
As a missionary in Tamilnadu, with my Tamil teacher, a convert from Hinduism, I visited Caldwell’s grave, in his beloved church at Idaiyankudi, near the Indian Ocean. Here I preached a first Tamil sermon. Caldwell, who died in 1891, spent 53 years in Tinnevelly, the most successful Anglican mission field in India. On his last visit to England in 1883, his message in the SPG chapel ended with the parting words: ‘For Tinnevelly I have lived, and for Tinnevelly I am prepared to die.’

Caldwell was devoted to the Tamil language. He wrote the definitive grammar of the four Dravidian languages – Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada and Telegu – which is still authoritative today. In 1968 his statue was erected, above the Marina Beach, in Chennai, at the behest of the Dravidian government (still in power). Extraordinarily, three of the eight statues of those who made outstanding contributions to Tamil culture and language are of missionaries. Kumaradoss writes insightfully that these statues stand against the Hindu right’s groundless propaganda (for *Hindutva* and against Christian mission).

Caldwell was known as ‘the Apostle to the Nadars’, to whom he was devoted. This remarkable community, traditionally palmyra tappers, embraced Christianity in large numbers and became the backbone of the Tamil church and the Tamil Christian diaspora. But Kumaradoss, himself a Nadar and admirer, emphasises that ‘a picture without shade, like a harmony without discord, is not only untrue to nature, but is also weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.’ Kumaradoss brings out well Caldwell’s unstinting labour for the gospel amongst the very poor, in this most hostile of territory for a European. He is also aware of Caldwell’s tendency to imperiousness, and stubbornness in times of conflict.

Caldwell saw the best way to root Christian faith lay in schools and colleges – ‘education, education, education’! With his remarkable wife Eliza focusing on girls (very unusual at the time, when the British Raj educated few but elite Brahmins), they were both deeply committed to the education of the poor. Caldwell fought to the end for the institutions he founded, when faced with closure for financial or personal conflict reasons. Caldwell College in Tutucorin was at one time the second most successful college in the Madras Presidency. His deepest sadness came when it was downsized and marginalised, due largely to personality conflicts he had with a fellow missionary, and with the Madras Mission Committee. The College closed...
in 1894, even though it had produced nearly all the headmasters in Tinnevelly Diocese and 28 ordained pastors. The present bishop records with pride that a new Caldwell College was opened in 1996.

Caldwell was a pioneer in ordaining Tamils, and made significant moves towards handing over financial, administrative and spiritual responsibility. It is not surprising that Tirunelveli Diocese became financially independent by 1947 and has long since received only the occasional specialist missionary. There are hundreds of missionaries from Tirunelveli working in other parts of India. This Diocese is in many ways his legacy. He became its assistant bishop in later years, and this was not his most fulfilled time. He felt thwarted by mission bureaucrats, who did not recognise his spiritual authority. But he still managed to unite SPG and CMS areas of the mission field that was to lead after his death to the formation of the Tinnevelly Diocese.

Kumaradoss brings out well the dilemmas posed by the famine of the 1870s. Caldwell laboured incessantly to save lives, by raising money in England. Large numbers of Nadars converted to Christianity, not as a condition for receiving relief, but in thanksgiving. Were they ‘rice Christians’? Caldwell defended his policy of giving baptism. A proportion relapsed, but many became the bedrock of the church. Today, mission reflection would take the side of the critics of Caldwell, that this was exploiting weakness, and indeed Hindu critics today accuse some evangelical Christian missions of using development, education, medical aid, and even tsunami relief, to win converts. But that is with the insight of history.

Tirunelveli is seen as contributing to caste problems in the CSI, as the Nadars have become the high caste of the Tamil church, and often marginalised Dalits. But Caldwell did his best to eradicate caste amongst converts. He failed as so many were to do in the following century.

Kumaradoss has written a valuable biography. His research, primary and secondary, has been very wide. The volume is always readable, if sometimes a little repetitive. It will be read widely in India. I hope it will be read also in Britain. When we grow jaundiced by quarrels within the Anglican communion, this account can inspire us to understand the labour that went into that communion and the imperative to hand down to the future a church with the kind of commitment to mission, the poor, and indigenous culture that we see portrayed in this book.

Andrew Wingate

Canon Theologian, and Director of the
St. Philip’s Centre for Study and Engagement
in a Multi Faith Society, Leicester
andangwingate@ntlworld.com