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“Imitating the Wisdom of the Almighty”

Ziegenbalg’s Program of Evangelism

By HANS W. GENSICHEN

BY a happy coincidence the quarter-millennium jubilee year of the Tranquebar Mission again brought to light a long-forgotten but most valuable source on that great pioneer enterprise of Protestant world missions, permitting a unique inside look into the evangelistic principles and techniques employed by Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and his co-workers and thus revealing the very heart and soul of their work. It is a small volume of 352 pages, and its full title may be of interest: “Thirty-Four Conferences Between the Danish Missionaries and the Malabarian Bramans (or Heathen Priests) in the East Indies, Concerning the Truth of the Christian Religion: Together with some letters written by the Heathens to the said Missionaries. Translated out of High Dutch by Mr. Philipps. London, 1719.”¹

The contents as such, transcribed conversations between the Tranquebar missionaries and Hindus or Muslims, are not altogether new. In fact, they have always been available in the original German. Ziegenbalg, who is apparently the chief author, occasionally sent such transcriptions to Halle, and August Hermann Francke had them printed, together with other materials, in the

¹ “Malabarian” stands for TAMILIAN, “High Dutch” for GERMAN. Nothing is known about the translator. A copy of the book is kept in the Library of the Gurukul Lutheran College and Research Institute, Madras. The title is not contained in the bibliographies of Ziegenbalg and the Tranquebar Mission available to the author. Professor A. Lehmann of Halle University in his most accurate and comprehensive account of the Tranquebar Mission mentions the following title: “Conferences between the Danish Christian Missionaries, Resident at Tranquebar, and the Heathen Natives of Hindoostan, now first (!) rendered into English from the original manuscript, by an officer in the service of the honorable East India Company. London, 1812. 183 pp.” (A. Lehmann, *Es begann in Tranquebar* [Berlin, 1955], p. 315). This book, apparently independent of the 1719 edition, was not available to the author.— All page references in the following account refer to the book of 1719. The original spelling was left unchanged.

current issues of the reports on the Tranquebar Mission. Only recently they have been analyzed in the wider context of Protestant theology of the 17th and 18th century.² But it seems that the English edition has found very little attention and that no attempt has ever been made to restate Ziegenbalg's principles of evangelism on the basis of these conversations and in the context of the present-day task of Christian evangelism in India. It can safely be said that in the spirit of Ziegenbalg no celebration of, or contribution to, the 250th anniversary of his coming to India would be worthwhile unless it attempts such a translation of historical achievements into new inspiration for today. It is here only that the present account of Ziegenbalg's program of evangelism among Hindus seeks its justification.³

I

Ziegenbalg's evangelism was primarily evangelism by personal contact. He *sought and found the people where they really were* — at work in the paddy fields or on the seashore, resting at noon in the shadow of a tree, relaxing in the evening on the verandas of their little houses, gathering in large crowds during the temple festivals. Correspondence with the literate was an important supplement. It need not be retold how untiringly Ziegenbalg worked in order to acquire the necessary command of the Tamil language and literature and a penetrating knowledge of the Hindu religion. His Tamil grammar of 1716, written in Latin, and his account of the vast Hindu pantheon, printed only in 1867 and probably never surpassed in completeness, are but a few outstanding examples of the way in which he made himself thoroughly familiar with the life and thought of the people whom he wanted to serve. More than once his knowledge of the sacred books of the Hindus, which he collected and studied in large numbers, surprised the learned Brahmans with whom he conversed.

All this was for Ziegenbalg but a beginning, a means to an end. But as such it belongs to the very fabric of his evangelism.

² E. Beyreuther, "Die Missionspredigt Ziegenbalgs." *Evangelische Missions-Zeitschrift*, XIII (1956) 19—36.

³ Out of the 34 conversations nine are with Muslims. They deserve a separate treatment and are here omitted.

Ziegenbalg found it implied in Christ's great commission, "Go ye," that he should meet the people in their surroundings and on their own level. He did not imagine that he could become a Hindu to the Hindus. But he did make every effort to become *as* a Tamilian to the Tamilians, as a Hindu to the Hindus, and thus he has set a shining example to many generations of missionaries and evangelists to come.

II

On the basis of his intimate knowledge of the people and their material and spiritual condition Ziegenbalg wasted no time with irrelevant talk but proceeded immediately to *show them their true state in the sight of God*. Often the outward misery provided a starting point:

As to your Outward Condition, your Miseries are too visible; for you lead the Lives of Slaves, and therefore without doubt very uncomfortable. . . . But alas, what is all this Drudgery of yours, if compar'd to the noblest part of your selves, your Souls? You wander about like Sheep that have no Shepherd; for your Bramans don't concern themselves with your Everlasting Welfare; and tho' you have among you stately Magnificent Pagodas, yet you never hear a Word of Comfort or Spiritual Instruction in those Places; but are permitted to walk in the Ways of your own Blind Hearts and follow your sinful Inclinations without Controul, from either Priest or Prophet. And as for your selves, you mind only to support your Bodies with Food and Cloathing as if they were immortal Being; and you disregard your precious Souls, as if they were subject daily to Corruption. Yea, you live in the profoundest Ignorance of him that created you, and of him that redeemed you. [38, 39]

The responsibility of the Brahmans was not minimized by Ziegenbalg, and he was never afraid of holding their special guilt before them (189, 190). But for the spiritual misery of the common people this was at best an explanation, not an excuse. Nor would Ziegenbalg allow another excuse which was offered frequently: "We are not to be blam'd upon this account; but rather God himself, who placed us in these miserable Circumstances" (39). Ziegenbalg's reply was straightforward: "You can't say, that God has any hand in making you miserable: Your Destruction

and Misery come of your selves; therefore, without any delay, repent, and turn to the Lord your God; for why should you be Vassals and Slaves to Sin and the Devil any longer, and render your selves obnoxious to the Displeasure of an injur'd God through all the Durations of Eternity?" (40, 41).

Was it too harsh an answer? Ziegenbalg, unlike many a later missionary, was convinced that in Christian evangelism there is more at stake than winning adherents to a new ideology. Just as Paul was not afraid to speak even to the sophisticated people of Athens of the impending judgment of God, Ziegenbalg's evangelism was dominated by the urgency of bringing to men salvation from eternal condemnation, and he found the real predicament of all mankind in that "Universal Confusion" (49) which resulted from man's "Rebellion against God" (6).

At the same time Ziegenbalg was well aware of the danger of speaking in the false security of the *beatus possidens*. The Christian evangelist cannot be like the Pharisee who deceives himself by thinking that he has no sin. He shares the sinner's plight, and he must know that he invites the non-Christians to join a nursery of sinners rather than a museum of saints. The Hindus themselves reminded Ziegenbalg that evangelism had to be much more than mere proselyting on behalf of Christianity as a religion among others: "Pray, Sir, wou'd not you do better to exert your Charity first at home, and Convert the Christians from the Wickedness of their ways, and then to come and to convert us?" (42). Ziegenbalg could not but appreciate such frankness. But the call to repentance was not to be subdued.

I heartily confess . . . that many Christians are worse than your selves . . . tho' they are baptized Christians; yet in truth, they are worse than Heathens. But let not their wicked Lives discourage you from giving Obedience to the Heavenly Voice, lest you aggravate your Guilt, as those wicked Christians of whom you speak, apparently do. . . . You must not judge of the Doctrine of Christ by some of his Nominal Disciples; but accept joyfully the same glad Tidings of Salvation, and endeavour not only to be better than the worst, but, to emulate, and to surpass the best of Christians: For the Promise is to you and to your Children, as well as to other Nations. [42—44]

III

The full burden of the evangelistic task in India will not be realized unless it is recognized that here more than elsewhere it is not just sin that stands between God and man but also man's own religious endeavors to find God. Ziegenbalg's studies of Hinduism had convinced him from the outset that it would be the most formidable part of his task to *show the people the futility of their religious efforts*.

There was comparatively little difficulty in invoking human reason as a witness against the obvious absurdities prevailing in Hindu polytheism. Brahma's three heads and eight hands, Vishnu's "many different monstrous Shapes," the love affairs and quarrels of the gods, their indulging in theft, fraud, and murder — should they not in themselves reveal the true character of these deities? "If you do but consult your own Reason, you'll see that they {the gods} are but mere Vanity and Lies" (104). But it was not all as easy as that. Even in those days the appeal to reason was largely paralyzed by the argument in behalf of tolerance: "It does not become an holy Man to blaspheme our Gods; for true Piety despises no Man upon Account of Religion" (107).

Here a clarification of the evangelist's true intention was required. "I neither censure nor despise any of you as to your Persons, or anything that is commendable in your Religion; but I reasonably condemn your gross Ignorance, and your false Worship pay'd by you to Nonentities and Vanities honour'd with the Title of Gods; and therefore both out of Duty to the true God, and out of loving-kindness towards you, I can't but speak the things that belong to your eternal Happiness, tho' you condemn me of Rashness and ill Manners for so doing" (107).

But if Ziegenbalg himself recognized commendable features in Hinduism, why not direct all attention to them, as they were revealed, e. g., in the exemplary lives of the *sannyasin*, the holy men? Ziegenbalg could and did of course reply: "'Tis of no use to you, that other Men are Saints, when you know your selves to be great and impenitent Sinners" (41).

Yet this did not solve the question of the noble ethical standards proclaimed on the higher levels of Hinduism in general. Here it was necessary to strike right down to the roots, to the motives.

There was no doubt a commendable knowledge of future reward and punishment. But was this necessarily proof of sincere repentance? "All this may proceed from a foolish Desire and Ambition of being thought holier than other Men, and more disengag'd from all Worldly Enjoyments, in Order to be more esteem'd and honour'd than other Men; 'tis certain that Man will sooner Change his way of Living, and undergo all the Austerest Penances, than change his Heart, and renounce his own Righteousness" (108, 109).

It was this self-righteousness or "Will-Worship" (109, 194, etc.), the veneration of a god created in the image of man, which Ziegenbalg discovered at the root even of the loftiest expressions of Hindu religion and philosophy. The very fact that there was such a distinction between a religion for the privileged few and a religion for the ignorant masses revealed the radical defect, and the Brahmans' excuse that they had no time to instruct the simple folk properly could not be accepted (193). At any rate, even monotheism in itself was not enough. "I am glad that you are come so far . . . as to believe in one God; but you must not stop here: For you must likewise endeavour to know who the One God is, that you may pay him the Tribute of Adoration and Praises due to his most excellent Majesty" (96).

Tiruvalluvar, Sivavakkiar, and other authors who "have written incomparably well of the Absurdities of the Pagod-worship . . . laying down fine Rules for walking in the fair Paths of Vertue" (82), were no less well known to Ziegenbalg than to his audience of enlightened Hindus. But even they stopped short at the decisive point and established man's own righteousness rather than to break it and to lead man on to the decision of faith and repentance.

In the final analysis all the various forms of Hindu religion and ethics could be regarded only as ways to evade the inescapable call of a God whose exclusive saving revelation was to be found in Jesus Christ. It was here that Ziegenbalg, just like the evangelist of today, met with the most vigorous resistance. A Brahman told him: "All Religions come from God, and are approved by him. . . . For a Thousand different Roads may lead to the same Capital City, as Lines drawn from the different Points of the Circumference, all terminate in the same Centre. There may be direct and roundabout Ways; and what then? if they do but lead to the King's House,

my Toil and Labour is not to come into any consideration, when I shall arrive at the long wish'd for Port of Rest and Happiness" (212). Another Brahman's statement anticipated even more clearly the favorite argument of modern advocates of Hinduism: "Every one may be saved by his own Religion, if he does what is Good, and shuns Evil" (15).

Ziegenbalg did not question the sincerity of such a conviction. But he did deny its sufficiency. He saw through the characteristic inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of Hinduism with a clarity which is amazing, for he found in it just another attempt of man to establish and maintain his "own Sufficiency" (16) instead of relying on the one and only sufficient revelation of God's truth, which, incidentally, was to Ziegenbalg also the only way to true happiness: "All these Diversities of Opinions are from our swerving from the Way of Happiness mark'd out unto Mankind by the Finger of God himself; and running astray in Ways and Roads of our own finding out, leading at last to Eternal Misery" (213).

IV

Every phase of Ziegenbalg's conversations reveals that, notwithstanding his untiring attempts to meet the Hindus on their own level, the *uncompromising proclamation of the free saving grace of God in Jesus Christ* was the heart and center of his evangelism. As a child of the dawning age of Enlightenment he was perhaps sometimes too confident in his appeals to reason and in his use of rational arguments. The great Christian Friedrich Schwartz of Tanjore, the most congenial of Ziegenbalg's successors in the Tranquebar Mission, had probably a deeper insight into man's capacity of deciding against the truth in spite of his better knowledge, and at this point Ziegenbalg's idea of evangelism might well be supplemented by what Schwartz had to say: "If idolatry would merely consist in an error of the mind, most of the pagans would already have given it up. But as idolatry is a work of the flesh which, according to the Christian faith, must be crucified, they stop at this point" (quoted by E. Beyreuther, p. 34). But this would hardly detract from the essential evangelical purity of Ziegenbalg's approach.

Ziegenbalg's ability of combining a sympathetic understanding

of the Hindu and a straightforward testimony to Christ appears with great clarity from a pathetic little scene which has an almost Biblical touch and is one of the most delightful pieces in the whole collection of talks. One day Ziegenbalg found a group of fishermen on the beach. While they were mending their nets, a boy read out to them some love stories of the gods, written down in the customary way on bundled palm leaves. Ziegenbalg listened for a while and then interfered, trying to convince the people of the dubious character of their deities. But they pleaded: "We know no better; for we have no priest among us . . . the Boy that reads that Book to us, can read no other: For this is the only Book he has learnt at School. Pray, Sir, what would you have us do?"

Ziegenbalg's answer was an unreserved call to conversion: "You must repent . . . and forsake your Dumb Idols, to worship the True and Holy God, who made Heaven and Earth" (264).

The fishermen readily admitted that this was a "very good and reasonable" proposition. "But alas! we are so plung'd in the Dregs of Earthly-mindedness, that we can't disengage our selves from a thousand Obligations which tie us fast to our old Religion; for we are, as it were, Vassals and Slaves to the Governours of the Place, to draw about the Great Wagon press'd with the heavy Weight of our Idols; and did we come over to the Tents of Christians, they would not suffer us any more to follow our ordinary Employments" (264).

Ziegenbalg must have been well aware of the sincerity of this plea. Yet he could not but close with a testimony to Christ: "All these Objections would be easily answer'd by your selves . . . if you were earnestly in love with Truth; and you should not think and esteem your Lives dear unto you upon the account of Christ, who died for you" (265).

And even for the devout and educated Hindu who was touched by Bhaktimarga, the deeply emotional religion directed toward a personal god, and willingly recognized that "we are not saved by our own good Works, but by the Grace of God," Ziegenbalg knew of no better advice than to direct him straight to Christ: "Your Observation . . . is very just; and I praise your quick Apprehension of Things: But this is not enough; you must likewise acknowledge, that all Grace and Mercy comes from Jesus Christ,

who is the only Mediator between God and Man; and believe, and be baptiz'd in his Name" (281).

Just as Ziegenbalg thus restated for his own time and for all following generations of evangelists in India the perpetual purpose of evangelism, he has also expressed its necessity in a way which is of more than transitory validity. Once a Hindu questioned the wisdom of his activity:

'Tis a Wonder that so wise a Man as you are, should thus go from Place to Place, to entertain People with learned Discourses, who don't much care to give you the hearing: I thought you had arriv'd at that higher Degree of Wisdom, that teaches you to forsake all the Conversation of the ignorant, and lead a retired Life, as our Hermits and Anachorets do, whom we worship and revere as the wisest of Mortals. . . . For they never come after us (238).

Ziegenbalg's reply may well be considered as a summary and a Magna Charta of all Christian evangelism: "So great is the innate Pride of Man's Heart, that he would rather hazard his Soul, and all, than owe his Deliverance to the free Grace of God: Therefore true Wisdom consists in seeking and saving those that go astray; and the more laborious and active we are herein, the more wise we are, in *imitating the Wisdom of the Almighty*" (239).

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