

# **OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES AUGUST 2013**

## **The influence of Danish missionaries to India on Susanna Wesley's methods of education and inspiration, and the subsequent influence on John Wesley**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to identify the lines of influence of the Danish protestant missionaries to India in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, on the activities of Susanna Wesley, and then the lines of influence of Susanna Wesley's methodical approach to life and education on John Wesley.

The study will begin with a letter written by Susanna Wesley to her husband Samuel in 1712 which forms part of the 'evening prayers controversy' between them. In this letter Susanna writes that she had discovered the account of the work of the Danish missionaries to India in her husband's study, and this account had a profound effect on her.

The account that had such an effect on Susanna Wesley will then be studied and the lives of Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and the other early Danish missionaries to India investigated, in order to attempt to discover the elements within their work that might have had such an influence on Susanna.

A comparison will then be made between their methods and hers. This will be followed by a study of some of the key moments in John Wesley's life when he was directly influenced by Susanna Wesley, particularly emphasising those that can be traced back to the Danish missionaries.

At the end of the paper the extent of the influence of the missionaries on Susanna Wesley's key activities will be established.

### **Introduction**

It has been noted in many biographical sketches of Susanna Wesley that she was ahead of her time, both as an educated woman herself and then through the early education she was determined to give to all of her children, the girls as well as the boys. Yet she was also subject to the limitations of her time, living as she did for 40 years in the quiet rural town of Epworth. That makes it remarkable that she was so influenced by the activities of Protestant missionaries from another culture to her own, who were working on the other side of the world among people of a different language, culture and very different religious context.

Yet missionary endeavour and world travel were not completely alien to Susanna Wesley. Her elder brother Samuel Annesley junior was a merchant in India. Born in about 1658 he left home at the age of 16 to seek his fortune in India with the East India Company and then later as merchant in his own right. He apparently flourished but never returned to England. Surviving letters illustrate Samuel Annesley on one occasion attacking his brother in law, Samuel Wesley, for his inability to manage his finances. Susanna stepped into this debate, spelling out to her brother her complete loyalty to, and belief in, her husband. Samuel Annesley mysteriously vanished in around 1732 and it seems that no one was able to discover what had happened to him.

Samuel Wesley himself considered becoming a missionary to the East Indies in the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was not simply a romantic dream, but he had worked out a considerable agenda which included enquiring into the numbers of English colonists and reviving their Christianity, forging links between scattered Christians in India and the Church of England, and learning the language of

Hindustan so that he might reason with, and preach to the 'heathen natives'<sup>1</sup> in their native tongue. He thought that the East India Company and Queen Anne might be prepared to support him, but even without their encouragement, he was still determined to go as long as £140 could be found, £100 for his expenses and £40 to employ a curate to take his place in Epworth. "*He was animated with a zeal for God and a love for the souls of men which made him willing not only to encounter hardship and danger, but even death in his great missionary project*".<sup>2</sup> His proposal was not adopted, and his scheme was in fact thwarted by the general election of 1705. This was the election where Samuel withdrew his support for one Whig candidate, Colonel Whichcott, which led to the calling in of a debt which Samuel could not pay. For that he was arrested and imprisoned at Lincoln Castle Prison.

Perhaps it was this well thought out missionary plan as well as his brief time as a chaplain on board a man-of-war that prompted his interest in the travels and ministry of those who were able to work as missionaries overseas. Perhaps that was why he had the account of the Danish missionaries' work in India on the shelves of his study. We cannot know how much the Wesley family discussed world church developments in their lives in Epworth, but Susanna was clearly able to make connections with worlds beyond the physical limitations that were imposed upon her.

The key year for this paper is 1712. In that year Susanna Wesley was forty-three years old. Her youngest child, Kezia, was three and her oldest child, Samuel, was twenty two and already making his mark on the world. The family had lived at the Rectory in Epworth for seventeen years and had been through many difficult experiences. Susanna had managed her household through considerable hardship, the loss of many children in infancy, continued ill health, poverty, unpopularity, attacks on their livelihood and on their home, and the loss of every material object that they owned in the famous fire of 1709. She had seen her family divided into different homes after the fire and was very keen to bring them back together and restore their manners and education. The correspondence between members of the Wesley family gives the impression of very close knit relationships with each taking a keen interest in the lives and thoughts of the others.

### **The 'evening prayers controversy'**

The famous 'evening prayers controversy' between Susanna and Samuel Wesley ranks, according to Wallace, as equal in stature to their earlier political controversy regarding who was the rightful king. In the winter of 1711-12 Samuel was in London as a delegate to the Church of England's Convocation. His membership was costly for his family, since he had to cover the expenses of travel, lodging, food and the fee for a curate to substitute for him at Epworth, but for him it seems to have acted as a form of pressure release valve. At Convocation he could be with other clergy on a larger map debating the major issues of the day, well away from the daily struggles of parish life in Epworth.

Susanna clearly found it difficult to manage without him, particularly because of the impact that had on the family's finances, though there is little evidence that she resented his absences from Epworth. Perhaps she just got on with it as the latest in a long line of hardships she had to endure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tyerman, L. "The life and times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley" 1866

<sup>2</sup> Tyerman, L. "The life and times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley" 1866

One thing she was not prepared to compromise on though was the spiritual formation of her children. She took upon herself the leading of their regular family prayers on Sunday evenings which involved the reading of prayers, the reading of a sermon and discussions on devotional topics. If these had simply been for the benefit of the family, it is unlikely that anyone else would even have noticed, and they would not have caused any comment. However, increasingly, the servants, then their families and then neighbours started to attend these gatherings. Eventually it was clear that many people preferred Susanna's gatherings in the Rectory to the official services in the church, led by the temporary curate, Mr Inman. John Wesley at the age of eight was likely to have been present at these gatherings, and perhaps he remembered them when later he developed the meetings of the Methodist societies which likewise were not intended to rival or replace the official church services.

Samuel received a message from Mr Inman that increasing numbers of Epworth parishioners were preferring the 'irregular' Sunday evening services, led by Susanna at the Rectory, to the official services in the Church. Samuel immediately wrote to Susanna rebuking her for such behaviour. She carefully and strongly responded to every point in what has become a famous letter. Susanna agreed that as a woman she did not have the "*superior charge of the souls*" in the household as Samuel did, "*Yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth*"<sup>3</sup>. After having explained why she thought she had a responsibility for the souls of their family she went on to explain the source of her inspiration:

*"Soon after you went to London, Emily found in your study the account of the Danish missionaries, which, having never seen, I ordered her to read it to me. I was never, I think, more affected with anything than with the relation of their travels, and was exceeding pleased with the noble design they were engaged in. Their labours refreshed my soul beyond measure; and I could not forbear spending a good part of that evening in praising and adoring the Divine goodness for inspiring these good men with such an ardent zeal for his glory, that they were willing to hazard their lives and all that is esteemed dear to men in this world, to advance the honour of their Master Jesus. For several days I could think or speak of little else. At last it came into my mind, though I am not a man nor a minister of the gospel, and so cannot be employed in such a worthy employment as they were; yet if my heart were sincerely devoted to God and if I were inspired with a true zeal for his glory and did really desire the salvation of souls, I might do somewhat more than I do. I thought I might live in a more exemplary manner in some things; I might pray more for the people and speak with more warmth to those with whom I have an opportunity of conversing. However, I resolved to begin with my own children, and accordingly I proposed and observed the following method: I take such a proportion of time as I can best spare every night to discourse with each child by itself on something that relates to its principal concerns."*<sup>4</sup>

Samuel's absence was therefore the first impetus to Susanna developing a sense of her own religious vocation. However the influence of the Danish missionaries had given her a drive in her activities for other people which went beyond just tiding things over until Samuel's return from

---

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley February 6<sup>th</sup> 1712

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley February 6<sup>th</sup> 1712

London. The strength of feeling in her letter suggests that reading this account was in fact a life-changing experience for Susanna.

As she states in the letter, her first step after reading the account was to allocate particular evenings for particular children. John remembered his special times of Thursday with his mother well into adult hood. These were not times of teaching or instruction, but more of advice and listening to the issues that were of concern to each child.

The letter continued to explain why she had begun the Sunday night gatherings. As the meetings had expanded, she felt she could not turn the people away, perhaps particularly because, at last, some of the barriers between the Wesley family and the local people in Epworth seemed to be breaking down. Susanna defended her actions explaining that they kept *"close to the business of the day, and as soon as it is over they all go home"*. She also alluded to the other things these people might have been doing on a Sunday evening if they had not been at the Rectory, such as making *"impertinent visits"*. Her gatherings were therefore bringing people to church and restraining them from *"profanation of God's most holy day"*. Samuel had suggested someone else could read the sermons and prayers – but she pointed out there were few there who were in fact able to do that.

Samuel wrote again asking her to stop and she replied: *"we used not to have above twenty or twenty-five at evening service, whereas now we have between two and three hundred, which is many more than ever came before to hear Inman in the morning"*. She said that relationships between local people and the Wesley family were much improved, people were going to church who had not been there for many years, and only a few people were objecting (chiefly Inman himself). Towards the end of this letter Susanna made her most dramatic and irrefutable statement:

*"If you do after all think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me any more that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good to souls, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ"<sup>5</sup>.*

### **Susanna's educational system**

Susanna Wesley's concern for all her children to be educated from a young age began with her first four surviving children: Samuel, Emilia, Susanna and Mary in South Ormsby. It continued in earnest when the rest of the family were born in Epworth: Mehitabel, Anne, John, Martha, Charles and Kezia. In response to a request for information from John, she wrote an account of her education method in 1732, and she also referred to it in various essays and journal entries. Her education system began when each child reached their fifth birthday, and gave each child a thorough grounding in quite a wide curriculum. She developed a clear timetable for the day and there was no allowance for play during the 'school' day.

After the birth of Kezia, she was no longer bearing children and this marked a change. She started writing, notably an exposition on the creed and the Ten Commandments and a dialogue on natural and revealed religion. This has been described as having revived her sense of vocation in the second

---

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley February 25<sup>th</sup> 1712

half of her life. Wallace noted: *“Heir to the traditional Protestant concern for education as embodied both in her Puritan upbringing and in her adopted Anglicanism, Susanna also absorbed many of the newer intellectual assumptions of her own age”*.<sup>6</sup>

Here Susanna had something in common with the Danish missionaries, who were schooled not actually in Denmark, but in the pietism of Halle. Puritanism and Pietism share an emphasis on personal behaviour, and the missionaries were constantly prepared to adapt their thinking and missionary work according to their experiences and growing understanding of the societies around them.

The account Susanna discovered in Samuel’s study was written by Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, one of the first two Protestant missionaries to India.

### **Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg**

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg was born in 1682 in Pulsnitz near Dresden, Germany. He was the son of a corn merchant of fairly high social standing. Both his parents had died by the time he was 12 years old so he grew up in his sister’s home. It was at the age of 16 through a music group that he discovered a desire to make harmony between himself and God which led to his conversion experience. From there he went to the school of the German theologian and philosopher Joachim Lange where he learnt Hebrew, Greek and Latin before studying theology at university. Lange, a friend of the Danish court preacher Dr Lutkens, taught philosophy from a Pietist perspective. This would prove to be significant contact as far as Ziegenbalg was concerned. From 1702 to 1705, Ziegenbalg moved between Berlin, Pulsnitz, and Halle, studying, helping his family as two of his sisters had recently died, and also doing a little private teaching. In September 1705 he became an assistant to a deacon.

While Ziegenbalg was quietly developing his own theological understanding, in Denmark the King, Friedrich IV, was trying to develop Danish overseas missions. It is not clear exactly why he felt this drive, though it could have been the influence of his mother Charlotte Amelia who was in touch with Dutch merchants in Copenhagen who may have been aware of the possibilities for preachers in South India. Also the Queen, Louise, came from a German Pietist background and the Pietists had a clear missionary zeal. This was resisted quite strongly by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Danish Lutheran church who believed that Lutheran pastors should only serve a particular congregation if they were invited to do so, and in their own territories. The Lutheran authorities were also not impressed by the missionary work of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore had little desire to start similar work.

Yet the King was determined. He asked the Lutheran Bishop of Copenhagen, Henrik Bornemann to suggest possible candidates for missions to Danish colonies in the Caribbean or in West Africa. Bornemann, unsurprisingly, was unable to find any suitable people in Denmark. He is unlikely to have looked in earnest because of his own opposition to the idea. The King therefore authorised Dr Lutkens, his court preacher, to find suitable candidates from Germany. Lutkens’ friends in Berlin were all Pietists, including Joachim Lange. Lange contacted two of his former students: Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau, suggesting that they might become missionaries.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, C. *“Susanna Wesley : The Complete Writings”* 1997

Like Jeremiah, Ziegenbalg pleaded his inexperience, frail health and lack of qualifications, but Lange was able to persuade him, and Ziegenbalg travelled to Copenhagen in 1705, the same year that Samuel Wesley was forced to abandon his ideas of becoming a missionary.

Ziegenbalg and Plutschau were the most unlikely candidates to develop Protestantism in the Danish colonies. Neither of them was Danish, nor, at this stage, was either of them ordained. They were examined by Bishop Bornemann who quickly declared that they were not suitable and refused to ordain them, but the King again intervened and threatened to remove Bornemann from office. That was enough to convince the bishop to ordain Ziegenbalg and Plutschau on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1705.

Despite these rather inauspicious beginnings, Ziegenbalg's ordination was a turning point in his life. He was convinced of his calling and organised his life around it. He was determined to be diligent in his reading and studying of scripture, prayer and administering the sacraments, to abide by the discipline of the church, to safeguard the doctrines of the church, to lead by example and in general to be a true and faithful priest.

It is remarkable that his sense of vocation remained so unshakeable because, for an unknown reason, the King almost immediately changed his plans, and rather than sending his newly recruited missionaries to the Caribbean or West Africa, they soon discovered they were destined for South East India, and the Danish colony of Tranquebar. The King tried to pave the way for them by informing the Danish East Indian Company (DEIC) in Tranquebar that these missionaries were on their way. He also told the DEIC that it was required to pay the missionaries' salaries. That did not go down well, and the problem was compounded because the King had not thought it necessary to inform the DEIC authorities in Copenhagen. The resulting tensions and distrust hounded the missionaries for many years.

Tranquebar was originally a small Tamil fishing town. The colony initially was a place of some conflict due to the various East India companies of the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French, all seeking to develop their own trading power. The DEIC had been set up in 1616. Many Indian inhabitants moved to the Danish colony of Tranquebar looking for better employment and a better standard of living but they also found a hierarchical system. Europeans and Indians lived in separate quarters in the colony and largely avoided each other. There were deep religious, cultural and social gulfs between them. *"In this fragile situation, they were unwilling to let any outsider like a Christian mission to come to them and start a new enterprise. They feared that any new movement of the people might disturb social equilibrium, and their trade would decline"*<sup>7</sup>.

It was not an auspicious start for the missionaries. They arrived in Tranquebar in May 1706 after six months travelling but initially were not even allowed to disembark due to the opposition of the DEIC. Finally in July 1706 they were allowed to set foot on Indian soil and they stayed with Hans Paulsen, a relative of the secretary of the Privy Council in Tranquebar, who became their first interpreter from Danish and German to Portuguese. He built many cultural bridges for the missionaries.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jeyaraj, D. "Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg: The Father of Modern Protestant Mission" 2006.

The opposition from the DEIC in Tranquebar, the Lutheran church in Denmark, and the DEIC in Copenhagen, made an already challenging task much more difficult. The conflicting goals of the missionaries and the colonists led to distrust and suspicion. Ziegenbalg himself was imprisoned for four months in 1708. Many were the times when they tried to return to Europe, but they were persuaded to stay, because even in the face of such opposition, the missionary work flourished and was very successful. Through letters and reports, the work became widely known and inspired other missions to be developed.

In 1710 a mission board was established in Denmark which was organised by the king to encourage other Protestant rulers in Europe to follow the example of Ziegenbalg. However the Mission Board did not include leaders of the Danish Lutheran Church and therefore it remained a lay movement somewhat distant from the church. The Anglican Missionary organisation: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in England supported the work from 1712 onwards. However it took until 1715 for the DEIC to agree to tolerate (but still not actively support) the mission work in Tranquebar after Ziegenbalg brought some Tamil Christians with him to Denmark to meet with the DEIC.

At the end of 1715 Ziegenbalg married Maria Dorothea Saltzmann, and a few months later they travelled to London where they were welcomed by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), and were introduced to King George I. They returned to India in August 1716. They had three sons: Gottlieb, Johann and Bartholomaeus, but only Gottlieb outlived his father. Ziegenbalg himself did not live to see the major impact of his work. He felt increasingly unwell through 1718 (blaming his illness on the constant tensions and discouragement) and died in February 1719 aged just 35, 13 years after arriving in India. He was buried in front of the altar of the newly built church in Tranquebar.

### **Language**

Language became their first focus. They were soon convinced of the need to be able to communicate in the languages used by the people around them. Tamil, or Malabarick, as Ziegenbalg referred to it (from the Malabar region), was spoken by most of the Indians they encountered, and Portuguese was spoken by many of the Europeans in the colony, due to the two hundred years of Portuguese presence in India.

They found a Tamil teacher and persuaded him to run his ordinary school lessons from their home which allowed them to participate and learn alongside the schoolchildren. The missionaries and the children sat together, writing the alphabet in the sand and later on palm leaves. This was a step of humility which characterised their approach. This first teacher could explain how Tamil was written, read and spoken but he could not explain meanings in any European language. So the missionaries searched for more help, which they found in the form of a man who formerly worked for the DEIC who could explain Tamil grammar to them in German. They also learned from the Roman Catholic missionaries about ways of expressing Christian ideas.

After the first eight months, Ziegenbalg could read, speak and write Tamil and he began translating and teaching the Lutheran catechism in Tamil. Nine months after they had arrived, Ziegenbalg and

Plutschau drew lots which decided that Ziegenbalg would concentrate on the Tamil work while Plutschau would concentrate on Portuguese.

One of the major developments in the mission was the arrival in July 1712 of a much needed printing press, a gift from SPG in England. Almost immediately Ziegenbalg wrote a circular letter to all Tamil people from the missionaries explaining the errors of their previous theology and ideas and outlining Christian theology. German and Danish versions were produced in 1717 intended to help Europeans to understand about bearing witness to non-Christians in their neighbourhoods. Ziegenbalg understood how valuable a printing press could be for the quick spread of information and general education. He used it to collect Tamil literature and to make multiple copies of his own work without having to employ copyists and review the manuscripts. The first book was printed in the same year as the press arrived.

Ziegenbalg's greatest literary achievement was to translate the New Testament from Greek into the spoken form of the Tamil language. To gain a deeper understanding of the Greek text, he consulted Latin, German, Danish, Portuguese and Dutch translations. This was a major task that took many years to complete. He also developed two Tamil dictionaries, one for common words and one for more literary concepts.

Most of Ziegenbalg's diaries, letters and reports were written in German. Joachim Lange published Ziegenbalg's letters in Berlin in 1708. In 1709 these letters were translated into English and appeared in London published by SPCK. This was the version which Susanna Wesley discovered in her husband's study in 1712. Lange published the missionaries' reports in the first Lutheran missionary magazine called 'Halle Reports' so that the accounts of the missionaries' work in Tranquebar began to reach a wide audience. The Tranquebar Mission became the example for several Protestant mission movements in Germany and other parts of the world.

### **Establishing churches and development of theology**

Initially Ziegenbalg and Plutschau used their home as their church. Ziegenbalg wrote:

*"Soon after our arrival here, some well-disposed Germans entreated us, to give 'em some good instructions out of the Word of God. We were glad of this opportunity, and set up an exercise of piety in our own house. On the same day we were to begin, the Governor sent for us to dinner, and having discoursed the point with us, he said: That he neither could, nor intended to hinder any way the work we were about, though he could be more glad, to see it publickly done in the Danish church there. We replied: we would begin in our own house, till we received further orders from him. Coming home we found the House crowded with people, to hear the word of God, whom we readily served as well as we could. But some ill-disposed men, highly displeas'd with our design, began to exclaim against it. However this proved but a means to draw more people to our house, and even some of the first rank, would now and then come to hear us, so that the room in our house was hardly big enough to hold them. At last the Governor sent his secretary, and enquired whether we had a mind to preach once a week in the church here? We said we were ready for it at any time, if we had but the consent and approbation of the Danish ministers, which the Governor, after removal of some obstacles, brought about at last."*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ziegenbalg, B. "Propagation of the Gospel in the East" 1711



In this account there are echoes of Susanna Wesley's experience in her home as more and more people were attracted to her 'services'.

Ziegenbalg had signed a three year contract. There was no intention to start a church in Tranquebar. However, as he learned Tamil and taught the pietism he had learned in Halle, people began to become Lutherans and very soon he could see the need to establish a new Lutheran congregation. The Europeans at the already established Zion church did not want to share any worship space with Indian Christians, who they regarded as of a lower status to themselves. Interestingly, many of the Indian Christians were equally unwilling to worship with the European Christians because of their impressions of European morality. Jeyaraj believes that these views arose from a lack of understanding because the Tamil people did not understand European languages and therefore formed their impressions on what they saw, rather than being able to converse with the Europeans. However other accounts suggest that this was a common experience. Indians had seen Europeans arriving in India, proclaiming a faith but not living it out. Jeyaraj quotes a conversation some of the Indians had with Ziegenbalg: *"European Christians are alcoholics and gluttons. They engage in prostitution and the breaking of marriages. They dance and gamble. They curse and swear. They lead a sinful life. Yet they claim that they will attain salvation. As surely and truly they think of obtaining salvation in spite of their evil and sinful life, we also hope to be saved through our calm and orderly life, even though our religion may be wrong"*<sup>9</sup>.

Ziegenbalg pointed out the shortcomings of many Europeans in his accounts written for the Danish church. Trying to teach Christianity when those who claimed to be Christian were not demonstrating it in the way they lived their lives, was a real stumbling block for his missionary work.

*"It would be infinitely better if never any Christian had been among 'em; for then the Mind would be less prepossessed against the Truth of Christianity, the free Reception whereof is now stifled, by many and inveterate sins and customs, they have observed all along among Christians"*<sup>10</sup>

The new church was built in 1707, called the Jerusalem Church, which began with forty Tamil and Portuguese-speaking Indians. Many of these had been formerly Roman Catholic servants or slaves of Europeans. Despite opposition from the Danish Lutheran church who felt the mission should be about itinerant preaching and not the establishing of congregations, the building went ahead. It combined European and Indian elements, for example there was a picture on the font which represented Brahmins having ritual bath in a river. Also the altar was built on the eastern side because, in the temples, the most holy place faced east. Ten years later the New Jerusalem Church was built because the first was by then too small.

Ziegenbalg followed the rites of the Danish Lutheran church. He used his Tamil translation of the Danish liturgy, and increasingly he also integrated Tamil elements into his worship and teaching. This is seen in his outworking of theology. In 1709 he wrote an essay in the form of an open letter from the perspective of God. In this he explored the Lutheran understanding of the hidden God: unless he chooses to reveal himself, no human can know God. He explained that the deities of the Tamil

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeyaraj, D. "Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg : The Father of Modern Protestant Mission" 2006

<sup>10</sup> Ziegenbalg, B. "Propagation of the Gospel in the East" 1711

people could not represent God because they exhibit human qualities such as limited knowledge, envy, and deception. He disagreed with the Tamil people who considered God to be originator of evil. He believed that the evil in human beings began with their first sin against God. God sent his son to redeem them and God desired that they might know the true way of salvation. God encouraged the Tamil people to repent voluntarily from sin. This letter was written in first person as if it was from God.

*“Now I have come to you, and consequently the true Veda (superior spiritual knowledge) is being preached to you throughout your country. Hence examine the signs of your time. Give me a chance to redeem you! Is it not enough that for several years you have been wandering in wrong ways? Is it appropriate for you to remain in spiritual darkness when the true light had come close to you?”*<sup>11</sup> He translated this into German and sent it to Francke, professor of theology at the University of Halle for publication. It was changed into indirect speech before publication.

Ziegenbalg laid equal emphasis on the wellbeing of the soul and the body. He also taught that caste has no place in relating to God, but that all people can attain salvation in and through Jesus Christ. That was a dramatic message in such a stratified society, which is why the relationships Ziegenbalg formed were so important.

### **Education**

In Tranquebar, when Ziegenbalg arrived, boys generally started school at the age of five. They received different education depending on caste. *“The rich heritage of Indian education was designed to benefit only a small section of religious and landowning Indian community”*<sup>12</sup> Traditional schools focused on arithmetic and also included elements of oratory, astronomy and medicine. These subjects were directly related to the boys’ future employment. Literacy was not a major focus. It was much worse for girls for whom there was no provision for formal education (much like the situation for John and Charles Wesley’s sisters growing up in Epworth). Girls tended to learn domestic economy at home.

Education was probably the most important element of the work of Ziegenbalg and his colleagues. He set up schools primarily in order to plant the seeds of Christianity among young Tamil people. He also believed that Christianity would only flourish if children were also instructed in reading, writing and valuing books. He was well aware that one of the reasons why the Reformation had spread throughout Europe so effectively was because of the development of printing. So his schools had a wide compass including literary skills and critical thinking. This made his schools very different from the Tamil schools.

By December 1707 Plutschau had set up a Danish and a Portuguese school in his house and hired two DEIC employees to run them. At the same time Ziegenbalg established a school for Tamil boys in his house and also founded a separate school for Tamil girls.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ziegenbalg’s ‘God’s Letter’ 1709 as quoted by Jeyaraj, D. 2006

<sup>12</sup> Jeyaraj, D. “Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg : The Father of Modern Protestant Mission” 2006

In the next few years three more missionaries arrived to help with the work. Polycarp Jordan and Johann Ernst Grundler had both trained in Halle. John George Bovingh was a theologian from Kiel. Grundler in particular worked closely with Ziegenbalg.

In 1709 they had five schools, four for boys and one for girls with each headed by a missionary. No caste distinctions existed in the schools. Children from various backgrounds were living and learning together, so friendships crossed all known conventional boundaries and gave these children a new identity as Indian Lutherans. Tuition, food lodging and clothing were free for resident students. Also parents of poor Christian children received a financial subsidy for sending them to school.

The basic textbook was written by Ziegenbalg in Portuguese and Tamil and it was used in all five schools. It consisted of the catechism based on Luther, summaries of the gospels, points of Christian doctrine and belief and a section on Christian ethics. All students learned that Christianity was not something to be believed in without thinking it through so they were taught to assess faith and theology rationally and intellectually.

In 1713 the girls' school had 11 pupils and one mistress. *"the school day began early and was rigorous. From 6 to 7am the girls were catechised by a missionary, then from 7 to 8 they learned the principal proofs of the New Testament by heart, After breakfast at 8 the older girls had a two hour 'conference' or discussion among themselves on matters of faith in which they had been instructed while the younger girls learned the catechism and devotional songs which had been composed in Tamil, or translated into the language from German, by Ziegenbalg, and were set to South Indian music. From 10 to noon everyone was instructed in reading; the text used was The Method of Salvation. The girls used the Tamil version. Lunch was at noon. Children of all five schools gathered together for the meal which was eaten to the accompaniment of readings from the Bible. From 1 to 2pm, the girls repeated the proofs of the New Testament that they had learned earlier during the day, then from 2 to 4 the older girls did needlework while the younger were taught to write"*<sup>13</sup>. The older girls joined the writing class from 4 to 6pm, and then all held further discussion on religious matters before dinner at 7pm and then bed.

Paper had to be imported from Europe and was therefore expensive, and in any case Ziegenbalg was concerned not to alienate pupils from their Indian society. So they used traditional methods of writing on sand with their fingers, and as they grew older, they wrote on palm leaves with a stylus. Some of the archives relating to Ziegenbalg still exist as palm leaf documents.

The boys also learned the catechism, also critical methods of exegesis, mathematics and poetry, and some learned to identify plants and to administer medicine (similar to John Wesley's development of 'Primitive Physic'). They too were encouraged to question and discuss what they were learning with each other and with the missionaries.

Interaction with Hindus was encouraged. In the earliest days of the schools the missionaries took all the children once a week to local villages and carried out their lessons in public places, thus enabling non-Christians to see how the missionaries were teaching. This broke down suspicion and developed

---

<sup>13</sup> Singh, B. "The First Protestant Missionary to India Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg 1683-1719" 1999

relationships. The schools were also open to inspection by any Hindu. The 'proofs' of the New Testament, which all pupils committed to memory, were arguments and reasons to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. Traditional schools and South Indian society as a whole did not encourage contact between the various racial, religious and caste groups who generally lived together quite peacefully. Ziegenbalg wanted to break down the divides and demonstrate the inclusiveness and equality of Christianity while at the same time not alienating the children from their cultural and community roots, something he felt had happened through the Roman Catholic missionaries work on the Western Indian coast. This is why he instituted the singing of Christian hymns in Tamil (which he had translated from German), set to South Indian music. He also brought Tamil poetry into the curriculum. At the end of each week, the missionaries and staff of the school met to discuss the events of the last week and to plan for the next week. Examinations were held at the beginning of every month.

Ziegenbalg's schools were set up very much according to the pattern of Pietist schools in Halle. He wanted students to develop a self-disciplined approach to meet the challenges of academic study and life from a very clear Christian perspective. *"We firmly think that the children are the true nursery in which we can raise the seedlings as we wish. We dream that one day our children will become able teachers and catechists and help this work to grow further and further"*<sup>14</sup>.

Increasingly the missionaries believed that the church and mission work in Tranquebar would be much more effective and successful if they could train European and Tamil students as future missionaries in East Indian languages there, rather than receiving more from Europe, who would not know either the language or the culture. Ziegenbalg and Grundler also wanted to be able to ordain the students themselves because they could then assess the maturity of the candidates and their attitude towards Indian people and culture.

Unbeknown to them, members of the mission board had already taken steps to train two Danes as missionaries for Tranquebar. Plutschau was at this stage back in Denmark and it was felt that he could train these new missionaries in Tamil and Portuguese. However King Freidrich IV also raised Ziegenbalg's status to that of 'Rural Deacon' which meant he could ordain appropriate candidates. In October 1716 the missionaries took matters into their own hands and selected eight senior students from the Tamil school for boys and set up first Protestant seminary in Tranquebar to train teachers, catechists, pastors and other Christian leaders, modelled on the work of Professor Francke. The training included reading through the bible in a specific time in original languages, systematic theology, exegesis, teaching of catechism to children, the sermons of the church, learning from the teaching of the missionaries and incorporating it into their own methods, Portuguese, geography and mathematics. Every evening one was required to report on their activities to the missionaries.

### **Building relationships and different religions**

The Halle Pietists followed the recommendations made by Johann Arndt, author of 'true Christianity', himself following the methods of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. Arndt suggested that his readers should observe the book of nature: the universe, in order to discern spiritual lessons and to understand them with the help of the book of grace: the Bible. Ziegenbalg was rooted in this school

---

<sup>14</sup> Jeyaraj, D. "Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg: The Father of Modern Protestant Mission" 2006 quoting Ziegenbalg.

of thought and therefore he became a careful observer of what was going on around him in Tranquebar. This greatly helped with his sensitive study of Indian religions and societies.

Ziegenbalg shared the common European understanding of his time that there were four religions. Three were monotheistic with scriptures: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The fourth was called 'paganism' or 'heathenism'.

Muslim merchants from neighbouring ports had moved to Tranquebar soon after the Danes established it as a trading port in 1620. Ziegenbalg developed contact with many of them, and held discussions with them about their theological understanding. He was not shy of inviting people to become Lutherans but he also developed mutual respect and encouraged intercultural learning.

Ziegenbalg wrote an essay suggesting that even though people are born into a particular religion, they can also make a choice. He was concerned to lead by example, especially as many Christians were criticised because they did not seem to be living out their faith. He wrote in his account of the missions in 1711:

*"The Lord has hitherto assisted us so powerfully, that both Christians and Heathens begin to be convinced that God is with us; especially since they see, that by his grace we endeavour to render our life and conversations conformable to the Doctrine we preach to them, which, as we find, leaves generally the strongest impression upon people's minds."*<sup>15</sup>

As his experience broadened he revised his opinion about world religions, realising that couldn't group all non-monotheistic religions under the concept of 'heathenism'. South Indian religions are distinctive in their history, teaching and practice. He studied these religions in order to be effective in his work with Tamil people. He was trying to develop new missionary work in an environment where the Europeans were hostile to him and the Hindu Brahmins were very suspicious of him and his motives. However, despite such setbacks, he forged strong and respected relationships with a large number of ordinary Hindu people. Hindus were generally quite pleased to have Ziegenbalg in their midst, enjoying their discussions and sharing the tenets of their respective faiths. He made many friends but few converts, and he soon realised that adult Hindus were unlikely to become Christian whereas Tamil children would be much more open to other viewpoints.

Singh suggests that it was Ziegenbalg's great respect for all human beings which set him apart. He did not impose himself on another culture or dismiss the religious and cultural environment he was in. Instead he walked alongside all people in Tranquebar trying to understand their perspectives and to explain Christianity to them using their own concepts. So he referred to himself and the other missionaries as 'gurus' and several times wrote that it was out of their affection for the Tamil people that they wanted to show them the way to salvation, not out of a desire to impose one culture on another. Singh reflects on Ziegenbalg's methods:

*"He proved a wonderful and very early instance of interracial friendship and interfaith dialogue. He lived, ate, talked, travelled and argued with Indians on equal terms, learned to respect them,*

---

<sup>15</sup> Ziegenbalg, B. "Propagation of the Gospel in the East" 1711

*developed a lot of affection for them, and amassed a wealth of info about their ways of life, their culture and their religion, about all of which he wrote objectively and at times sympathetically”<sup>16</sup>.*

Ziegenbalg wrote down some of his most important interreligious dialogues with people from different walks of life in order to teach others (in India and in Europe) about how to carry out such dialogue. He maintained that these dialogues should be carried out in the mother tongue of the other person, and that partners in the dialogue should try to understand the deep differences that characterise their religious and social identity. Mutual respect and recognition as human beings is indispensable. He worked hard to understand Tamil ideals, standards, and principles of right and wrong conduct in making moral choices. He learned that some were common to all, but others were specific to a religion or caste, or stage of life. He saw his partners as those who were created in God’s image by God, given free will and able to make responsible choices. *“He proclaimed to them his basic conviction that God loved them, Jesus Christ died and rose again for them, and the Holy Spirit would help them to grasp the message of the bible; and the Protestant congregation in Tranquebar would enable them to negotiate an alternate socio-religious identity”<sup>17</sup>.*

To Ziegenbalg then, mutual respect and affirmation did not mean compromise. He was quite clear that Christianity was true. However he was equally aware that the Christian example being lived out by many European Christians in India left a great deal to be desired. In translating some of the Tamil books on ethics and morality, he illustrated that the ethical behaviour and morality of the European Christians was much lower than that of the non-Christian Tamil people.

### **Connections between the missionaries in Tranquebar and Susanna Wesley**

Ziegenbalg and the other missionaries very soon realised that education was vital for their mission to succeed. Adult Hindus were largely reluctant to change not only their religion but, with it, their whole social structure. The example of the European Christians they saw around them, did not inspire them. So the focus for the mission was on educating children.

The account of the mission, which made such an impression on Susanna, spelt out in some detail how the school days were structured with an identified and prepared curriculum, defined hours for particular activities and no moment wasted, with the bible read to the children even while they were eating meals. This has very clear echoes with the method of education that was conceived by Susanna, as she outlined it in her letter of 1732 to her son John. It is very methodical, planned, and disciplined. It is of vital importance, showing how much it mattered to Susanna to spend the time to help to develop the mind of each young child.

Susanna Wesley wrote: *“As soon as they knew the letters, they were first put to spell, and read one line, and then a verse; never leaving till perfect in their lesson, were it shorter or longer. So one or other continued reading at school time without any intermission; and before we left school, each child read what he had learnt that morning; and ere we parted in the afternoon, what they had learnt that day”<sup>18</sup>.* She continued: *“When the house was rebuilt, and the children all brought home,*

---

<sup>16</sup> Singh, B. “The First Protestant Missionary to India Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg 1683-1719” 1999

<sup>17</sup> Jeyaraj, D. “Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg : The Father of Modern Protestant Mission” 2006

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to her son John July 24<sup>th</sup> 1732 quoted in Clarke, A. *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* 1823

*we entered on a strict reform; and then was begun the custom of singing psalms at beginning and leaving school morning and evening. Then also that of a general retirement at five o'clock was entered upon, when the oldest took the youngest that could speak, and the second the next, to whom they read the psalms for the day and a chapter in the New Testament: as in the morning they were directed to read the psalms and a chapter in the Old Testament, after which they went to their private prayers, before they got their breakfast or came into the family"*<sup>19</sup>.

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg wrote: *"From seven to nine ... one of the Malabarick Masters reads to the children a chapter out of the Malabarick New Testament. After this the children are taught the principles of the Christian religion, done into Malabarick for their use. ... From seven to eight, both catechumens and children eat their supper, one or more masters being present, who during that time, reads to them out of the New Testament. After supper they say their prayers and about nine they lay themselves down on their mats"*<sup>20</sup>.

These are just two excerpts of the account of both Susanna Wesley and Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, and although Susanna's education method began in earnest after the fire of 1709 and she did not discover the account of the missionaries for another two years, there are very clear connections. Perhaps then, the missionaries' work relating to the education of children did not so much change Susanna's own methods, as confirm them and inspire her to develop them further.

Education was a broader theme too. The missionaries' very determined efforts to become fluent in the languages spoken by the people around them in Tranquebar show how important it was to them to educate themselves. Mission to them was not about imposing one culture on another or assuming that they were universally right. They were much more concerned about becoming part of the society they were in, understanding how society was stratified, what it was that other religions taught, the idioms of the language, the pressures of life for different people there. Only having become part of it did they feel they could teach Christianity, and then it was often done from the perspective of Indian culture. Their early lessons writing on sand with young school children demonstrate their humility and willingness to learn.

Although learning other languages was not a part of Susanna's own education, she was very aware of the need for on-going education and the need to stretch her own mind. She was also prepared to be changed by experience, as the missionaries were. One example of this is when in 1741, she prevailed on her son John to hear the layman Thomas Maxfield preach before judging him for such unorthodox activity. He did so, and declared that Maxfield was indeed called to preach, thus changing his view about the ministry of laymen.

Susanna Wesley stated in her 1712 letter that she was impressed with the missionaries' complete commitment and dedication to their work, even to the extent of putting themselves in danger. She had a far from comfortable life. She was never in very good health, she struggled to raise her family in a local society full of distrust and outright violence, there was never enough money and she was in a rather remote and difficult part of the country with little opportunity to move elsewhere. In

---

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to her son John July 24<sup>th</sup> 1732 quoted in Clarke, A. *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* 1823

<sup>20</sup> Ziegenbalg, B. *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* 1711

Epworth she had to depend very much on her own resources and those of her family. Yet she was living in the country she had grown up in, she was part of the majority religion, and everyone communicated in her mother tongue. The hardships the missionaries encountered, with hostility even from their home churches let alone from the trading companies and other religions in India, must have reassured Susanna and affirmed her as she struggled with her own hardships. Perhaps they also helped her to put her own difficulties into context.

Ziegenbalg often wrote about the poor example of Christianity the European Christians in India were giving to people of other religions. Why would they be attracted to a religion when followers of that religion were clearly not living it out in everything they did? Religious faith, maintained Ziegenbalg, had to be both a matter of words and a matter of deeds. The same principle guided Susanna through her life. For example, she wrote in a letter to her son Samuel in around 1704: *“Examine well your heart, and observe its inclinations, particularly what the general temper of your mind is; for, let me tell you, it is not a fit of devotion now and then speaks a man a Christian: but it is a mind universally and generally disposed to all the duties of Christianity”*<sup>21</sup>.

There are then many connections between Susanna Wesley and the Danish missionaries, notably Ziegenbalg. The roots of it go back before their personal histories to the Pietist school of thought which educated Ziegenbalg and the Puritan upbringing of Susanna. Both emphasised the right ordering of life, the importance of experience and a personal faith lived out in the world.

### **The influence on John Wesley by his mother and by the missionaries to India**

Much has been written on the ways in which John Wesley was influenced by Susanna. She may indeed have been the strongest female influence on his life and she certainly was his inspiration at many key moments. It was at his request that she wrote her account of her methods of educating her family, and he vowed to use her thoughts as he developed schools. She was the one he turned to when he faced the decision to go forward to ordination. She was the one with whom he discussed everything from theology to the experiences of other members of the family.

Adam Clarke reflected: *“it has been wondered at that a man who had no children of his own could have known so well how they should be managed and educated: but that wonder will at once cease, when it is recollected by whom he was himself educated; and who was his instructress in all things, during his infancy and youth”*<sup>22</sup>.

In John Wesley’s life and ministry there are many similarities and connections with the Danish missionaries to India. His methodical approaches owed much to his mother, and her methodical system of education was clearly inspired by the missionaries. *“As she was a woman that lived by rule, she methodized and arranged everything so exactly, that to each operation she had a time; and a time sufficient to transact all the business of the family”*<sup>23</sup>

John Wesley’s desire to use every waking moment productively has echoes with the missionaries’ clear systems not only in their schools but also in their own lives. The way of life in the seminaries

---

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley Jr. around 1704 as quoted in Stevenson, G. *Memorials of the Wesley Family* 1876

<sup>22</sup> Clarke, A. *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* 1823

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, A. *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* 1823



developed by Ziegenbalg in Tranquebar was similar to the 'general rules of engagement' which John Wesley developed for the early Methodist societies, particularly the need to review their lives and faith and how they were using their time. Ziegenbalg succeeded in completing his massive works of translating the bible and of creating Tamil dictionaries, by being disciplined with his time.

Language too is a connection. Samuel Wesley advised his son when in Oxford to compare different translations of the same biblical passage in different languages, just as Ziegenbalg did to ensure that his Tamil translation was as true to the original as possible.

The learning by the boys in the mission schools in Tranquebar about the use of medicinal plants is another connection between the work of the missionaries and John Wesley, and this perhaps illustrates the concern both had with the wholeness of a person's well-being, physical as well as spiritual.

John Wesley became ever more convinced of the Arminian theological view that all people could have access to the love, grace and forgiveness of God. Although the name was not used by Ziegenbalg, it seems that his theology was similar, seen in his challenging of the caste system and the stratified society in Tranquebar. In his Christian schools and church communities, all were equal.

Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was a student at Francke's school in Halle and there met Grundler and Plutschau and Ziegenbalg. He said in 1753 that if he had not read the Halle Reports and met with the missionaries, he would not have developed any missionary zeal. He went on to found the Moravian mission which sent missionaries to various parts of the world, including America. When John Wesley met a group of Moravians on the voyage to Georgia in 1735, he was greatly impressed as they calmly prayed through a terrifying storm. That was the start of a lifetime connection with the Moravian church. Again the connection stems back to the missionaries in Tranquebar.

The clearest connection between John Wesley and the missionaries in Tranquebar is seen in the inclusion of their letters in several volumes of the Arminian magazine. John Wesley first published this magazine in 1778 in the midst of controversy about the true presentation of the Methodist Arminian theological position. It was designed to demonstrate the theological distinctiveness of Methodism, particularly the belief in God's offer of universal redemption. So for the letters to have been included in the Arminian Magazine for 1789 and 1790, gives them a definite stamp of approval from John Wesley. The first appeared in the magazine of July 1789 and gives the account of the missionaries' journey to India. It is interesting that the date of the letter is not included even though the events happened some 84 years earlier. The final letter included in the magazine was the letter from October 1709 which included the daily schedule at the schools the missionaries established. This was published in the Arminian Magazine of December 1790, just three months before John Wesley died.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that Susanna Wesley was influenced by the Danish missionaries to India, particularly Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, because it was his accounts that formed the 'Halle Reports'

which were so widely available in England. She herself states “*I was never, I think, more affected with anything than with the relation of their travels*”.

Although this statement is widely known, little has been written to explore the elements that so impressed her. It seems that it has been generally assumed that she was simply impressed by them and that led her on to be more diligent in her faith and life. However when their lives and work are investigated, there are a number of clear connections, which suggest that Susanna actually followed their example in her own development. The most notable elements are their methodical system of education, the living of faith in words and deeds and the importance of personal experience.

There is also no doubt that John Wesley was profoundly influenced by his mother. He stated so on numerous occasions. Some would argue that it was from her in the Rectory at Epworth that he first learnt the importance of method and order, planting the seeds of the Methodist movement. It is clear therefore that some of the elements of that inspiration on John Wesley had their beginnings with the Danish missionaries inspiring Susanna.

However there are also sufficient direct connections between the work of the Danish missionaries and John Wesley’s own thought and work which do not have a clear connection to Susanna’s thinking, to suggest that John Wesley was directly influenced by the Halle Reports as well. That is borne out by the inclusion of the missionaries’ letters in the Arminian Magazine. These elements include: their concern to learn their language and use it to teach about Christianity, the rules of life developed in their seminaries and their inclusive theology.

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and the other missionaries sent from Denmark to Tranquebar were pioneers not only in their own work, but also in the influence they had on the other side of the world from 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Susanna Wesley, living in a remote corner of rural Lincolnshire, had her eyes opened by their experiences, faith and thought. She was able to follow some of their methods in her own life and able to adapt others to fit her own situation. These elements were the ones that had the most profound influence on her son John, supplemented with his own understanding of the missionaries’ accounts of their work.

It is remarkable that these layers of influence mean that work among Hindus, Muslims and ‘heathens’ in south-eastern India could make such an impact in the development of Christians in England in a generation when relatively few people could travel so far or understand other cultures so completely. The impact of the Danish missionaries was to broaden Susanna Wesley’s already fairly broad mind still further, and allow her to pass on that inspiration to her children.

---

## REFERENCES

**Clarke, A.** *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* London 1823

**Edwards, M.** *Sons to Samuel* London 1961

**Gunter, W.S.** *The Arminian Magazine, Vols. 1–20 (1778–1797) an Annotated Content Index* Duke Divinity School, North Carolina

**Jeyaraj, D.** *Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg: The Father of Modern Protestant Mission* New Delhi 2006

**Lindberg, C.** (ed) *The Pietist Theologians* Oxford 2005  
**Singh, B.** *The First Protestant Missionary to India Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg 1683-1719* Oxford 1999  
**Stevenson, G.** *Memorials of the Wesley Family* London 1876  
**Tyerman, L.** *The Life and Times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley* London 1866  
**Wallace, C.** *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings* Oxford 1997  
**Ziegenbalg, B.** An extract from the Success of two Danish Missionaries to the East Indies: in several Letters to their Correspondents in Europe 1789 and 1790 (many extracts) in *The Arminian Magazine* London  
**Ziegenbalg, B.** *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* London 1711

**Claire Potter**  
**June 2013**