

## Review

Hephzibah Israel, *Religious Transactions in Colonial South India: Language, Translation and the Making of Protestant Identity*. Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 286 pp. \$90. ISBN 978-0-230-10562-1 (hardback).

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As Wilfred Cantwell Smith showed, a sacred text is only sacred in relation to a community. 'No text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into a scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.'<sup>1</sup> This book studies the relationship between Tamil translations of the Bible and the Tamil Christian community, and between this community and the European missionaries who saw themselves as arbiters of the correctness and suitability of the translations.

The author introduces herself in the preface by commenting briefly on her experience as a Tamil Christian with a Jewish-seeming name, brought up in Delhi and graduating in English: a fitting opening for a book concerned with religion, language, ethnicity and identity. An introductory chapter presents the historical framework: the eighteenth century, when German missionaries translated the Bible into Tamil, the nineteenth, when further translations were supervised by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the twentieth, during which, in 1944, this work passed to the Bible Society of India. The main part of the book is organized not historically but thematically. Chapter 1 surveys the debates over translation policy which resulted from the missionary project of transferring to India the Protestant ideal of a Bible open to all in their own language. It finds that the translators' 'Protestant belief in the transparency of the Bible remained at odds with their translation experience' (p. 79). Chapter 2 studies the Tamil words chosen in various versions to translate 'God', 'baptism', and 'sacrifice', and the arguments for and against them urged by missionaries and by Tamil Protestants. Here, the endeavour to convey meaning through words that are current in the host culture conflicts with the wish to differentiate Christian concepts from Hindu ones. Chapter 3 turns to controversies over Bible translation among Tamil Protestants, and their social and political implications. Chapter 4 examines presentations of

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 18.

the Biblical story in verse form, in a culture which had traditionally subordinated prose to verse. Stepping outside the topic of Bible translation, this leads to devotional poetry, sung by solo performers and by congregations. A briefer concluding chapter discusses how—reversing Smith’s observation—the scripture constitutes the community. This process is complicated, but not negated, by the attachment of different sections of the community to different versions, both Tamil and English.

Some of the history parallels what was going on in the English-speaking world, and is part of the same history. The tendency to think of the King James Version as the Bible itself, and any newer version as a corruption of it, will be familiar to many; the missionary translators often depended on the King James Version in practice, though in principle they gave the ultimate authority to the original Hebrew or Greek. Tamil Christians in turn have regarded successive Tamil versions as the true Bible, and resented proposals to revise or replace them. Resistance to Bible revision is part of a popular struggle against the hegemony of a highly educated class which has access to ancient languages and the tools of scholarship. Similar resistance to the standardization of church music in early nineteenth-century South India had its counterpart in England, as the author points out. On the other hand, some of the history is peculiar to South India, being influenced not only by the colonial situation but by specific features of Tamil society such as competition between castes and attitudes to Sanskritic norms. The twentieth-century ‘pure Tamil’ movement, which sought to exclude Sanskrit loanwords, placed Protestant Tamils whose speech was influenced by the Tamil Bible in a sociolinguistic backwater. When this led to further revision, the revisers were denounced as ‘Destroyers of the Holy Faith’ (p. 149). Missionaries thought of translation as a process of making the sacred text accessible in whatever language; they failed to appreciate that, for Tamil Christians, the Tamil Bible itself was sacred, and not merely a means of access to a text that existed elsewhere.

This fascinating study involves linguistics, translation theory, sociology, political history, church history and theology, and should be read by anyone interested in these subjects in relation to India. Appearing repeatedly in it, like a tragic hero, is the poet Vedanayaka Sastri (1774–1864), who complained bitterly against the project of the British and Foreign Bible Society in the 1820s to replace the Tamil Bible which he knew, and whose devotional poems were criticized by missionaries for being too close to the Hindu bhakti tradition. It is odd that he is introduced biographically only on p. 199, although parts of his story have already been told here and there. Some awkwardness in organization is hard to avoid in such a complex book, but it could have been alleviated by a really good index. Instead, many proper names, and many topics, are not indexed at all, and some entries give dozens of page references without sub-headings. There is no list of abbreviations. A book as good as this deserves better.