

A Brief History of Missions in Tirunelveli: From the Beginnings to its Creation as a Diocese in 1896¹

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Tinnevely² has been the fulcrum for Christian missions in south India for at least 150 years. The region adds a rich and lively chapter to Church History. Although Christianity is being actively suppressed in south India today, there is little doubt that the Church will continue to thrive as it has for generations.

It is difficult to point an official date for Christianity's arrival on the Indian subcontinent.³ The traditional view is that the apostle Thomas first brought Christian teaching to the land in the first century. No records survive that would put the matter to rest, but there is no doubt that many Indians attest to the veracity of the story. In Kerala and around Chennai, TamilNadu,⁴ there are many monuments, relics, and churches that testify to the popular belief of Thomas' presence.⁵ Whether true or not, the story does demonstrate an historic fact: Christianity has had a presence in South India since early times.⁶ There are limited resources for delineating the history of Christianity in India until the early-to-mid 16th century⁷ when, according to one historian, "Roman Catholic missionaries, chiefly Franciscans worked among the Paravas of the west coast of TamilNadu and made many converts."⁸ Father Michael Vaz was the leader of this endeavour as he "...baptized most of the Paravas, or caste of fishermen."⁹ Mass baptisms were not uncommon during these years.¹⁰ Jayakumar writes, "Xavier arrived in India in 1542, and in less than ten years he could claim between fifteen to twenty thousand converts among the oppressed classes, particularly the Mukkuvas, a sub class of the Parava community."¹¹ Francis Xavier arrived in India in 1542 and "...worked mainly among the Paravas in the Tuticorin and adjoining coastal areas."¹² He left India a decade later and the work was carried on through various Roman Catholic missionaries.¹³

Protestantism entered India later; it was still fighting its own battles as it swept across Europe in various guises throughout the 16th century. Müller writes,

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In the first 150 years after the outbreak of the Reformation, the Protestant churches were so much occupied with the working out to their own positions, with their defense against the forces of the Counter-reformation, and the solution of their own inner tensions, that they had little time or strength to consider a wider world and its claims upon them.¹⁴

It wasn't until the early 18th century with the arrival of German Lutherans sent from the Kingdom of Denmark that Protestant Christianity would be firmly planted on the subcontinent.¹⁵ This is a story that is well-known among the Christians of the Tinnevelly region, even to this day. As northern European nations were establishing bridge-heads and trade centers throughout India in the 17th century, King Frederick IV, of Denmark decided to send the first Protestant missionaries to the Danish trading settlement of Tranquebar (also known as Tarangambadi) which was located about 150 miles south of Madras.¹⁶

On July 9, 1706, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pluetschau arrived at Tranquebar, thus beginning a new epoch in the history of Christianity in South India. They had been ordained in Denmark prior to their departure and were financed by the King. The King was unable to attract any Danish missionaries to the undertaking, but instead recruited two German theological students (Lutheran), who were studying at the recently founded University of Halle under the influence of the Evangelical Pietism movement. The young missionaries encountered hostile reactions early on as Danish merchants were more concerned with profits than with propagation. However, they persevered, learned the Tamil language, established schools and seminaries, translated the Scriptures (in 1714-15) as well as many textbooks, set up printing presses, and collected a vast corpus of manuscripts that rests in Halle today.¹⁷ Others came to join them in their work—which was by now gaining the attention not only of the Danes but of the British as well. Ziegenbalg was eventually given the title Provost of the Tranquebar Mission and was given the right to ordain.¹⁸ It wasn't long, however, until the new head of the council in Copenhagen sent an exceedingly acrimonious letter to the missionaries which caused Ziegenbalg's already poor health to deteriorate and eventually cave in.¹⁹ He died on February 23, 1719, at the age of 36.²⁰

Ziegenbalg's leadership was passed to a series of others, of note was J.E. Gruendler, who died on March 19, 1720. Benjamin Schultze (1689-1760), next took the mantle of leadership of the Tranquebar mission and had a successful ministry, although he moved his residence north of Madras. Danish missions, were by this time, loosely affiliated with the British Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). It wasn't long, before the SPCK took responsibility for Schultze's work and provided him with a salary.²¹ One of the great moments, during Schultze's time as leader of the mission was, when the first Indian minister was ordained in December, 1733.

Schultze returned home to Germany in 1743 and was succeeded by Philip Fabricius, an excellent Tamil scholar. In 1750, he completed his translation of the New Testament, revising it through the years until his last revision was

printed by a donated British printing press in 1766.²² Fabricius went on to produce the Old Testament, hymns, a Tamil grammar in English, and an English-Tamil dictionary.²³

The next major period in South Indian Christianity is usually identified with, according to one, "The most renowned of all European Evangelicals in eighteenth-century India": Christian Frederick Schwartz (1750-1798).²⁴ He was another pietist from the University of Halle. He arrived at Tranquebar on July 30, 1750. His astonishing productivity prompted Stephen Neill to remark, "Schwartz was without doubt the greatest of all the Tranquebar missionaries. Yet, it is a little difficult to put this greatness into words."²⁵ His linguistic capabilities were astonishing. Frykenberg writes that he was, "Fluent in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Persian, Sanskrit, Portuguese and European tongues, both modern and classical."²⁶ Like Neill, his lifelong celibacy afforded him the opportunity for this type of rigorous learning.²⁷ Stephen Neill describes the man:

On all, he left an impression of perfect and transparent sincerity; he lived out his Christian life before their eyes in such a way as to make faith attractive even to the hardened and the cynical. He carried with him an atmosphere of quiet tranquility... This was due to the beauty of holiness, to the superlative purity and integrity of his life... But all that we know of the last thirty of the forty-eight years which he spent in India, without once returning to Europe, gives the impression of a joyful and confident faith and of an untroubled spirit.²⁸

The Indians still hold Schwartz in high regard; their accolades are every bit as soaring. Müller refers to Schwartz as "The founder of the Tirunelveli Church." He notes that Schwartz first took notice of Tinnevely in 1771 in his journal, "At Palamcottah,²⁹ a fort and one of the chief towns of Tinnevely, about 200 miles from Trichinopoly, there resides a Christian of our congregation."³⁰ However, Schwartz would not visit Palamcottah until 1778.³¹

In spite of interminable opposition from the East Indian Company, Schwartz continued to campaign around South India, recruiting disciples³² and visiting fledgling churches.³³ One famous incident that Schwartz had to deal with sheds considerable light on some of the problems he faced. The incident took place in Palamcottah in 1778, when Schwartz was requested to visit the church, perform a European marriage, and baptize several children. When Schwartz arrived, he was approached by a Maratta Brahmin widow whom he had met before. He had met her years earlier at Thanjavur and had refused to baptize her because, she was living out of wedlock with a British Captain named Lyttelton.³⁴ The Captain had died since, and left his somewhat affluent estate to her. Schwartz baptized the woman and gave her the Christian name Clorinda. Assisted by English officers, Clorinda used her funds to build a small church that stands to this day, known affectionately as "Clorinda's Church." The Church is a very sacred site in the district of Tirunelveli. Although small, it contains an impressive cemetery with remains of the early Christian (largely British) community. This story is widely known in the Tirunelveli area and Clorinda's memory is eagerly told by the locals.

In 1784, Clorinda travelled all the way to Tanjore to request for a permanent pastor for the now somewhat stable congregation at Palamcottah. Schwartz travelled once again to visit the church the following year. It was during this visit that he consecrated "Clorinda's Church."³⁵ Schwartz left behind one of his most trusted Indian friends, Satyananthan Pillai, to pastor the flock.³⁶ Schwartz remarked of this early Indian pastor, "I may say, with truth, I never met with his equal among the natives of this country."³⁷

Schwartz died in 1798, however the church at Palamcottah continued to thrive due to the excellence of an almost completely indigenous leadership. Clorinda was extremely zealous in propagating the Christian faith. She held women's meetings in her home, she arranged marriages, and she was, in the words of Müller, "...the moving spirit behind the great awakening there."³⁸ Today, Tirunelveli Christians mark the year 1780 as the beginning of their church. This is primarily for two reasons. First, the Church was by then taking an organized shape, and secondly, the first Palamcottah Church Register dates to 1760 and includes 40 names, with Clorinda's in the first position.³⁹

In 1791, Schwartz sent another German missionary named Joseph Daniel Jaenicke to the Tirunelveli district. When Jaenicke arrived in Palamcottah he found a membership of 282.⁴⁰ He would lead the Tinnevely Christians, in particular the community at Palamcottah, until his death in 1800.⁴¹ His legacy is that of "gospel tours" where he would preach and convert Hindus, forming Christian settlements for the Christians who had to bond together to survive. Some of the names of these towns are quite familiar: Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Samaria for example.⁴² Devadason remarks that during Jaenicke's leadership there was one incident of great significance and eventually great consequence: the Tirunelveli Christians converted a Nadar.⁴³

The Nadars are an interesting people, known for their work among the palmyra trees in the region.⁴⁴ Stephen Neill was very familiar with this people and explains about them with familiarity.

The great majority of Christians belonged to the Nadar community. This remarkable people occupies a peculiar position in the Hindu world. They are not admitted to worship in the Hindu temples, and therefore cannot be regarded as caste Hindus; on the other hand they are not untouchables, and do not belong to that fifth of the population which is excluded from all social privilege. The extremely hard work by which they earn their living gives to many of them a magnificent physique and a hardy aggressive temperament, which when influenced by the grace of Christ leads to great strength of Christian character; when less sanctified, it can produce obstinacy and quarrelsomeness and a state of endemic faction in the villages. Since these folks had for the most part become Christians in groups, they had not to leave their villages, and so had avoided that dependence on the missionaries which has been the bane of many Churches in India. When the missionaries first encountered them, the Nadars were almost wholly illiterate; they took eagerly to education, and have produced a number of distinguished leaders...⁴⁵

The Nadars were unusually receptive to Christian teaching. This was largely because of the increase in social status that could be effected through conversion to the faith.⁴⁶ Stephen Neill describes the rapid growth of the community's Christian composition:

The movement grew gradually, and then suddenly gathered pace. The figures for the years 1802 and 1803 are astonishing. A carefully kept record makes it plain that between 2nd April, 1802 and 24th January, 1803, forty-six baptismal services were held and 5629 persons were baptized.⁴⁷

Hardgrave, a specialist in Nadar history, writes of other mass conversions of Nadars to Christianity in the 1840's, the early 1870's and early 1880's, and by the end of the 19th century, the Nadars "...had the greatest number of Christians in the Madras Presidency, divided about between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants."⁴⁸ The missionaries had found a receptive people in south India, and the fruits were impressive.

Jaenicke led the Tinnevely Christians at a critical time, as Schwartz died in 1798 and the leadership of the larger missionary movement in south India would certainly suffer as a result. Jaenicke provided an important role through his missionary campaigns and his ability to select competent leadership among the churches. He chose a missionary by the name of Gericke, who had patterned his ministry after Jaenicke's—with tireless touring of the fledgling Christian communities scattered around south India. However, Gericke would only serve until his death in 1803.⁴⁹ During the early 19th century the Tinnevely mission, according to Gibbs, "...fell into a phase of decadence."⁵⁰ He places the blame chiefly on conditions in Europe: (1) the eclipse of pietism by Voltairian enlightenment, (2) the death of A.H. Francke—the Pietist lover of missions to south India at Halle, (3) the French Revolution and ensuing Napoleonic Wars which effectively severed Halle from the Prussian monarchy, and (4) the rising German nationalism taking place at the University of Berlin. The result of this was a shortage of missionaries. Devadason notes, "...between 1804 and 1829 there was no SPCK missionary."⁵¹

By this time, "...the entire Tinnevely district had been ceded to the British in 1801."⁵² However, the East India Company was still very suspicious of Christian missions, demonstrated by the fact that they did not officially allow missionaries even to work in India until 1813.⁵³ According to van der Veer, "...in the early decades of the nineteenth century the Company was still giving patronage to Hindu temples and festivals, especially in the South."⁵⁴ The Company was eventually forced to withdraw this policy, but not without resistance. Jayakumar's excellent study of the Company's resistance is particularly useful,

The East India Company, as a trade and profit-oriented organization, was not willing to interfere in matters of the religion and culture of the natives... The Company, and later the British Raj, the imperial system constructed by the Company, was suspicious of missionaries' political views and therefore both Company and Raj favoured Brahminical Hinduism... (T)he Raj spent 20,000 Pounds annually for the support of Brahmins and the operation of several pagodas in the district, besides other emoluments. In the 1840's, Robert Caldwell himself witnessed open British support for Brahminical Hinduism.⁵⁵

The debates over this issue would continue to 1838.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the missionaries' zeal was unrelenting. Five missionary societies led the charge to Christianize the subcontinent: (1) the London Missionary Society (LMS—founded in 1795); (2) the Church Missionary Society (CMS—founded in 1799); (3) the Wesleyan Methodist Mission (founded in 1814); (4) the various Scottish missionary societies that would culminate under the banner of the Foreign Missions Committee in 1824; and (5) the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG—founded in 1701, but turned its attention again to India in 1818).

In addition to having to contend with the East Indian Company, the Christians were also having to struggle with Hindu resistance.⁵⁷ Devadason agrees with Gibbs' assessment that the district was facing Hindu persecution,

The years 1809 to 1816 may be described as a dark period for Tirunelveli district because of droughts and epidemics and it was even a darker period for the little Christians community who suffered additional distress owing to persecution by Brahmins.⁵⁸

Hudson agrees that the Hindu resistance was quite vigorous during this period:

Hindus opposed the Christian missions from the earliest days they were established among the Tamils; literary evidence for it is indirect, largely because the printing press was not available to Tamil ownership until 1835. Hindus, who wrote anti-Christian literature during this period, circulated it as oral literature or in handwritten copies, few of which survive. Hindu works that did appear before 1835 were printed on government or missionary presses and were written generally by Tamil scholars who worked for Europeans.⁵⁹

The persecution was so intense at one point in 1841 that the Bishop of Madras wrote a letter to the Tinnevely clergy addressing these issues. Included here are excerpts:

It has been brought to my knowledge that a spirit of persecution has lately sprung up against our poor native Christian flocks throughout the district of Tinnevely... But fear not for your little flocks: if they thus suffer for the sake of righteousness, blessed are they... These trials are sent for the proving and the purifying of their faith and ours, and that like the first converts to the gospel in their patience shall they possess their souls... If they hold fast the profession of their faith without wavering continue patiently in doing well, casting all their care upon that God who, as they now know, careth for them, most undoubtedly they will be supported... The temptation must be strong to the native Christians to fall away under such a situation: but I with hope believe that they will be enabled to stand. Tell them of the holy men in Scripture who had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds, and imprisonment and death.⁶⁰

Müller writes that the Christians were being harassed by the local government and on at least one occasion (at Mudalur) a Church was burned down. The tumult caused many of the new Christians to feel that this was punishment for abandoning their previous deities and demons.⁶¹

The clouds began to scatter on March 22, 1816, when Bishop Middleton, the first Bishop of Calcutta, stopped by Palamcottah and Tinnevely on his way to catch a boat for Bombay.⁶² He visited "Clorinda's Church", worshipped with them, and

visited with the Christian school children. A few months after the Bishop's visit, and possibly due to the Bishop's influence, "The second founder of the Church in Tinnevely" (after Schwartz) arrived: Reverend James Hough.⁶³ Hough was a military chaplain and took a genuine interest in the region, which he would lead for five years. At the time of his arrival in November of 1816, the district had 3100 Christians in the district in 63 different locales.⁶⁴ During his time he made an invitation to the Church Missionary Society (CMS)—a decision which would prove significant.

The CMS sent its first four missionaries to India around this time (1816-1820). Two Englishmen Germans were sent – one (Schnarre) to Tranquebar and the other (Charles Theophilus Ewald Rhenius) to Palamcottah. Although often at odds with the CMS,⁶⁵ Rhenius proved an exceptional ability to rapidly learn the indigenous languages and he was able to build on the work of Hough. By 1826, Rhenius had supervised the construction of a Renaissance-style church. He made schools mandatory in every Christian village. He proved to be an effective leader although Stephen Neill discusses two major mistakes he made that led to his dismissal from the CMS.⁶⁶ First, Rhenius' independent spirit would not allow him to submit to the CMS, which was an Anglican organization, in issues of authority. Rhenius was a Prussian Lutheran and never did favour the Common Prayer Book. This led to the CMS ordering Rhenius to leave. The second mistake he made, according to Neill, was when he went back to Palamcottah, after being dropped by the CMS, and effectively split the Christian community. The CMS sent a missionary named George Pettitt to restore order, and although Pettitt did gain the support of a majority (176 to 67), the fracture was evident.⁶⁷ All was solved, however, at Rhenius death on June 5, 1838. Bitter feelings did not last. Rhenius' widow was given her pension, and Rhenius' name enjoyed popular assent as "the third founder of the Church in Tinnevely,"⁶⁸ the "Apostle to Tinnevely," and a "Prince in Israel."⁶⁹

From Rhenius on, it is difficult to imagine the Tinnevely district without thinking of the CMS. Pettitt led the Tinnevely district from a nascent headquarters in Palamcottah until 1847, when he moved back to England. Pettitt's leadership brought about accomplishments such as building the steeple at the Holy Trinity Church in Palamcottah,⁷⁰ supervising the erection of many new churches, and establishing schools. Perhaps the most significant of Pettitt's endeavours was his attempt to provide theological training to suitable young men in preparation for ordination to the priesthood in Palamcottah.

During the 1840's, it was increasingly clear to the Nadar community that conversion to Christianity meant social improvement. Oddie discusses this phenomenon,

By the 1840's, Christian shanars were already expanding their economic activities to include work in sugar refineries in Cuddalore or on coffee plantations in Ceylon, as a result of which they were sending money back to relatives in Tirunelveli district. Progress in education and an improving economic position, evident in these and other economic activities, were accompanied by a growing self awareness and improvements in social status. In fact, as early as 1849, Caldwell, in his work *The Tinnevely Shanars*, noted that

“generally... conversion to Christianity is found to raise rather than lower them in the social scale.” Unlike higher-caste converts, the shanars, who converted in groups together, did not lose status, and were not usually ejected from the broader caste community... Not only did they not lose case, but, as Hardgrave has pointed out, having connections with the CMS or other Protestant missions provided them with a network of opportunities in education and in other activities that had the effect of greatly improving the community’s social standing.⁷¹

The CMS missionary, John Thomas was leading the Tinnevely district through years of increase. He arrived there in February 1837. His name became synonymous with the village of Megnanapuram, where he directed the Christian cause in Tinnevely until his death in March 1870.⁷² Bishop Robert Caldwell⁷³ remarks of Thomas:

He... was an excellent lawyer. He had made himself by study and practice an excellent doctor. He was an excellent singer, a good musician and well acquainted with the science of music. As a builder he had no equal in Tinnevely... In addition he was a good mechanic, a good rider and swimmer, and was a man of great bodily strength, though often ailing through the influence of the climate as time went on... He was a good Tamil scholar, a particularly good speaker of Tamil, a good preacher both in Tamil and English and an administrator of first-rate excellence.⁷⁴

Descriptions such as the one above give historians a sense of the proficiency of these able men.

A brief discussion of happenings in north Tinnevely is necessary as the missionary Thomas Gajetan Ragland is considered. This “Heroic Pioneer”⁷⁵ was active in the northern part of the Tirunelveli district from 1846 to 1858, when he died suddenly of a haemorrhage while resting in his bungalow. He is remembered for bringing the North Tinnevely Itinerancy into being during 1854-1855—an organization to which Neill would belong. Ragland was a math scholar at Cambridge and had even become tutor at Corpus Christi College. In 1845, he joined the CMS work in India. He emphasized to the CMS that south Tinnevely had many missionaries and many missionary projects going on while the north had virtually nothing—not even a resident missionary prior to his arrival. Ragland compiled a team of three missionaries and several Indian helpers, and spent several years getting to know the 1000-town area. To this day, according to Neill, his memory is honoured,

The Ragland Memorial church in Sivakasi preserves the memory of one whom the Indian church has never forgotten. The four silver cups, engraved with the pelican (the symbol of Corpus Christi College), which he had won while a young man as mathematical prizes at Cambridge, are still in use as chalices in the churches of that northern Tirunelveli which he loved and for which he gave his life.⁷⁶

Ragland’s work was not carried on as enthusiastically after his untimely death, however, his work continues to manifest fruit for his cause.⁷⁷

During this time, Palamcottah was becoming known as the hub for Christian labours in the Tinnevely district. The town was becoming somewhat of a headquarters for the CMS. One visiting CMS historian visited in 1892 and wrote, “I suppose that in the number of resident missionaries, Palamcottah is the largest CMS

center in the world." He goes on to list 35 names associated with the mission.⁷⁸ The greatest accomplishments by the CMS in the Tinnevelly area during these years however had to be that of its astounding educational contributions. A printing press was founded by the CMS in 1847. The CMS Industrial School was founded in 1854 although it did not last long. The Sarah Tucker Training School for women began in 1858.⁷⁹ The Palamcottah High School was flourishing by the year 1867. The Usborne Memorial School was started in 1878. The Church Missionary College was established in 1880. Sarah Tucker High School began in 1890. The Sarah Tucker College started in 1896. The CMS started the Palamcottah School for the Blind in 1890. The Florence Sainson School for the Deaf in Palamcottah began shortly thereafter.⁸⁰

The year 1877 was significant, for it was this year that the district of Tinnevelly received two Assistant Bishops. Up until that time, Tinnevelly fell under the bishopric of distant Madras. Then Bishop Lord Frederick Gell felt that Tinnevelly was eating up too much of his time and so appointed Edward Sargent, who was from the CMS, and Robert Caldwell, from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) as Assistant Bishops.⁸¹ Sargent and Caldwell served the Tinnevelly district until 1889 and 1891 respectively.⁸²

In 1880, the Tinnevelly district celebrated its first centenary. This was an important event in the district, as the historian Bishop Caldwell presented his "Centenary Paper" which traced the history of the Tinnevelly church, no doubt impressing more of an identity into the minds of the Christians of the region.⁸³ Assistant Bishops Caldwell and Sargent remained the figureheads of the Tinnevelly Church for another decade. It was the deaths of these two stalwarts that caused the SPG and CMS to push for the creation of a separate bishopric. The SPG voted for a separate diocese in 1891 and created a generous endowment of 5000 pounds.⁸⁴ Any concern by the CMS missionaries was put to rest by the Archbishop of Canterbury when he met with the CMS Secretaries in order to discuss the matter with them. Müller sums up the final move towards making Tinnevelly an independent diocese with its own bishop:

Now that all hurdles—legal, doctrinal, financial—had been cleared, it only remained for the Bishop of Madras to nominate the first Bishop of Tinnevelly. He selected in the first instance the Ven. Rev. W.W. Elwes, Archdeacon of Madras. After he had accepted the offer, Mrs. Elwes' state of health obliged him to withdraw his acceptance. The choice then fell on Rev. Samuel Morley, Chaplain of the Bishop in Madras, bringing a long story of suspicion, hesitancy and redtapism to a happy close and enabling the Tinnevelly Diocese to realize its long-cherished dream of having a Bishop of its own.⁸⁵

The year was 1896. The Tinnevelly diocese came to be a reality; a bishopric had been created.

NOTES

1. This paper comes from my exploration of a British missionary and bishop in south India by the name of Stephen Neill. Neill was bishop of Tinnevelly during the Second World War and went on to become a leading authority in the mission field. To the end of his days, he was particularly

fond of this region, as it is where he would devote two decades of missionary service. I spent over a month in south India, in early 2003. I came to appreciate the Tinnevely region a great deal. I was welcomed by the CSI bishop in Tirunelveli, Jayapaul David. He was most generous in providing for all my needs. I am also very grateful to his esteemed assistant, Rev. Isaac Sutherson, Head of the Tirunelveli diocese school for deaf adults. Without their assistance this paper would not be possible.

2. The British word will be more often used rather than the Tamil "Tirunelveli." The diocese was known by the British as Tinnevely during Neill's entire time as a missionary and the English records that cover Neill's dates in India always use the Tinnevely spelling. In addition, Indian scholars use the two words interchangeably, however, they normally use Tinnevely to refer to the period of British rule and Tirunelveli since Independence. See Prof. D. S. George Müller's *The Birth of a Bishopric (Being the History of the Tirunelveli Church from early beginnings to 1896)* (Palayamkottai: Diocesan Offset Press, 1980) for an example of this.

Tirunelveli is in the southeast of India and is separated from the state of Tranvancore by the Western Ghat mountains which extend down to Cape Comorin. The word "Tirunelveli" is composed of three Tamil words: *thiru* which means sacred; *nel* which means paddy; and *veli* which means hedge. The town of Tirunelveli has been the capital of the province since the time of the Nayakan rulers. The Nayakans ruled this area of Indian at least since 1600, when the British East India Company was established. This information and much more can be found in Samuel Jayakumar's *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1999). See especially, pp. 48-70 for an historical discussion of the land and the people.

3. This discussion of the history of missionary work in south India deals with the years up to 1896, as this is when Tinnevely was established as an Anglican diocese. Robert Frykenberg's chapter on India in Adrian Hastings' *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) is excellent on the unfolding of this complicated topic. His bibliography in this volume is one of the most important mines of reference for Christianity in India.
4. Tamil Nadu has been the name of the area known formerly as the "Madras Presidency" or "Madras State" since 1969 when the name was officially changed. See *History of Christianity in India Vol. IV, Part 2: Tamilnadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990) by Hugald Grafe, p.1.
5. Stephen Neill's researches on the Thomas Christians of South India are still some of the best. See his *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to 1707* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), chs. 2 and 9 ("Christianity Comes to India" and "Rome and the Thomas Christians"); *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858* (Cambridge: University Press, 1985), chs. 3 ("The Thomas Christian in Decline and Recovery") and 11 ("The Thomas Christians in Light and Shade"), and *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 49-52.
6. Stephen Neill, in his articles on "India" in the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* writes, "It is certain that Christianity has existed in India from a very early date. The acts of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) were signed by John, Bishop of Persia and Great India... The *Acts of Thomas* (3rd century) tell how the Apostle Thomas was sent to India by Jesus Christ himself... All that a sober historian can say is that, in view of the archaeological evidence of lively trade between the Roman empire and India in the 1st century A.D., the story is by no means incredible, but that actual confirmation is lacking" (p.268).
7. Stephen Neill writes that a considerable Syrian church existed during this period in the Kerala district consisting of merchants from Mesopotamia. In the 13th century, a Roman Catholic archbishop of Peking was in India in 1291-1292—a few of his letters are preserved. He encountered small groups of Christians in South India, all of whom were Nestorian and retained allegiance to the patriarch of Babylon. See his article on "India" in the *Concise Dictionary of the World Christian Mission*, p.269.

Vasco de Gama reached Calicut on the southwest coast of India in 1498 which led to rapid European expansion in the area in the 1500's, however, missions would not be of central concern until Xavier.

8. Prof. G.J. Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up to 1838," (A paper jointly sponsored by the Tirunelveli Diocese of the Church of South India (CSI), the Centre for Research on the

New International Economic Order, Madras, and the All India Association of Christian Higher Education, New Delhi. This paper was presented for the Consultation on the History and Heritage of Christianity in the Tirunelveli Area from October 23-25, 1992. The location of the meeting was at the Bishop Stephen Neill Ecumenical Study and Research Centre, Palayankottai, p.2. This paper comes from the archives at the Gurukul Theological College in Chennai. Presumably, what Devadason has in mind here is the Western part of Tamil Nadu, as the western border of the state is not a coastal border.

Robert Caldwell, wrote an early and important work on the political history of Tinnevely entitled *A political and General History of the District of Tinnevely in the Presidency of Madras from the Earliest Period to its Cession to the English Government in A.D. 1801* (Madras: E. Keys, at the Government Press, 1881). This book contains an important chapter on pre-British missions in the area. Chapter 10 is entitled "Mission in Tinnevely Prior to the Cession of the Country to the English, 1801." Caldwell's account is one of the earliest; it serves as an important step in the history of the area.

9. Rt. Rev. Robert Caldwell, *Records of the Early History of the Timevelly Mission* (Madras: Higginbotham and Co., 1881), p.3.
10. Jayakumar discusses the various periods of mass conversion in south India at length. This excellent resource is indispensable for looking into the various methods, dynamics, and strategies of the mass conversions to Christianity by lower class Hindus from the 16th century to the early 20th. The mass conversion that were as a result of Roman Catholic mission work are discussed on pp. 93-99.

Stephen Neill writes about the first mass conversions by Roman Catholic missionaries in his early *Builders of the Indian Church: Present Problems in the Light of the Past* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1934). See particularly, Chapter 3: "They Were Fishers: Francis Xavier and the first Mass Movement."

11. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion* (cited above), p.93.
12. This quotation is from Devadason's "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up to 1838 (cited above), p.2. Tuticorin has been considered a part of the Tinnevely region since well before its official diocesan status in 1896, when Rev. Samuel Morley was consecrated Bishop in St. George's Cathedral, Madras, by the Metropolitan of India. See *The Birth of a Bishopric (Being the History of the Tirunelveli Church from early beginnings to 1896)* (Palayamkottai: Diocesan Offset Press, 1980) by D.S. George Müller, p.58.
13. Although the date for his arrival in India in 1542 is not disputed, the precise dates of Xavier's exiting India are not altogether clear. Müller (*Birth of a Bishopric*, p.2) places the date at 1544, while Devadason (*From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli up to 1838*, p.3) has the date of 1552. Stephen Neill addresses these problems in his article on Francis Xavier in the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* (pp.669-670) as well as in his *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to 1707*. He claims that Xavier lived in India from 1542 to 1547 and then left for Japan for three years. He died on a trip to China and his body was then brought back to Goa, India. R.E. Frykenberg in his chapter on India (p. 168) in Adrian Hastings' *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) places Xavier's final brief trip to India at 1548. Frederick Norris (in his *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: One World, 2002), p. 150, writes, "In 1552 [Xavier], returned to Goa and then headed out for China." The scholarship indicates that Xavier's missionary career was frenetic; he frequently left his mission, wherever it might be at a given time, to go on short term missionary travels.
14. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.3. Müller cites Stephen Neill's *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) in this passage, although he doesn't refer to a specific page, so it is possible this quotation actually comes from Neill.
15. It must be noted here that Protestants had been in India at least by 1658 when "...the Dutch captured Tuticorin from the Portuguese, whose priests also they drove out. The Dutch were Protestants and theirs was the first Protestant influence to be felt in the area. They also built the first protestant church in Tuticorin in 1750. Unfortunately, there is no record available to show whether there were any Christian evangelistic activities by the Dutch, or to what extent they succeeded in building up a local Christian community. In all probability, the Protestant influence faded away after some years and it was once again the Roman Catholic community only that flourished in those parts" (Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up to 1838," p.4). Müller

- notes that the Dutch not only expelled the Catholic priests, but they also "...turned many Roman Catholic Churches to warehouses." He writes that the church which was erected in 1750 still stands with the monogram of the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.) over the porch with the date still apparent. He writes, "This is, therefore, the oldest Protestant Christian Church in Tirunelveli District." It was handed over to the British on June 1, 1825 on the condition that it will never be renamed after a Christian saint. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.4.
16. The British East India Company was founded on December 31, 1600 and the Dutch East India Company in 1602. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.4; and *The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970* (New Delhi: India SPCK, 1972) by M.E. Gibbs, p.3.
 17. R.E. Frykenberg, "India" (in A. Hastings), p. 174.
 18. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.37.
 19. Frykenberg, "India" (in A. Hastings), p.175 and Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.39.
 20. According to Gibbs (*The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970*), p.14, Ziegandalg's companion had left the mission eight years prior. He writes, "Pluetschau was invalidated home in 1711."
 21. According to Neill, in *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.41, his salary was 60 pounds a year. However, the SPCK "...did not try to interfere in the direction of the work."
 22. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.45.
 23. The final chapter of Fabricius' life was a dark one as he was imprisoned for outstanding debts. He died on January 24, 1791. See Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.45.
 24. Frykenberg, "India" (in A. Hastings), p.176. There is an excellent discussion of Schwartz in the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* by H.W. Gensichen, pp. 541-542.
 25. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.44.
 26. Frykenberg, "India," (in A. Hastings), p.176.
 27. Both Neill and Gibbs refer to this idea.
 28. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.46. Robert Caldwell also describes Schwartz at length on pp.3-6 of his *Records of the Early History of the Tinnevelly Mission* (cited above).
 29. Palamcottah is also often spelled Palayomcottai, among other spellings. This is the present-day residence of the Bishop of the diocese of Tirunelveli. Neill lived in the Bishopstowe there while Bishop of the Diocese.
 30. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, pp.6-7.
 31. This is according to Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tinnelveli Up to 1838," p.6; Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.7; and Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.53. Their primary source is Robert Caldwell's *Records of the Early History of the Tinnevelly Mission* (cited above), p.5, "Swartz's first visit to Palamcottah was in 1778."
 32. There deserves to be written a monograph devoted to the Indian assistance that Schwarz received during the outstanding expansion of Christianity under official opposition by the Company. Most historians discuss the disciples who proved indispensable to Schwartz' cause, but certainly deserve careful attention. Frykenberg discusses Satyanathan Pillai, who converted to Christianity in the face of familial opposition and became "Schwartz's most active and energetic assistant ("India," p.176, in Hastings)" at the city of Vallam (near Thanjavur), during a time when the British forces attacked and destroyed the church building in 1772. (It must be pointed out, however, that while the Company "officially" opposed the Indian Missions, there were certain soldiers who actually aided the missionary cause—see Frykenberg, pp. 176-177). Frykenberg also discusses this band of Indian disciples, referring to them as Schwarz's "Helpers" who "...extended the reach of Tamil Christianity as never before" (p.176). Another young man, Devanayagam Sastri became, in the words of Frykenberg (p.177), "The most renowned of all Schwartz's Helpers." Frykenberg goes on to discuss Devanayagam's extraordinary contributions to Tamil Christianity (pp. 178-179) such as his copious works of prose and poetry that became much loved by the Christians in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Gensichen, in his article on Schwartz in the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* writes that Schwartz often supported indigenous catechists from his own money.
 33. Frank Conlon writes, "As most of the students are aware of the Indian history know that, the East India Company's initial policies toward Christian missionaries were at best ambivalent... Until

pressure at home was created by the evangelical Christian interests, the Company kept mission stations out of its territories and tried to limit the entry of missionaries thereto." See p.6 of his article "Vishnubawa Brahmachari and Hindu Revival" in *Religious Controversy in British India*, ed. By Kenneth W. Jones.

34. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.7.
35. See Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up To 1838," p.7.
36. Devadason notes that while Satyanathan Pillai was un-ordained at the time, he was ordained priest at Tranquebar according to Lutheran rites in 1790. It was at this time, according to Frykenberg, "India" (in Hastings), p.177, that he became fully commissioned by the SPCK as "...the first Tamil missionary..." and was back to Tirunelveli.
37. Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up to 1838," p.8.
38. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.8.
39. Unfortunately, according to Devadason, this document has been lost. It was originally in the archives of the Tanjore Mission, but has since disappeared. Fortunately, Bishop Caldwell (although not a Bishop of Tinnevely) reproduced these records in his *Records of the Early History of the Tinnevely Mission* (1881, cited above), pp.9-11. See also Devadason's "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up To 1838," p.7, and Müller's *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.9.
40. 282 is the number provided by Devadason, p.9; however, Müller puts the number of Christians in 1791 at around 400.
41. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.14.
42. Neill informs that it was the SPG tradition to give their stations Bible names, but the CMS chose Sanskrit terms such as Suvisheshapuram—"the village of the gospel," or Kudeshapuram—"the village of grace." See *God's Apprentice*, p.90.
43. The word "Nadar" translates to English as "Lord." The historic name for this caste is the "Shanars," or, "climbers" (Gibbs, p.62). They prefer to be called "Nadars." The best analysis of the Nadars is by Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., in his *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969). However, the earliest history of these people was highlighted by the great Tinnevely historian Robert Caldwell in his *The Tinnevely Shamars: Their Religion, and their Moral Condition and Characteristics as a Caste: With Special reference to The Facilities and Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity Amongst Them* (Madras: Reuben Twigg at the Christian Knowledge Society's Press, Church Street, 1849).
44. The palmyra tree produces a fruit that is very sweet and is often used for making beer. The present author was given some of the palmyra trees to eat the fruit in India. It has a consistency of packed, brown sugar and tastes similar to brown sugar, only much less refined.
45. *God's Apprentice: The Autobiography of Stephen Neill* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), pp.82-83. Susan Billington Harper provides several excellent discussions on the Nadars in her book of Bishop Azariah: *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000). Bishop Azariah came from the Nadars and went on to found the important Indian Missionary Society in Tirunelveli. See pp. 11-14 in her biography of Azariah. See also Geoffrey A. Oddie's article "India: Missionaries, Conversion, and Change," where he has a section in this article entitled, "Tirunelveli Nadars and Conversion." This article is located in Kevin Ward and Brain Stanley's *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity: 1799-1999* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).
46. Susan B. Harper discusses this on p. 12 of her biography of Azariah, It must be noted, however, that the future of Christian converts was unpredictable. There were times when the Christians could gain social status, but there are also occasions where the Christian community would become out-casted. The issues were complex. If the new converts could convince the entire caste to convert, the social status of the group could actually increase. Individuals who converted were often forced to abandon their community and move in order to find Christian support. The often difficult situations regarding conversion and caste exist to this day.
47. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.216.
48. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (cited above), p.47.
49. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970*, p.22. Robert Caldwell devotes an entire chapter to

- Jaenicke (Chapter Two: "From Jaenicke's Arrival in Palamcotta in October, 1791, Till His Death in May 1800") in *Records of the Early History of the Tinnevely Mission* (cited above), pp.36-65.
50. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970*, p.22.
 51. Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up To 1838," p.9.
 52. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.15.
 53. This is discussed in Peter van der Veer's *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: University Press, 2001), p.41. The Company's Charter Act of 1813 "...opened the door of India to Christian Missionaries" according to E.S. Alexander (see below for reference), p.2. She notes that it also. "...provided for the appointment of a Bishop and archdeacons in India."
 54. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, p.41.
 55. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, p.91. Robert Frykenberg agrees with this thesis in his "Construction of Hinduism at the nexus of History," *Journal of Indian History* (Vol. XXIII, No. 3, Winter, 1993).
 56. There is a good discussion of the erratic and at times vitriolic relationship between the Company and the missionaries in Elizabeth Susan Alexander's *The Attitudes of British Protestant Missionaries Towards Nationalism in India (With Special Reference to Madras Presidency): 1919-1927* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994), pp.1-3.
 57. A good example of how sophisticated and vehement the resistance could become is found in Kenneth W. Jones' "Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Critique of Christianity," (ed) by Jones; this article is Chapter Three of *Religions Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (SUNY Press, 1992). Barbara Metcalf argues that this was a very important period for Hindu faith formation, "These debates... were an important element in constituting fundamental changes in Indian social, political, and cultural life. Through their polemics they at once created a role for themselves and forged the notion of religion, above all, as a self-conscious ideology and a primary focus for group loyalty." This quotation comes from p.230 of her article entitled "Polemical debates in Colonial India" in the Kenneth W. Jones volume. Frank F. Conlon's article in the same volume entitled "Vishnubawa Brahmachari and Hindu Revival" is also very helpful. Conlon argues that Hindu street preachers had to counter Christian street preachers, thus bringing what were usually affairs of the religious elite to a public stage. He also argues that Vishnubawa Brahmachari could be considered India's "first Hindu missionary." See pp. 8-9. Elizabeth Susan Alexander writes, "The late nineteenth and early twentieth century socio-cultural 'renaissance' in India was thus the result of a process that western Christian missionaries had, in part, initiated. The socio-religious movements were an expression of national consciousness, and they deepened the growing spirit of nationalism in India." See here *The Attitudes of British Protestant Missionaries Towards Nationalism in India*, p.7.
 58. Devadason, "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up To 1838," p.10.
 59. D. Dennis Hudson, "Arumuga Navalar and the Hindu Renaissance Among the Tamils," in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, p.28.
 60. This letter is found in Appendix 4: "Bishop Spencer, Bishop of Madras to the Tirunelveli Clergy, 8th December, 1841," pp.232-233 in the book *Mission Reader: Historical Models for Wholistic Mission in the Indian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) by Samuel Jayakumar.
 61. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, pp. 15, 18.
 62. The story is recounted by both Devadason (p.10) and Müller (p.18). Bishop Middleton was born in 1769 in Derbyshire, the son of a rector. He took the doctorate from Cambridge and was consecrated the first bishop of Calcutta in June, 1814. He arrived in Calcutta in December that year. This is recounted in Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970*, pp. 55-59.
 63. George Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p. 19, writes, "Rev. James Hough... may be (after Schwartz) rightly called 'the second founder of the Church in Tinnevely.'"
 64. These statistics are from Devadason's "From Tranquebar to Tirunelveli Up To 1838," p.12.
 65. See Stephen Neill's article on Rhenius in the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* where he discusses some of the conflicts between Rhenius and the CMS. His most thorough treatment of Rhenius is in his *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, pp.218-222.
 66. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, pp. 218-222.
 67. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.221.
 68. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.222.

69. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.28.
70. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.29.
71. Geoffrey Oddie, "India: Missionaries, Conversion, and Change," pp.249-250, in *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity: 1799-1999* (ed. By Ward and Stanley, cited above). For a formidable discussion on related caste issues, see Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: University Press, 2001).
72. Mrs. Thomas, John's wife, became a CMS missionary in her own right and served in India 29 years as her husband's widow.
73. Caldwell (1814-1892) was an historian of Tinnevely, an archaeologist, and a well-known Tamil scholar. He is perhaps most well-known for his *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* (first published in 1856) that, according to Jayakumar, began the "Tamil renaissance." Caldwell was the first person to use the word "Dravidian" (see Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, p.49). He arrived in India in 1838, was ordained in 1841, and was consecrated "Assistant Bishop of Madras" along with Edward Sargent in St. Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta, by the Metropolitan of India, Bishop Johnson, on March 11, 1877. The two worked in harmony, serving the Tirunelveli region for many years. See Neill's *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, pp. 228-229, 388, 395; and Müller's *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p. 41. For more on Robert Caldwell, see Jayakumar's Appendix 2, "Robert Caldwell," cf. *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, pp. 420-421.
74. This quotation comes from Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India: 1600, 1970*, p.144.
75. This is the title of Stephen Neill's discussion of Ragland on pp.234-235 in *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*. Gibbs (*The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970*) has a more thorough discussion of Ragland on pp.159-162.
76. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707-1858*, p.235.
77. *In God's Apprentice*, p.103, Neill writes, "His grave is to me one of the holiest places in the world."
78. The source for this information is Müller, Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, pp. 33-34. The historian mentioned here is Eugene Stock. For a good discussion of Stock, see Kevin Ward's "'Taking Stock': The Church Missionary Society and Its Historians" in Ward and Brian Stanley's *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1799-1999* (cited above).
79. Sarah Tucker never visited India for she was an invalid, but she was deeply interested in mission work and wrote some books on missions. She was the sister of John Tucker who was a CMS missionary in the 1830's and 1840's in the Kerala region. Many funds were raised in her name to go towards missions in the Tinnevely region.
80. See Müller's *The Birth of a Bishopric*, pp.35-39, and Chapter 17 in Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India: 1600-1970* which is entitled "Education, Women's Work and Medical Missions."
81. Müller notes that establishing bishops was a torturous process, however, in 1874, a new law (Colonial Clergy Act) was passed to enable "Suffragan," or, Assistant Bishops to be consecrated by the Bishops in India themselves. It would not be until 1896 that Tinnevely would become an official Diocese with its own bishop. See pp. 43-44 of his *The Birth of a Bishopric*.
82. The deaths of both men are recorded in Müller's follow up to *The Birth of a Bishopric*, entitled, *The Tirunelveli Bishopric: A Centenary Survey (1896-1996)* (Palayankottai: Diocesan Offset Press, 1996), pp. 26-30. Without a doubt, Müller is recognized among the Tirunelveli Christians as the chief historian of the diocese.
83. See Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.39.
84. Müller, *The Birth of a Bishopric*, p.58.
85. Müller, *The Tirunelveli Bishopric: A Centenary Survey (1896-1996)*, p.32.