Chapter 5

A Swiss Missionary Orientalist and His Indian Guru: Jakob Urner and Channappa Uttangi

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Abstract: The chapter focuses on the career of a Swiss missionary who developed an interest in texts (in particular the corpus of *vacana*s) of the Liṅgāyat community in Karnataka, Jakob Urner (1883–1961). Beginning with biographical elements about Urner in Switzerland and then in India, the chapter looks at the "revival" of the Liṅgāyat tradition in the early twentieth century in relation to local identity claims. Replacing the creation of editions of the *vacana*s in this context, the chapter analyses Urner's translation of these texts from the 1920s onwards. The role of his teacher of the Kannada language, Channappa Uttangi (1881–1962), is highlighted, and some extracts from the later correspondence between the two men are analysed. The chapter concludes by examining a possible influence of Urner – whose work has remained unpublished – on the missionary and later university professor Carl-Albert Keller (1920–2008).

1 Jakob Urner and the Kanarese Evangelical Mission

In this chapter we examine the outcomes of encounters between Swiss and Indian scholars in the framework of the Kanarese Evangelical Mission (KEM). The context of these exchanges is the same as that discussed in the previous chapters. Faced with competition from other religious groups and having to cope with the politicization of their own congregations in the 1920s, missionaries felt that it was necessary to gain a better understanding of local traditions. They worked in two interrelated directions: on the one hand (1), they developed a genuine interest in local religious movements, such as that of the Liṅgāyats. On the other hand (2), they strove to strip Christianity of its European image and indigenize it. In this process they did not work alone: they interacted with local scholars, in particular language teachers and religious specialists. In this context it is possible to ask in what measure the encounter of specific missionaries with Indian scholars can be described as a "collaborative construction of knowledge" or if it was a highly imbalanced process.

Knowledge transmission can be explicit, as in the case of a European scholar learning a language from an Indian teacher, or an Indian student learning at a school whose curriculum was designed by European agents. It can also be less

expected and more implicit, as in the case of a teacher learning about schemes, questionings, attitudes, or methodologies from his or her student(s). This second aspect is prominently featured in the rich set of examples studied by Nile Green, in which scenarios involving learning languages, translating and editing texts are shown as particularly favourable for such "epistemic encounters."[1]

Investigating one such case, this chapter explores the curriculum of a scholar from the Zurich region who spent time as a missionary in South India, Johann Jakob Urner (1883–1961), and his "encounter" with Channappa Uttangi (1881–1962), a Christian specialist on the Liṅgāyat tradition. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the Basel Mission (BM) counted a number of "missionary scholars" among its ranks, such as Hermann Gundert, Hermann Mögling, and Ferdinand Kittel. In addition, there were less well-known figures who also produced significant works, such as Jakob Friedrich August Männer (1828–1891), the first compiler of a Tulu dictionary, and Gottlob Adam Würth (1820–1869), an early translator of the *Basava Purāṇa* and *Chennabasava Purāṇa* from Kannada to English.[2] Urner is a latecomer to the same tradition and, like Mögling and Kittel, developed a strong scholarly but also affective interest in vernacular forms of religion. He can be considered as a representative of "missionary Orientalism," akin to the Indological works developed in the context of YMCA – with all the ambiguities that surrounded such projects.[3]

1.1 Jakob Urner: From Zurich to Mangalore

Born in 1883 in a small rural town close to Zurich, Langnau am Albis, Urner studied Protestant theology in Zurich, Tübingen, and Berlin until 1907. From 1907 to 1912, he worked as a pastor in Fällanden, in the Zurich area, before resigning to join the BM as a missionary (Figure 5.1). He followed a basic curriculum, spending three months in Edinburgh, and embarked then for India. He arrived in Dharwad in October 1912 and stayed there a year before being moved to Guledgudda where he stayed until the beginning of the war before going back to Dharwad. As a Swiss national, Urner could stay but the institution as a whole reduced its activities in significant ways (see chapter 3, 2.1). It is during this period that he became proficient in the Kannada language. In 1921, and while on leave in Switzerland, he married Lydia Jakob (1888–1972) who had previously spent time in India. In 1912 she had founded a school for women aspiring to become teachers in Mangalore, hoping to instil in them the Christian values that

1 Green 2014, pp. 67–138.

2 On which, see Boratti 2011, pp. 95–102.

3 See Fischer-Tiné 2020 for a characterization of the "Y Orientalism," around the figure of J. N. Farquhar.

Figure 5.1. J. Urner before leaving for India (1912). Source: BMA QS-30.001.1328.01. https://www.bmarchives.org/files/fullsize/100208120.jpg

she found lacking in many schools funded by the mission.[4] From 1918 to 1928 Lydia managed the orphanage in Guledgudda-Sumaddi while her husband was the "district supervisor," responsible for the smooth running of schools in the region.

In 1928 the couple left India, officially to secure a good education for their children.[5] Urner settled near Zurich and resumed his pastoral activities before

4 See her journal, "Meine erste Evangelisationsreise," Basel Mission Archives (BMA) C-10.66. For a similar situation of "non-Christian competition" in the domain of schools in Mysore and Punjab during the same period see Naidu 1996, pp. 91–111; Cox 2002, pp. 208–209.

5 There is however evidence that Urner disagreed with the idea of the Basel Mission coming back with the intention of continuing its activities as it had before the war: see Urner 1927, p. 43 ("Hier trifft die Vereinbarung der Basler und der Kanaresischen Mission auf grossen Widerspruch. Man möchte am liebsten das ungesorgte Leben, das man vor dem Kriege hatte, wieder führen können und wieder einen Gutteil der Verantwortung auf den Missionar abladen.")

retiring in 1951. In a biographical sketch written by himself in 1954, he adds a laconic sentence: "his love for the Indian people incentivized him to explore Indian literature."[6] As we shall see, this is quite an understatement and there is evidence that he became familiar not only with the Kannada language but also with a whole range of Indian literatures in Kannada and Sanskrit, and in particular with a vast corpus from the Liṅgāyat religious tradition – the so-called *vacana* literature.

1.2 Urner's Involvement with Liṅgāyats

The Vīraśaiva or Liṅgāyat tradition (with various sub-caste affiliations) was the strongest group in the region of Dharwad and Betageri, and most Christian converts in the region had come from that background. Notably, an important number of Liṅgāyats of the Chalavadi caste converted together to Christianity in 1913, in the hope of achieving higher social status.[7] The Liṅgāyat tradition itself goes back at least to the twelfth-century figure of Basava (1105–1168). A Brahmin from birth, Basava developed a sectarian movement centred around the idea of a personal and direct relation to the divinity, contesting the caste privileges acquired by birth and opening up religious practice to all, including the low caste and women. Often presented as egalitarian and promoting non-violence as its supreme principle, the movement actually begun as a rebellion – also violent – against the aristocracy of the time and its social, religious, and literary codes.

1.3 Translation of the *Vivekacintāmaṇi*

Chronologically, the first translation project undertaken by Urner was a full English version, about 400 pages, of Nijaguna Sivayogin's *Vivekacintāmaṇi*, a fifteenth-century Kannada Shaiva compendium. The work had been translated many times into different Indian languages, attesting to its popularity well beyond Karnataka.[8] Considered a classical text, some parts of it were included in school syllabi, and probably in the very schools that Urner was supervising.[9] We have little information about how the translation was realized, but it was done

6 "Lebenslauf von Herrn Jakob Urner," Urner personal file, BMA BV 2001.

7 Sargant 1987, pp. 111–112.

8 Translated into Marathi by Shanteshvara Shivayogi in 1604, into Sanskrit by Shivaprakasha Swami (1652) and again into Sanskrit by Lingaraja (end of the eighteenth century). Urner's translation is kept in the Basel Mission Archives: BMA C-10.67.

9 The *Vivekacintāmaṇi* had already attracted the interest of Urner's famous predecessor, F. Kittel, who looked for elements concerning Carnatic musical systems in it (Kittel 1874).

over five years, from 1921 to 1926, and would have needed much additional work in order to be considered for publication.

It can be speculated that Urner's intention was to find the key to local culture in its own terms and to build a reference book for himself and a close circle of colleagues – an impression reinforced by the presence of a concordance at the end of the translated text. Next to this first attempt at translation, Urner also showed interest in religious practices and the ritual uses of texts. In a short report about a visit to a *maṭha* located in the town of Kotikal, right next to Guledgudda where he was stationed, he writes the following:

> From mid-August to mid-September the Liṅgāyats celebrate the month of Śrāvaṇa; that is, the month of the hearing. For them this is, so to speak, the only opportunity to get religious instruction. In general the legends of Shaiva saints are read aloud in the monasteries. I have already attended such a performance two times in the monastery in the neighbouring town of Kodakal. The reading was performed in front of about 20–30 people in a small room, which opened out onto a hall. On a chair, to the right of the speaker, was the Guru of the monastery in a yellow ochre garment. On the left was the elder, and further down, a drummer, a player of cither and a player of harmonium. […] It is a great help for preaching to the heathens [Heidenpredigt] that the leaders are not inaccessible and narrow-minded.[10]

As is evident from the last part of the quotation, it is clear that the "evangelization of the heathens" remains a major goal at this point and that Urner's knowledge of the tradition is somehow conceived as strategic. At the same time, the "open-mindedness" of the Liṅgāyat leaders might suggest that they too had an interest in having the Swiss missionary around: perhaps they saw it as an opportunity to publicize their views.[11] Urner's normative perspective is confirmed in his interest in yet another classical South Indian Shaiva work: the Tamil *Tiruvācakam*, from which he had published extracts in the confidential venue of the *Mitteilungen der Kanaresischen Mission* in 1921. The translations included comments about the text representing an erroneous answer to a universal human concern.[12]

Of course Urner was not the first to develop an interest in these layers of tradition: he was preceded by several other Protestant missionaries who had identified ideas that closely resembled their own notions of an all-pervading God

10 Urner and Urner 1927, pp. 41–42 (my translation). See Jenkins and Jenkins 2013 for a detailed account of the first visit of a missionary as a "guest of honour" at a Liṅgāyat *maṭha*, that of Herrmann Mögling in Hubli, as early as 1838.

11 See Assayag 1989, pp. 111–112, on the competition between Liṅgāyat *maṭha*s of different persuasions in this period (in particular on the issue of caste identity).

12 Urner 1921b, with a very approximative translation of the *Tiruvācakam* 6.18 (transl. Pope p. 91) and the following commentary: "the need for a divine redeemer is deep in the human heart. Where the truth is not manifested, one looks for a substitution in myths."

and of grace in the South Indian devotional Shaiva tradition and in the school of Ramanuja.[13]

2 Urner and the *Vacana*s

It is however another translation project that occupied Urner for the longest period of time and in which his activity stands out: the translation of texts from the vast corpus of *vacana* (lit. "utterance") literature – that is, the short texts in free verse form attributed to saints and poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries such as Basava, Allama, Channabasava, Siddharama, and Akka Mahadevi. Generally opposed to ritualism and Brahmanical orthodoxy, these texts promote an ideal of individual piety and social equality. For example:

> He who kills is a *madiga*
> He who eats filth is a *holeya* [both are considered as out-castes]
> What is caste
> Tell me what is their caste
> Our Koodalasangama's [a form of Shiva] *sharanas* [devotees, lit. "those who have sought refuge"]
> Who wish the well-being of all creatures in the entire universe
> They are truly the well-born ones.[14]

To understand Urner's specific intervention in this domain, it is necessary to contextualize his activity within the rediscovery of the *vacana* corpus at the end of the nineteenth century.

2.1 Collecting, Editing and Translating: F. G. Halakatti

Among all the early authors who have left us observations on Liṅgāyats, none had mentioned *vacana* literature until the end of the nineteenth century. A few *vacana*s were already published in a modern form in 1874, in a tract of the BM that criticized both Brahmanical Hinduism and the Liṅgāyat tradition.[15] This fact suggests that the missionaries could access at least some of the texts kept in the Liṅgāyat *maṭha*s and that they were interested in "modernizing" them. The more systematic work of rediscovering these texts, however, has very much to do

13 See, for example, G. U. Pope and his interest in the *Tiruvācakam* in the late nineteenth century in Bornet 2014. A more concrete case is Scudder and Scudder 1869: a handbook presented as "the vernacular preacher's companion" containing quotations of various Tamil religious texts along with a Christian interepretation of them, emphasizing either similarities or differences.

14 Basava 257, transl. Vijaya Guttal, in Nagabhushana Swamy 2007, pp. 123–124.

15 Basel Mission 1874. I thank V. Boratti for this information.

with F. G. Halakatti's (1880–1964) work on collecting and editing – to the point that he has been nicknamed *vacanapitāmaha* (the grandfather of *vacana*).[16] Born in Dharwad, Halakatti studied at the Basel Mission High School from 1890 to 1896, at the time when F. Kittel was the school's principal. He moved then to Bombay and became a lawyer. Intrigued by the *vacana* literature, he began to collect palm-leaf manuscripts in individual homes and *maṭha*s from around Bijapur. Even if the palm-leaf manuscripts came from different areas, and even if they were probably not as old as they were claimed to be (supposedly the twelfth or thirteenth century), he brought them together and collated them into a single edited corpus. Since some parts of the manuscripts were damaged or missing, Halakatti also intervened as an author, completing parts of *vacana*s, adding punctuation and probably modernizing the language. The resulting work was published in three volumes popularly known as *Vacanaśāstrasāra*, from 1923 to 1953 – the first attempt to systematize the *vacana*s into a corpus, even if a few isolated texts had already been published. As the book's table of contents shows,[17] Halakatti organized the *vacana*s not by author, but by themes, attempting to find texts illustrating points reflecting the hallmarks of a modern society (in his eyes), such as monotheism, the absence of idolatry or the lack of distinction between castes. This edition became a new basis for a kind of reformed "Vīraśaivism," brushing the contours of a "practical religion" centred on social action.[18] Halakatti's selection was quite "irenic" since some of the texts *do* actually defend the recourse to violence against Brahmins.[19]

Based on this edition, a translation of some of Basava's *vacana*s appeared in the 1922 issue of the *Indian Antiquary* – a journal which specialized in Indian epigraphy but also published reports about and translations of various vernacular Indian literatures – edited by Devadatta Ramkrishna Bhandarkar (1875–1950) and Sir Richard Carnac Temple (1850–1931), then working in Territet, Switzerland (from 1921 to 1931). Temple noted the following in his introduction:

> Rao Sahib P. G. Halakatti has translated a large number of those attributed to Basava in English. From these Dr. J. N. Farquhar has made a selection, and has prepared the MS. for the press.[20]

16 See Boratti 2010 for the history of this rediscovery.

17 Halakatti 1923, pp. xxiii-xxxii.

18 See Hawley 2015, pp. 338–339, on the issue of political appropriations of bhakti, and in particular of the Vīraśaiva tradition.

19 See, for example, Nagaraj 2003, p. 354: "In ideological terms, the revolt embodied in the vacana can basically be conceived in terms of its opposition to the nexus of the court, temple, monasteries, and to the elite that formed the basis of this imposing combination." See also Zydenbos 1997 and his criticism of Schouten 1991's "irenic" views.

20 Temple, "Introduction" in Halakatti and Farquhar 1922, p. 7.

John Nicol Farquhar (1861–1929) was, of course, a Scottish missionary known for his *Crown of Hinduism* (1913) in which Christianity is presented as a religion that can accomplish the moral and social principles that Hinduism can only point to. Staying within the general framework of Halakatti, this represents the first reconfiguration to emphasize the compatibility of Protestant Christian values not so much with the *vacana*s themselves but with the revivalist programme laid out by Halakatti.

2.2 Urner's Translations

Approximately 10,000 *vacana*s from more than 200 authors have been preserved, of which Urner translated about 2,000 – most of them before the appearance of any translation in a European language and long before the English translations of A. K. Ramanujan or K. Zvelebil.[21] The autobiography of Urner's Kannada teacher, Channappa Uttangi, gives an account of the missionary's first interest in the *vacana*s:

> A few Vachanas of Sarvajna were being read when Rev. Urner was captivated by the simple direction and modern ideas, which seemed close to his own thinking. […] The next day, he [Uttangi] found on Rev. Urner's desk two volumes of English translations of the Marathi Saint Tukaram's 'Abhangs' (devotional chants) translated by Nelson Frazer, then working in Maharashtra. He also saw that Rev. Urner was similarly trying to translate the Vachanas into English and for this purpose was working on arranging them in alphabetical order and preparing a concordance.[22]

It seems then that it is while learning Kannada with his language teacher that Urner bacame acquainted with that strand of literature.[23] Urner translated most of the texts from Halakatti's first volume of the *Vacanaśāstrasāra* (1923, Figure 5.2), as he himself explains:

> For a few years there has been a Kanarese book which gives us an insight into the actual currents and forces which were instrumental in the development of Lingaitism [Lingaitismus]. Its title is "Vachanashastrasara" and it was written by Raobhadur Ph. G. Halakatti, a Lingayat lawyer, who represents his community also on the political level, in the "Legislative Council of Bombay." Already in 1905, this layman had searched for and col-

21 Urner's manuscripts are kept in the Basel Mission Archives, BMA C-10.89.

22 Gunjal 2007, pp. 71–72.

23 See Urner's "Meine Bücher," BMA C-10.89.26, which mentions two Kannada "Schulbücher:" Kanarese Reading Series, Fourth Book, Bombay, Macmillan, 1912 and Kanarese Reading Series, Seventh Book, Department of Public Instruction, Bombay 1913. Those books had been prepared by the "vernacular textbooks revision committee" and were printed by the BM Press in Mangalore.

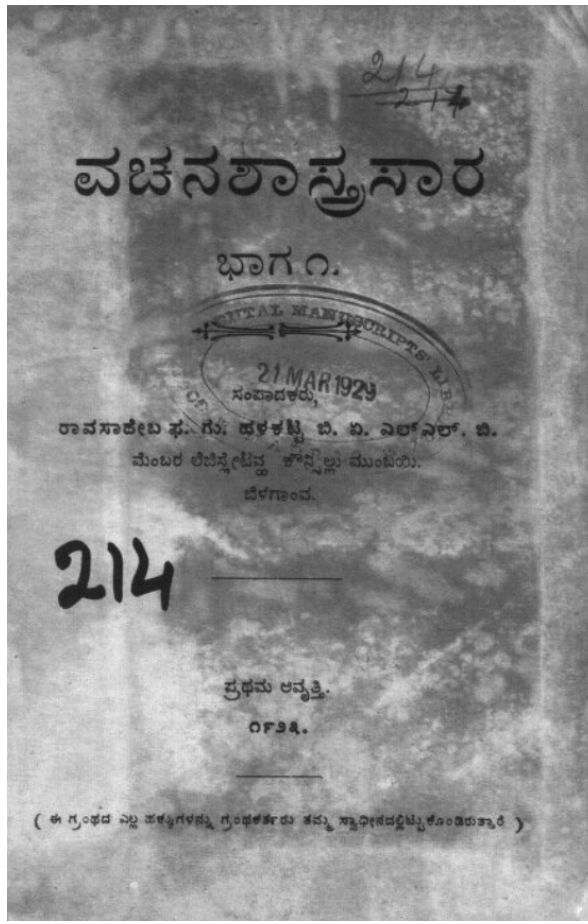

Figure 5.2. Cover Page of P. G. Halakatti's *Vacanaśāstrasāra*, 1923. Source: "Vacanaśāstrasāra Bhāga-1, British Library, EAP673/2/81, https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP673-2-81".

> lected the sayings of wisdom [Sinnsprüche] of the founder of the Lingayat movement in Lingayat monasteries.[24]

Translating from this volume, it is then not surprising that Urner recognized values that were dear to him. Indeed, these texts had been selected specifically for their "progressive values," and they conveyed a message close to Urner's understanding of Protestantism: a religion without clergy, accessible to all without distinction of class or caste, and strict moral precepts that showed the way to-

24 Urner 1928a, p. 5 (my translation).

wards a "simple life," encouraging work and action, not contemplation or philosophy. Moreover, the texts were expressed in relatively simple language, meant to be understood by all.

To exemplify these points, let us take as an example Urner's 1925 translations of the author signing with the formula Akhandeshwar (ca 1700?). Urner translated all the 102 *vacanas* present in Halakatti's volume. He not only reordered the *vacana*s by author (and not by theme), but also selected the authors whose *vacana*s seemed to focus on themes of specific interest to him, as in the following:

> Is the sun that shows itself reflected in thousand waterspouts not one? Or are there as many suns? Sir! Causing illusion in all bodies as filling them, thou alone art the highest being. I cannot see any other, Akhandeshwar. The light bodied Murties are not god.[25]

Or further, under the rubric (copied from Halakatti's classification) "in investiture (*diksha*) no division of caste:"

> Be he a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, or born in any caste, if he obtained guru's grace and put in a linga on his body, he is a great soul endued with rites and true work. He is entitled to the three worlds, see Akhandeshwar.[26]

Interestingly, Urner initially focused on relatively "minor" *vacanakāra*s (authors of *vacana*s), such as Urilinga Deva (1170), Urilinga Peddi and Kalavya (1180), Tontada Siddhalinga (1470), Nijaguru Svatantra Siddhalingeswara (1480) and Akhandeshwar (1700), translating a total of about 500 verses in this first phase. A few German translations were published in the very last issues of the *Mitteilungen der Kanaresischen Mission*, in 1928, and were accompanied by a brief commentary.[27] In the introduction to these published translations, Urner mentions the recent evolution of Liṅgāyat literature, in particular the publication of Halakatti's volume.[28] Quite evidently, in these early translations, he kept a critical and normative eye open for what he considered to be non-Christian aspects. For example, he wrote:

> Whereas there is much that is nice and gripping in these expressions of Indian devotion (bhakti), there is also, here and there, as a wrong note, a word about a challenge to the deity which shows clearly that the Hindu does not know the sanctity of God in its full dimension. Some Vachanas end with: "This is your duty! God!", almost reminding us about Heine's perfidious formula: "God will pardon me, it is his job!"[29]

25 Halakatti 1923, p. 26 (no. 4), tr. Urner in BMA C-10.89.13.
26 Halaktti 1923, p. 73 (no. 1), tr. Urner in BMA C-10.89.13.
27 Urner 1928a, 1928b.
28 Urner 1928a, p. 5.
29 Urner 1928b, p. 10 (my translation).

He looked, however, with interest and admiration upon utterances witnessing a spirit of humility and social equality, and was probably struck by the popular appeal of these texts. Echoing Halakatti's ambitions, Urner noticed that the *vacana*s could serve as a basis for a new "reform" movement:

> The Chelavadis, among which our mission is working in and around Motebennur, are considered as belonging to a lower caste by the Lingayats, even if they are also Lingayats. The orthodox Lingayats are all in the caste system. In more recent times, the spirit of reform is gaining ground in small, English-educated, circles. It has, however, to fight against a fierce resistance. *Its cornerstones are particularly vachanas of the religion's founders that speak against caste.*[30]

At this stage, and as suggested in the second part of the text, it seems that Urner could accept that these socially progressive ideas could be carried by another institutional vehicle than the Christian religion. In sum, his efforts witness an attempt to build bridges between his own theological views and a revivalist Liṅgāyat theology that was deemed fit for the social and political challenges of the time.[31]

More translations followed after Urner returned to Switzerland. The translations are generally typewritten and often include a few introductory lines. He focused this time on major authors of the *vacana* tradition, such as Basava, Akka Mahadevi, Molige Marayya, Sakalesha Madarasa, and Dasimayya the weaver.[32] While the translations remain unpublished,[33] the general impression is that Urner was addressing the target audience of a circle of interested friends, desirous to make this tradition better known. By this time Urner had reconceptualized his own role as more of a sympathetic exponent of Liṅgāyat literature than an evangelical missionary. This was of course nothing really new since, as we have noted, it had been a path taken by many missionaries, and the BM itself counted an important number of missionary scholars who had mitigated their "normative"

30 Ibid. (emphasis mine).

31 On the perpetuation of a comparison between *vacana* literature and Christian Protestant authors, see the debate between Niranjana 1992 and Dhawarker 1992 on A. K. Ramanujan's translations of selected *vacana*s (Ramanujan 1973).

32 All the texts are kept in the archives of the Basel Mission: Basava (BMA C-10.89.2.1, BMA C-10.89.7–9), Molige Marayya, Adayya Vacana (BMA C-10.89.2.6), Sakalesha Madarasa (BMA C-10.89.2.4), Mahadeviakka (BMA C-10.89.2.1) and Dasimayya (BMA C-10.89.2.5). Based on his numbering system, Urner's source for Basava appears to be the edition of Basavanal 1951. Urner's translations are earlier than all published English translations of these texts, for example Menezes and Angadi 1967.

33 According to his daughters, Urner had explicitly expressed the wish that his translations should not be published (personal interview, October 2016). There is however mention of C.-A. Keller describing these texts as "prepared for publication" ("Ausgeführte Texte") (Jenkins 2011, p. 352).

viewpoints, such as Kittel and Mögling. Uttangi even speaks about these missionaries as *bhakta*s, hence considered as inspired devotees rather than as European actors coming to impart their views.[34] This evolution is probably also to connect with Urner's own guru, who was none other than his former Kannada teacher.

2.3 Urner's Guru: Channappa Uttangi (1881–1962)

In a letter written to Channappa Uttangi in 1956, Urner addressed his former language teacher as his guru, inaugurating a renewed and rich correspondence between the two, now aged, men.[35] Born into a Christian family and raised in the Dharwad BM school, Uttangi later became a teacher at the same school. Calling himself a revolutionary he was also, according to his autobiography, a "secret member of the Rationalist Press Association" in London – an association of atheist freethinkers.[36] At the start of the twentieth century, he developed a strong interest in the *vacana* literature, focusing on texts attributed to Sarvajña (sixteenth century).[37] The history of the project's genesis is worth mentioning since Urner's role is explicitly noted:

> I got to know about him [Sarvajña] through a foreign Missionary. I was teaching the missionary Kannada at that time. The questions this Missionary asked about Sarvajña were worth contemplating. […] Whatever it is, since a foreign missionary who had come from a distant place was so intrigued by Sarvajña who was not even a poet from his own country, I was ashamed that I, who was born in the same district as Sarvajña, had not done anything about him. Therefore I dedicated myself to the service of Sarvajña. When I started working, all that I wanted to do was to translate some of his *vachana*s into English and make him known to others.[38]

Looking at existing works on Sarvajña, Uttangi was not satisfied with the state of the text and published several critical notes in the monthly *Vāgbhūṣana*, the official mouthpiece of the Karnataka Vidya Vardhaka Sangha, a society promoting

34 Uttangi observes: "The first foreign researchers [of Vīraśaivism] are Basel Missionaries, of which Würth, Kies, Kittel are the most significant. […] Kittel wrote a German book in 1876 on the origin of the Linga culture. Since it is difficult for a European to understand this without recourse to psychology, and against rationalism, the BM Committee has sent more Bhaktas than missionaries. They have produced much in the domain of language and religion." In Uttangi (transl. Urner), *Die Religionslehre und Literatur der Virashaivas* (BM C-10.89.17).

35 The correspondence is kept in the BMA C-10.89.33.

36 Uttangi 2007, p. 7.

37 Sarvajña is only part of the "signature" (*aṅkitanāma*) of this "author," traditionally depicted as a mendicant.

38 Uttangi, "Autobiography," in Uttangi 2007, pp. 17–18.

the unification of Karnataka along linguistic lines.[39] Like Halakatti, and familiarized with the philological methodology through his contact with Urner, Uttangi went on a hunt for manuscripts. He published his own edition of Sarvajña slightly later, in 1924, and the book was of course part of Urner's library.[40]

The reality and historicity of gatherings of *vacanakāra*s, as described by the classical text, *Śūnyasaṃpādane,* was central for Uttangi. These gatherings, located in the *anubhavamaṇṭapa* (the hall of experience (of the divine)) at Kalyana (present-day Basavakalyan, north-east Karnataka), are made into an origin myth of the region in opposition to the Sanskritic culture of the north.[41] Given that the regional movement was very much connected to Liṅgāyat revivalism, the question of the relation between Uttangi's "regionalist" agenda and his Christian identity is a significant issue. Specifically, it translated into political action and Uttangi joined a dissident group within the Christian community affiliated with the mission: Prabhakar's *svatantra* party of the Christian church in Hubli (see chapter 3, 3.3). Intellectually, he sought for solutions to this double bind in the comparative study of religions and the psychology of religion, especially in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) and William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). There is evidence that these books were circulating between Urner and Uttangi, and Uttangi quickly appropriated arguments for his own agenda. One cannot discount, either, the possible influence of S. Radhakrishnan's popular works – in particular his *Idealist View of Life* (1929) in which he similarly reconciled recent studies in the psychology of religion (W. James, H. Bergson) about intuition and an emphasis on religious experience (*anubhava*).

For Uttangi the notion of "mysticism" became a crucial device in his argumentation to reconcile aspects of the religion of the *vacanakāras* and Christianity without engaging the slippery slope of speculating about historical influences. Reversing Farquhar's theology of fulfilment, he argued that the *vacana*s were actually a fulfilment of Jesus's teachings – himself described as a follower of the *anubhava* philosophy.[42] Uttangi further argued that the *anubhava* model could

39 Naidu 1996, pp. 142–144.

40 Urner, "Meine Bücher," BMA C-10.89.26.

41 Uttangi himself attended the Kannada Sahitya Sammelan of 1925 presided by Sriman Benegal Ramarao. He was also in close contact with Shri Kumaraswamy of Hangal, one of the main artisans of the All India Vīraśaiva Mahāsabhā (established 1904). On Uttangi's Dravidian ideology (as an advanced and casteless society), actually not very far from that of Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) despite the different religious affiliations, see Bergunder 2004, pp. 67–72 and Sebastian 2005, pp. 218–219.

42 Cf. the argument opposed to Urner's suggestion of a Christian influence: "But since I knew that all the anubhavis were in one way or other like the missionaries (seekers after truth) and since we can find such thoughts in the vachanas in a number of places, I knew that there was no need for them to come under the influence of Christianity" (Uttangi, 2007, p. 17). On antecedents of this type of argument see Boratti 2011, p. 96: "As challenges to the missionaries

"sustain the whole nation," trying to align this regionalist (and particularistic) agenda with the struggle at a national level.[43]

Whereas Halakatti cautiously stayed out of the debate between Brahmanical and anti-caste interpretations of Liṅgāyat texts,[44] Uttangi explicitly took sides, publishing a text that showed his engagement for the cause of untouchability: *Basaveshwara and the Upliftment of Untouchables* (1933). This view was further elaborated in his later works and in the correspondence with Urner, fuelling an argument that reinforced the special character of the local tradition against the shadow of Advaita Vedānta. Considering the Advaita Vedānta tradition as elitist, he thought the tradition represented by the *vacanakāras* could bring deeper and more lasting social change at all levels. Whereas Christianity could easily be appropriated, the Brahmanical and Vedāntic perspective was, on the contrary, clearly identified as unassimilable.

Tellingly and importantly, the same arguments reappear under Urner's pen to criticize "orientalist" conceptions of Indian religions based on a purely Advaita Vedānta framework. Urner also corresponded with Uttangi about his translations and in at least one place, Uttangi suggests which *vacana*s Urner should translate. As we read in a letter:

> Since one Prof. of Lausanne is interested in your translation of Basava's sayings I would rather suggest to add some more subjects like grace, humility, confessions etc. to your prayers of Basava, which, I believe, will be more appreciated by the scholars of mysticism, especially from the standpoint of mystic literature.[45]

The unnamed professor of Lausanne is none other than Carl-Albert Keller (1920–2008), who also worked as a missionary in South India and who, upon his return to Switzerland, built an academic career on the study of mysticism with a focus on the South Indian bhakti tradition.

3 Urner's Legacy? C.-A. Keller's Changing Interests, from Vedānta to South Indian Bhakti

Like Urner, Keller worked as a missionary in South India and developed a genuine intellectual interest in Indian religious traditions. Even if we cannot analyse Keller's intellectual formative years in much detail here, it is clear that he arrived

proved to be futile and the fear of Government enforcement of conversion amplified, the Lingayaths, who were not blind listeners of the Gospel, resorted to an appropriation of Christ himself."

43 On the concept *anubhava* (experience) in neo-Hinduism, see Halbfass 1988, p. 395.

44 Boratti 2010, p. 186.

45 "Letter by Uttangi to Urner," 9 June 1959, BMA C-10.89.33.

in India with a strong knowledge of Indian religious traditions, and that he used it to make sense of his experience. His main interest was in accounts of the manifestation of the divine to mankind – as is apparent from his doctoral thesis on the "divine sign" in the Hebrew Bible. Keller had also been deeply influenced by the Basel theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) in at least two domains: (1) in considering grace as exclusively bestowed by an all-mighty, inscrutable God to mankind; (2) in developing a sceptical attitude towards any connection between nationalism and religion, insisting that religious experience cannot be put to the service of any "nation" or inferior cause, but is truly "transnational."

Keller had explicitly chosen to be sent to India, precisely because of his scholarly interests. The BM – then looking for Swiss missionaries to be sent to India in the wake of the Second World War, which had once again forced the mission to present itself as "neutral" and to reinforce its Swiss identity – accepted his requests and sent him to Kerala. In India from 1947 to 1952 he conceived his own work as a missionary against the Indian tradition of gurus, and of people building bridges between the Vedānta system and Christianity. He was of course not the first one to seek out such a combination: there had been early attempts to fuse Hindu (Vedāntic) and Christian frameworks, for example in the works of Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884), Protap Chandra Mozoomdar (1840–1905) and his "Oriental Christ," or in those of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861–1907) and his idea of a fundamental compatibility between Christianity and Vedānta.[46]

As in the case of Urner's interest in Vīraśaivism, Keller's Vedānta was a modern reconfiguration of an old tradition, made compatible with contemporary social, scientific, and political challenges.[47] This modernization was the result of so-called neo-Hindu reformers, from Ram Mohan Roy to Vivekananda and S. Radhakrishnan, who all considered Vedānta an "inclusivist" religious philosophy which not only contained a soteriological doctrine similar to that of other religions, but actually exposed the essential unity of religious experience.[48]

46 See, for example, Upadhyay 2002 [1898], in which the main idea is that Christianity should remove its European clothes (those of Catholic Christianity) to put on its Indian garments, those of Vedānta, which will make it acceptable to all Hindus.

47 On Vivekananda's or Radhakrishna's notion of Advaita Vedānta in comparison with traditional Advaita Vedānta, see Halbfass 1988, p. 253; King 1999, pp. 135–136.

48 On Radhakrishnan's inclusivism see Halbfass 1988, pp. 253–254. For example, Radhakrishnan 1926, p. 18: "All sects of Hinduism attempt to interpret the Vedānta texts in accordance with their own religious views. The Vedānta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance. Thus the different sects of Hinduism are reconciled by a common standard and are sometimes regarded as the distorted expressions of the one true canon." On Vivekananda, see Vivekananda 1970–1972, vol. 8, pp. 250–251 ("Unity"): "The different sectarian systems of India all radiate from one central idea of unity or dualism. They are all under Vedānta, all interpreted by it. Their final essence is the teaching of unity. This,

Keller felt legitimated in using Vedāntic philosophy to better understand the message of Christ as spelled out in the Bible:

> But just as no Western theologian can or should deny his connection with Western philosophies, so must an Indian theologian be equally loyal to his. We must, indeed, for once, adopt the Vedantist theories and try with their help to penetrate the secret of the Bible, i. e. Christ. […] It may be that the Vedanta provides a better method for the study of the message of Christ than our methods of thinking derived from Greece and the Renaissance.[49]

This is quite a powerful statement, which might have raised the eyebrows of more than a few Western theologians. At the same time, Keller not only equated "Vedānta philosophy" with "Indian tradition," but he also preserved an "exceptionalism" rooted in the Bible and in the figure of Jesus himself.[50] He saw this approach as the only one practicable for the indigenization of Christianity in India – despite the fact that "Vedānta philosophy" was certainly not very popular among the people he encountered within the missionary institution. In a slightly later article written after his return from India, Keller maintained a normative view, noting crucial differences between Indian traditions and the Christian religion in the following terms: "India […] knows of theistic systems, these are either pantheism (Ramanuja) or a subordination of the God to the experience of liberation."[51] He concluded:

> [T]he real God, the only God, our God truly revealed himself to the people of Israel, and was truly present among his elects. […] Israel had the privilege to know the true God, and the true God is as attested in the Old Testament.[52]

Claims such as these, written as late as 1957, maintain a vision of Indian religions as fundamentally different from the Christian tradition – and deficient in regard to the type of religious experience they offer.

Keller's later intellectual production displays, however, a very different attitude, with a detachment from Christian exceptionalism and a full recognition that experiences of a nature similar to those spoken about in the Old Testament

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which we see as many, is God. We perceive matter, the world, manifold sensation. Yet there is but one existence. These various names mark only differences of degree in the expression of that One." For a commentary see King 1999, pp. 137–139.

49 Keller 1953a, p. 384.

50 For a similar pattern of liberal Christian missionaries wishing to learn "from the Indian orientation towards inner experience and the inner life, in order to appreciate neglected areas of Christianity itself," see Halbfass 1988, p. 398.

51 Keller 1957, p. 277.

52 Ibid.

have been and are present in the Indian context.[53] Even if Keller claims to have encountered the Shaiva devotional theology during his stay in Kerala,[54] it is not clear that he drew all the theological implications until well after his return. To explain the transition, the correspondence with Jakob Urner from 1952 to 1956 might shed precious light. In October 1952 Urner sent Keller a letter with the following arguments, reacting to his article on Vedānta and the message of Christ:[55]

> I have been very interested to read your paper in *Missionsmagazin* and it has awakened in me the will to get in touch with you. Maybe, when you will understand that I am now grey and a retired pastor, you will have little desire to deal with me. My passion for the topic has however encouraged me to try my luck. I have immediately written down what I would like to say about your paper in the six following theses:
> 1. Vedanta, as "monism" is close to the "brain" of Hindus, but not to their hearts.
> 2. Philosophers are not the most important to their hearts, but poets, such as Manikkavacakar etc.
> 3. There are more relations between the Bible and Bhakti than between the Bible and Vedanta.
> 4. The "Hindus of higher spiritual culture" (whatever this means!), such as Gandhi, Pandit Siddhanatha Tatvabhushana, Svami Ramtirtha, Rabindranath Tagore and Indian theologians such as Nehemia Nilakantha, Shastri Goreh, Rvd Krishna Mohan Banerji, Isaac Tambyah, A. J. Appasamy etc., do away with monistic Vedanta! [lassen den Vedanta monistischer Prägung beiseite].
> 5. A philosophy that is "nirishwara" is not appropriate for Indian theologians.
> 6. We can only compare a system with a system and Śrutipramaṇa with Śrutipramaṇa, as secondary products.[56]

This was then a very serious disagreement: under these rather laconic theses, Urner refuted the core of Keller's article on Vedānta, reproaching him for considering Indian religions exclusively through an elitist and abstract lens, bypassing the more "popular traditions." Not only was Keller missing the core of what

53 See Keller 1970 and 1971 on Manikkavacakar's Shaiva theology.

54 Keller 2006: "It is in Kerala that I made the shocking discovery of a mystic and Tamil singer of Shiva (ca. 8th–9th century), whose religious experience, strong and authentic, forced me to rethink my theology. […] The study of Manikkavacakar and of the founding texts of the Tamil Śaiva-Siddhānta convinced me of the living reality of Shiva who had tangibly intervened in the existence of Manikkavacakar and other *bhakta*, subjugated by the power of his love. This led me to clarify not only my vision of Christian theology but also my approach to the religious phenomenon in general." (my translation)

55 Keller 1953a.

56 "Letter by Urner to Keller," 1 October 1952, ACV PP 902/964/3 (my translation). Unfortunately, only the letters of Urner to Keller (not the responses of Keller to Urner) are preserved, but they do give important insights on the nature of the exchange.

was important to Hindus in South India – the devotional expression of religion, as recorded in inspired poems such as those of the Tamil Shaiva *nāyanmārgaḷ* – but he was also constructing an inappropriate "bridge" between Christianity and Hindu traditions, using an intellectualist Advaita Vedānta framework rather than emotional bhakti.

However, even if initially disagreeing with him, Urner must have felt that Keller had interests close to his own, since he donated to him his full collection of scholarly papers, including his own translations of the Liṅgāyat *vacana*s – and Keller in turn donated these papers to the Basel Mission Archives.[57] It is tempting then to see in Urner an important incentive for Keller to dive deeper into the vernacular religious traditions of South India, and so to consider Keller's renewed intellectual interests a part of Urner's legacy.

While it is difficult to find definitive proof of an influence in that case, Keller's interest in "devotional" traditions comes up more frequently in articles written after this correspondence. For example, in a review of an edition of Sadhu Sundar Singh's texts by F. Melzer,[58] Keller understands Sundar Singh as a true *bhakta*, overwhelmed by the deity – but Sundar Singh was of course Christian, not Hindu. However, Keller's interest in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (Ramanuja) and Śaiva Siddhānta (Manikkavacakar, etc.) – against an exclusive focalization on Vedānta – is only manifest in later works published in the 1960s and beyond.[59]

4 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, it is important to observe that both Urner and Uttangi played the role of "cultural brokers," attempting to bridge the gap between two (very) different forms of religion. By collaborating, they both progressively emended their positions and developed similar world views, almost echoing each other. The price they paid was, as J. Becker has noted about other similar figures,[60] a marginalization in their own respective domains. This explains why Uttangi's legacy remains contested up to the present day,[61] and probably also why

57 Jenkins 2011, p. 350.

58 Keller 1953b.

59 Keller 1966, 1970, 1971.

60 Becker 2015, p. 10.

61 His Christian identity remains an important issue today. While some theologians would like to see him as a precursor of "interreligious dialogue," Hindu nationalists criticize him for having driven a wedge between Hindus and Liṅgāyats. See, for example, a 2018 blog article by Aishwarya Shivashankarappa at https://postcard.news/yes-i-am-a-lingayat-i-am-a-veerashaiva-i-am-a-hindu-rahul-gandhi-who-gave-you-authority-to-say-i-do-not-belong-to-hindu-religion: "Mr. Rahul Gandhi, we know that the idea to divide Lingayats was started by a man called

Urner's translations were never published: he was in a marginal posture regarding both the Liṅgāyat tradition itself (and its entanglement with regional politics at the time) and academic theology or Indology.

Because the war durably destabilized institutional settings, this "reconfigured Christianity" was very much influenced by the dimension of individual religious experience (*anubhava*), meant as a domain disconnected from failing institutions and constituting a cornerstone for rebuilding a new socio-religious order. Back on European soil, these theological conceptions could easily be transformed into a scholarly interest in the phenomenology of religion, mysticism, and comparative religion, as in Keller's case.

Finally, it is striking that both Urner's and Keller's interest in Hindu traditions was mediatized by "non-Aryan" traditions and that both were in contact with eminent representatives of "regional" (Liṅgāyat or Tamil Śaiva) movements. One could wonder if this interest in rather marginalized traditions – in comparison with the mainstream neo-Advaita Vedānta of the time – might not be symptomatic of a type of "Orientalism from the margins,"[62] of Orientalists who were not depending on a strong disciplinary tradition and were therefore free to develop an interest for forms of philosophy and religion that were "off the beaten track," sometimes for strategic interests, sometimes because they were echoing strong personal convictions, and sometimes out of mere intellectual curiosity.

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Channappa D. Uttangi who called himself a Kannada poet. This man took up Theological studies at the Basel Seminary and joined the Basel Mission as an Evangelist in 1908. From the year 1908, he joined hands with British and started spreading the message of Jesus and Christianity in Hindu dominated places like Varanasi. He wrote many books of Christianity and gave it Hindu names in order to misguide people."

62 On the concept, see Bornet and Gorshenina 2014. This is similar to what Fischer-Tine has called "Third-Stream Orientalism:" see Fischer-Tine 2020.

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