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Response to John Carman

Dennis Hudson

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JOHN CARMAN concluded his essay with request for further information about "conversations between Hindu pandits and the Christian missionaries supervising their translations." I would like to respond with some information about Arumuga Navalar's side of the dialogue that developed with Peter Percival while working with him on the "Tentative Version" of the Tamil Bible from 1841 to 1848. The information comes from Navalar's Tamil booklet, *The Abolition of the Abuse of Saivism (Caivatuṣaṇaparikāram)*, published in Jaffna in 1854. Navalar intended the booklet to be used by Śaivas as an intellectual aid in their opposition to the aggressive attacks on Śaivism by Protestant missionaries. I doubt that Navalar thought of Percival as such a missionary, but he did use sophisticated arguments and readings of the Bible that he must have developed during the years of translation. They represent, I think, evidence of a dialogue that probably took place with Percival over those years, at least within Navalar's mind. I have no evidence of actual conversations. I will select only a few items from a longer study I have made of the booklet.¹

First, regarding the question of the Tamil word to be used in translating "God," Carman noted that Percival and Navalar chose *deva* instead of other possibilities suggested by Kulandran, such as *tambiran* (the Lord or the Absolute) and *sarvesuran* (the Lord of All). Interestingly, in his booklet for Śaiva use against the missionaries, Navalar used for Śiva the word *kaṭavul* (Transcendent Being) and for lesser deities the word *deva*, including in that category the Christian deity: For example, he specifically referred to each person of the Trinity as a *deva*. Consistent with that evaluation of the God of the Bible as encompassed by Śiva, he referred to the Christian heaven as *mokṣa*, but referred to the ultimate realm of

Śiva as *mukti* and implied that the former is but a penultimate and transitory stage on the way to the latter.

Second, Navalar paused twice in the booklet to discuss the Śaiva and Biblical views of God and of worship comparatively. The first discussion followed a comparative description of the liturgical aspects of Śaiva and Israelite temple worship, and his comments reveal his response to the Bible as he encountered it, especially to the Old Testament. A brief summary of his comments in that discussion will reveal his side of "dialogue" with Percival. Navalar addressed himself in the booklet to an anonymous missionary.

Navalar began the discussion by noting that Protestants do not follow the worship prescribed by Jehovah in their own scripture, namely the rites of the Temple in Jerusalem. Śaivas, however, still perform the acts of temple worship prescribed by Śiva in their scriptures and, as he had already noted, they resemble those rites prescribed for worship in Jerusalem. Moreover, he said, the missionary asserts that none of those ritual acts that Śaivas perform has any value and that therefore the Transcendent Being who prescribed them is not truly the Transcendent Being. If that is so, he argued, then Jehovah who prescribed rites very similar to those of the Śaivas, is not truly the Transcendent Being either.

The New Testament, he continued, provides the missionary no basis for abandoning those prescriptions for worship. The missionary says that Jehovah is the Transcendent Being and is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons. Among them, the Son became the human *avatar* named Jesus Christ. He renounced all those ritual acts and therefore, the missionary said, we do not perform them. But, Navalar responded, Jehovah had repeatedly said that those ritual acts are to be performed

for all generations as “an everlasting statute.”² If Jesus Christ did in fact renounce as useless the ritual acts that his Father Jehovah had enjoined for ever, then it shows him to be smarter than his Father and in rebellion against him. How, he asked, can anyone believe that two persons who disagree like that are equal in knowledge and power?

The missionary may reply, he went on, that all along Jehovah the Father thought that those ritual acts of worship should be given up in later days, but that in the meantime they should serve as symbols of the future crucifixion. But, Navalar replied, the statement, “an everlasting statute,” that Jehovah applied to these rites in the Old Testament suggests that they should never be abandoned. And, if Jehovah commanded ritual acts that will be fruitful for earlier people but that will be fruitless for later people and will be abandoned, then he is not innately intelligent. Moreover, the four Gospels show that Christ the Lord himself followed the “everlasting statute” of Jehovah and participated in the commanded rites, beginning with his own circumcision, and did not believe they should be given up.

Navalar continued. The missionary says that Jesus Christ was born as a man to be crucified on a cross and to die for the sins of all people. Jehovah instituted the ritual acts of the Old Testament as symbols of the future event. Now, since a symbol is useful so long as the thing it symbolizes is not present, when that thing is at hand, the symbol is useless and can be discarded. Similarly, the missionary says that once the crucifixion occurred, the ritual acts that symbolized it were useless and should be discarded.

Now if that were true, Navalar responded, as soon as Christ died, all those ritual acts would have been given up as useless, but that was not the case. Paul and other Apostles continued to practice them.³ When Paul did abandon circumcision, he abandoned only that and nothing else.⁴ In any case, Paul was only a man, not a god. If you say, however, that Paul gave up circumcision in accord with the words of Christ, who was a god, where do you find Christ saying that? There is no place in the New Testament where Christ the Lord says he would have all those ritual acts abandoned as

soon as he died. Therefore, whoever abandons them acts directly against the everlasting statute of Jehovah.

The missionary, Navalar continued, says that all ritual acts commanded in the Old Testament are symbols. But, he replied, symbolic acts are useless if one does not know what they symbolize. Nowhere does the Lord explicitly give their meanings as symbols. If Moses and others who performed those ritual acts thought them to be symbolic but did not know what they symbolized, then they received no benefits from performing them. The missionary, he concluded, makes no sense.

Arumuga Navalar ended the discussion by presenting the Śaiva view of ritual acts and of their symbolic meaning. He explained that the Āgamas are divided into two parts. The first teaches ritual acts, the second teaches direct knowledge of Śiva, *Śivajñāna*. *Śivajñāna* is the direct cause of release from birth and death, *mukti*. Ritual acts make one fit for *Śivajñāna* and create the lineage of gurus by which one attains *mukti*. All of those ritual acts symbolize *Śivajñāna*. At the emanation of the world Śiva himself revealed the meaning of each ritual act in the Āgamas. All of the rituals appropriate to a person and taught by an *ācārya* are to be followed until *Śivajñāna* appears. Once *Śivajñāna* has appeared, however, the ritual acts may be abandoned altogether or one may continue to observe them for the sake of others. Śaivas thus perform ritual acts that have come down to them in the Āgamas through the lineage of gurus and do so in order to obtain the direct knowledge of Śiva.

Yet, Navalar said to the missionary, you do not know the slightest thing about those things. You think of yourself as the ruling colonialist and spend your days vainly thinking your job is to go on despising us and our religion as you please, just as you have done until now. Give up that idea, he urged, understand the truth, and be free, be free.

Footnotes

- 1 “A Hindu Response to the Written Torah” in *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Studies in Comparative Jewish and Hindu Religion*, ed. Hananya Goodman (forthcoming).

- 2 He listed as texts for "everlasting statute": *Genesis* 17.7, 12-13; *Exodus* 12.14, 17; 28.43; 29.9; 28.42; 30.8, 10, 21, 31; 31.13, 16; 40.15; *Leviticus* 3.17; 6.22; 7.33, 35; 10.11, 15; 16.29, 31, 23; 17.7; 22.3; 23.14, 21, 41; 24.3, 8, 9; *Numbers* 10.8; 18.11, 19, 23; 19.20; 28.6.
- 3 Here Navalar cited: *Acts of Apostles* 18.18-21; 21.26; and 16.3.
- 4 Citing Paul's letters to the Hebrews and to the Romans.