

# Theological Content in the Tamil Christian Poetical Works

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(Continued from previous number)

(b) *Jesus Christ*.—Jesus Christ is God, the second Person of the Trinity (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 213:77), and the only begotten Son of God (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 227:133; *C.L.*, p. 19:4; p. 31:2). He is God incarnate. When reference is made to incarnation, the Hindu term *avatār* is employed (*C.L.*, p. 41:2; *R.Y.*, Part I, p. 3:5; p. 55:11) along with other Tamil expressions like *manu uru*, *nara uru*, in the form of man (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 213:28; *C.L.*, p. 31:1). In Hinduism the term *avatār* signifies many kinds and degrees of divine appearances and descents in physical bodies. It describes brief manifestations of the divine in illusory forms as well as divine indwelling in a human body for a lifetime. Though Christian poets use this term, they do not ignore or water down the differences between the Hindu and the Christian conceptions of incarnation. Jesus Christ is born of the Virgin Mary (*C.L.*, p. 24; *R.Y.*, Part I, p. 3:5). He is the supreme revelation of God, once and for all (*C.L.*, p. 21). He came lowly, emptying Himself of the heavenly glory (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 60:11), in order to redeem the world (*C.L.*, p. 251), by removing the evil caused by the woman's eating of the fruit (*C.L.*, p. 26). He is the river of life from heaven and the mountain of salvation (*R.M.*, Ch. 10). He brought God to us and us to God (*C.L.*, p. 38). His coming in the form of man emptying Himself of His heavenly glory is compared to the taking of medicine by the mother when her sucking child is ill (*C.L.*, p. 41:5).

The Tamil poets are extravagant in their language in listing the qualities of Jesus Christ, and they compare Him to various things. Krishna Pillai, for instance, describes Jesus Christ, in his *Rakshanya Manoharam*, as the ocean of bliss, the cloud that showers the rain of grace, life-giving medicine, wealth, river from heaven, mountain of salvation, gem of gems, holy teacher, lord of human soul, eternal life, and the like. The figure of a cloud is employed by Vedanayaga Sastriar and other lyric writers also. The concept is indigenous and full of meaning.

The most common idea in all such figures is that Jesus Christ is rich in love and grace. The Tamil word to signify both richness and generosity without limitation is *vallal*. Its root *val* means 'to bend' (compare Latin *vallum*, old English *weal*, and modern English *wall*). When the crops and trees are rich in fruits, they bend. Hence the word *valappam*, also derived from *val*, means fertility (compare modern English *weal*). The word *vallal* indicates a person who is not only rich in wealth, but also limitlessly generous in giving. This word is found in classical literature, where there are a number of stories about the *vallals* of the past. Tamil Christian poets give this name to Jesus Christ in order to show that He is the *vallal* of *vallals* in His generosity, for He gave His precious and innocent blood to save the world. Hence this is an adequate indigenous term to express the richness and wealth of Jesus Christ and the magnanimity of His giving.

(c) *The Holy Spirit*.—The term used for the Holy Spirit is *Parisutta Avi*, which is a Sanskrit expression. The first word means holy, and the second vapour, smoke, warmth, life, soul. In spoken Tamil *avi* is employed by the Hindus to mean life-breath and spirit of the dead. In Christian language, when preceded by the epithet *parisutta*, it signifies the Holy Spirit.

He is one in the Triune God. Whenever praises are sung to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are taken in order and the three are praised. Though the term *avi* is neuter, the language used of the Spirit signifies personality, as these typical passages indicate :

Praise to Thee, O God, the Holy Spirit ;  
Protect us giving strength, good knowledge,  
Pure mind and gripping devotion in the Holy Word.

(C.L., p. 4:3)

We worship Thee, Holy Spirit, heavenly Teacher,  
Thou who livest in our hearts for ever invisible.

(C.L., p. 5:3)

He proceeds both from the Father and the Son,  
Purifies the sinners, making them righteous,  
Shows the way of the Scriptures,  
Controls them giving them comfort.

(*Japamalai*, Ch. 9, p. 52:3)

With reference to the work of the Holy Spirit, Krishna Pillai writes :

He gives the light of the Scriptures in the heart and enlightens it ; He removes the darkness of ignorance, and helps always to walk in the unique way of salvation, for He is always aiming to save us ; He grants us grace, so that we may be successful in all good deeds undertaken.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 4:7)

Vedanayaga Sastriar describes the qualities of the Holy Spirit comparing Him to a flood of joy, eternal life, medicine for the

heart, good watch, the key to heaven, the stream of oil of happiness, sacred milk, light flame, holy righteousness, wisdom, truth of truth, tongue of fire, truth that passeth understanding, treasure of heaven, heavenly dew, wind, spring of wisdom, water of life, river of grace, companion on the way to heaven, the first, middle, and the end of the Scriptures, and dove (*Japamalai*, Ch: 9, pp. 51-54).

In the language of the poets, the personality of the Holy Spirit is implied. He is the helper and comforter; He cleanses, enlightens, and guides. He is the giver of gifts, talents, and wisdom. He dwells in the hearts of men who are believers. His continued fellowship is sought by the devoted followers of God.

(d) *The Trinity*.—The doctrine of the Trinity is accepted by one and all of the Tamil Christian poets. But no attempt is made to explain the doctrine. Krishna Pillai calls God One in Three and Three in One (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 1:2; p. 195:14), the primitive substance or stuff which has three branches (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 29:4). In his poetical imagination he sees the Ganges, the river of life, as having its origin in a mountain with three peaks. The polytheistic conception of the Hindu triad, made up of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, was not unknown to him. Yet in all his works we find only the monotheistic conception of God.

There is no word in Tamil which exactly describes the relation of the diversity within the Godhead, nor is there any word which corresponds to the English word 'person'. The poets therefore refer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the three aspects of God revealed to us. The one God who is the *prima causa* is in Himself the Maker, the Saviour, and the Inspirer.

The idea of a primitive substance or *prima causa*, although evidently borrowed from the Hindu tradition, can offer only an impersonal conception. Yet it is not to be misunderstood as referring to something neutral. The personal character of God is very clearly expressed throughout.

Krishna Pillai calls Jesus Christ 'True Substance' (*R.M.*, p. 58:12). The same expression, *meipporul*, meaning true substance, is used twice in the Tamil New Testament in 1 John 5:20. It is the translation of 'him that is true'. The usage of the Greek *ousia* in Christian thinking is suggestive of this connection.

(e) *The Christian Understanding of Man*.—What is man? All the Tamil Christian poets hold the traditional view of the story of man's creation given in the book of Genesis:

Having created man from the dust of the earth,  
Breathed in his nostrils the breath of life, and made him  
sleep soundly,  
He took one of his ribs and made of it a woman beautiful,  
And placed them both in the grove of Eden.

(*Gnanavula*, p. 25)

Adam and Eve had the image of God (*Life of Christ* by John Palmer, Nagercoil, 1865, p. 7):

Power of discrimination, wisdom, blessing of inner holiness, strong conscience—

Having been pleased to grant these graciously to the human beings,

The King of glory placed them in the new status and commanded them, Disobey not our word.

God said unto Adam, the first man :

Give we unto you the earth as a possession ;

Enjoy all the goodness thereof,

Rule justly as a king under my sceptre.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 50 : 4, 5)

Krishna Pillai refers to Adam by the word *mrityakeyan*. This may mean either one who is of the earth or one who is liable to die. Before the fall Adam and Eve were in a glorious state, which Krishna Pillai describes in the following way :

No sin was there, no fear of sin, no divine curse,

No death, no anxiety, no fury,

No enmity, no guilt, no avarice,

In those ancients who lived in a leaf-hut.

Disease, old age, death, these they knew not,

Depressing pain, affliction, sorrowful tears never occurring,

With their senses pure and with knowledge true filled,

... the heavenly beings marvelled at them.

Becoming infinite and blissful by approaching

King Satchidānanda, the saviour of the world,

They take as food for their ears

The exalted sweet words taught by Him ;

Daily praising, carrying out His orders, they live.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 51 : 11, 14, 15)

The ideas expressed by the poets may thus be gathered. God created man in His own image. The world is the product of God's creative and purposive act. He is God-King of the universe. Everything is under His control. Created out of the dust of the earth, man is under the control and protection of God. Before the fall he was enjoying bliss in a state of sinlessness. In fellowship with God, he was pure, having no ills.

While describing the blessed state of man in Eden, Krishna Pillai says that Adam and Eve knew not disease, old age, and death. These incidentally are the three evils that had driven Buddha to renounce the world. With regard to the composition of man, Krishna Pillai declares that man as created is made up of five sense organs, five physical elements, mind, and soul (R.Y., Part I, p. 54 : 2). He uses here terms employed in the Sankhya system of Hindu philosophy. Yet, unlike the Sankhya system which talks of the evolution of human body, Krishna Pillai speaks about the body and the soul of man as created by God.

(f) *Sin*.—(i) *The Origin of Sin* : For Hinduism there are a number of views regarding the origin of sin. According to

Sankhya, for instance, evil comes as a result of the conjunction of *Prakṛiti* (primordial matter) and *Puruṣa* (spirit). These two exist from eternity. Sankhya finds the explanation of the presence of evil in the process of nature. In Saiva Siddhanta the principle of evil, *anava mala*, the primeval dirt, coexist with God from eternity. The human soul is from the very beginning completely in the grip of *mala* (evil). The illustration used in this connection is that of brass and the copper oxide that is formed by chemical process. Copper corresponds to the soul and copper oxide to *mala*. Thus in Saivism evil is considered to be eternal. Therefore it is regarded as fate and not as an act of will. In Vedantism evil is due to *māyā* (illusion), and there is no deep conception of sin in it either. In the Bhedabheda theory (duality and non-duality) the view held is that both good and evil coexist in God Himself. This view is maintained in the influential *Bhāgavad Gītā*.

Over against these Hindu conceptions of evil and the origin of sin the Tamil Christian poets ascribe the origin of sin to the evil power which tempted Adam and Eve. Thus Vedanayaga Sastriar, both in his *Gnanavula* and in his *Balasarithiram*, recites the story of the fall of man as set forth in the third chapter of the book of Genesis. In his lyric (No. 134) he makes mention of the disobedience of man and of his falling a prey to the temptation of the serpent.

Krishna Pillai narrates the same story very picturesquely, as the following summary may indicate :

From among the group of the heavenly beings who were ever devoutly serving in the eternal kingdom of heaven the devil came forth. As he turned out to be an enemy he was cast out, and he then became the cause of evil and hatred. In disguise he came into the world and saw all the richness. 'I will fill these lion-like ones with deceit', he says to himself, 'and bring the whole world under my control and rule it.' He entered where the noble ones were, in the form of a venomous snake, and confused the mind of the woman. Through her he changed her husband and made them both disobey the commandment of God, the most high. The devil thus doomed himself because of pride and others out of envy. He placed the whole human race in the pit of *mala* (sin). What shall I say about this evil that befell the great world ?

(R.Y., Part I, pp. 52, 53)

From passages like these it may be inferred that the Tamil Christian poets were unanimous in saying that as created by God man does not have sin as something instinctive in him ; it came from without, and is the consequence of an act of deliberate disobedience on the part of man. Distrust of God, sin makes man defy God.

(ii) *What, then, is Sin ?* The following passages show that the Tamil poets view the fall of man as the great tragedy which has blighted the whole human race :

On account of the evil done by Adam and Eve in the garden mankind suffers.

(C.L., p. 124:2; p. 46:1, 2)

Those in the garden, trespassing the word of God, trusted a devil, not realizing the righteous way, and wilfully ate the evil fruit in the vast garden. Thereby they lost the four talents of wisdom, holiness, blessedness, and sin.

(*Japamalai*, p. 121)

For hereditary sin Krishna Pillai uses a term, *sanjitham*, which in Saiva Siddhanta means *karma* that is left over, the effect of which has not yet been brought to bear on a birth. For sin the poets use Hindu terms like *karma*, *mala*, and *pasam*, along with other terms which are not specifically Hindu in meaning. They are *papam*, *tivinai*, meaning evil, evil deed. The poets compare sin to disease, as the following passages show :

Wicked people, on account of the disease of sin, we have earned for us a curse.

(C.L., p. 25:3)

It [salvation] is a medicine prepared by the Holy God ; it is a medicine that will cure the disease of sin.

(C.L., p. 127:1)

This comparison of sin to disease is Biblical. 'The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint' (Isa. 1:5). Jesus likens Himself to a physician attending to the sick (Mark 2:17). Justin Martyr speaks of the Eucharist as 'the medicine of immortality'. The concern is expressed in the Augsburg Confession, Article II :

Also they teach that since the fall of Adam, all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence ; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.

A figure of this kind affirms that sin does not belong to human nature as such, but that it is its perversion. Therefore, in order to be whole, man has to be cured of the disease. That is to say, man must be saved from sin. At the same time we should not press the figure too far. Sickness may be considered as fate, but sin pertains to the will, the core of the human heart. So sin is connected with personal responsibility. A distinction between the sinner and his sin is untenable. Yet the poets, as the following verses indicate, seemed to make a distinction between the two :

The destroyer of sin, the friend of sinners,  
The divine Christ came to give His life for mankind.

(C.L., p. 19:6)

He is wrathful at sin, but not at the sinner.  
To the sinner who yearningly believes,  
He will stand as a refuge.

(C.L., p. 100:3)

To say that Christ hates sin but loves the sinner is to view sin apart from the sinner. Sin is not a thing; it is man that sins. It consists in the wickedness of his will, the sinfulness at the very core of his personality. So the sinner must be identified with the sin he commits. At the same time there is some truth in saying that God hates sin but loves the sinner. For in His love God always seeks the sinner challenging and calling him to right relationship with Himself.

The following lines of Krishna Pillai reveal some of his ideas about sin:

The moment I was conceived in my mother's womb original sin clung to me.

Having been born on earth, all kinds of wickedness began to abound and I became wicked.

The warring good conscience was made blunt, and I having become confounded in mind through the three lusts,

Committed sins daily without a limit and spent my days in vain.

There is in me nothing that is good. My evil has gripped me.

What shall I do ?

(*R.M.*, p. 17 : 5)

Krishna Pillai makes a distinction between original sin and actual sin. The original sin is said to have its root right at the embryo stage (*Ps.* 51 : 5). With his hereditary propensity towards sin man has a natural inclination actually to commit sin.

By 'three lusts' the poet means lust for land, woman, and wealth. When the Tamilians talk of lust, they usually classify it under these three. Lust is essentially the result of the primary sinful nature. Having lost the true centre of his life, man is no longer able to maintain his own will as the centre of himself. He has lost control over the impulses of his body and becomes a prey to the undue gratification of physical lusts.

Krishna Pillai speaks of sin as a grim reality. It is rebellion against God (*R.M.*, p. 16 : 2). The lyric writers call it treachery against God (*C.L.*, p. 161 : 2 ; p. 162 : 3 ; p. 171 : 21). It hardens the heart like steel (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 215 : 84). Sin is a prison of fire from which man is not able to escape (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 193 : 8). Sin is a deadly poison which spoils the health (*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 13 : 60). The wages of sin is death. The whole tragedy of man may be summed up in terms of his rescue :

The cloud of sin that devoured the world spread all over and drew the water of suffering. In the river of death, into which it rained its water, the majestic Saviour swam all alone with countless souls within His arms. He was drawn by the floods, laboured without losing the souls, and suffered, being concerned about their salvation.

(*R.Y.*, Part I, p. 225 : 122)

In Hinduism sin is less the violation of the law of God than the selfishness and distress bound up with earthly existence. The Tamil Christian poets are very clear in their conception that sin is rebellion against God and the trespassing of His commandments.

Man is living in a sinful context. The world is full of deceit, evil (R.Y., Part I, p. 13:1). This frightful situation is not created by him, but he has a share in it and he makes his contribution to it.

Out of personal experience, both from their own lives and from those around them, the poets have given expression to the dreadful reality of sin in man:

I am able to do only that which is evil,  
For the poison of evil has infected me,  
Even when I was in my mother's womb.

(C.L., p. 153:1)

To do anything truthful I know not but evil.

(C.L., p. 167:3)

In iniquity have I been shapen  
A great sinner have I become and a friend of the devil.  
No good quality have I in me,  
In the eternal hell of death am I.

(C.L., p. 170:1)

For the exalted life graciously offered to us  
By the immortal God-King we do not long.  
Like a dog that roams about for a bone that is dry,  
We for the wretched life of the land of destruction  
Go about to find it for us.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 19:26)

Like a python that is unwise and foolish  
Which sleeps when fire near it comes,  
We, not knowing that the time for the end  
By the fire and wrath of the heavenly King has come,  
Long still only for the fleshly lusts,  
And waste our days in vain.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 19:28)

My heart is a spring of sin, this is true;  
Out of my ear, mouth, eye, leg, hand sin springs.

(C.L., p. 170:2)

Without even a bit of fear of God in my heart,  
From the path of righteousness I strayed.

(C.L., p. 171:3)

Such expressions of Christian experience prove the effect of sin on man. Everyone that commits sin is the bondservant of sin. By abusing his freedom man has acquired a nature by which he is not able not to sin. Because of his perverted will he has become a slave to sin.

(To be continued)