

# LCMS Missionaries and an Alien Indian Culture: A Gospel-Culture Engagement at the Margins of Indian Society

Stanish Stanley

**Abstract:** Does the Gospel message have within it the inherent potential to engage and transform a culture that seems to be alien and at odds with its worldview? A look into the early twentieth century history of the evangelizing efforts of LCMS missionaries in South India provides a glimpse into how the missionaries as the “bearers of the Gospel” encountered a native culture at odds with the Biblical message and vision. Through this mission story, the essay argues that Gospel-Culture engagement entails negotiations of varying concerns and aspirations of both the missionary and the “converting” people, with the Gospel enabling the native people to challenge and transform their culture by contextualizing its Biblical promise and hope.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that the culture promoted by our scientific- and technology-driven society of the twenty-first century poses enormous challenges for Christian life and witness. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and technology have made life easier and faster; and with increase in comfort, organized religion seems to be shedding adherents by the millions. That the church seems to be talking to a culture that is completely at odds with it poses an important question: Can the Christian message (Gospel) engage a culture that seems to be alien to its worldview<sup>1</sup>? Surely, this is not the first time that the Church has faced the challenge of encountering an opposing worldview or system at odds with its biblical vision and promise. A critical look into the past will suffice to answer any lingering doubts about the clash of perspectives in Gospel-Culture interaction and also reveal the inherent potential of the Gospel to transform people and culture. Accordingly, this essay looks to history to find whether Lutheran Christians have encountered such a situation of opposing values before and, if so, then investigate how Lutherans shared

---

*Stanish Stanley, an ordained pastor of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church is pursuing his PhD in Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His dissertation investigates the mission work of his, “mother” and presently “partner,” Church—the LCMS—in Trivandrum, South India. He is married to Beena Stanish and has three daughters. He has his Bachelor’s from United Theological College, India (2006) and Master’s in Cross-Cultural Theology from the Protestant Theological University of the Netherlands (2007).*

Copyright 2014 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 2 (2014) at [www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org).

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) if you would like to subscribe or order a print copy of this issue.

the Gospel in a cultural context much different from their own and determine the outcome of such an interaction that teaches important lessons for us today.

### **Picturing the Historical Context: Twentieth-Century Subaltern<sup>2</sup> Culture in Travancore<sup>3</sup>**

In the year 1911, the LCMS<sup>4</sup> missionaries moved into Trivandrum to proclaim the Gospel at their initial mission sites among the Sambavar (also called pariahs, paraiyans, parayas, or Adi-dravidar) community.<sup>5</sup> The chief initiators of this move were the Sambavar leader, Arulanandan Upadeshi, and his colleague, Kanjanam Upadeshi, who belonged to a mixed caste.<sup>6</sup> They came to know of the Missouri Lutheran India Mission (MELIM, the organizational name of the LCMS work in India) working among their Sambavar kinsmen in Nagercoil, the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore. Through the missionary's native assistant, G. Jesudason, they invited the Lutheran missionary,<sup>7</sup> Rev. Henry Nau, to work among the Malayalam-speaking population of Travancore. This move on the part of the LCMS missionaries to enter Trivandrum and work among the Sambavars meant that they were entering a culture that, much like cultures in other parts of India, promoted and maintained a '*non-egalitarian social vision*' of caste stratification and prejudice that was severely manifested in its day-to-day life practice.<sup>8</sup> The social vision of Travancore society was played out through the Hindu social structure that was designed to provide the Brahmins<sup>9</sup> various socio-economic and religio-cultural benefits at the apex of the system. Following the Brahmins in influence were the land-owning Nairs<sup>10</sup> and Syrian Christians,<sup>11</sup> along with the Muslims. By this time, the lower castes, such as the Nadars and Ezhavas, were also seeking their own power and influence in this system through socio-political emancipatory struggle. Below these caste groups were the slave castes of Travancore (who today categorize themselves under the name 'dalits'<sup>12</sup>), like the 'Sambavars' and 'Cheramars,' who until 1855 could be bought and sold as slaves and were living under severe social and economic constraints.<sup>13</sup> Inherent in such a society was the imagined and lived-out reality that not all people were the same, even that the lower castes and the slave castes were lacking in their humanity to be seen on par with those belonging to the higher castes.

Apart from the 'superior/inferior' dichotomy that was played out in the cultural life of Travancore, the LCMS missionaries also had to engage a culture of exclusion, control, and mutual suspicion. From the eighth century, with ever-increasing Brahmanical influence and power in Kerala, the slave castes—the Sambavars, Cheramars,<sup>14</sup> Vedas, Kuravas, Nayyadis, etc.—came to be seen as ritually polluting people. In order to maintain systemic exclusion of people, certain castes like the Sambavars and Cheramars served as hereditary slaves for whom it was impossible to release themselves from their wretched condition even if they so desired.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the owners had power to flog them, enchain them, and in some cases maim them and

deprive them of their lives. Not only were they denied human comforts, but they were systematically tortured both mentally and physically; if they tried to escape, they were hunted down, brought back, and punished to serve as a terror for others likely to seek escape.<sup>16</sup> Alongside, daily life transactions in Travancore were defined by the maintaining of a prescribed distance between the lower and slave castes while interacting with members of the higher castes. According to rules, they were supposed to stand sixty-four paces away from the Nair landlord while conversing and also had to make sure that they would not pollute the high castes with their 'contaminating approach.' This meant that slave castes like the Sambavars were not permitted to enter villages or towns of higher castes; and, in certain places, if any untouchable person was seen in public, he would be immediately killed or physically injured for not moving out of sight quickly enough or far away enough.<sup>17</sup> Such rules of 'untouchability and unapproachability' had to be observed when approaching the courts for redress of grievances, which meant that their concerns would in most cases not be heard at all. As a part of the all-encompassing control system, the slaves could not speak the language of the ordinary people and were supposed to refer to their masters and their family members with respect, while referring to himself as 'adiyen' (servant/slave) and his own children as 'monkeys' and 'calves.'<sup>18</sup>

The slaves were also sold and transferred like cattle from one owner to another, or were bonded laborers for the Sirkar (government) or for temples and churches. Often husband, wife, and children were separated by sale or mortgage, and their prices were determined in terms of money or domestic animals.<sup>19</sup> All of these restrictions, coupled with a ban on holding land and no access to education, assured that the slave castes of Travancore fell farther down into the abyss of ignominy and despair.<sup>20</sup> Also, the slave castes could not enter higher caste temples and worship their Hindu gods. Sadly, the low-castes who were victims of such an oppressive system had internalized it to such an extent that among the various lower castes competing for elevation and dominance in the social hierarchy, there was intense caste-feeling; and they observed untouchability among each other as a normal and necessary social rule.<sup>21</sup> Naturally, with opportunities and resources being scarce, there was intense competition among the different lower caste communities that was driven by caste prejudice and mutual suspicion of each other.

The cultural context of Travancore in the twentieth century also manifested a perspective of slave mentality, exploitation, and caste oppression. The slave castes had once been a free people, but by the twelfth century, with the entrenchment of the Brahmanical caste system in Kerala, the slave castes had become a degraded and oppressed community that had no option but to work in the field of the 'Jemmies' (mostly Nair village landlords) or 'Routers' (Muslim landlords) and do all kinds of dirty menial jobs. The exploitation of the slave castes could be gauged from the fact that even after serving as the backbone of agriculture and working from morning to night in the rice fields, the slaves themselves went starving because all the rice went

to fill the barns of the high caste masters. Living in crowded 'paracheries' beyond the village limits in unhygienic conditions with houses made of sticks, reeds, and mud, the slave castes were also prescribed a particular dimension which made them bend double to enter their own house. To make ends meet, the Sambavars also worked with bamboo, making baskets and mats that they would sell in the markets by placing their articles in view and then retiring to a specific distance from where they would shout the price to the passerby and take whatever money was placed for the articles taken by people.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the cultural environment of the slave castes was defined by a severe 'slave mentality,' such that even though slavery was abolished in 1855, the idea of freedom bereft of their master's guidance and control was a strange phenomenon to which the slave castes could not acclimatize themselves; thus, sadly, these communities and individuals could not unshackle themselves from the all-encompassing effects of the system.<sup>23</sup> The social exploitation was so bad that in 1910 the Dewan (Prime Minister) of Travancore had to issue a circular to address the issue of caste people trying to keep the lower castes away from judicial institutions where apparently they had the opportunity to seek redress for injustice committed upon them.<sup>24</sup>

The impact of systemic caste oppression also included its corresponding influence upon the religio-cultural world of the lower and slave castes in Travancore. A significant challenge for the LCMS missionaries was that they were entering a subaltern religio-cultural world of fear and ritual appeasement. Religio-culturally, the slave castes had their own gods and deities. They indulged in appeasement of demons to keep themselves and their family members safe from trouble. They lived in constant dread of demons and evil spirits, which they believed would harm people, and had to be propitiated by animal sacrifices and libations of blood.<sup>25</sup> Fear of 'pey,' the roaming evil spirits of departed individuals who had met with violent and tragic deaths, was a serious affliction; and the community diviner/exorcist who was consulted for help served as an important leader and comforter of the subaltern communities.

The comforting and uplifting presence of the Gospel met another important challenge in the Hindu-imposed worldview that the slave castes were a 'cursed' people. Without doubt, the behavior of the Hindus had its own impact upon the consciousness of the Dalits such that they had accepted their degradation as being normal.<sup>26</sup> According to Hindu belief, the Dalit was impure because of sins committed in a previous life and so their occupations were dirty in themselves. Consequently, the Hindus believed that all pollution was transferable by physical contact between a defiled person or object to another, meaning that the psycho-social perception of the slave castes included the understanding that they were an impure people by birth who were consigned to such fate by God for their previous sins.<sup>27</sup> Even though this was probably not personally acceptable to many in the slave caste communities, still

these perceptions and images were reinforced in real life daily practice and socio-cultural symbols of society.<sup>28</sup>

Thus for the slave castes of Travancore, as in many subaltern communities in India, the dominant Hindu vision of collective living and religion presided over a host of disabilities in various spheres of life that contravened the fundamental rights of the Dalits to construct their identity in freedom and dignity.<sup>29</sup> It was into such an environment—radically opposed to the Biblical understanding of God and its values of humanity—that the LCMS missionaries were called to proclaim the Gospel and change lives.

### **LCMS Missionaries and Their Gospel Emphasis**

A close look into the history of MELIM reveals the fact that the LCMS missionaries were representatives and products of their times. Its initial missionaries in India, Theodore Naether and Franz Mohn, had earlier left the service of the Leipzig mission in India because of irreconcilable differences on the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scriptures. Undoubtedly, the Lutheran missionaries were convinced of their Confessional Lutheran faith and placed a strong emphasis on ‘proper Lutheran doctrine,’ and preaching of the ‘pure Gospel.’<sup>30</sup> They believed in the three *solas*: grace alone, Scripture alone, and faith alone; and the two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were affirmed as channels through which God bestows forgiving and empowering grace upon humankind.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the focus of the LCMS missionaries when entering the Malayalam-speaking area of Travancore was to proclaim the Gospel among the Sambavars and many other castes and to establish the Church.<sup>32</sup> As such, this community of faith that the missionaries worked to gather, teach, and grow in Travancore was not envisioned as prioritizing any particular caste community or group. Rather, the desire was to establish the Church as a community where people of all castes would coexist without any caste feelings and prejudice. In this, the focus on the spiritual side of believers and the need for salvation from sin were central to the missionary effort.<sup>33</sup>

It also seems that the LCMS missionaries, like other Western missionaries during this time, were modern men who conformed to a modern worldview and culture. As Paul Hiebert points out, most missionaries accepted the superiority of Western civilization and saw it as their task to ‘Civilize, Commercialize as well as Christianize’ the people they served.<sup>34</sup> In Travancore, the LCMS missionaries saw themselves as civilizing and ‘saving the souls’ of individuals who were damned because of their idolatrous practices and unethical living.<sup>35</sup> According to Rev. M. M. Jacob, who grew up in the environment of MELIM and later became a pastor in the church, the missionaries dismissed any talk of ‘pey’ and ‘spirit worship’ as devilish Hindu practices that had to be overcome by proper teaching of doctrine and by living a proper Christian life.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, even though adhering to a modern bias,

the missionaries' Lutheran faith also convinced them that all cultures and people were overwhelmed by sin and were in need of redemption and saving through the Gospel of Christ. For this reason, the Law-Gospel contrast was central to the way they saw the world and the native culture to which they were called to proclaim the Gospel. Quite probably they saw themselves as 'enlightened' Christians who were able to grasp the cognitive propositional truths of Christianity that had to be disseminated to the pre-modern natives through proper catechetical instruction.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the proclamation of the Gospel and the establishment of the Church in Travancore meant breaking down cultural prejudices and boundaries and providing a new vision of community and hope. The period of the early twentieth century was a time of social upheaval and change, with the slave castes especially seeking alliances with the missionaries for emancipation and modernization. In such an environment of competing communities—all seeking entrance into the Church, but combined with personal and communitarian interests—the missionaries seemingly believed that it was up to them to provide the leadership and administration to teach the native converts that the Church was a place where people from all castes could come together and worship their true Lord and Savior.<sup>38</sup> This meant that various communities had to learn to accept each other and be ready to accommodate the concerns and aspirations of the other within the Church. Even though this was not easy task, the presence of the missionary provided the authority and influence to assure that all were welcome into the Body of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

### **Gospel-Culture Interaction in Travancore—Strategies, Engagement, Disillusionment, and the New Community**

The LCMS missionaries started work in Trivandrum around the adjoining areas of Kuttichel and Kattaicode in the year 1911. They very soon realized that proclaiming the Gospel meant reaching the people embedded in the midst of despair and various socio-cultural disabilities. In establishing the Church, the missionaries were heavily outnumbered in catering to the needs of the locals. They realized from their experiences in the other mission stations of Ambur and Nagercoil<sup>40</sup> that they needed the help of native co-workers to carry forward the Gospel message.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, at the very outset, they focused on catechetical instruction of potential native leaders. They met weekly on Saturdays for catechetical instruction of native workers at a training school in Kattakada in Trivandrum, and

The study was in Malayalam. Studying the Word of God, focus on proper doctrinal truths through a study of the Small Catechism, learning of Christian songs, sharing and learning through Bible stories form part of the curriculum. Particular sins and events required a particular admonition and instruction. . . . The workers consist of a mix of both men and women, but walking long distances to reach Kattakada for study is a rather difficult task

for the women. . . . this study was to offer the Catechists and teachers that which can be taught to catechumens and school children week to week.<sup>42</sup>

Naturally, the LCMS missionaries in Travancore were serious about engaging the local culture with the Gospel. In many ways, they were seeking a complete change in the individual and wanted to see tangible changes in the lives of their converts. They were convinced that the best way to materialize this objective was through the agency of schools and boarding homes.<sup>43</sup> Entering into the subaltern Travancore culture, they soon found that the greatest impediment to a better future for the new converts was their practices drenched in age-old traditions and lifestyle that had to be questioned and changed. Thus, they started boarding schools with the belief that the next generation of Sambavar converts would learn scriptural truths alongside other school subjects, change long-established bad behavior patterns, and be an example to others of the new being promised in Christ.<sup>44</sup> In addition, nursery schools, middle schools, high schools, English education, teacher training schools, seminary for theological education, etc. helped alleviate the despair of the slave castes and also in the creation of a new Sambavar Lutheran community.<sup>45</sup> In due course, in keeping with their vision of a Church that included all communities of India, the missionaries moved from working only among Sambavar converts to engage other slave communities like the Cheramars and also other low-caste communities like the Nadars and Ezhavas. They also moved out of Trivandrum into other Malayalam areas in Malabar, Alapuzha, Shertalley, etc. Even in these moves, the native workers belonging to different communities played an important role in working side by side the missionary to carry the Gospel message to the people.

Given the enormity of the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel to a subaltern culture, mission engagement of the LCMS missionaries entailed constant appraisal and adjustments to the demands of context. For instance, the LCMS missionary was different in the sense that he was ready to ‘mingle and even literally embrace’ the ‘polluted slave’ people.<sup>46</sup> Presumably, this act of the missionary immediately projected him as the manifestation of a benevolent God, who was ready to embrace all, in contrast to the dominant caste Hindus, who practiced ‘untouchability and maintained distance rules’ in personal dealings and whose god could not be approached by the slaves. One could argue that the missionary through his interaction with the slave castes was embodying a symbolic Christian world vision of a different community dynamic that could be now lived out in the Church and larger society. However, at the same time that the missionaries were committed to improving the lot of the slave castes in the Lutheran Mission, they were also very conscious of the fact that they would be stuck with a caste group that would entrap and curtail their desire to share the Gospel with other communities in Travancore. Missionary F. R. Zucker, (served 1910–1930), in his quarterly report from Trivandrum in 1916 about the boys included in the boarding school at Trivandrum, notes:

There are three reasons for not limiting our classes to the number of boarding scholars, but admitting day scholars also, boys not as yet belonging to our Mission. First, our general principle of not restricting our missionary work to a specially favored class of people, whatever class that may be, but to preach the Gospel to every creature; secondly, our mission here in Travancore has already gone far on the road toward being definitely known as an exclusively Pariah mission, and every measure that we can take to correct this decidedly mistaken idea of our principles is of distinct value; third the number of boys that we shall be able to get from our own village churches for a number of years to come will not be sufficient to bring the classes up to the minimum strength necessary for obtaining Government grant and recognition. . . . By this plan adopted we can . . . extend our good influence to others besides Pariahs. Moreover, the presence of Shudra boys in the classes may be expected to raise the standards of cleanliness and intelligence.<sup>47</sup>

The above observations of Missionary Zucker provide a window into the mind of the LCMS missionary who is moved by the Gospel to care for the needy but at the same time is conscious of cultural codes and their resultant effects on the future of the mission. Undoubtedly, the missionaries wanted to help the Sambavar (pariah) converts and establish the Church among them, but at the same time they were conscious of the fact that the Lutheran Church in Travancore risked the prospect of being derided and dismissed as a ‘Pariah church.’

Furthermore, the missionary interaction in Travancore can be from the perspective of a ‘disillusionment and hope’ juxtaposition. These were challenging times for the missionaries as they were entering into a subaltern culture and a new language group. The missionaries had to pursue their own language study alongside their own Gospel work among the people, and the last thing they wanted was a disinterested, non-appreciative, and resistant audience. Missionary F. R. Zucker, in his quarterly report to the Mission Board in St. Louis, reports in Nov.–Dec. 1914, just three years after the work started in Travancore:

no one ought to think that the hundreds of souls that we count have all been won and brought in securely, certainly not even half, perhaps not even a fourth, and none of them is secure in the faith. When we daily hear it and see with our own eyes how these people are bound and chained in certain unchaste customs and grave sins against the sixth commandment, how they stand in service as slaves to the father of lies, how so many among them are mentally dull and spiritually dead, so I hope that it will not be falsely interpreted or that someone would be taken amiss when I say we do not always do our work with courage and joy, but rather that there are times when hope completely disappears and we want to give up the work. When God then comforts us again and strengthens us, he gives us fresh courage

and his blessing for renewed labor. But He must do it. Thus we pressingly need the supplication of our brothers at home, not only customary prayer, but prayer that is in earnest.<sup>48</sup>

Imbedded in the above observations of Missionary Zucker is the fact that the Lutheran missionaries in Travancore had entered into a subaltern culture and people who were badly in need of help. Clearly, the missionaries had their own approach to addressing the concerns of their slave caste converts; and, even though many times the results were depressing, they held out hope. In the course of time, the missionaries—through financial schemes to eradicate poverty, personal help to pay off landlord debts, protecting the right to worship at church on Sundays, safeguarding converts from high caste goons, and instilling in them a sense of social dignity by helping them dress neatly and speak good language like the caste people—enabled and strengthened the establishing of the Lutheran Church in Travancore.<sup>49</sup>

### **Gospel and Culture in Dialogue: The Native Converts Respond**

In spite of the challenges that the missionaries faced in Travancore, they gathered the most converts for the LCMS mission in India. The mission phase of the Lutheran work in Trivandrum ended in November 1956 with the formation of the Trivandrum District. Later, on January 8, 1958, all the mission churches of MELIM from the Districts of Ambur, Nagercoil, and Trivandrum came together to form the India Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>50</sup> It needs to be noted that even when the LCMS missionaries were heavily outnumbered in the mission field of India, especially during World Wars I and II, the Lutheran Mission grew at a rapid pace.<sup>51</sup> Thus, even as the LCMS missionaries were registering their unhappiness at the converts and native helpers not reaching up to the standards that they expected of them, the believers were gradually entering the new Christian community of promise with hope and great expectations.

In all probability, the ‘called community’ of Christ in Travancore were using their Lutheran heritage to address issues that concerned their life and culture. Undoubtedly, the Gospel shared by the Lutheran missionaries in Travancore focused heavily on the sinfulness of people and cultures and proclaimed the forgiveness in Jesus Christ that spoke directly to the life situation of the slave castes who were overburdened with systemic disabilities in a culture that had denigrated them as sinful people. Caught in a culture of shame from which they had no escape, the Gospel provided them with the necessary tools and symbols of hope to envision a new life of promise. The Lutheran pastor-poet, Rev. M. Paulose, who worked alongside the Lutheran missionaries from 1911 in Travancore, captures this new found picture of hope in his Baptism song, found in the Malayalam Lutheran Liturgy Book:

Chorus: Lord, Son of God, give us your blessing!

Stanza 1: Ocean of blessing give us your blessings, Answer the prayers of sinners / and slaves who suffer in this world with burdens of sin

Stanza 3: Jesus, let them drink your Word every day, and / protect these born again babies through the way of eternal life.

Stanza 5: Come near us and give us victory when the sins that fell humankind, / ropes of Satan (worldly desires and enjoyment of the flesh) create struggles in our life<sup>52</sup>

The above verses from the baptismal song of Rev. Paulose prioritizes ‘blessing’ for the new convert in Baptism. For a community that was challenging an imposed dominant caste perception of their being a ‘cursed’ community, the entry into the community of Christian faith was seen as an initiation into a new socio-religious reality of blessing, protection, and hope. In Christ, the new identity of the Sambavar converts was that of a ‘blessed’ people chosen by God and nurtured into His community, the Church. Moreover, the song does not end with total deliverance, but with a plea of God’s presence to be near the convert, making victory possible as they engaged in a continuous fight against worldly suffering unleashed by the forces of evil. Also, the Sambavar understanding of God undergoes a radical change from envisioning of ‘evil spirits’ as the supreme power that can be worshiped and appeased to get back at enemies to the Christian God being seen as an ‘Ocean of blessing’ who blesses and answers the prayers of sinners and suffering slaves. This change in perception about God and themselves as sinful human beings can also be seen in yet another song by Rev. M. Paulose:

Stanza 1: God’s dear Son sent to earth for sinners as a gift / sinners rejected gift of God, went through many ways and joined with evil spirits (pey)

Stanza 2: to destroy the power of evil spirits (pey) and to turn and sanctify the sinner / the curse of sin and punishment of sinners was foisted on the head of holy Son.

Stanza 3: Holy God hates sin, (but) loves sinner with mercy / nobody knows the scale to measure the depth and height of God’s love

Stanza 4: (God) quickly lifts the falling children and leads (them) through holy path, / (He) adopts the sinking sinner as own son and supports and embraces

Stanza 5: joining near (with) him is wonderful love, attracts towards the Calvary hill / the God who picks up and embraces is love, (He) died and resurrected on the cross and gave liberation

Stanza 6: the power of god’s loving Word gave birth again to me a sinner / I have abundance of fortune that I am God’s child, for ever and ever Jesus is my manager<sup>53</sup>

The above song provides glimpses of the creative ways in which the slave caste converts used the conceptual tools provided to them by the Lutheran sharing of the

Gospel to address their own socio-cultural challenges and look forward to the future. This song on Christian warfare captures the psycho-social world of the slave castes and especially the Sambavar converts. That evil spirits (pey), an important religio-cultural belief, still had to be addressed by the Christian Gospel may be seen in the song as the spirits of those sinners who rejected the gift of God's dear Son. Very much like the slave castes themselves, Jesus Christ is pictured as being burdened with the curse of sin and punishment of sinners. This burden is, however, for a divine purpose, namely, to destroy the power of 'pey' (evil spirit) and to sanctify the sinner who is loved by God. Here, too, we see that, in contrast to their earlier religiosity of fear and appeasement, their 'God understanding' now changes to one of 'love and acceptance.' Now they proclaim allegiance to a God who readily 'lifts' them out of their fallen situation, adopts them as His own, and supports them with a warm embrace. God is here understood through Jesus Christ as one who 'picks up and embraces,' showing 'love,' and giving 'liberation' to the much-oppressed slave community.

From these songs articulated by Rev. Paulose, one can argue that the work of the Lutheran Mission in Travancore provided the local native converts with the conceptual tools to understand God in completely different terms as compared to their previous religiosity. Slowly but surely, the religio-cultural worldview and lifestyle of the new Christian community of slave caste converts was changing from a context of 'fear' to one of 'promise and hope.'

## **Conclusion**

This essay has provided several significant insights for our consideration. First, the LCMS mission in Travancore affirms the assessment put forward by Cyril Firth in studying the conversion movement in India, that "it has often been the converts who sought out the missionaries rather than the missionaries who sought out the converts."<sup>54</sup> Second, the desire of the Dalit community in Travancore to enter into the Lutheran mission was an effort by the oppressed community to reject and overcome a non-egalitarian, exploitative, and despair-instilling symbolic worldview that was manifested in the socio-economic and religio-cultural way of life in Travancore. For this purpose, they sought an alliance with the Lutheran missionary and, through the active involvement of their kinsmen, the subaltern Sambavars sought to enter into the Christian world vision of human living that proclaimed a counter-cultural egalitarian, accepting and hope-instilling worldview. In this new religious meaning system, the missionaries provided a helping hand to the Dalit and other low-caste communities through economic and social capital.<sup>55</sup> Third, even though the Dalit community's entrance into the new symbolic vision of Christianity was heavily managed and controlled by the Lutheran missionaries who were convinced of their action-plan and solutions, there were no doubt theological resources in the newly-embraced religion that helped the converts to resourcefully

construct an alternate worldview that spoke directly to their concerns, aspirations, and hopes.<sup>56</sup> The entire understanding of a ‘loving and grace providing’ God manifested in the socio-religious approach of the benevolent missionary, who was ready to engage the ‘polluting slave’ people, had a far-reaching impact in the minds and perception of the Dalit converts. The Christian faith and perceived faith community stood in symbolic contrast to that of their previous religiosity of fear and a community impacted by socio-economic exploitation and degradation.

In summing up, this short essay argues that the LCMS mission to India from the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century involved the clashing of divergent worldviews and beliefs represented by the Western Christian missionary and the subaltern people of India. In addition, it also entailed the dialogue between different perceptions, concerns, and aspirations of both the missionaries and subaltern converts. In and through this interaction has developed the Lutheran Church in Kerala, India.<sup>57</sup> This body of Christ is not perfect, and it has its own problems and internal challenges that need to be addressed by its believers. Nevertheless, the Gospel has penetrated the culture and its people and has provided the tools to address the challenges of the present and the future.

It has to be noted that even today the Church is placed in a context of divergent worldviews, especially promoted by a post-Christian West steeped in different philosophies, ideologies, and progress driven by science and technology. There is no doubt that even in such a culture there are those who feel left out, marginalized, out of place, and in need of purpose and hope. Through identifying their concerns, through contextualizing the Gospel to answer and challenge the aspirations, perceptions, and worldview of today’s culture, and through providing an alternative vision of a community that lives Christ’s love, forgiveness, and grace, the mission of the Lutheran Church will continue to be relevant and life-giving in a highly individualistic and materialistic world.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Worldview can be understood as the ‘fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things and which they use to order their lives. Further, worldviews are the maps that people in a community have of realities that they use for living. See, Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews. An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the term ‘subaltern,’ ‘dalit,’ ‘slave caste,’ and ‘Sambavar’ will be used interchangeably to articulate the marginalized people in Indian society. The term ‘subaltern’ used by the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci means a position of ‘inferior rank.’ The term was popularized in India through the Subaltern studies group headed by historian Ranajit Guha looking into the subordination of South Asian society under colonial British rule, and the common man’s resistance to such rule. In India, the dalits, the tribals, the Adivasis, the backward classes, women, the varieties of workers involved in cheap and bonded labor, and

children can all belong to the classification of ‘Subaltern.’ See Gnana Patrick, “Subaltern Hermeneutics” in E. P. Mathew (ed.), *Hermeneutics—Multicultural Perspectives*, (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2009), 247–250. Also see, David Forgacs, ed., *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1925*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 333–335.

<sup>3</sup> Travancore State in the southern part of India was one of the larger of India’s many princely states ruled by a Hindu Maharaja but indirectly ruled by the British. He legitimized his rule by defining himself as ruling on behalf of the deity Sri Padmanabha (Lord Vishnu) who was the real ruler of the State. The Travancore State was made up of Malayalam-speaking and Tamil-speaking people, and in 1956, the Malayalam-speaking part was included to form the state of Kerala in free India while the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore remained in the State of Tamil Nadu. See Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State. Travancore 1858–1936* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> LCMS stands for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a Confessional Lutheran Church Body in the United States of America. When the LCMS mission to India began in Tamil Nadu on the South Eastern tip of India, the LCMS went by the name ‘The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States’ organized in Chicago in 1847. Further, the LCMS work in India during its mission phase went by its organization name—Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM). See Earl H. Miller, “The Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission” in C. H. Swavely (ed.), *The Lutheran Enterprise in India* (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1952), 184.

<sup>5</sup> H. M. Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning. A Report on 75 years of Mission in India* (Malappuram, Kerala: MELIM, 1970), 19–20. Also see Swavely, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 188.

<sup>6</sup> See G. Jesudason, *Early History of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Nagercoil District*, Unpublished manuscript written for Missionaries (Madras: Aug. 24, 1948), 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Similar requests were made to the LCMS missionaries many times during their work in Trivandrum and elsewhere in South India. One such request made to missionary F. R. Zucker and the approach taken by the missionary to decide in favor of the work can be found in his Quarterly Report of 1914 to the Mission Board in St. Louis. See translated letters of LCMS Missionary F. R. Zucker by Shawn Barnett, “Malayalam Field in India” in *Historical Footnotes*, Vol. 59, Issue 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute, Spring 2014), 5.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social Transformation. The Kerala Story* (Trivandrum: ICRO, 2002), 15–16.

<sup>9</sup> The Indian social caste structure consists of Brahmins (the priestly class), the Kshatriyas (the warrior class), the Vaishyas (the trading class) and the Shudras (the servile class). However, within this fourfold division are various ‘jati’ or communities. Also, outside of this fourfold division are various backward castes, the Dalits (previously called the slave castes or untouchables) and the Adivasis (forest dwellers or tribals).

<sup>10</sup> In Kerala society, Nairs belonged to the Shudra class but for all practical purposes were warriors for the local kings (Rajah). By the twentieth century, they had become the village landlords called ‘Jemmies.’ See Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> The Syrian Christians of Kerala, claim ancestry with those converted by the Apostle St. Thomas in AD 52. Historical evidence points to the Syrian Christians as a community arising out of the immigration of Nestorian Christians in AD 345 under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, who settled and adapted to life along the Malabar coast in Kerala. The Syrian Christians (also called St. Thomas Christians) adapted to their socio-cultural environment as one of the high castes in Kerala on par with the Nair landlords. See Joy Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History. The Story of Missionary Movement and the liberation of people in South Travancore* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1994), 33. Also see Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Dalit’ means burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed, or crushed. The previously untouchable (slave) castes of India have taken the name ‘Dalit’ for themselves to express their collective experience as an oppressed and marginalized community and also to collectively fight for their rights. Hence, the Sambavars are a Dalit caste that is part of the subalterns of Indian society. See Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> K. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1973), 28–41.

<sup>14</sup> Cheramars were also called Pulayas. See Kusuman, *Slavery*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 59.

<sup>17</sup> See A. Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 7, 14–16, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 30–32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–29.

<sup>21</sup> Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 19. Also see Kusuman, *Slavery*, 34, 37–38.

<sup>22</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 30–32.

<sup>23</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery*, 55–58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–19.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012. Rev. Jacob, at the time of the interview, was around 90 years old and is the oldest living pastor who studied and worked with LCMS missionaries during the MELIM period.

<sup>29</sup> Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clark eds., *Religious Conversion in India. Modes, Motivations and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 331.

<sup>30</sup> Swavely, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 185.

<sup>31</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> See Missionary Conference response to memorandum of Depressed classes (untouchable castes) prepared by A. Johnson in the 131st *Trivandrum District Conference*, (MELIM: 1954), 30–31. Also see Missionary Conference Response to petition by Rev. G. Jesudason the Sambavar pastor who invited the MELIM missionaries to work among the Sambavars of Nagercoil—the Tamil language-speaking areas of Travancore, in the 72nd *Nagercoil District Conference Minutes*, (MELIM: April 1942), 14–15. Also see F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916, 3–4.

<sup>34</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts. Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2009), 83.

<sup>35</sup> See F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916, 1–2.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012 in Trivandrum.

<sup>37</sup> See the essay of M. L. Kretzmann, “The Missionary and His Theology” read at the 1962 General Conference of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, 2. Cited in Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission: Identity and Purpose in India* (Vaniyambadi: IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, 1981), 76, 77–85.

<sup>38</sup> 72nd *Nagercoil District Conference Minutes* (MELIM: April 1942), 13–18.

<sup>39</sup> Swavely, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 196. Also see Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> The LCMS mission first started in 1895 around the northern Tamil-speaking area of Krishnagiri and Ambur on the South eastern tip of India. It later moved southward in 1907 to Nagercoil—the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore State. Later in 1911, it entered the Malayalam language-speaking area of Trivandrum in the Travancore State.

<sup>41</sup> Elmer Edward Griesse, *Lutheran India Missions, Unpublished Master's Thesis* (St. Louis: Washington University Department of History, 1945), 40.

<sup>42</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report to the Mission Board from Trivandrum*, Oct–Dec. 1914.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert M. Zorn, *The Background and the First Twenty-Five Years of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission 1894–1919*. Unpublished Master's Thesis (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1969), 117.

<sup>44</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916.

<sup>45</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012. The observation is also a summation of the common nostalgia among the elderly Dalit Christian converts in Trivandrum irrespective of denominational affiliation.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916.

<sup>48</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report to the Mission Board from Trivandrum*, Oct–Dec. 1914, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 74–77.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>51</sup> Griesse, *Lutheran India*, 22–23. Also see Zorn, *The Background and the First Twenty-Five Years*, 117.

<sup>52</sup> Song No. 204, *IELC Malayalam Hymn book*—Baptism section (Trivandrum, 2011), 127.

<sup>53</sup> Song No. 355, *IELC Malayalam Hymn book*—Warfare section (Trivandrum, 2011), 185.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Robinson & Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 338.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>57</sup> Kerala is the State on the South West tip of India that consists of all the Malayalam-speaking areas. The erstwhile Malayalam-speaking part of the Travancore State was included in the Kerala State when it was formed.