D. Rajarigam, "Theological Content in the Tamil Christian Poetical Works," Indian Journal of Theology 11.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1962): 130-135.

Theological Content in the Tamil Christian Poetical Works

D. RAJARIGAM

The very earliest form of poetical expression of Christian thought and experience in Tamilnad may be found in the lyric literature. A long chain of Tamil Christian poets have left behind them a rich legacy of their devotional hymns. The first edition of the book containing them came out in 1859. It underwent a number of revisions and enlargements, and the latest edition of *Christian Lyrics*, published in 1950 by the Christian Literature Society, contains 400 of them. The work breathes an ecumenical spirit and is being used by all denominations. This is the first source of the indigenous expression of Christian thought in Tamil, which was followed by the *Dohnavur Tamil Lyrics, Pughzhmalai,* and the *Ashram Hymnal.*

The next source consists in the poetical works of Tamil Christians. Only very few have, to be sure, produced Tamil classics worthy of the Gospel. During the past century there have been over two hundred Tamil Christians who have endeavoured to communicate the Gospel in poetical form. In recent years even non-Christian poets have sought to deal with Christian themes. Of the Tamil Christian poets, two deserve special recognition. They are Vedanayaga Sastriar and H. A. Krishna Pillai.

Vedanayaga Sastriar, the evangelical poet of Tanjore, was in his childhood one of the favourites in the household of Christian Friedrich Schwartz (died in 1798), probably the greatest of the Halle missionaries. Sastriar composed verses and set them to simple tunes, which even children could easily sing. The following are some of his representative works: *Perinbakadal,* a series of contemplations on the nativity and sufferings of Christ, composed in 1813; *Balasarithiram* of 1821, which deals with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ; *Gnanavula* of 1837, a poem in praise of God's mercy and love; the same theme was developed further in *Paraparakanni* of 1850; the *Last Judgment,* composed in 1844, is a contemplation of the second coming of our Lord; and

Japamalai of 1855 contains a rosary of songs and prayers, which brings his career as a poet to a close. Sastriar's poems began to be published only in 1861 and it still goes on. The Christian Literature Society is carrying forward at the present time the publication of the works of Sastriar, which have hitherto remained unknown. The enthusiasm thus evinced in him is comparable perhaps to the revival of Kierkegaard in the twentieth century.

Krishna Pillai who died in 1900 at the age of seventy-three was a most gifted poet. The first edition of his works appeared in 1894, and the second at the centenary of his birth in 1927. During the last decade new editions of his works were being issued from the press, and thus the bard of an indigenous faith in the Gospel is recovering himself. Krishna Pillai was born of a Vaishnavite, non-Brahmin, high-caste Hindu family. During his early manhood as a teacher in the Church Mission Society College, Tirunelveli, he was gripped by the Gospel and embraced the Christian faith.

Best known of Krishna Pillai's works is *Rakshanya Yathrikum*, an epic depicting the journey of salvation. Basing his account on the *Pilgrim's Progress*, he has given to Tamil Christians a poetic narrative comparable to John Bunyan's masterpiece. Far from being a mere imitation, Krishna Pillai's poem shines with originality, all its own. As the well-known C.M.S. author, the Reverend T. Walker, has observed: 'though adopting the main framework of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, it will be found that the poem before us is original in many particulars'. *Rakshanya Yathrikum* is a classic poem of high quality, written in five books, which are divided into forty-seven sections or cantos, and contains in all about four thousand stanzas.

Another famous work of Krishna Pillai is *Rakshanya Manoharam*; it describes the joy of salvation through Jesus Christ. The work had its third edition published in 1951. As a deeply devotional poem, it conveys the Gospel in a wealth of similes and figures. Some of them, as shown below, reveal the high theological significance of Krishna Pillai's poetry.

Before turning to a closer examination of the theological content in Tamil Christian poetry, it is well to remember that the majority of the poets are laymen. They speak to their fellowmen on the basis of the Bible and of Christian experience. Their primary intention is not to produce systematic theology, but to communicate Christian conviction through the medium of poetry.

For the sake of convenience, the expressions of these poets are grouped below under nine general heads. They are:—God; Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit; the Holy Trinity; the Christian Understanding of Man; Sin; Salvation; the Fruits of Salvation; and Eschatology. So also in order to facilitate reference to the major sources here used, the titles of the works in question have been abbreviated as follows:—*C.L.*, *Christian Lyrics*, Madras, C.L.S., 1950; *R.Y.*, *Rakshanya Yathrikum* by Krishna Pillai, Madras, C.L.S., Part I, 1927, Part II, 1931; *R.M.*, *Rakshanya*

Manoharam, by Krishna Pillai, Madras, National Missionary Society Press, 1931.

1. God

(*a*) *The attributes of God.*—The knowledge that God is one and universal lies at the heart of all the literature referred to above. Both Vedanayaga Sastriar and Krishna Pillai compare him to a sovereign king ruling the whole world under the shade of one umbrella, as the Tamil expression of sovereignty goes, and in this way affirm monotheistic faith. In his *Paraparakanni* Sastriar refers to a number of qualities affirmed of God. He is one, eternal, the *alpha* and the *omega*, not bound by time, without change, almighty, omniscient, omnipotent, truthful, holy, righteous, full of goodness and grace. He has no body, no *karma* (evil), no name, no father, no mother, no relatives, no wives and no children.

(*b*) *God the Creator.*—God is the maker of heaven and earth. He is above all His works. He loves, sustains and guides the course of all that He has made. These ideas are emphasized in the face of the Hindu denial that God created the world. 'Basic to the Hindu concept of the natural world is the belief in the Ultimate Absolute Reality, the Supreme Self or Soul, which is described as Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. The Hindu scriptures identify God with the Universe, the natural world of multiplicity and differentiations, believing that Brahman transforms Himself into the ever blossoming and developing form of the external world . . . The Supreme Being is the whole universe, animate and inanimate.' Being identified with the world, the Supreme Being is seen by the Hindu in everything and everything in Him. As to creation, the Hindu insists that nothing can be made out of nothing; so they talk about *prakriti* and *purusha* as primal matter and the principle of consciousness respectively, and that they are eternal. Creation, then, is the coming together of these two eternal principles, without the intervention of a divine agent. It is this Hindu view of creation that these Tamil Christian poets are opposing in clear terms. They reflect on the story of creation contained in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis.

> To fulfil His will He, by His word, created in a day the world with a shape, brought it under His umbrella, and gave it to the Divine Son (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 50:2).

This view is repeated in the lyrics again and again. Their writers, all of them, insist that it is the holy will of the Father that brought the entire world into being. Vedanayaga Sastriar is not content with this emphasis alone. So having listed at length the things created by God, he prays that God may remove His grace from the sinners who worship creation in place of God. He also remarks that all the books written by the blind, who identify creation with the Creator, are nothing but dirt and falsehood (*Paraparakanni*, p. 9).

(*c*) *The Fatherhood of God.*—This idea is expressed in various ways. So *C.L.* 4 says: He is the author and preserver of life.

He has created the world and has brought it into being; He has laid down conditions of life; He has done much to enrich what He has made. Above all, according to His eternal decision, He has sent His Only-begotten Son to save the world (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 2:4).

> Let us, with all our mind, worship God the Father of glory,
> Who, having created the world and preserving it,
> In love towards mankind that are therein, gave His Son as a sacrifice
> That they may attain and enjoy salvation.
>
> (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 191:1)

To liken God to a father is not unknown in Hinduism (see *Thiruvasagam*, pp. 46, 145). But the fact is that popular Hinduism has held the masses in terror of gods and goddesses, by portraying them to be frightful and unapproachable. Further in its doctrine of *karma* and transmigration Hinduism has held out to them a bleak conception regarding their future. In the face of this terrifying fact the Christian belief in the love of the heavenly Father, who forgives and saves sinners, came as a great source of consolation. The idea of the Fatherhood of God is thus emphasized in Tamil Christian literature.

(*d*) *The Motherhood of God.*—Many Tamil poets call God not only Father but also Mother. Both God the Father and Jesus Christ are referred to by them as mother on occasions (see *C.L.*, pp. 220, 225; *R.Y.*, Part I, pp. 113:4, 159:4, 173:8).

The tradition of referring to God as mother is there in Hinduism. God's almighty power as well as his reproductive work are symbolized by the idea. But the Tamil Christian poets do not speak of God as mother in this sense. They use this language in order to heighten the faith in God's loving protection. In most places God is called Father and Mother at the same time.

> Mother, Father! standing in Thy presence, beside promises uttered, I give myself now as a living sacrifice, accept me, O Jesus (*C.L.*, p. 220:1).
>
> Father, mother, relatives, friends, joy and full blessedness—all these to me is Jesus (*C.L.*, p. 225:2).

Krishna Pillai compares the love of Christ to that of a mother and says that the former is a hundred times deeper than the latter (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 221:72). He calls Christ on the Cross his mother and says that He is all in all to him, and that there is none else as helper and relative (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 173:8).

This comparison of God to a mother is not totally unbiblical, although it is quite rare. 'As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and he shall be comforted in Jerusalem' (Is. 66:13). 'Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee' (Is. 49:15).

(*e*) *Usage of Hindu terms.*—In their attempt to express the Christian idea of God, Tamil Christian poets borrowed words from the Tamil Hindu literature. But in so doing they have emptied the terms of their old meaning and filled them with Christian connotations. The wisdom of this method may well be doubted; for it may lead to a distorted understanding of the Christian doctrine. At the same time it must be admitted that from the time of the Apostles the Church has endeavoured to communicate the Christian message to the non-Christians in a language understandable to them. St. John, for instance, calls Christ *Logos*, thereby employing a term current among the non-Christian Greeks. The following examples from Tamil Christian literature will show how misleading and, at the same time, how serviceable it is to use such non-Christian terminology in Christian writings.

(i) *Sat, Chit, Ananda.*—God is said to be *Satchitananda* in Hinduism; it means Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. The point made is that God alone is pure existence, true consciousness, and eternal bliss. Christian poets have used these terms separately to affirm the attribute of God (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 172:1). In Hinduism these three constitute, so to say, the name of God. Further, there lies behind these terms an impersonal conception of God. Therefore there is danger in using such specific Hindu terms to affirm the Christian conception of God. At the same time, since Hindus are thoroughly conversant with them, they may serve as a convenient tool to express the Biblical understanding of God's self-existence (Ex. 3:14; 1 Tim. 1:17), the true knowledge or wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1 : 18f), and the source of eternal bliss through life with God. So long as God is not identified with these impersonal qualities, as in Hinduism, there can be no misunderstanding of the Christian conception of God as personal. For it is Biblical to talk of God in impersonal terms, such as calling Him Salvation (2 Cor. 14:7), or Refuge (Ps. 46:1) or Rock (Ps. 28:1).

(ii) *The threefold activity of God.*—In Hinduism the threefold activity of God is referred to as Creation, Sustenance and Destruction. These three are severally ascribed to three gods, namely Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva respectively. The last of these terms refers to the destruction of the universe at the end of the ages. Christian poets also employ these words in Tamil and say that they comprise the activities of the Almighty God (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 147:11). So they use the terms not in the Hindu sense, but to emphasize the Christian idea of the creating, saving and sanctifying work of God affirmed of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Joseph Constantius Beshi, the early Italian Jesuit missionary in India, in his famous Tamil epic, *Thembavani* (Ch. 1:1), speaks of God as One who is powerful to create, to preserve, and to destroy the world. Thus the Christian poets have used Hindu terminology in trying to affirm God's omnipotence and to insist that

These questions were raised to push the above meaning of baptism to its logical conclusion. This meaning is the result of reading into Rom. 6:3-4 something which does not really belong there. Paul does not say here that baptism is a symbolic witness. He does not say that it is a testimony to something which had already taken place in the believer. What he does say is that in baptism something happens. He is reminding the believers in Rome of what happened in their baptism. In verse two he says that 'all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death'. In the usual Pauline fashion he goes ahead and explains the same idea in verse four, using a different figure of speech. In other words, he is using different figures of speech to express the one thought that in baptism they were incorporated into the Body of Christ.

Then what is the real meaning of baptism? To give an answer to this question we have to start with the 'baptism' which Jesus received for all mankind. He refers to it twice. In Mark 10:38 He says, 'Can ye be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' and in Luke 12:50 we read, 'I have a baptism to be baptized with . . .' In both instances baptism means His death. As He took this baptism for all mankind, it may be called the 'general baptism'. It completes all baptisms that preceded it. It is the ground of all baptisms that follow it. Just as the Cross stands in the centre of all history, general baptism stands in the centre of all baptisms. It belongs to the essence of this general baptism effected by Jesus, that it is offered in entire independence of the decision of faith and understanding of those who benefit from it.

Baptismal grace has its foundation here, and it is in its strictest sense 'prevenient grace'. It is in the light of this prevenient grace that we have to understand Christian baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6). In 1 Cor. 12:13 Paul explains the nature of this participation, when he says, 'By one Spirit we are all baptized into one body.' In the preceding verse he makes it abundantly clear that the Body of Christ is the Church. The visible fellowship of the Church is the continuation on earth of the crucified and resurrected body of Christ. Therefore, to be baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27, 28) means into the Church. Baptism is an act of God by which He sets a person within the Body of Christ—the Church. Even for Calvin, 'outside the Church no salvation'. In other words, according to this sixteenth-century Cyprian, the Church is the exclusive channel of God's redemptive grace.

Hence, baptism is an act of God through the Church. The person baptized is the passive object of this act. He is baptized (Acts 2:41), the verb here is an unambiguous passive. We have seen the ground and nature of baptismal grace. This prevenient grace is operative through the Church—the Body of Christ. When a child is set within the Body of Christ by baptism, it is in the atmosphere of the above grace—the Prevenient grace or

nothing existed which was beyond His sovereignty. He can create, preserve and destroy according to His divine will.

(iii) In Tamil literature there is a widely spread Hindu idea, which insists that God is affectionless. The point made is that He is beyond all passions, so that sorrow, joy, enmity and the like are not there in Him. Krishna Pillai ascribes this attribute to Jesus Christ (*R.M.*, p. 9 : 2). It is not easy to find how the poet expounds the idea in consonance with Christian thinking. Perhaps he has used it to signify the divinity or the sinlessness of Jesus Christ.

(To be continued)

Books Received

Hodder and Stoughton :

Brian O'Brien. THAT GOOD PHYSICIAN.
Charles Smyth. THE CHURCH AND THE NATION.
Patricia Chater. GRASS ROOTS.
A. D. R. Polman. THE WORD OF GOD ACCORDING TO ST. AUGUSTINE.
Frank Colquhoun. TOTAL CHRISTIANITY.

Lutterworth Press :

A. Leonard Griffith. WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN ?
D. T. Niles. UPON THE EARTH.

Tyndale Press :

W. Hendriksen. MORE THAN CONQUERORS.

The Christian Students' Library :

Maxwell R. Robinson. A COMMENTARY OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES.

The Christian Literature Society.

D. A. Christadoss. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT (in Tamil).