

Benjamin Bailey, the CMS, and the attempt to ‘convert’ an ancient Christian Church

Abstract: Benjamin Bailey (1791-1871) was one of the first English born Church Missionary Society missionaries to go to India. Along with Joseph Fenn and Henry Baker Snr., he was part of what has been called the Travancore Trio. Their objective was to reform the ancient community of Syrian Christians in Travancore that they in turn might be a great native missionary force in India. Their mission came to be known as a ‘Mission of Help’ to the ancient Syrian Church. The mission was distinctive from others in India at that time which sought to more directly call for the conversion of the country’s massive Hindu and Muslim populations. Unlike other missions this one may almost be said to have as its aim the conversion of an existing church. For twenty years the mission of Bailey based in Kottayam focused its attention on reforming the Church in that land. This paper will explore their successes and failures in trying to reform the ancient Church and seek to explain why the ‘Mission of Help’ ultimately ended. In particular the mission will be set in its political context and some of the underestimated differences in understanding between the missionaries and the Syrians will be highlighted. This paper will therefore point out how staunch conversionist evangelical Christians nevertheless refrained from mass evangelization and focused instead on equipping an indigenous church to engage their neighbors. Some lessons for mission today will be suggested.