The Legacy of Christian Friedrich Schwartz

Robert Eric Frykenberg

Christian Friedrich Schwartz (1726–98) was perhaps the most remarkable missionary of eighteenth-century India. For forty-eight years the influence of this gentle and unassuming forerunner of Anglo-Saxon missionaries reached farther and farther across South India, from Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) southward to Tiruchirapalli (Trichinopoly), to Thanjavur (Tanjore), and to Tirunelveli (Tinnevelly), if not even to Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) and Travancore. Eloquent in many tongues, he won respect and renown as a preacher, schoolmaster, educational innovator, diplomat, envoy, and statesman, and, finally, as protector-regent and raja-guru to Serfoji, Maharaja of Thanjavur (Tanjore). He, more than any other, together with disciples whom he called "helpers," strengthened the foundations of Tamil Evangelical Protestant Christianity. That this was done in a time of war, when armed conflicts and conspiracies were rife, when the Raj of the East India Company was spreading its imperial (British) sway over much of the subcontinent, and when opposition to missionary work was implacable makes what he achieved all the more remarkable and deserving of more serious attention from analytic historians than has so far been received.

Son of "Hannah's" Prayer

Christian Friedrich was born on October 22, 1726, at Sonnenburg, in Neumark, Prussia (now known as Stonsk, near Gorzow, Poland). His father, George Schwartz, was a baker and brewer. His mother, Maria Grunerin,[1] had already lost her first husband (Hans Schönemann) and three children, all of whom died young. A daughter, Maria Sophia, had been born three years earlier. Having earnestly prayed for a son, like Hannah of ancient Israel, Maria dedicated her infant boy to Christ and, on her deathbed (sometime before 1731) made her husband and her pastor solemnly vow, before the Lord, that the lad would be nurtured and trained for service to God. At the age of eight, on entering grammar school, Christian came under the devout influence and teaching of the local pastor and was confirmed in a pietistic personal faith and a disciplined daily worship. In Küistrin (ca. 1740), under the instruction of the syndic's daughter, he was profoundly inspired by stories about what missionaries of the Royal Danish Mission (also otherwise known as the Danish-Halle Mission) were doing in India, and by the writings of Professor August Hermann Francke, under whom she herself had studied. Entering Halle University in 1746, Schwartz was given bed and board in the orphanage that Francke had founded in 1698. Soon after, already a disciplined scholar and thinker, with a proficiency in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and modern European languages, Schwartz also gained a thorough acquaintance with recent currents of Enlightenment thought, including the latest developments in philosophy, theology, mathematics, and sciences, both theoretical and applied.[2] The diligent and earnest young man soon caught the eye of Benjamin Schultze (1689–1760), a veteran missionary who had recently returned from two decades in India, first in Tranquebar and then in Madras. He asked Schwartz to assist him in the production of his new translation of the Tamil Bible. It was Schultze who, after seeing how brilliant and gifted the youth was, recommended that Schwartz would make an ideal missionary. The director of the Franckesche Stiftungen, Gotthilf August Francke (son of August Hermann Francke), readily agreed, and in due course, Schwartz's appointment was confirmed.

Schwartz, with two other young missionaries bound for India, was ordained in Copenhagen on September 17, 1749, by a bishop of the Danish Church. After reaching London on December 8, he was invited to preach and did so several times, including Christmas Day in the Chapel Royal of St. James Palace. During his stay in England, he became acquainted with George Whitefield, the spell-binding evangelical preacher of the day. Aboard the East Indiaman, *Lynn*, in which he left Deal on January 29, 1750, he endured a stormy voyage. He landed in Cuddalore on June 17 and arrived in Tranquebar a few days later.

The Danish trading settlement of Tranquebar was the earliest home of evangelical Christianity in India. Frederick IV of Denmark, inspired by the Enlightenment and by the Pietism of Philipp Jacob Spener (1635–1705), had sent forth the very first evangelical missionaries, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) and Heinrich Plütschau (1677–1752).[3] These missionaries, upon their arrival in 1706, had immediately encountered strong opposition. Danish merchants, secretly forewarned and fearing anything that might threaten profits, induced the governor to throw Ziegenbalg into prison (where he languished for four months, from November 19, 1708, to March 26, 1709). Despite such ordeals, the missionaries had proven themselves to be resourceful. After mastering local languages, they had translated Scripture and scientific texts, set up printing presses, established schools, gathered congregations of believing or "confessing" converts, and trained local disciples as pastor-teachers. These Tamil Christian pastor-teachers (catechists), drilled in the latest, most advanced ideas and methods of modern education developed at Halle, had then become harbingers of radical cultural and social change. Francke's dictum, that every human being in the world—every adult and child, regardless of age or gender—should be equipped with basic literacy and with a grasp of modern science, had revolutionary implications. In 1731 these new-model schools had caught the attention of a captain in the royal guard at the Thanjavur Court. He in turn had been instrumental in bringing one of these schools into that kingdom and in obtaining a royal land-grant for its support. Three Tamil preachers, Aaron, Diago, and Rajanayagam, fully ordained, had also begun to serve local congregations within villages of the kingdom. In Tranquebar, meanwhile, six to eight European (mainly German) missionaries, dozens of local Tamil pastor-teachers, and nearly seventeen hundred believers (exact figures not now confirmable) had formed an institutional base for further expansions of "confessional faith" into the continent. Thus, even before Schwartz's arrival in India, an evangelical form of Tamil Christianity had already gained a firm foothold in South India.

Plunged into a Land at War

The South India into which Schwartz entered in 1750—indeed, the entire Coromandel Coast as well as the Carnatic interior—

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was embroiled in war. Sepoy forces of the English East India Company under Clive were engaged in campaigns against those of the French Company under Dupleix; the very survival of either or both powers in India was at stake. Devastation suffered by village peoples during such troubles would be a continuing concern to Schwartz throughout his entire career. His reports conveyed heart-rending accounts, horrific details, and insightful social analysis. From his grass-roots vantage, he witnessed the rise of the English Company, from its coastal enclaves and city-states to paramount overlordship in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean. Danish territories, such as Serampore (Srirampur) and Tranquebar, carefully remained on the sidelines, seeking to stay untouched by such dangerous developments. But Schwartz himself, despite his strong aversion to political affairs, could never fully escape being sucked into this larger tide of events. What eventually prompted involvement was the fact that, before long, most of his own work would lie among peoples in principalities far beyond borders of the Danish settlement at Tranquebar.

At the beginning, however, this was not so. The young Schwartz worked among Tranquebar congregations and schools. Already proficient in European languages (modern, classical, and biblical: German, English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, etc.), he became fluent in local Indian languages (modern and classical): Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, Marathi, Dakhni-Urdu (Southern Hindustani), Persian, and Portuguese (the coastal lingua franca).

With his linguistic skills and engaging manner, Schwartz won the hearts of many nationalities in India: British, German, Portuguese, Maratha, Mughal, Telugu, and Tamil.

His reputation as a gifted schoolmaster grew. He established a school in every local congregation, faithfully following the philosophy and formula developed by Francke in Halle. He and his "helpers" then became responsible for all new mission work south of the Kaveri River. This task involved caring for congregations in Thanjavur, Tiruchirapalli, and Tirunelveli. In 1760 he crossed the Palk Strait and traveled among Tamil villages of Jaffna (Dutch Ceylon, now Sri Lanka).

Two years later, while visiting Tiruchirapalli, Schwartz was implored by Major A. Preston, the local commander, to render assistance. A powder magazine had blown up, killing many soldiers and sepoys. With no military chaplain to bury the dead or comfort the wounded, Preston promised to build a "prayer-school" hall for Tamil Christians if Schwartz would only stay. Two years later, in 1764, when troops were ordered to march and to besiege Madurai, Preston again begged the missionary to act as his military chaplain. What Schwartz did in ministering to sick, wounded, and dying sepoys and soldiers was so appreciated that he was given an award of nine hundred *pagodas* (gold currency, equivalent to about £360) from the nabob of the Carnatic (the Arcot prince whose palace in Tiruchirapalli was then under company "protection"). These funds were useful for building new schools, including a special "orphan school" for the neglected offspring of the soldiers. After Preston died during a Madurai campaign, his successor, Colonel Wood, also turned to Schwartz for help, offering to construct a larger, proper place of worship. A stone structure, seating fifteen hundred persons, was completed and dedicated on May 18, 1766. Within its large enclosed compound, "Christ Church" schools, both English and Tamil, and a commodious mission house were eventually added.

Thus, as a consequence of extraordinary and unforeseen events, a major shift in Schwartz's career occurred. Much correspondence between authorities in London, Madras, Halle, and Copenhagen passed to and fro before his position could be clarified. The old transnational triangle of collaboration between Halle, London, and Tranquebar would continue, with communication networks, support, and cordiality unchanged, and henceforth Schwartz was to be more formally designated and supported as a special missionary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). A year later, in 1768, he also received a formal appointment from the East India Company, gazetting him chaplain for Tiruchirapalli, on a salary of £100 (most of which was plowed into local missionary outreach projects). Schwartz's regular working station, both as a missionary and a chaplain, was to be in Tiruchirapalli.

Missionary, Chaplain, Emissary

In his new assignment, the German missionary from Halle and Tranquebar proved to be singularly effective and successful. His knowledge of languages, with his engaging, caring, and gentle manner, enabled him to relate to many kinds of mercenary soldiers and sepoys: British, German, Portuguese, Maratha, Mughal, Telugu, and Tamil. Consistently cheerful, kind, and self-giving, he won the hearts of officers and troopers alike. At the same time, his missionary activity continued to expand. The "helpers" he had trained went out into towns and villages, two by two, returning to meet with him for self-analysis and prayer. As pastor-teachers, they sought to provide basic literacy for believers in each congregation. Besides meeting these "helpers" each morning and evening, Schwartz also accompanied them on missionary forays to more distant places.

In 1773 war again ravaged the land. The storming of Thanjavur by the nabob's forces brought suffering to many people in that city. Schwartz came to them and began to organize relief efforts. His efforts to help the poor and suffering, Christian and non-Christian alike, brought him recognition, and his fame spread. On more than one occasion, when no grain could be obtained and people were starving, his simple word was sufficient to underwrite loans and stabilize prices. Without such surety, grain would not come onto the market, and food purchases for masses who were dying from famine would not have occurred. When Tulaui, the rajah of Thanjavur, was restored to his throne in 1776, he begged Schwartz to remain permanently. Two years later, Schwartz left his junior colleague, Christian Joseph Pohle, to carry on as missionary and chaplain in Tiruchirapalli and moved to Thanjavur. Among various concerns, the humble prayer-school halls of growing local Tamil Christian congregations, damaged during the wars, needed to be rebuilt. The Rajah, in token of his appreciation, made an endowment for the building of a new and larger stone place of worship. Thereafter, despite travels, Schwartz was to make Thanjavur his permanent abode for the remaining twenty years of his life.

Shortly after this move, Schwartz was summoned by the British authorities to Madras. There he was asked to undertake a secret peace mission. Hyder Ali, ruler of Mysore, had specifically requested that Schwartz be sent. No other emissary was deemed

more trustworthy. No one could command such trust; and no one could command such fluency of the relevant languages (Urdu, Persian, Marathi, Tamil, and others). No translator or interpreter would be required. Reluctantly, "to prevent a further effusion of blood," Schwartz agreed to go, but only as long as it was clearly understood that he went only as a missionary and only as an emissary of peace. His journey took eight weeks. Along the way, he and his unarmed entourage took advantage of every opportunity to preach or teach at every place where his palanquin halted. When he finally arrived at Srirangapatnam (Seringapatam), the capital of Mysore, he was ceremonially received. At meetings, both in public durbar and in private audience, he was accorded courtesy and respect. He then wended his way back to Madras and personally reported his conversations to the governor of Madras, at Fort St. George. He handed over the prize purse of three hundred rupees that Hyder Ali had given him, and when this was then handed back to him, he made it the initial base of an endowment for the establishment of an orphan school in Thanjavur. From neither government, Madras or Mysore, would he allow any personal payment beyond expenses for his travel. He did, however, succeed in securing for Pohle, his successor in Tiruchirapalli, the chaplain's salary of one hundred pounds per year that he himself had previously received from the company. The words that Schwartz conveyed from Mysore to Madras in his report were never made public, but his personal impressions of Hyder and of this whole episode are to be found in his letters to Europe.[4] He was never convinced that his efforts had done much to avert the war that he saw coming.

Back in Thanjavur, construction of the Gothic stone place of worship was completed on April 16, 1780. This structure, capable of holding five hundred, was named St. Peter's Church. In the suburb of Vallam, a house and compound were converted into a prayer-school hall and other *pukka* buildings also began to rise. But again, war interrupted activities. Hyder's armies broke upon the Carnatic "one-hundred-thousand strong," destroying Baillie's brigade near Kanchipuram and sweeping to the gates of Madras itself. Once more Schwartz found his hands full, tending the hungry, sick, wounded, and dying. Hyder Ali commanded that the missionary be allowed to pass among his own troops without molestation. "He is a good man," he is reported to have remarked, "and means no harm to my government." When peace negotiations resumed, Schwartz was again called upon to act as a go-between (*dubash*). Twice more he acted in this capacity but his efforts were aborted: on the first occasion Tipu Sultan's pickets stopped him at the border (Hyder Ali having died in 1782); on the second, his legs became so afflicted with boils ("eruptions") that he could not travel. Colonel William Fullarton, commander of the Madras field force, later wrote: "The integrity of this irreproachable missionary has retrieved the character of Europeans from imputations of general depravity."

Introducing Modern Education

Schwartz's most notable achievements, in modern education and in government, still lay before him. His scheme for a modern, state-subsidized "public" system of schools in India began with the rajahs of Thanjavur, Shivaganga, and Ramnad. High schools that he established so impressed the East India Company's resident at Thanjavur that the company's directors in London and its government at Fort St. George, in Madras, were persuaded to subsidize them, even though none of these schools lay within company territory. Maratha Brahman youths who would eventually fill uppermost rungs of civil service positions within the entire Madras presidency flocked to these schools. The curriculum, combining biblical and Christian texts with principles and sciences of the Enlightenment, included English literature and European philosophy.

At the same time, Schwartz laid the foundations for what was to become the largest and strongest evangelical Christian community in India. As early as 1769 and 1771, word had come to him that Tamil Christians had settled in Tirunelveli. An affluent Brahmin widow, residing with an English officer at the company's fort at Palayamkottai (Palamcottah), had appealed to Schwartz for help. In 1778, having come to Tirunelveli to see for himself, he baptized her, christening her "Clarinda." When Clarinda later made a personal endowment to pay for construction of a proper prayer-school building for the new congregation, Schwartz sent Satyanathan Pillai, one of his most gifted "helpers," to serve as a permanent resident pastor-teacher. Satyanathan was formally ordained in 1790, after undergoing a rigorous examination in Thanjavur. He was then also formally commissioned as a missionary, the first Tamil evangelical to be so designated. In 1799 Satyanathan joined David Sundaranandam, a local convert and disciple who had come from the lowly Shanar (now Nadar) community, in organizing one of India's earliest modern "mass movements" of conversion to Christianity. Thousands turned to the new faith and suffered severe persecution for so doing.

Meanwhile, north of Tirunelveli, war continued, bringing further devastation to Thanjavur. This time also, local distresses were aggravated by the rapacious avarice and oppression of the rajah's servants. The country was left waste, and thousands fled their villages. The company's resident at the Thanjavur Durbar recommended that Schwartz be put in charge of a special committee of investigation. At Schwartz's insistence, the rajah dismissed his corrupt officials, and without coercion, a modicum of justice was restored. Once again placing faith in Schwartz's word, seven thousand people returned and took up the cultivating of their fields. Upon the recommendation of the British resident, Schwartz was appointed royal interpreter (on a salary of £100 a year). When the rapacity of the rajah's servants again became intolerable, Schwartz drew up a state paper, suggesting how the administration of justice should be thoroughly reformed. As a consequence, he and his "helpers" were asked to assist those in charge of the Courts of Justice.

In 1787, as he lay dying, Tulaji Rajah adopted ten-year-old Serfoji, a cousin, as his heir. At the same time, he turned to Schwartz and begged him to serve as the boy's guardian. Schwartz hesitated and then declined. But when the company set the boy aside and made Amir Singh rajah in his place, and when Amir Singh's servants threatened the boy's life, keeping him in a dark room and refusing to allow for the boy's care and education, Schwartz made a special appeal to the Madras government. The Madras authorities formally recognized him as the boy's guardian, but in 1793, when Amir Singh's servants again made attempts against Serfoji's life, placing him in a special house and surrounding him with armed guards so that the missionary had much difficulty in gaining access to the boy, Schwartz decided to journey to Madras and to make a personal appeal. Such was his concern for the prince's life that he brought Serfoji with him, along with the three widows of the late rajah. The governor-in-council heeded Schwartz's appeal. Serfoji's claim was recognized, and restoration of Serfoji to the throne of Thanjavur was ordered. Thus the succession of the prince whom the deceased rajah had begged Schwartz to protect was finally confirmed.

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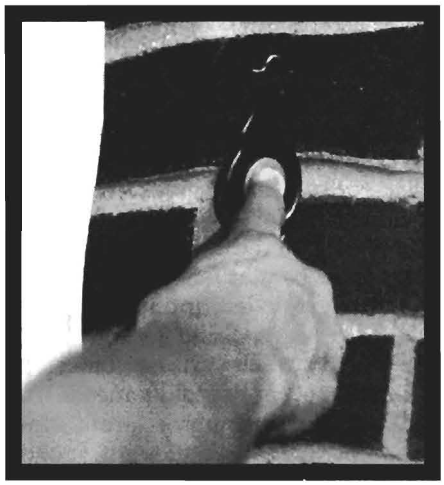

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Raju-guru to the New Maharaj

The new rajah became an enlightened and highly educated young man ruling in his own right, having imbibed much learning from Schwartz, his raja-guru. Indeed, the new and modern palace that he was to construct and dub Saraswati Mahal would contain a Room of Wonders (*Wunder Kammer*) that, replete with modern library, laboratory, microscopes, and telescopes, boasted the latest in scientific apparatus and instruments. Inspired by the Enlightenment, he became a founding member of the Royal Geographic Society in Britain. By then, the young prince had come to think of the old missionary not only as the protector and regent of his realm but as his personal father and friend. When Schwartz suffered his final illness, he called Serfoji to his side and bestowed a special blessing upon him. He exhorted the prince to rule *all* his subjects with even-handed justice, to protect his Tamil Christian subjects from persecution, and to submit himself to the grace and mercy of the One and true God, who alone could give him eternal peace.

Schwartz died on February 13, 1798. For the memorial service, Serfoji Maharaj read some deeply heartfelt English verses that he had composed for the occasion. He sent to England for a special monument. This monument, a marble sculpture by Flaxman, rests in Christ Church, in the Small Fort of Thanjavur. It depicts the old man on his deathbed, surrounded by his beloved Tamil "helpers" and holding the maharaja's hand. In Madras (now known as Chennai), on a huge brass memorial placed in St. Mary's at Fort St. George by the East India Company, a long and detailed eulogy of tribute (by Bacon) is inscribed. Except for something to his sister's family, Schwartz left all possessions, with nearly a thousand pounds, for the work to which he had given so many years.

In a world awash in corruption and injustice, both European and Indian, the personal integrity of Schwartz was never questioned. To the very last, he showed indifference to personal power or wealth. "He was," Heber later wrote, "one of the most active and fearless, as he was one of the most successful, missionaries since the Apostles." Heber estimated the number of Tamils who came to faith directly because of Schwartz at six thousand. In Tirunelveli many thousands more came to faith in the years just after he died. Young missionaries were told to emulate "that worthy man and labourer in Jesus Christ who established such a reputation of candour, integrity, and disinterestedness among both natives and Europeans, as cannot fail to recommend the cause of Christianity to men of every description who have ever heard his name." Such words could echo Joseph Jaenicke's confession: "My connexion with Mr. Schwartz is another proof of [God's] good providence over me"; or Paezold's anecdote about overhearing Brahmans at Tiruvallur solemnly declare to Schwartz, "You are a holy man: if all your Christians thought, spoke, and lived as you do, we would, without delay undergo the change and become Christians." Simple folk ever thronged around their beloved teacher, everyone trying to get nearest to him and be the first to greet him with "O Sir! God be Praised!" Amazingly, few would know about Schwartz two hundred years later.

Notes

1. Not Margaret Grundt (as in Pearson or SPCK sources). W. Germann, *Missionär Christian Friedrich Schwartz—Sein Legen und Wirken aus Brief des Halleschen Missionsarchivs* (Erlangen, 1870), pp. 3–4: "Meine lieben Eltern sind gewesen George Schwartz und Maria Grunerin."
2. Copies of lecture notes he took while listening to Baumgarten, Michaelis, and Freylinghausen were long preserved by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London.
3. Circumstances of collaboration between Copenhagen, London, and Halle are not entirely clear. The king of Denmark and Queen Anne of England were (Hanoverian) cousins. Francke's former student Anton Wilhelm Boehme served as a link between them and between Francke and the newly formed SPCK.
4. These are found mostly in his letters to authorities of the Waisenhaus (orphanage) in Halle and of the SPCK in London, later printed in the famous "Halle Reports."
5. Thomas Robinson, *The Last Days of Bishop Heber* (Madras: Vepery Mission Press, 1829), appendix, "Legacy and Memorials to C. F. Schwartz."

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