The Use of History
Speaking of God in Sanskrit-Derived Vocabularies

by H. L. Richard

T his paper presents a broad overview of a particular Bible translation issue in India, where most vernacular languages are rich in Sanskrit-derived terms. Different Bible translations have adopted different Sanskrit terms for key theological words, and this paper will focus on terms used for God in various vernacular Bibles. The purpose of the paper is not antiquarian, but to shed light on current translation concerns and in particular questions of best practices in communication in India today. Linguistic questions are, of course, vitally important in every mission field, so this discussion has repercussions far beyond India.

Sanskrit is central to the project of Bible translation in almost all the major languages of India, as it was also central in the development of modern linguistic theory (see Trautmann 1997, 131–132 for example). William Carey (1761–1834) is a central person for discussions of Bible translation in India. Carey, widely recognized as the father of the modern mission movement, lived in Bengal during the heyday of the Asiatic Society (founded in Calcutta in 1784) which promoted the knowledge of Sanskrit texts and Indic traditions.

Carey had learned Bengali during his first six difficult years in Bengal (1794–1800) and in 1801 became teacher (later professor, in 1807) of Bengali and Sanskrit at Fort William College in Calcutta (founded in 1800 to provide Indological education to Britons serving in India). Carey produced a Sanskrit grammar in 1806, followed by a translation of the New Testament into Sanskrit (1808) and then the Old Testament (1818). Specifics related to Carey's choices of terms for God will be discussed below.

Competing Terms across North and South

Despite the centrality of Sanskrit, the dominant languages of South India belong to the Dravidian language family. The discovery of this Dravidian linguistic family can be traced to F. W. Ellis in Madras in 1816, but his

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theory remained virtually unknown until the 1856 publication of Robert Caldwell's *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*.[1] Since the Dravidian family of languages borrowed a great deal of terminology from Sanskrit, many terms from South Indian Bible translations are relevant for this study.

The first Indian Bible translation was into Tamil, the most important of the Dravidian languages, so this survey will begin with Sanskrit-based Tamil terminology. The Tamil New Testament was completed by Bartholomew Ziegenbalg in 1714. Ziegenbalg seems to have followed the great Roberto de Nobili in referring to God as *saruvēsuran*, a neologism compounding *sarva* (all) and *ishwar* (god).[2] This aligns with the standard usage in North Indian languages, as will be discussed below. However, Philip Fabricius, in his long-esteemed translation published in 1798 (NT in 1772), abandoned the pattern of de Nobili and Ziegenbalg and introduced *parāparan,* another Sanskrit-derived neologism developed from *para-apara* (remote-not remote), suggestive of transcendence and immanence.[3]

The 1871 Union Version of the Tamil Bible adopted *deva* as the fundamental word for God.[4] The earlier translators had used deva in various compounds but avoided the term alone as an inadequate word for God. The 1854 Telugu Bible (NT, 1818) also used deva. The use of deva is now standard across South India and has also appeared in Marathi and Gujarati Bibles; see below for analysis of this term. To complete the survey of translations into Tamil, the 1956 Revised Version and 1995 Common Language Version *(Tiru-viviliyam)* shifted to using a non-Sanskrit-based Tamil term, *kadavul,* which did not find favor with most Tamil Christians (cf. Hooper and Culshaw, "the Union Version [*deva* for God] continues to serve a large section of the Tamil-speaking church," 1963, 78).[5]

Thus, Tamil Bible translation tells the story of two Sanskrit-based terms, deva and ishwar, in reference to God.

Despite a binary consideration of terms throughout this translation history, this paper would suggest that viewing deva and ishwar as right or wrong options is not the proper frame of reference for considering this translation matter. William Carey, who is by far the dominant figure in translations into North Indian languages,[6] rejected the option of deva and adopted ishwar in reference to God, which has been followed across most of North India. Amaladass and Young summarize Carey's approach:

> The uniformity of terminology in Carey's translations of the Bible is far

The choice of deva *or* ishwar *is not just an option of right or wrong.*
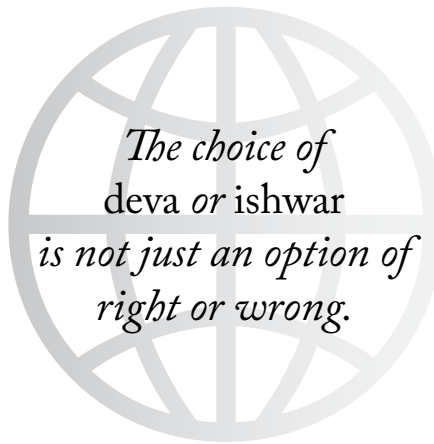
from always evident on the surface, for there are numerous inconsistencies, but the terms he chose to denote other gods as opposed to *the* God of the Christian faith are invariable in the *Dharmapustaka* [Carey's Sanskrit Bible] and elsewhere. Whereas *theos* in the Greek New Testament is used both in the singular and the plural either in affirmation of the unitary existence of God or in denial of the existence of many gods, in the Sanskrit Bible the cognate *deva* always differentiates false gods from the true God, *Iśvara* (or in the Old Testament *Yihuha* for the proper name Yahweh or Jehovah). *Iśvara* in the *Dharmapustaka* never occurs in the plural. True to his evangelical instincts, Carey could not bring himself to believe that the polytheistic connotations of the term *deva* could ever be

rehabilitated. In this respect his Catholic predecessors in the South of India were far more bold and accommodative, since they simply added strings of modifiers to *deva,* whenever they felt uneasy about it standing alone, so as to emphasize the transcendence of the God of the Christian faith over all the other *devas* whom the Hindus revere. (Amaladass and Young 1995, 38–39; italics in the original)

It should be noted that the southern associations of these two authors undoubtedly impacted their analysis (as the more northern associations of the present author have impacted mine).

Two word lists of Sanskrit terms are available that gauge the terminological diversity for God, and both demonstrate the basic North-South split between deva and ishwar. In 1957, J. S. M. Hooper published a comparative list of Indian terms for significant Greek theological words. Under *theos* (God) he indicated that seven languages used ishwar or a derivative thereof (Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Oriya, Panjabi, Santali, and Sindhi). He likewise indicated that six languages used deva or a derivative thereof (Gujarati, Kanarese, Malayalam, Marathi, Sinhalese, and Telugu).[7] As discussed above, Tamil has translations using both. Muslim-related languages used *khudā* (Urdu and Pashtu, as well as in some Panjabi and Sindhi versions) and English translations used God. These comprise the seventeen languages in Hooper's survey (Hooper 1957, 86–87).

Secondly, in 1904, 1930, and 1965, the British and Foreign Bible Society published selections from languages in which they were distributing portions of the Bible. Appendix three of the 1965 version listed the terms for God in the various languages. In this list deva is indicated as being used in fifteen languages, including five in Indonesia and the major South Indian languages of Kanarese, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu with Sanskrit-based Marathi an outlier. Ishwar is indicated as being used in thirty-four languages,

including a few in Tibetan-related and tribal languages, as well as in the major North Indian languages of Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, and Panjabi. A further ten languages are listed for *parmeshwar (param-ishwar,* supreme *ishwar),* including Oriya (British and Foreign Bible Society 1965, 184, 185, 188).

It is easy to find fault with both ishwar and deva as terms for the God of the Bible. In the case of deva, Hopper's word list and editorial analysis supported Carey's position, indicating "devan was considered unworthy, being normally used in Hinduism for any minor deity" (Hooper 1957, 86). Tiliander, in his outstanding study of Hindu and Christian terminologies, comments that the change to deva in the Tamil Union version of 1869 "was in fact a retrogressive step on account of the polytheistic taint attached to it" (1974, 132).

In the case of ishwar, a great historian of Christianity in India, Julius Richter, presented a different perspective as to why this term did not appeal to South Indian translators.

> "Isvara," "lord," is also common to all the Indian languages, and is found in many compounds, but in philosophical terminology it is a much used technical expression for a phase of the lower Brahma in union with Avidya, i.e. it describes God as caught in the toils of Maya [illusion, contingent reality]; for Christian purposes, therefore, the word is useless. (Richter 1908, 270)

Hephzibah Israel provides another perspective on the terminological issues in Tamil in her outstanding study *Religious Transactions in Colonial South India: Language, Translation, and the Making of Protestant Identity* (2011).[8] She shows that a major motivation in the Tamil terminology discussions was finding a term that was *unfamiliar* to Hindus. Deva was a happy choice because no Hindus used it for the almighty God, thus the Protestant biblical associations would be attached to that term (108–110).

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Another reason to particularly advocate the Sanskrit word deva, rather than the Tamil kadavul, was that everyone in India could use the same term for God (Israel 2011, 108). As this paper shows, that did not happen. Once deva became a distinctly Protestant term in South India, translations with more linguistic sensitivity and those using kadavul (as in the Tamil Revised Version of 1956 and Common Language Version of 1995) were rejected in favor of the now-familiar deva, which was seen as a marker of Protestant Christian community identity (113–114).

When such controversy and opposing views about these terms developed, it is no surprise that other terms were also considered. As early as the 17th century, the Jesuit Roberto de Nobili actually used *sivan* (Shiva) for some time, due to a root meaning of "goodness" (Tiliander 1974, 91), and William Carey flirted with the use of *om* to represent Yahweh (Amaladass and Young 1995, 39).[9] But these were fleeting experiments that took no root. More substantial suggestions of alternative terms included *brahman* and *bhagwān.*

Exploring Alternative Terms for God

In 1992, Benjamin Rai in an analysis of words for God in North Indian languages suggested three options for translating God: deva, ishwar (or param-ishwar), and bhagwān.[10] Rai pointed out that "in North India Christians never use Deva to refer to the God of the Bible" (1992, 444). However, he also asserted that bhagwān as an alternative is an even worse option.

> Perhaps because of this close association of the term *Bhagwan* with Ram and Krishna, none of the Bible translators in any of the four languages I am considering has translated the

word "God" by this term. Moreover, *Bhagwan* has sexual overtones. Besides these four languages, no other North Indian language uses *Bhagwan* in the Bible. Even in hymns and prayers, this term is strictly forbidden. (Rai 1992, 444)

Tiliander, however, after careful analysis of the associations of bhagwān, concludes that

> It is a very expressive term to be used in presenting Christ to Hindus. It also deserves a proper place in the Christian vocabulary. It is too dignified a word to be reserved for the devotees of Vishnu and Buddha alone. (1974, 125)

The eccentric intellectual Nirad C. Chaudhuri shared a striking perspective on bhagwān as well.

> The One God to which I am referring here is a Hindu form of the Christian and Islamic. The most common name under which he is referred to is *Bhagavan.* Though he is a personal God, he is never thought of or spoken about as an anthropomorphic God in a physical form. Actually, no physical form is ever assigned to him, though he is a full anthropomorphic psychic entity. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is personified compassion and justice at the same time.
>
> The Hindus always turn to him when they are in trouble, in all their sorrows and suffering, but never when prosperous. They would say to others, God will show you mercy, God will judge your actions, or God will not allow this. No particular, individualized, anthropomorphic god of the old Hindu pantheon ever fulfilled this role with any Hindu. To the other gods of Hinduism, even when thought of as a supreme god, the Hindu looked with some confidence based on his right to ask for divine help, since through worship he was performing his part of the contract and giving the god his *quid pro quo.* But to this God, *Bhagavan,*

he appealed when he was wholly without any resource, yet he did so with complete faith in his mercy.

Nevertheless, this *Bhagavan* has never been worshipped, nor has he even become an object of regular prayer. St. Paul said to the Athenians that He whom they worshipped as the Unknown God was being proclaimed to them by him. To the Hindus the Unknown God was fully known, but never worshipped. In the whole religious literature of the Hindus there is no discussion of the nature of this God. Yet in one sense this undiscussed God is the only real God of Hindu faith. (Chaudhuri 1996, 149)

Despite Rai's adamant comments above against bhagwān, an English-Hindi glossary of theological terms included bhagwān, although it was oddly listed as an acceptable theological term for "Lord" rather than for "God" (Clark and John 1969, 47). Interestingly, for God an acceptable alternative term in Clark and John's glossary was *paramātman* (supreme spirit).[11]

Paul and Frances Hiebert present a case study in speaking of God in Sanskrit-derived vocabularies, and the options presented are deva and brahman (1987, 155–157). The bias of the paper is for deva, as brahman is too abstract a philosophical term. But Robin Boyd promoted the use of brahman, rightly stressing the need to speak in the highest of transcendent terms (1975, 233–236). Yet brahman is hardly used in normal speech, as Hindus are not nearly so philosophically inclined as some populist descriptions suggest. (Note how this point undermines Richter's criticism of ishwar quoted above. Richter focused on the technical philosophical meaning of the term, but this is very different from its common usage.) Paramātman carries some of the highest philosophical weight while also being more commonly used.

Affirming Linguistic Diversity

To this day, criticisms of the North India-biased ishwar and/or South-India biased deva translations for God

continue to be heard. Yet the lesson from this historical review is not that one or the other was right or wrong. Rather the lesson is that alternative choices were made in a complex linguistic environment, and neither choice was ideal. Yet in the end there are dynamic Christian bodies using these alternative terminologies, indicating that in one sense it did not matter which term was used. The context and content of the Bible contributed to the refining of the meaning of these terms in their usage by followers of Christ.[12] An immediate corollary of this conclusion is that there needs to be greater freedom of expression—more linguistic diversity—in continuing to speak of God than is present in much of Indian

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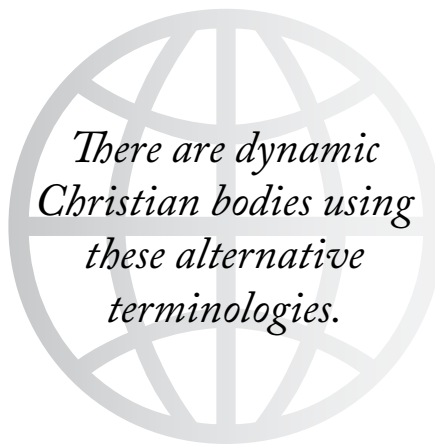
(and other international) Christian thought and speech.[13]

The sad reality is that there remains a great linguistic gap between Hindus and Christians in most of India's languages. To a large extent, this is due to narrow views of translation and to restrictive terminological choices in vernacular Bible translations. No Indian language has as illustrious a Christian history as Tamil, where geniuses of the likes of Constanzo Beschi and Fabricius experimented and innovated. Yet in concluding his survey of Tamil church history Hugald Grafe pointed out that

Interaction between Christianity and Tamil culture certainly issued in a sort of Christian subculture in Tamilnadu,

which became evident in a particular "church language" moulded by translations of texts from foreign languages as well as by the creativeness of Tamil for ecclesiastical purposes. (1990, 257)

A similar reality developed from William Carey's pioneering work, as diagnosed by Sisirkumar Das.

Bengali Christians are bilingual. They use standard Bengali both spoken and written in domestic, occupational and non-religious situations; but the language they hear in sermons and use in religious discourse is in the idiom we have called Christian Bengali, the father of which was Carey. Christian Bengali literature is little read outside the religious community in which it was born, but it must be noted that except where comprehension fails because of its sectarian content non-Christian Bengalis are able to understand it. Its peculiar style, however, has had little influence on other streams of prose literature, beyond the initial impulse that Carey's Bible gave to prose writing in the Bengali language. (Das 1966, 68)

Robin Boyd's expertise was in Gujarat, but he generalized this linguistic principle to all of India.

The Biblical vocabulary with which people are familiar from childhood tends to become firmly entrenched in their minds, and any move to change it is resented. So it comes about that in each language area Christians are prone to use a "language of Canaan" which non-Christians find difficult to understand and often positively misleading. (2014, 160)

This amounts to a conundrum far beyond the focus of this paper, raising multiple questions and challenges. But a conservative approach to terminology related to God has certainly contributed to a situation where Christians in India developed dialects that differ markedly from the heart languages of Hindus. A significant start towards better communication of biblical ideas to Hindus can be made by moving beyond the narrow confines of deva or ishwar as the only acceptable choices for speaking of God. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] Trautmann indicts Caldwell for not sufficiently acknowledging the work of Ellis, contributing to the continued neglect of the latter (2006, 74–75).

[2] Hephzibah Israel suggests the possibility that Ziegenbalg chose this term without influence from de Nobili based on his own understanding of Tamil Saivite usage (2011, 90).

[3] For a discussion of *parāparan* and various theories related to the term see Tiliander 1974, 127 and Israel 2011, 92ff. De Nobili had at times used *parāparavastu* and was followed in this by Ziegenbalg; *vastu* indicates something that is real and substantial (see Amaladass and Clooney 2000, 223–4 and Jeyaraj 2006, 198–207).

[4] In Tamil there is a neuter signifier with the Sanskrit root *deva*, and the word is often used in the plural for many lesser gods. For Protestants, the term was changed to masculine singular, a use only found among Tamil Christians.

[5] See below for further comment on this. Israel 2011 is a major study of Tamil Bible translation and gives detailed analysis on this point.

[6] Carey's translations were of poor quality; I have analyzed this in a sister paper to this one, "Some Observations on William Carey's Bible Translations," forthcoming in the *International Bulletin of Mission Research*. For a broad statement supporting this, see Hooper and Culshaw 1963, 20.

[7] I believe it is an error that this list indicates Gujarati using deva; see the contradictory opinion in the list in the next paragraph. In a discussion with the Rev. Nicolas Parmar at the Bible Society of India, Gujarat, at Ellis Bridge, Ahmedabad on March 13, 2013, Rev. Parmar indicated to me that deva was once in Gujarati Bibles but was subsequently replaced with ishwar.

[8] See my analytical review of this outstanding work at ijfm.org, *IJFM* 32:4 (Winter 2015): 211.

[9.] Technically, *om* is not a word but a mystical or liturgical syllable. It can and has been invested with meanings reaching literally from nothing to everything.

[10] Benjamin Rai, "What is His Name: Translation of Divine Names in Some Major North Indian Languages," *The Bible Translator*, vol. 43 no. 4 (1992): 443–446.

[11] A new Hindi New Testament under translation is introducing both paramātma and bhagwān into the text along with other designators for God.

[12] Howard K. Moulton stressed this point by quoting the Bible Society's *Rules for the Guidance of Translators*: "Every care should be taken to select the *highest* term for God that a language affords. The teaching of the Bible will by degrees *purify* and *raise* the ideas associated with the word used" (1962, 71, italics in the original).

[13] The reflections that led to the research and writing of this paper were spurred by debates about Bible translations into Muslim languages. Some have suggested that an erroneous term for "father" or "son" could have devastating consequences, but the story outlined in this paper suggests that linguistic diversity and flexibility are the rule, and such a focus on a single term is linguistically misguided.

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