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No religion, but ritual?
Robert Caldwell and *The Tinnevelly Shanars*

Introduction

When the Bishop of Madras, George Trevor Spencer (1799–1866), visited the south of his diocese in 1841, he also came to Mudalur, a Christian village in the South Indian district of Tirunelveli. On this occasion, he wrote in his diary:

> I want words to express my astonishment at all I see in this land of promise. The word of the Lord is covering it ... I unhesitatingly declare to all who are interested in the progress of the Gospel in India, that this is a land of promise. ... Here we have Christian villages – villages entirely Christian. It is a glorious sight ...[1]

In the decade before, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) had revived its mission in the south-eastern portion of Tirunelveli, as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) had done in other parts of the district.[2] The steadily growing numbers of converts to Christianity, especially from the Shanar / Nadar (Tam. cāṇār / nāṭār) caste, excited not only missionaries and bishops, but also mission propagandists in Britain. Like no other mission field throughout India, the claim of there being 'fields white to harvest' in Tirunelveli seemed true. Missionary magazines, as well as other Christian periodicals and even ordinary newspapers, were constantly filled with articles describing the success of Christianity in Tirunelveli and which depicted the 'customs' and 'religion' of the Shanars / Nadars. Therefore, in the public missionary discourse of the 19th century, the 'Tinnevelly Shanars' were probably the best known single caste in India besides the Brahmans.

The Anglican missionary Robert Caldwell (1814–1891) was the man who made the most important single contribution to this by writing an entire book entitled *The Tinnevelly Shanars*. His frequently quoted essay claimed to be much more than a mere ethnographic description. Its subtitle reads: *A Sketch of Their Religion and Their Moral Condition, and Characteristics as a Caste. With Special Reference to the Facilities and*

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[1] Spencer 1842: 120.
[2] For the history of the CMS and SPG missions in Tirunelveli, see Pascoe 1901; Stock 1899; Appasamy 1923; Grafe 1990. The CMS had already started its work in Tirunelveli in 1816, through the efforts of James Hough, and in 1820 it sent its own missionaries to the district.

Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity Amongst Them.[3] Although primarily a theological work, Caldwell's book was quickly understood as one of the first ethnographic accounts of a South Indian caste and their religion. However, basically, it was only the product of Caldwell's first ten year's experience as a missionary in Tirunelveli. It is astonishing that Caldwell's book, *The Tinnevelly Shanars,* is to this day less known for its contents than for its impact on the emerging identity of Shanars / Nadars in the second half of the 19th century.[4] Aiming at the description of the Shanars as objects of Christian mission work, Caldwell ascribed to them a distinct religion that was separated from Brahmanical Hinduism and afforded points of contact to the Christian mission. His representation of the Shanars' religious and social identity, as well as his predominantly negative account of their 'moral condition', caused a wave of protest from Shanars / Nadars – a striking example of what happened to colonial and missionary representations of South Indian culture and religion once they left the hands of their inventors.

The context: The reorganisation of mission in Tirunelveli

When, in 1826/27, the SPG took over the mission field in Tirunelveli from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), there were almost no missionaries of British origin working in South India. For more than a century, the missionaries were Germans, provided by the Danish-Halle connection to the SPCK.[5] The introduction of British missionaries into mission work in South India brought a completely new kind of missionary to India. They no longer came from the tradition of German (Lutheran) Pietism, but were heavily influenced by the Evangelical Awakening and missionary movement in Great Britain, which developed from the 1790s onwards. Calvinism, the Evangelical revival, and British missionary debates constituted the background of men like Robert Caldwell, who came to Tirunelveli in 1841.[6]

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[3] Cf. Caldwell 1849.

[4] For the impact of Caldwell's theories about South Indian culture and religion on discourses of identity in nineteenth-century colonial South India, especially among the Shanars/Nadars, and on the upcoming Dravidian movement, see Hardgrave 1969; Kent 2004; Vaitheespara 2000; and Vaitheespara 1998.

[5] For a recent overview of the history of the Protestant Tranquebar Mission in the 18th century see Gross, Kumaradoss, and Liebau 2006.

[6] For the social and theological background of British missionaries in India cf. Piggin 1984 and Potter 1974. For a general overview of the history of the British missionary movement see Porter 2004. The biographical sources on Caldwell's personal background are rather rare. The *Reminiscences of Bishop Caldwell*, published and edited by Caldwell's

The development of the missionary movement in Great Britain had led to the foundation of missionary societies that distinguished themselves along denominational lines. Fostered by the growth of independent church bodies in England and Scotland through the Evangelical Awakening, denominational identities were reshaped in Britain in the first half of the 19th century. For example, Robert Caldwell began his missionary career as a staunch Evangelical missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and was heavily influenced by the moderate Calvinism of the new Scottish Congregationalism.[7] He took an active part in denominational debates about 'church principles' and 'church government' that also swept into the field of mission. Before coming to Tirunelveli in 1841, he decided to change his denominational alliance from the independent LMS to the Anglican SPG, which represented the opposite pole of denominational identity in Britain, namely the Anglican High Church establishment, which was largely non-Evangelical.[8]

Caldwell changed his denominational alliance not only because he disagreed with the LMS work in Madras. Like many Anglicans, he was attracted by the prospect of reviving a mission in Tirunelveli that could claim the tradition and success of their older 18th-century German predecessors, like Christian Frederick Schwartz.[9] Yet, the ways in which the new Anglican missionaries continued the work of the older mission resulted in a completely new concept of mission: they transferred the model of the Anglican parochial system into the mission field. This model relied completely on an ecclesiastical hierarchy and paternal supervision, infused by the Evangelical zeal for 'serious religion' in every-day practice.[10] The Indian congregations, which had come into existence before the reorganisation of the mission, had largely sustained themselves independently by Indian catechists and 'country priests', and

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son-in-law, Joseph L. Wyatt (Wyatt 1894), do not provide much detailed information about Caldwell himself. For a recent biography of Caldwell see Kumaradoss 2007.

[7] As a student at the Glasgow Theological Academy, which was founded by two leading Scottish Congregational Evangelicals, Ralph Wardlaw (1779–1853) and Greville Ewing (1767–1841), Caldwell was most probably influenced by the "Scottish school of mission theory" (Stanley 2001: 19). His autobiographical remarks in *Reminiscences* show a tendency to downplay his Evangelical upbringing; see Wyatt 1894: 3 ff.

[8] Caldwell's position in these debates and his decision to join the SPG is reflected in his later remarks in *Reminiscences* (Wyatt 1894: 7 ff. and 62 ff.). Stanley (1996) provides an insightful analysis of Caldwell in the context of the denominational debates in Madras in the 1830s and 1840s. See also Copley 1997: 144 ff.

[9] Christian Frederick Schwartz (1726–1798) was considered the 'founder' of the 'Tinnevelly mission'. This view was enhanced by Caldwell in his works about the history of the Tinnevelly mission, see Caldwell 1880 and 1881.

[10] Cf. Caldwell 1857: 62, where he describes the method of "assembling the Christian inhabitants of every village every morning, and evening, for public prayer and catechization."

had been only occasionally visited by European missionaries. This led to the development of Christian congregations which were, more or less, firmly bound to the local religious context, but did, however, not fit to the ideals of the new missionaries. They established a system of mission stations that exposed the Indian Christians to a new order: organized as strongly hierarchical, it gave all authority to the missionaries as heads of their own missionary establishments. The apostolic and Episcopalian form of church government, as it was represented by the Church of England, was held to suit especially to India and to the 'genius of the Orient' in general.[11] The mission work modelled Tirunelveli as an ideal for the revivalist reorganisation of the Anglican Church in the first half of the 19th century. Therefore, the importance of Anglican mission in Tirunelveli exceeded the local or regional level of India and was of importance for the religious discourse in Britain as well. In 1858, Thomas Brotherton observed that "in no agricultural parish in England and Wales [are the people] so systematically, carefully and effectively instructed in the Christian doctrines [as are] the people in our Tinnevelly Missions."[12] Caldwell also ascribed the "success" of Christian mission in Tirunelveli to the parochial system:

Much of the success realized in Tinnevelly has been owing to the personal influence of the Missionaries; and I am naturally led by what I have said respecting the introduction of the parochial system, to mention this here, for it is only by means of the parochial system that the personal influence of the Minister of Christ can systematically cooperate with the influence of the truth.[13]

The great increase in the missionary presence throughout the district from the 1820s onwards[14] posed a significant threat to the established order of Tirunelveli's society. It resulted in fierce struggles with the upper caste Hindu and Muslim communities. They were alarmed by the conversion of

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[11] Cf. Stanley 1996: 411. Caldwell probably shared this idea when he wrote, in a letter home defending his change from the LMS to the SPG, "Should [I] be tied down to a system of Christianity which whether suited or not to England, is not, I believe, suited to India?" Letter, dated Madras June 20, 1841, cited in Wyatt 1894: 66.

[12] Pascoe 1901: 541 f., citing the *SPG Report* for the year 1858. Spencer wrote in his visitation journal of 1841: "I affirm it as my deliberate conviction, that the parochial system of the Church of England is in active operation in Tinnevelly. The plan pursued by the missionary clergy both here and in Travancore seems to me particularly well-adapted to accomplish their object. Their doctrine I have every reason to believe is simply, truly, and fully that of the Church of England, neither turning to the right hand nor to the left, but faithfully delivering that message which the Church has committed to them; while their discipline and the management of their congregations is wholesome, godly, and primitive." (Spencer 1842: 128 f.).

[13] Caldwell 1857a: 58.

[14] Between 1829 and 1850 the number of European missionaries (CMS and SPG) increased from 3 to 16 (6 SPG and 10 CMS Missionaries), cf. Pope 1850–51.

larger groups of Shanars / Nadars, including whole families and villages, into the folds of the missionaries, seeing the conversions as a threat to the social and ritual hierarchy of the South Indian society. In 1845, when Bishop Spencer was on his next visitation tour through South India, he received a petition from the villagers of "Streeveigoondum". They complained that the missionaries "make congregations of wicked Shanars and thievish Maravars, and the Pullers and Pariahs, who have always been our slaves and shoemakers, basketmakers, and other low-caste-persons, and teach them the Gospel, the Ten Commandments, and the other things."[15] In essence, the conversions were not, as the missionaries thought, an effect of their own agency, but part of the already ongoing emancipative movement of the Shanars / Nadars in order to escape from social and religious oppression by the dominant elites. Especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, the conversions in Tirunelveli were fuelled by local conflicts between landowners and peasants.[16] For many subaltern groups in South Indian society, the Christian mission provided an opportunity to flee from oppression and to benefit from the mission, which provided protection and education.

However, the massive missionary activities in Tirunelveli were indeed influential on local religious cults. For the missionaries, conversion included the strict proscription of demonolatric practices among the converts, as well as the systematic destruction of 'devil temples' (Tam. pēy kōvil) and other places of worship in those cases where whole village communities converted to Christianity. The destruction of temples – along with the confiscation or destruction of 'idols' and 'images' – or their conversion into places of Christian worship was frequently used by the missionaries as an indicator of their success. George Uglow Pope, who superintended the Sawyerpuram District of the SPG Mission, reported in 1845:

I may also mention that since my appointment here 9 devil temples in this division of the district, have either been destroyed or converted into Christian prayer-houses, and that of the 22 villages in connexion with the mission, the whole of the most respectable and influential inhabitants are under instruction.[17]

Such demolitions evoked local resistance from Hindu organisations, like the Vibuthi Sangam and the Sadur Veda Siddhanta Sabha, which counter-acted by destroying prayer houses and persecuting new Christians. As Robert Frykenberg noted, these tensions between Hindus and Christians

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[15] Spencer 1848: 51.
[16] For an analysis of the social and economical condition of Tirunelveli in the nineteenth century see Ludden 2005.
[17] Pope 1845: 5.

in Tirunelveli led to a form of early Hindu-Christian communalism.[18] The incidents in Tirunelveli were taken to the courts at Madras, where the Hindu elite was already alarmed about the agency of Christian missionaries, and fuelled the heated debates in Madras newspapers about the question of mission and conversion. Tirunelveli was labelled the "emporium of missionaryism, flourishing under the auspice of the public servants of the Company" by Hindu critics.[19] The missionaries from Tirunelveli did not remain silent, but published a lengthy reply that disapproved of the allegation of interfering with 'devil-worship' by the deliberate destruction of "Peycoils".[20] It is interesting to note that Caldwell was among the signatories, though he mentions virtually nothing concrete about these incidents in his reports from Tirunelveli besides vague remarks about a "crisis in the history of the Missions in this province", caused by the "persecuting zeal" of "Hindooism".[21]

Another problem the missionaries had to face while operating in the 'mission field' was revivalist and sectarian movements, which sprang up in South India during the 19th century. The most prominent example was that of Ayyavali (Tam. ayyāvaḻi), which originated in South Travancore and was led by the Shanar / Nadar Muthukutty Swami (Tam. muttukuṭṭi cuvami, c. 1809-c. 1850), later known as Vaikunda Swami or Ayya Vaikundar (Tam. ayyā vaikuṇṭar).[22] In his first report from Tirunelveli, Caldwell reported that this movement also swept to the south of Tirunelveli and gained considerable influence in his mission district. He noticed that Muthukutty styled his message and mission method on the practice of the (mostly Evangelical) missionaries:

It is held that there is but one God, whose name is Narayana, 'The Predestinator,' 'the Master,' and whose mark or 'seal,' as it is styled, resembling that of the *Vaishnavas*, is worn on the forehead. Mootoocootty and his disciples, orgininally twelve, the inspired representatives of this deity, profess to foretell all events, to avert all calamities, and to cure all diseases by giving sick persons copious draughts of cold water. The followers of this system are required to renounce the

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[18] For a historical reconstruction of these affairs, cf. Frykenberg 1976. The conflict between Hindus and Christians is also summarized in Suntharalingam 1974: 32 ff.

[19] "Hindoo Memorial: To the Honourable the Court of Director of the East India Company [Dated Madras, 7th October, 1846]." *Allen's Indian Mail and Register of Intelligence* 5/69, January 26, 1847: 41–44, p. 43. This statement was set up at a large public meeting on October 7, 1846 in Madras, to claim the violation of "civil and religious interests of the Hindoo community" by the missionary agency in the Madras Presidency, particularly in Madras and Tirunelveli. (For the background of the statement cf. Frykenberg 1976: 209 f.)

[20] Pettitt 1847: 44. Cf. also Appasamy 1923: 79 ff., and Stock 1899.1: 324.

[21] Caldwell 1847: 19.

[22] Muthukutty Swami had probably also come into contact with Christian ideas, as the LMS mission was active among the Shanars/Nadars in Travancore. Cf. Patrick 2003.

worship of devils to break their idols, to bring presents to the prophets of the sect for distribution to the poor, and to assemble every Sunday for what they style 'instruction' and 'prayer,' but which seem to me to be screaming and dancing. So greatly has this system prevailed among the heathens of the South, especially those of the Shanar caste, that it bids fair to supersede devil worship.[23]

It has to be kept in mind that the reorganisation of the mission in the 1830s and 1840s, and the conflicts in Tirunelveli that followed from this, constitute the historical background of Caldwell's book, *The Tinnevelly Shanars*. Another important element, though, was the prominence that the Tinnevelly mission had gained in public and, particularly, in missionary circles. The revitalization of the mission in Tirunelveli was presented to the interested public in Britain as the homemade success of SPG and CMS-Missions. The enormous amount of missionary reports that were published, in all major missionary magazines from the 1830s onwards, aimed primarily at raising funds for the Tirunelveli mission, but they also presented the Tinnevelly Shanars as a distinct group of people to a wider public in Britain. The encounter with Indian people, as the objects of colonial and missionary endeavours, did not only take place at the overseas frontier, but also in the home of the Empire – by disseminating images and descriptions of the 'Shanars' as 'Palmyra climbers' and 'devil worshipers'. Therefore, knowledge about the 'indigenous races' or the 'heathens' of the British Empire was not only accessible to the educated classes and colonial elite.[24] Missionary meetings were envisaged as a proper means to teach the ordinary citizen about the "homes, habits, and lot of remote nations", as a writer in the London Quarterly Review observed:

We cordially welcome the Missionary Meeting ... as an instrument of educating the people into a sense of fellowship with 'all sorts and conditions of men;' of acquainting them with the homes, habits, and lot of remote nations; of enlarging their minds, and infusing lofty sentiments ... The influence already exerted by this new element of social life has been great; for in some villages the Missionary Meeting is now the great annual festival; and many a small tradesman or rustic knows more of African or Polynesian life than London journalists.[25]

One could add here that this was certainly also true of India in general and of Tirunelveli in particular. The influence of missionary representations of Indian people and religion in the colonial discourse is quite well known. Nevertheless, I stress this point here for two reasons. First, as a part of the SPG-Series, *Missions to the Heathen*, Caldwell's book, *The*

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[23] Caldwell 1844: 21 (italics in the original).
[24] Cf. Pennington 2005.
[25] "Reports of the Various Missionary Societies for the Year 1856." *London Quarterly Review* 7, October (1856): 209–261, 239.

Tinnevelly Shanars, was part of the SPG policy to disseminate knowledge and to arouse interest in Anglican missions throughout the British Empire.[26] Second, Caldwell's social and religious theories about the Shanars / Nadars draw directly and indirectly from the missionary discourse in general, and particularly from the Evangelical concept of religion that was dominant throughout the 19th century. We now turn to look at this second point, and, first of all, briefly consider the context of Caldwell's book, *The Tinnevelly Shanars,* within the SPG series and other journals.

The *Missions to the Heathen* series started in August 1844 with a collection of correspondence between George Uglow Pope (1820–1908), a missionary in Sawyerpuram, and the SPG officials in Madras (Madras Diocesan Council) and London. Pope reported about the group conversions of members of the Retti caste into his fold. During the next six years, no less than thirteen out of twenty three issues published were concerned with missionary reports and journals from Tirunelveli. The issues were so frequently reprinted that some earlier issues reached their ninth reprint after three years.[27] By far the most industrious contributors were the aforementioned Pope, of whom six reports from the Sawyerpuram Mission were published,[28] and Robert Caldwell, who contributed three reports from Idaiyangudi ("Edeyenkoody")[29] and his book about the Tinnevelly Shanars. The missionaries in Tirunelveli were also frequent suppliers of reports for other missionary periodicals published by the CMS and SPG, for example, the *Mission Field* and the *Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal.* The latter was especially designed to link the affairs of the Anglican Church at home with its missionary endeavours abroad. Here again, Caldwell and Pope were the main authors of lengthy reports about the Tinnevelly mission.[30]

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[26] Cf. the review of SPG publications in: *Churchman's Monthly Review* (1846), 600–601. See also the preface of Earnest Hawkins, secretary of the SPG, in Caldwell 1844: iv.

Compared to other missionary societies, such as the CMS, the SPG started to publish its own periodicals and book series about its mission work relatively late. The first regular periodical was the *Quarterly Paper,* which was published from 1834 onwards. The *Mission Field,* which became the main periodical of the SPG in the second half of the 19th century, was started as late as 1856. According to Thompson, the *Missions to the Heathen* series together with its twin publication, *The Church in the Colonies* were intended to record alternately from the two fields of the Society's work, the ecclesiastical bodies in the colonies and the missions to the heathen. Cf. Thompson 1951: 109 and Pascoe 1901.2: 813d–816 for a complete list of SPG home publications.

[27] For example, the first issue of *Missions to the Heathen* (Pope 1844) reached its ninth reprint in 1847.

[28] *Missions to the Heathen* no. 1, 3, 7, 8, 12, 16.

[29] *Missions to the Heathen* no. 2, 10, 19.

[30] For example cf. Caldwell 1857, separately published as Caldwell 1857 and Pope 1849–50, Pope 1850–51.

The book, *"The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion and Their Moral Condition, and Characteristics as a Caste ..."* was published in 1849 in Madras,[31] and republished in 1850 by the SPG as number twenty three of the series *Missions to the Heathen*.[32] Written for an English speaking public in Britain and India, it aimed primarily at promoting an interest in the Tirunelveli mission and collecting funds for it. In the following decades, it provoked the critique of members of the Shanar / Nadar community by its unflattering statements about their religion and their low 'moral disposition'. From the 1880s on, a war broke out – a war of petitions and counter petitions by different groups of Shanars / Nadars, Christians and non-Christians alike, that centred around the question of caste identity and the impact of Christian missionaries on the Shanar / Nadar community in Tirunelveli. Before turning to the repercussions of Caldwell's book, though, it is necessary to have a closer look at the book itself.

The Tinnevelly Shanars (1849)
as a ritual typology of 'demonolatry'

Theories of religion were never absent in the observation of local religious practices by missionaries like Robert Caldwell. Their remarks on 'superstitions' and 'idolatry' are, of course, no more than rough and stereotyped sketches of the local field. However, the importance of such accounts is not so much on their verifiability. Rather, they have to be understood from the perspective of category formation and comparative theories of religion which emerged at the colonial and missionary frontiers.[33] As Brian Pennington has observed:

The construction of religion ... was more than an imaginative exercise involving category formation and descriptive discourses. It also involved the manufacture of actual religious ideas and practises for Christians and non-Christians alike. New religious ideas and practises appeared across the globe in places touched by British colonialism, and they conformed to the categories and descriptive habits of the emerging study of religion.[34]

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[31] Caldwell 1849.

[32] Caldwell 1850. This edition of Caldwell's book contains numerous slight variations, additions and deletions, compared to the original edition of 1849. (Cf. also Hardgrave1969: 21). My references in this article are to the original edition from 1849.

[33] For this understanding of Caldwell's book, I am indebted to David Chidester's analysis of the history of comparative religion in Southern Africa as a "science of contact" that emerged out of colonial frontier situations. Chidester 1996.

[34] Pennington 2005: 24.

It is certainly true that Caldwell's book fits well in this frame, because it is a good example for this discursive liaison of description and missionary practice.

As noted before, Caldwell's earlier reports in the series *Missions to the Heathen* give an insight into his first observations on the local people and the religious context in Tirunelveli, prior to his book in 1849. A comparison of his different works about South Indian culture and religion indicates that his theories underwent a considerable development in the period between the 1840s and 1880s. For example, while he observed from the beginning the difference between the "orthodox system" of the Brahmans and the local religious practices of the lower castes in Tirunelveli,[35] which were depreciated as 'devil-worship' by the missionaries, in his later accounts he separated the Shanars / Nadars, and subsequently the Dravidians, on the basis of linguistic, racial, and particularly religious arguments from the dominant Brahmans / Aryans. Moreover, in his first report from the "Edeyenkoody Mission" (1844), he described devil worship only as a "primitive form of Hindoo superstition, on which the Brahmanical system afterwards grafted", but did not stress this point further in terms of a conceptual difference between two different systems of religion.[36]

Although Caldwell claimed to have gained his knowledge about the Shanars / Nadars from personal observation and local informants ("intelligent Hindus" and Shanars)[37], his book should not be read as a firsthand account of the local religious practices in Tirunelveli. As he admits in his description of the ritual of 'devil-dancing', he did not witness such ritual practices at close range.[38] Obviously, missionaries were not admitted to be present at such occasions, because their presence was considered to be inauspicious and an obstacle to the right performance of the ritual. Joseph Mullens, a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), reported that missionaries had only seldom the opportunity of obtaining a sight of rituals like devil-dancing and sacrifices, as the people believed that "their devils cannot cope with Europeans."[39] According to Caldwell, Europeans

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[35] Caldwell 1849: 7.
[36] Caldwell 1844: 6.
[37] Cf. Wyatt 1894: 84–85.
[38] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 20–21.
[39] Mullens 1854: 99, see also p. 112. Joseph Mullens (1820–1879) worked from 1843 till 1865 as a missionary in Calcutta, and from 1868 as Foreign Secretary of the LMS. He visited South India in the years 1853 and 1865–66 and published two books on South Indian missions: Mullens 1854 and 1863. His description of the mission among the Shanars/Nadars is mainly based on Caldwell, with whom he was personally acquainted. For biographical information on Mullens, see Sibree 1923: 57.

were attributed with immunity against the power of demons,[40] but proba-
bly the refusing of a European presence at such events was also an indi-
cation of the serious threat that the agency of Christian missionaries
among the Shanars / Nadars posed to local religious cults.

If not derived from personal observation, Caldwell's ideas about the
Shanars and their 'religion' were predetermined by the Evangelical (more
specifically Calvinistic) concept of religion. As a missionary, his tacit
axiom was the question of conversion, which, in the language of the
Evangelicals, always meant the attainment of a personal conviction con-
cerning God's salvation of humanity in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the
parameters of his accession on the religion and culture of the Shanars /
Nadars – and in general terms also to South Indian religion and culture –
were primarily theological, even if they were combined with linguistic
arguments and the intermixed language of "race", "class", and "nation".[41]
The structure of the book indicates this more clearly: "True", or rather
"genuine" religion could be detected and determined by the knowledge of
a superior divine being (I.1.), the personal commitment to a future state of
being ("spiritual condition" I.2.) and the effects on the "moral constitu-
tion" of a subject (II.). For Caldwell, the religion of the Shanars / Nadars
had to be evaluated according to these terms. It is obvious that the close
connection between mission theory and a theory of religion is already
provided by the structure of the book, and that, more specifically, the
theory of Shanar religion evolves out of his missionary ambitions. The
main internal contradiction of his argument is, therefore, that while he is
constantly stressing the (un)readiness of the Shanars / Nadars for Christi-
anity due to their lack of any 'serious' or 'higher' religion at all, he is
delineating a religious "system" of a lower degree that affords important
points of contact to Christianity.[42]

According to Caldwell, the religious system of the Shanars / Nadars
could be denoted as devil-worship or "demonolatry".[43] The latter term is
used by Caldwell in an abstract sense. It indicates an attempt to systema-
tize his cultural, historical and linguistical observations into a coherent
theory of demonolatry. According to Caldwell, this religious system had

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[40] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 16–17.

[41] Caldwell 1849: 4. This is not to deny the importance of Orientalist theories about
Indian religions. Caldwell was, for sure, deeply influenced from the very beginning by his
own studies of Orientalist theories of Indian religions and culture. But the relationship of
Evangelical conceptions of religion and Orientalism needs to be more carefully considered
than is currently done, at least when speaking of 'missionary orientalism'. For an analysis
of Caldwell's Orientalist studies, see Vaitheespara 1998: 26 ff.

[42] Caldwell 1849: 18.

[43] Caldwell 1849: 12.

to be clearly separated from "Brahmanism", which was, for Caldwell, largely identical with Hinduism:

Their connection with the Brahmanical systems of dogmas and observances, commonly described in the mass as Hinduism, is so small that they may be considered as votaries of a different religion. ... The mind of the Shanars has appeared to be a dreary void, a desert in which no trace of religious ideas is to be found. I have now to show how this desert has been peopled by a gloomy imagination with visions of goblins and demons. ... Demonolatry, or devil-worship is the only term by which the religion of the Shanars can be accurately described. ... Demonism in one shape or another may be said to rule the Shanars with undisputed authority. ... A large majority however of the devils are of purely Shanar or Tamil origin, and totally unconnected with Brahmanism.[44]

His attempt to describe demonolatry as a system totally different from Brahmanical Hinduism was motivated by considerable anti-Brahman reservations, which were shared by nearly all missionaries in India at that time. From the missionaries' point of view, Brahmanical Hinduism was liable for the caste system which was considered by the new British Protestant missionaries to be the greatest obstacle to Christian mission in India. Caldwell might have been also aware of the internal debates between Catholic and Protestant missionaries, like Abbé Dubios and James Hough, about the Catholic partiality for a mission among the higher castes.[45] But Caldwell's concern to construct a system of 'Shanar religion' independent from Brahmanism served primarily his missionary agenda, to utilize it as the soil on which the mission could plant its Christian tree. Therefore, his main argument was that demonolatry failed to be a higher form of religion at all, as it could not comply with the (Christian) criteria of religion. For example, the Shanars did not have any real knowledge about a God or any good divine being that was worshipped on a regular basis, as well as any apprehension of divine salvation, and the person's future state of being.[46] Whereas these failings could be considered as disadvantages at first sight, the absence of a higher religion was seen by Caldwell as an advantage for Christian mission:

It must be obvious that the sincerity of the belief entertained by the Shanars in their demons, though productive of superstitious gloom and incompatible with a high caste of thought, is morally a more promising feature of mind than the conceited rationalism or universal scepticism of the Brahmanical higher castes, and capable of being turned to better account.[47]

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[44] Caldwell 1849: 7, 11–13.
[45] Cf. Vaitheespara 2006: 43 ff.
[46] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 8 ff.
[47] Caldwell 1849: 43.

Caldwell's strategy, to construct demonolatry as a cohesive system, is worthy of consideration from a methodological point of view. His description of devil-worship is a reduction of the complex variety of South Indian religious practices and rituals to one uniform system. The first step he takes is the reduction of certain gods and divine beings to one "genus" of deity:

I shall now mention some particulars illustrative of the opinions entertained respecting these demons and the peculiarities of their worship, as it exists at present. I shall not attempt to enter upon a minute description of the system, or exemplify it by specific illustrations; but shall confine myself to the more general object of furnishing the reader with a sketch of its salient points and more prominent characteristics, and helping him to form an estimate of its tendencies and effects. My description will therefore apply rather to the genus 'demon' than to any demon in particular – rather to the points in which all diabolical rites agree than to local or incidental varieties.[48]

Caldwell admitted that his account was somehow generalized, but it was exactly this method of generalization which enabled him to construct demonolatry as the prototype of non-Brahman, Tamil religion in South India. This religion, he believed, had been prevalent in South India prior to the immigration of Brahmans from the north.[49] Accordingly, his understanding of demonolatry is rather inclusive, as it includes the spiritual beings that were denoted as *pēy*, but also, to some extent, the Amman (Tam. amman) goddesses, which were typical of South Indian villages. Although Caldwell denotes the Amman goddesses as female "demons", the relationship between Amman-worship and demon-worship seems to be quite ambivalent.[50] On the one hand, he is aware of the strong relationship between village cults and the worship of *pēys*, including the fact that animal-sacrifices were part of both cults. On the other hand, he assumes that the worship of Amman goddesses did not belong to the original form of demonolatry, because the goddesses are seen as forms of Kali (Skt. kālī, Tam. kāḷi), thus providing for them a Brahman lineage. Hence, the worship of Amman goddesses becomes, for him, an example of the partial Brahmanisation of demonolatry over the course of time. Further, the two most important male deities in South India, Murugan (Tam. murukan) and Aiyanar (Tam. aiyanār), are decidedly excluded by him from the concept of demonolatry, because of their clear connection with Brahmanical mythology. He only gives their Sanskrit names, "Subrahmanya" (Skt. subrahmaṇya, Tam. cuppiramaṇiyan) and "Shástá" (Skt. śāstṛ, Tam. cāstā) without mentioning any particularities of their worship

[48] Caldwell 1849: 13.
[49] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 24.
[50] Cf., for example, Caldwell 1849: 13–14 and 23 ff.

in South India.[51] It is interesting that, in his article on "Demonolatry in Southern India" which appeared more than 30 years later (1886), he revised this classification in a significant way. Here, he included male deities, such as Aiyanar, as well as the female deities, such as the various forms of Amman, in the system of demonolatry, but clearly distinguished them as "semi-divine beings" from the devils / demons (*pēy*) as "semi-diabolical beings".[52] This is contrary to his arguments in *The Tinnevelly Shanars* (1849). In 1886, he gives a fuller account of at least one male deity, Aiyanar, and does not emphasise the opposition of Brahmanism and demonolatry to the same extent as he did before.[53] However, in *The Tinnevelly Shanars* the worship of spirits – and to some extent also that of Amman deities – provides the background for Caldwell's theory of demonolatry.

This reduction of different deities to one "genus demon" reinforced his claim that the Shanars / Nadars were a separate social entity with a distinct ritual identity. The second step, therefore, was the generalization of the variety of ritual practices connected with spirit worship and village deities. Caldwell took two rituals as the key practices of the system of demonolatry. The first is called "devil-dance" by him (Tam. cāmiyāṭṭam). The description of the devil-dance is chiefly used by him to show that the Shanars do not know any separate priesthood, but that this rite "may be performed by any one who chooses" and who, then, carries out the role of the priest.[54] He seems to acknowledge this indirectly as a positive aspect, since the presence of a strong religious authority – the Brahmans for example – was usually seen as a major obstacle to the success of Christian mission. In connection with the devil-dance he could, of course, not abstain from explaining the issue of demoniacal possession, which was one of the most striking features of the Indian religious context for the

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[51] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 12.

[52] Caldwell 1886: 93 ff.

[53] Caldwell 1886: 93–94. Caldwell's article, which is partly a revision of his concept of demonolatry after a fierce conflict with the Shanar/Nadar community of Tirunelveli, cannot be discussed here at length, although there are significant differences compared to his argument in 1849. The most striking feature is his attempt to re-integrate the system of demonolatry into a broader concept of Hinduism, following Monier Monier-Williams' description of 'demon-worship' as an integral part of Hinduism (Monier-Williams 1883: 230–256). Citing Monier-Williams, Caldwell wrote: "In fact, a belief in every kind of demoniacal influence has always been, from the earliest times, an essential ingredient in Hindu religious thought." (Caldwell 1886: 92). In fact, this was a retraction from his earlier positions due to the protest of the Shanars/Nadars, who denied that their religion was not to be considered as part of Hinduism. The article was republished in the *Indian Evangelical Review* 14 (1887–88): 192–203. For the conflict between Caldwell and the Shanar/Nadar community see also the next paragraph.

[54] Caldwell 1849: 19–20.

missionaries.[55] Although he gives the typical rationalistic explanation, reducing the description to the performative acts of the ritual, the question of possession was nevertheless an ambivalent issue for the European missionaries. The possibility of 'real' demoniacal possession – understood as the presence of the devil in Christian terms – was never far from their mind. Hence, their descriptions very frequently display this ambivalence between the Christian devil (singular) and the local devils (plural). Edward Sargent's (CMS) short account of devil worship, which appeared also in 1849, can be seen as a good example:

It is a curious question whether those who dance and are said to become possessed are really so in the strict sense of the word. The whole service is the service of the devil, and must, in a certain sense, be attributed to his influence and agency; but whether he so possesses their bodies and governs their minds as to make their volition and action not properly their own, but his, appears to me very questionable. From all that I have seen and heard, I should rather consider it as a voluntary excitement, which works itself up to a species of frenzy, and which gradually subsides as the party becomes exhausted.[56]

The second ritual, which Caldwell designates as the "offering of bloody sacrifices", becomes the key point in his construction of a coherent system of demonolatry and its ritual typology.[57] The description provided in this section differs substantially from that of devil-dancing; he does not give a very detailed account of the ritual performance, but goes on to introduce a theory about the genealogy of demonolatry as the original religion of the Tamil people. It is noteworthy that he does not use the term 'Dravidians' here, which was a few years later the key term in his

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[55] See Kent 2004: 58 ff., for an insightful analysis of Caldwell's account.

[56] Sargent 1849: 61. It is worth mentioning here that, around 1850, a number of descriptions of devil worship in Tirunelveli appeared in periodicals and books. See, for example, Tucker 1848: vol. 2, chapter 4–5; Best 1849; and Pope 1850–51. Some of them, like Edward Sargent's description, are autonomous accounts, which describe similar features of the religious practices in Tirunelveli, but are virtually independent from Caldwell's book. Interestingly, Sargent does not seem to share Caldwell's idea of a coherent system of demonolatry, because he uses the term 'devil worship' without any systematic intention. His account is also rather differentiated compared to Caldwell's book, and is at least willing to differentiate between Amman and spirit cults.

Other descriptions of devil worship in Tirunelveli, which refer to Caldwell's book are, for example, Pettitt 1851: 476 ff.; and Mullens 1854: 96 ff. The latter reflects Caldwell's typology of Shanar ritual practice by stating that "the service presented to the demons is of two kinds, DEVIL-DANCING and DEVIL-SACRIFICE [sic]." (Mullens 1854: 98).

An Abridgement of Caldwell's book was reprinted by G. J. Metzger in the English edition of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's *Genealogy of the South Indian Gods* (Metzger and Germann 1869).

[57] Caldwell 1849: 21 ff.

Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages (1856).[58]

However, the idea of demonolatry as the "aboriginal" religion in South India, prior to the immigration of the Brahmans from the North, is already to be found in his earlier book (1849). According to Caldwell, the "origin of the Shanar Demonolatry lies in the unknown depths of antiquity. ... The worship of devils would seem to have been anterior to the Vedaic [*sic*] system itself."[59] He is arguing that demonolatry is not only more ancient than Vedic religion and subsequent Brahmanism, but not dependent on both in any way: "There are many direct reasons for assigning to demonolatry an origin independent of Brahmanism and anterior to its introduction into the Tamil country, or even into India."[60] The complex argument which follows tries to examine the religious antiquity of demonolatry by a combination of mythological evidences from Brahmanical Hinduism, contemporary theories of the history of religions, and linguistic and cultural observations. It is obvious that they serve Caldwell's intention to restore the historical antiquity and theological independency of demonolatry in India, which can readily be adapted for Christian mission:

Here, in polished and metaphysical India we find a civilization but little raised above that of the Negroes, and a religion which can only be described as fetishism. And what exists in Tinnevelly is only a type of the social and religious condition of extensive tracts throughout India with which Europeans have not yet become familiar.[61]

The idea of adaptability of 'ancient', that is to say 'primitive', religions with Christian concepts is further enhanced by Caldwell's theory about the genealogy of animal sacrifices among the Shanars / Nadars. It is obvious that his definition of 'sacrifice' was dictated by the Evangelical notion of Jesus' death as sacrifice for the redemption from sin; the latter being primarily understood as offences which affected the moral consciousness of Christian believers:

The sole object of the sacrifice is the removal of the devil's anger or of the calamities which his anger brings down. It should be distinctly understood that sacrifices are never offered on account of the sins of the worshippers, and that the

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[58] Cf. Caldwell 1856. Appendix IV is entitled "Ancient Religion of the Dravidians". Parts of the text (pp. 521–522) were taken from his earlier book. Here, Caldwell used explicitly the term 'Dravidian demonolatry'. For his explanation of the term 'Dravidian', see pp. 26–28.
[59] Caldwell 1849: 24.
[60] Caldwell 1849: 25.
[61] Caldwell 1849: 29.

devil's anger is not excited by any moral offence. The religion of the Shanars, such as it is, has no connection with morals.[62]

Indeed, nowhere else can Caldwell's Evangelical attitudes be seen more clearly than in his interpretation of sacrifice. What, one could ask, makes in the eyes of Evangelical missionaries, like Caldwell, such people better objects for the Christian mission than any devotee of 'higher' religions? Here, Caldwell's astonishing answer is that, even if there is no connection between belief and ethics in demonolatry, its theological adaptability exists primarily in the idea of substitution which lies behind the sacrificial rituals. Although he claims that the Shanars / Nadars do not explicitly know a theory of substitution, the ritual of bloody sacrifice is interpreted by Caldwell as a substitutional practice, which, implicitly, serves as a kind of 'praeparatio evangelica'. Aside from the historical and theological independence of demonolatry from 'higher Hinduism', its ritual practice is, according to Caldwell, the most important point of contact for Christian mission and the main reason for the success of Christian missions among the Shanars / Nadars:

The Shanars have not intellect enough to frame for themselves a theory of substitution; but their practice and their mode of expression prove that they consider their sacrifices as substitutions and nothing else. ... It is sufficiently obvious that ... they are in a better position [than other Hindus] for understanding the grand Christian doctrine of redemption by sacrifice. ... The prevalence of bloody sacrifices for the removal of the anger of superior powers is one of the most striking [facts] in the religious condition of the Shanars, and is appealed to by the Christian Missionary with the best effect.[63]

Turning the idea of substitution into a historical fact, he even supposed that the animal sacrifices were themselves a substitution of the even more ancient "human sacrifices to the demons", which had prevailed in ancient times all over South India. Like many of his contemporaries, Caldwell believed the 'meriah' sacrifice of the Khonds, a tribe in the north-eastern parts of Madras Presidency, to be a vivid remnant of this history.[64]

A further point, which cannot be analysed here at length, is his account of the 'moral constitution' of the Shanars that follows in chapter two. As mentioned before, Caldwell attested that the Shanars / Nadars had a total

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[62] Caldwell 1849: 21.

[63] Caldwell 1849: 22. In the introduction he writes: "There are certain facts and truths proper to Christianity, such as the doctrine of our redemption by sacrifice, which are peculiarly offensive to some of the Brahmanical sects, and are supposed to be offensive to the Hindu mind every where, but which convey no offence in Tinnevelly; where the shedding of blood in sacrifice and the substitution of life for life are ideas with which the people are familiar." (Caldwell 1849: 7).

[64] Cf. Caldwell 1849: 22. Consequently, he marked the Khonds as the "most primitive and least Brahmanized portion of the aboriginal Tamil race." (ibid.)

absence of any ethical consciousness ("morals").[65] However, the fact that this chapter makes up more than half of the whole book indicates that Caldwell's theory of demonolatry, evolved in chapter one, serves primarily as a prerequisite for the typical Evangelical agenda of Christian mission as moral and social improvement directed towards the lower classes of society. Caldwell, thus, writes in the beginning of chapter two:

> From the description now given of the religion of the Shanars, it will not be difficult to form an estimate of its moral results. The influence of religion in forming or modifying the character of nations is well known ... Nations are what their gods are. ... In considering the moral condition of the Shanars as affected by their demonolatry ... incidental light will be thrown on some correlative questions. Reasons will probably appear why Christianity has prevailed more amongst the Shanars than amongst higher castes; reasons why the Shanars as a class should be less bigotedly attached to their religion and more easily impressed by Christian teaching and influences than other Hindus; and reasons also why the style of character exhibited by the native Christians in Tinnevelly differs so considerably from that of the Christians of Tanjore and Madras.[66]

As Eliza Kent has observed, the missionary interest in social uplift did not stem from altruism alone, but was motivated by the theological presumption that the "low castes' depths of degradation made their material and spiritual uplift a persuasive index of the power of Christian faith. ... God's greatness was affirmed by his ability to lift up wretches from their lowly and benighted state."[67] Hence, missionary descriptions like Caldwell's book were always inclined to amplify the antagonism between the factual condition of its missionary objects and their own Evangelical ideals of 'moral religion'. The Shanars / Nadars were constructed as idealised representatives of a 'particular need' of the missionary agency for all lower caste groups in Tirunelveli, by means of adapting them to the common Evangelical narratives. Not only in the case of Caldwell, the peculiar dynamics of these narratives in Tirunelveli resulted from their strategy to represent Tirunelveli as a land without religion, which was at the same time the habitat of the devil(s) and, as Bishop Spencer said, the land of promise for the missionary endeavour. Caldwell's book is a good example of how missionary narratives about the Tirunelveli mission covered up this space between the devil and the devils, between the 'land without religion' and the 'field white to harvest'. Missionaries like Caldwell were well aware that the congruence between accounts of devil worship and Christian conceptions of the devil could be understood as

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[65] Caldwell 1849: 11.
[66] Caldwell 1849: 32.
[67] Kent 2004: 52–53.

contrived.[68] Yet, he and other missionaries did not invest much effort into dissolving such identifications. Far from it, it had a massive impact on their missionary strategies. In an account of a (typical) dialogue between a missionary and a 'devil worshipper', written by George Uglow Pope, the missionary asks the devotee: "Have you never heard of holy and beneficient beings that protect the sons of men, and deliver them from the power of demons?"[69]

Caldwell's method of systematizing the religious practice of Shanars as demonolatry, and the temporal theories he then imposed on his findings, led to several consequences that I will now consider briefly in the end of this paragraph. First, he constructed the Shanars / Nadars as a coherent community with a distinct ritual identity, depending on their low caste status in South Indian society. As I have already indicated, Evangelical narratives had a preliminary tendency to locate the objects of their missionary concern at the lower ends of society, which, in turn, forced their emphasis on the necessity of social uplift. Caldwell's theory of demonolatry is, therefore, also a theory of lower class religion; based on the assumption that demonolatry was not only the most ancient religion of South India, but a typical example of the religious degradation of the lower classes. It is unsurprising that he shows no serious intention – if he had any – to differentiate between the Shanar / Nadars and other lower caste groups. He even admitted that he would go so far as to "include [sometimes] the whole of the lower classes of the local population under that predominating name",[70] and extended this claim by substituting demonolatry, occasionally, by the term 'Shanarism'.[71] His book adapted the Shanars / Nadars, therefore, not only to the Evangelical narratives, but also fixed their place on the social scale of South Indian society. His frequently cited words from the beginning of his book ascribe to the Shanars / Nadars a position at the lower end of social hierarchy:

The caste of Shanars occupies a middle position between the Vellalers and their Pariar slaves. ... They may in general be described as belonging to the highest

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[68] See, for example, Caldwell 1849: 12, where he writes: "When Missionaries allude to the devil worship prevalent in Tinnevelly, some persons seem to suppose that by the term 'devils' we mean the gods worshipped by the people; and that we style them 'devils' because their claims are supposed to those of the true God ... It is thought that we use the term in a controversial sense ... But ... in describing the *positive* [sic] portion of the religion of the Shanars as devil worship, the word used is not only the most appropriate one we know, but it exactly corresponds with the term used by the Shanars themselves. ... Consequently, demonolatry, or devil worship, is the only term by which the religion of the Shanars can be accurately described."

[69] Pope 1850–51: 60.

[70] Caldwell 1849: 4.

[71] Caldwell 1849: 34.

division of the lower classes, or the lowest of the middle classes: poor, but not paupers; rude and unlettered, but by many degrees removed from a savage state.[72]

This assignment became the bone of contention for Caldwell's Shanar opponents in the following decades.

Second, his method led him to the level of religious theory and comparative religion. Having separated demonolatry from its religious and cultural context in South India, he could even claim that the rituals and religious practices of the Shanars were to be compared to other forms of primitive religion, for example "fetishism" in Western Africa.[73] This introduced the Shanars / Nadars as a separate group, with distinct rituals and a distinct identity, into the field of global comparison. Although he asserts that there exists no common historical origin for both Shanar demonolatry and fetishism, "the two systems have a greater resemblance to one another than either of them has to any of the other religions of the heathen world."[74] It is telling to see how he constructs the similarity on the basis of a morphological comparison, referring to a fixed set of components, for example, the transformation of the spirits of the dead into demons, the same forms of worship ("frantic dances" and sacrifices), possession, exorcism, the absence of a regular priesthood, and of "every idea of revelations and incarnations."[75] Hence, demonolatry was for him not only a religion specific to South India, but also a translocal phenomenon that could be found, for example, also in Sri Lankan Buddhism.[76] Moreover, the Evangelical conviction that religion and morals were inextricably bound to each other enabled him also to treat demonolatry as a specific mentality, signifying a complete absence of any "morals" in parallel to "atheism" and "materialism".[77]

It is remarkable that he did not follow up his assumption of a structural identity between fetishism and demonolatry in his later works. A few years later, in his *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (1856), he replaced it by a comparison with "shamanism" in Siberia, explaining that he had written his earlier book "before I was aware of the identity of the demonolatry of Siberia with that

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[72] Caldwell 1849: 4.
[73] Caldwell 1849: 25.
[74] Caldwell 1849: 28.
[75] Caldwell 1849: 28.
[76] See Caldwell 1849: 27, where Caldwell asserts that the worship of devils could also affect higher religions, for example Buddhism: "The Buddhists of Burma and Ceylon have added to Buddhism the worship of indigenous demons, though nothing can be supposed more foreign to the genius of Buddhism than such a system." For an analysis of colonial representations of Singhalese religion and the ritual of "Yaktovil" in particular, see Scott 1994.
[77] Caldwell 1849: 36.

of Tinnevelly".[78] This enabled him to incorporate the theory of demonolatry into his broader theory about a common racial and linguistic origin of the Dravidians and Scythians in Upper Asia. It should be clear from these few remarks that his theory of demonolatry made up an essential part of his theory of the Dravidians, filling the gap of historical evidence for a uniform pre-Aryan and non-Brahman culture in Asia.

Casting and re-casting the Shanars:
Reactions of the Tirunelveli Shanars / Nadars

In missionary circles, in India as well as in Britain, Caldwell's book was readily received as an exemplary testimonial of mission work in India. In a review, the *Madras Quarterly Missionary Journal* praised Caldwell for providing his readers with "something to read", in contrast to the over-whelming mass of missionary literature which bored its readers with patchy extracts from journals and diaries:

In such a sketch the real work of the Missionary is made manifest; the many strange phases of human error which he has to oppose and dissipate are illustrated, we are enabled to enter into the arena of conflict and see unbelief set face to face with 'the truth as it is in Jesus,' and to anticipate its shameful retreat.[79]

The reviewer's call, for more accounts of missionary work in the style of Caldwell's book, indicates that missionary circles in India felt a demand for quasi-ethnographical accounts of their converts, which helped to overcome the conceptual lacks of standard Evangelical anthropology in the field of missions. Whereas in the following decades Caldwell's book gained recognition as a canonical work on South Indian religion and culture, absorbed as an integral part of colonial knowledge, the repre-sentation of Tirunelveli and the Tirunelveli Shanars by Caldwell and his epigones did not remain unanswered by Shanars / Nadars and other local groups, Christians and non-Christians alike. The battle about their customary ritual and social ranking in South Indian society during the nineteenth century is a good example, which displays the effects of colo-nial representations of Indian society and how the dynamics of represen-tation and counter representation unmasked the dominance of cultural and religious paradigms in colonial discourse.

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[78] Caldwell 1856: 521.
[79] 'Reviews and Notices of New Publications: 1. The Tinnevelly Shanars, a Sketch. By the Rev. R. Caldwell, Edeyengoody'. *Madras Quarterly Missionary Journal* 1,2 (1850): 123–128, p. 124.

As already mentioned, the general resistance to missionary activities
was organised by the dominant caste groups in Tirunelveli. The more
specific critique of Caldwell's book came from the side of the Shanars /
Nadars, who disagreed particularly with the low social status Caldwell
had ascribed to them, and with his claim that their religion was to be
denounced as aboriginal demonolatry that had no connection with
Brahmanical Hinduism. Parallel to Caldwell's preferred methods, theories
about historical genealogy, linguistics, and ritual became the most
important ingredients of their counter manoeuvre in the following
decades. According to Hardgrave, the movement took its initial motiva-
tion from conflicts between Shanar / Nadar Christians and European
missionaries in Tirunelveli.[80] Converts to Christianity challenged the
paternalism of European missionaries and their narratives about Tirunel-
veli and the Shanars / Nadars in missionary publications. Arumai
Nayakam Sattampillai (Tam. arumaināyakam caṭṭampiḷḷai, 1824–1919), a
catechist of the SPG mission in Nazareth (Tirunelveli), took the lead in
organising resistance to missionary dominance among Christian converts.
He was dismissed from his post as catechist in the SPG mission after
fierce debates with the local missionary in Nazareth, August Frederic
Caemmerer. In reaction, he founded, in 1857, his own church, the 'The
Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus', which he also called the 'Hindu
Christian Church'. At that time it was probably the only independent
Protestant Indian church in South India.[81]

In contrast to European theorists like Caldwell, Shanar activists claimed
a different status – one *within* the Brahmanical varna (Skt. varṇa)
system – as Kshatriyas (Skt. kṣatriya). This was based on the assumption
that Shanars were descendants not of any aboriginal Dravidian race, but
of the Pandya kings, once the powerful rulers of ancient South Indian
kingdoms, who had lost their original social and ritual status over the cen-
turies and were reduced to servitude.[82] According to Hardgrave, the
writing of caste histories to prove this genealogy became one of the major
activities of the emerging movement, resulting in the production of more
than forty books, pamphlets and articles in the years following the schism
in 1857.[83] This claim of a noble descent was further justified by an
etymological re-interpretation of the word 'Shanar', which seemed to
have a contemptuous meaning as a caste designation in the 19th century.
The standard orientalist etymology interpreted Shanar as a derivation of

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[80] As Hardgrave and Kent have both given detailed accounts of this movement, I confine
myself here to a short summary of their findings. Hardgrave 1979; Kent 2004.

[81] For Sattampillai and his church, see Thangaraj 1971; Kumaradoss 1996; and
Sugirtharajah 2005: 175–189.

[82] Cf. Surguner 1883: 17–18.

[83] See Hardgrave 1969: 78 ff. and Appendix III, for a full account.

the Tamil word for toddy, 'caru' (Tam. cāṟu), thus associating the Shanars with the production of alcohol from the Palmyra juice, which was considered a polluting business by the higher castes. In contrast, Shanar activists, like Samuel Sargunar, interpreted a variant of their caste name, 'canrar' (Tam. cāṉṟār), as a derivation of the Tamil word 'canror' (Tam. cāṉṟōr), frequently used in Sangam Literature. According to Sargunar, there it designated not only a 'noble' or 'learned' man, but their ancestors as a distinct group.[84] All these arguments were closely linked to a detailed criticism of Caldwell's book. Grasping precisely the major shortcomings of colonial knowledge production, Sarguner wrote:

> The whole of this discussion by the Bishop, so far as it relates to the Dravidians, is nothing but a mass of unadulterated falsehood, which appears to have originated with the Bishop's unsound and superficial knowledge of Tamil, combined with the imagination of his illogical mind, which too readily took it for granted that what it found to exist now had existed always, just as it believed [sic], as I have shown above, [and] that what was true of a few Shanars at or about Edeyengudi must be true of each of the Shanars all over the Tinnevelly District. ... It is none the less true ... that he has been a greater writer than thinker, and that his forte is to compare a dozen Grammars and Dictionaries of as many languages and boil down bundles of papers, be they Government records, Missionaries' letters, or copies of inscriptions, into forms of narratives.[85]

Yet, these claims were more than only a tug of war over words. The example of Sattampillai's Hindu Christian Church demonstrates that such counter representations did not remain in the sphere of mere words, but were also transferred to the field of ritual practice and religious identity. Based on the claim that Shanars / Nadars had originally a Kshatriya status and had to be called 'Nadars' as the correct name for their caste, Sattampillai and his followers challenged the image of Shanars / Nadars as a low caste community by a reconstruction of a ritual canon that served the religious needs of Shanar / Nadar Christians as Kshatriyas. They combined an adaption of Jewish rites from the Old Testament with the attempt to confer high caste moral and social norms upon the Shanar / Nadar community. As Eliza Kent has demonstrated, this implied substantial changes on gender relations within the Shanar / Nadar community, because the revaluation of matrimonial concepts was a central concern of

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[84] Cf. Samuel Sarguner: *Dravida Kshatriyas* (1880), cited in Hardgrave 1979: 174. See also Surguner 1883: 6 ff. Hardgrave gives a detailed analysis of these "new mythologies" and the etymological evidence. According to him, these linguistic theories were even debated in public newspapers, for example, the *Madras Mail* in 1899.

[85] Surguner 1883: 5–6.

Sattampillai's agenda.[86] Sattampillai understood his Hindu Christianity as a true challenge to the Protestant missions in Tirunelveli. As Caldwell noted:

> They call themselves in their documents 'The Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus;' but amongst their neighbours they call themselves, and are generally called, the Nattar, or 'national party'. In their zeal for caste and Hindu nationality, they have rejected from their system everything which appeared to them to savour of a European origin. Hence they have abandoned infant-baptism and an ordained ministry. Instead of wine they use the unfermented juice of grapes in an ordinance which they regard as the Lord's Supper, and observe Saturday instead of Sunday as their Sabbath.[87]

The catechism Sattampillai wrote in 1890 was primarily a harsh critique of the Western concept of Christian religion, in which he accused the missionaries of mixing their national customs with Christianity. The appendices of his book were filled with carefully selected references to prove "Anglican national profligacy" and the "idolatry" of the old Saxons "quoted from the very words of the Europeans themselves".[88] Yet, Sattampillai's method not only mirrored the tune of missionary rhetoric adopted by Caldwell and others. Besides discrediting European Christianity, he used such statements to argue that Christianity was tampered with Western decadence, sexual immorality and materialism, which were contradictory to the "national customs" of the Hindus. Converts to Christianity were thus allowed to keep their respective traditions alive, based on the argument that in the time of ancient Christianity "the Gentile converts would be incorporated with the Jewish Holy Church, with the full liberty to practise such of their own respective national customs ... as would not violate but naturally be in accordance with the righteousness of the [Jewish] law ...".[89] Although Sattampillai's reconstruction of a Nadar Christianity with the help of Old Testament law and rituals was to a certain extent an idiosyncratic endeavour, it was much more oriented towards Brahmanical Hinduism than towards Jewish religion. He seems to have adapted only those rituals which were not objectionable from the point of view of Brahmanical Hinduism. For example, he demanded "sacrificial nourishments" to Jesus Christ during worship, but allowed only "*pure* offerings, that is, substances *not offensive* to any class of

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[86] Kent 2004: 190–196 gives an excellent analysis of Sattampillai's concept of Indian Christian marriage and his role in the emerging discourse on Shanar/Nadar identity in the second half of the nineteenth century.

[87] Cited in Mullens 1863: 51–52.

[88] See the appendix of his book where he cites contemporary critics of Western culture at length to emphasise his argument. Sattampillai 1890: 30–47.

[89] Sattampillai 1890: 3–4. See also p. 7.

people."[90] Thus, the offering of "food, drink and perfumes [i. e. burning of incense]" during worship,[91] as well as the substitution of wine by grape juice during the Eucharist, indicate that the rituals in the Hindu Christian Church were clearly oriented towards Brahman standards.

The criticism of Caldwell and his book continued until the late 1880s and resulted in a war of petitions that was closely related to caste conflicts within the mission congregations. Furthermore, it was also related to the conflict between Caldwell and his fellow missionary Margöschis, in which Indian Christians of different castes were also involved. The petitions accused as well as supported Caldwell. They were written to different ecclesiastical and political authorities in Britain and India, which set the question of Shanar Christian and non-Christian identity again from the local to a global level of discourse. Besides the plea to withdraw the book entirely from circulation, the petitioners all shared the opinion that this was a debate on the issue of the 'respectability' of their caste, as well as a clear knowledge of the reception and reproduction of their image in Britain and in the missionary discourse in particular.

In the SPG archive there are no less than eight petitions filed, which were written in only two years between 1882 and 1884.[92] Each petition complaining about Caldwell was followed by one in favour of him. Both sides accused each other of deception and forgery in obtaining signatures.[93] By far the most interesting point concerning these petitions relates to how they mirror the effects caused by Caldwell's book and the debates among the parties involved; for example, about the role of missionaries. First, the authors were fully aware of the effects Caldwell's book had on the colonial discourse and their popularity as 'mission objects'. Gnanamutthu Nadar, Caldwell's most active and distinguished opponent in the course of the affair, observed that the circulation of Caldwell's book in Britain led the "enlightened world" to form a low opinion about Shanar Christians in Tirunelveli. The dissemination of this image through the work of various copyists made things much worse. He claimed that "every writer having read Bishop Caldwell's work writes as if he were quite sure of the non aryan and aboriginal origin of the Shanars, and their

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[90] Sattampillai 1890: 12 (italics in the original).

[91] Sattampillai 1890: 12.

[92] All petitions are held in the archive of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG), Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Copies of Letters Received (CLR) vol. 52, henceforth cited as CLR 52. I am grateful to the USPG for permission to cite from their archives.

[93] This was claimed in a Petition of "Native Christians of Tinnevelly", July 25, 1883, CLR 52: 268 ff.

degraded condition. ... Every writer ventures to call the Shanars an aboriginal race which is far from being the fact."[94]

Moreover, one petition of the Shanar Christians argued that Caldwell's depiction of the Shanars / Nadars as a degraded caste provoked local Hindus as well as Christians to uphold their caste distinctions even more furiously: "Because they think, that this system is inquired into, and made much of, even by the European Missionaries."[95] They very clearly stated that this had led to an increased consciousness of Shanar identity among Hindus as well as Christians. The petitioners even went so far as to state that Caldwell and his book alone had – ironically – become the cause of the extraordinary caste consciousness amongst the Shanar / Nadar Christians and the greatest obstacle to the progress of Christianity in Tirunelveli. Finally, the wave of resistance Caldwell had to face from the Shanars / Nadars induced him to retract the book from further publication by the late 1880s, a fact providing powerful evidence that missionaries – and colonial representatives in general – were not always powerful enough to control the genies they let out of their bottles.

Conclusion

In this article I have sketched how, in the period between the 1840s and 1880s, the missionary agency and the reflection on it by local Shanars / Nadars in Tirunelveli, contributed to the emergence of a globalised colonial image of the Shanars / Nadars and, closely related, to discourses of identity among this particular South Indian caste group. Their claim for a higher social position in South Indian society strongly affected the formation of a transregional Shanar / Nadar identity in the decades to come after Caldwell.[96] To briefly sum up my argument, it is necessary to return to the question at the beginning of how the restructuring of the Christian mission in Tirunelveli necessitated missionary narratives about Tirunelveli and the Shanars / Nadars. These narratives were distinctly elaborated in Caldwell's book, *The Tinnevelly Shanars*. His book should be seen in the broader context of comparative theories of religion, as they emerged all over the world in fields of colonial conquest during the nineteenth century. As David Chidester has observed, in the case of comparative religion in colonial South Africa, the colonial reaction to the encoun-

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[94] "Petition from certain Shanar Christians of Tinnevelly" (written by Y. Gnanamutthoo Nadar), May 19, 1883, CLR 52: 230.

[95] "Petition from certain Shanar Christians of Tinnevelly" (written by Y. Gnanamutthoo Nadar), May 19, 1883, CLR 52: 231.

[96] See Hardgrave 1969.

ter of alien peoples and their culture was a shift from a denial to a 'discovery' of their religions. Accordingly, the evolution of comparative theories about 'indigenous' religions was linked to the implementation of control on colonial frontier zones.[97] It should now be clear how this entanglement of the global and local levels of discourse helped Caldwell to galvanise the local missionary agency with a comparative religion approach and, in return, helped discourses of identity among Shanars / Nadars to take place at the intersection of regional as well as global levels of colonial discourse.

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[97] See Chidester 1996: 1–29.

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