficulties, and Ziegenbalg’s own impetuosity was at least partly responsible. Yet often he seemed to grow under pressure, not least on account of his practice of dealing with unforeseen challenges by intensive prayer and by accounting for his actions in incredibly extensive reporting and correspondence.

“There was, first, the challenge of the local languages – Portuguese and, more urgently, Tamil. With the assistance of indigenous helpers, Ziegenbalg quickly acquired command of both the spoken and the written forms of Tamil, prepared dictionaries, published a grammar (1716), and collected Tamil manuscripts. He thus became a pioneer in the Western study of South Indian culture, society, and religion, although three of his translations and his two major works on Hindu religion remained unpublished for a long time as they did not meet with approval at Halle. His translation of the Bible, on the other hand – the whole New Testament, for the first time in any Indian language, and the Old Testament up to the book of Ruth – was printed at Tranquebar on a Tamil press sent out from Halle.

Tamil hymnbooks, catechisms, and other Christian literature followed. Schools for boys and girls were established, and a seminary for the preparation of Indian assistants was opened. All this underscored Ziegenbalg's conviction that the indigenous church would be Lutheran in faith and worship but Indian in character.

"However, a dispute over policy with the Danish mission secretary, Christian Wendt, undoubtedly contributed to his sudden death in 1719, before he had completed his thirty-sixth year. Much later it would be recognized that with him 'a new epoch in the history of the Christian mission had begun' (Stephen Neill)."