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The Importance of the Written Word in the Contemporary Missionary Situation

BY NORMAN COCKBURN

It is generally recognized that at no previous time in the history of the world has human population been increasing so rapidly. It is, however, no easy task to assess accurately what this means, because in large regions of the world no reliable population records are yet kept. All attempts to understand this speed and size must therefore be intelligent guesses.

Let us for interest review some of these attempts.

The missionary bulletin issued by the Missionary Research Library, New York, dated May, 1958, gives the following table :-

	<i>Date</i>	...	...	...	<i>World Population</i>
A.D.	1	...	...	...	275,000,000
	1600	...	...	...	360,000,000
	1800	...	...	...	912,000,000
	1850	...	...	...	1,160,000,000
	1900	...	...	...	1,550,000,000
	1950	...	...	...	2,500,000,000
	1958	...	...	...	2,655,000,000

This same article, discussing the relationship of these figures to Christian population and literacy, points out that Christians are increasing at a speed only one-third as rapidly as the contemporary world population. On the estimated annual increase of thirty-five million human beings on the globe, six million will become Roman Catholic, three million Protestant and two million Eastern Orthodox.

It is rather interesting to compare these estimates with that of Lord Boyd Orr writing in the *World Digest* of February, 1959. The following table shows his estimate :-

	<i>Date</i>	...	<i>World Population</i>	...	<i>Average rate of annual increase</i>
B.C.	1000	...	5,000,000	...	
A.D.	1	...	300,000,000	...	30,000
	1700	...	650,000,000	...	300,000
	1900	...	1,500,000,000	...	8,000,000
	1946	...	2,500,000,000	...	22,000,000
	1950	...	2,600,000,000	...	30,000,000
	1959	...	2,850,000,000	...	50,000,000

We said above that these estimates are intelligent guesses, but they do fix attention upon the fact that population increase today is rising with meteoric speed. This is due to a number of factors, chief among

them being the stamping out by scientific means of many former scourges, the increase in the food supply through the application of scientific knowledge of agricultural processes, and, lastly, the increase of longevity in considerable areas of the world through improved conditions of life.

While it is undoubtedly true that, from the point of view of medical science, conditions have greatly improved, it is equally true that the turmoil of emotional conflicts which trouble and perplex humanity today offset these advantages which have given rise to population increases. It remains, therefore, true that the increased world population is basically in as great need of the redemptive help which the Christian religion can give as in other times in the past when numerically the world population was smaller.

* * * *

Because the written word has always been one of the most important channels through which religious understanding is conveyed to individuals and kept fresh in churches as religious institutions, this thought by natural transition leads us to consider the place which literacy occupies in the world today.

To avoid vague generalities, it is always advisable to turn to accredited sources with regard to literacy. Probably the most useful book ever published is that known as *World Literacy at Mid Century*, published by U.N.E.S.C.O.

Literacy is defined as the ability of adults of fifteen years and over to read and write a simple message in any language. In spite of great advances in popular education in most countries throughout the 19th century, it is still true that more than two-fifths of the world's adult population remains illiterate. An enormous work is still to be done in achieving, if it is ever possible, complete literacy for the human race. The area of highest literacy is constituted by Europe and the United States, where, in countries such as Great Britain, Switzerland and the Scandinavian north, about 98% of the population is literate. One of the most remarkable advances towards literacy in modern times has taken place in Russia. In the 1926 census only 51% were able to read and write, but the 1950 reports from the U.S.S.R. indicate that over 90% of the population is now literate. The areas of lowest literacy are to be found in certain areas of Asia and Africa. India, which is making rapid progress, has reached over 20% literacy (some say 40%), which means approximately eighty million people (or one hundred and sixty million) out of its population of four hundred million. Considering the enormous number of small villages into which India's rural life is broken, this advance is noteworthy. In Africa, as a whole, less than 15% of its population of over two hundred million is literate.

One could go on endlessly quoting statistics and not get very far. It is necessary to stand back and look at the situation in perspective. The one certain fact is the continuing growth of literacy. Nearly all Governments make it a part of their social programme. The warm and positive response given to pioneers such as Dr. Frank Laubach indicates the world-wide willingness to advance the progress of literacy among the majority of human groups.

It is important to distinguish between literates in the sense of persons who will, by normal growth and education, be able to read the literary treasures of their particular country and culture, and those *new literates* who have only now acquired access to the world of literature and have become capable of expressing themselves by writing. The *established literate* is not easily changed in his view-point by new reading, since his critical faculties have been long in use. It is the new literate who interests those who desire in ideological warfare to draw the minds of men towards freedom or captivity. It is the claim of the Christian religion that its aim is to set men free in the deepest and profoundest way by their coming to know God and themselves in relation to Him. It is this profoundest meaning, which claims to give answers to life's deepest questions, which is contained in the Bible.

The world we live in is marked by the evident renaissance of the ancient world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.¹ In India, Hindu institutions now provide graduates with free copies of the Bhagavadgita. This meets the Christian challenge presented by the practice of the Bible Societies in presenting the Gospels and New Testament to matriculates and graduates. At Christmas, 1956, a Hindu book-publishing company issued a set of the Mahabharata with attractive paper covers at the very low price of one rupee (1s. 6d.). No fewer than eighty thousand copies were sold in the first three months. Since then many editions have been repeated. A book of poems and patriotic songs of Hinduism having 612 pages (half the size of a Bible) was published in India in 1957 at the price of 2s. 0d. (this being below production cost) and sold fifteen thousand copies in three days. Since India's independence in 1944 Sanskrit Scriptures are being translated into the majority of the fourteen official languages of India.

The occasion of the two-thousand-and-five-hundredth anniversary of the death of Buddha, celebrated in 1956, marked a stage in the modern development of what we might call Buddhist ecumenism. Buddhist scholars assembled in Rangoon for fully two years to undertake a recension of the Buddhist Canon of Scripture. At the beginning of this Buddhist Scripture Conference plans were expressed for publishing popular editions and circulating portions of the Buddhist Scriptures.

One of the challenges presented by Islam today is that of the formation of Koran societies now engaged for the first time in translating the Koran into vernacular languages. The development and organization of the work is remarkably similar in construction and expression to that done for Christianity by the Bible Societies. After the last war large editions of the Koran were printed in Japan and India. In 1954 these imports into Indonesia exceeded all Bible imports for many years together. Distribution was made through shops, colporteurs, in mosques and at religious gatherings.

* * * *

How are we to assess this challenge of these other religions in scriptural circulation?

¹ See, for example, *Resurgent Religions* by Bishop S. Kulandran.

In the first place, it is noteworthy that the dynamic is often not religious but nationalist. Very often the work of Scripture circulation is not sustained by the steady and maintained purpose such as characterizes the work of the Bible Societies through the last one hundred and fifty years of their life and activity.

It is well known that for many years now Communist strategy has sought to take fullest advantage of the avenue opened by growing literacy throughout the world. One illustration will be sufficient. In one recent year four million Communist books published in Moscow were distributed throughout India as against over one million Scriptures published in India and the West. It is true, however, that this kind of massive exploitation of increasing literacy represents the result of a specially planned effort rather than the sustained inflow of literacy material which the Bible Societies aim at. It is possible also, if the recent recommendations of Mr. Kruschew that political proselytization cease in accordance with the ending of the cold war and the beginning of peaceful co-existence, such a change of policy will not affect the distribution of the Christian Scriptures which are not associated with the political endeavours and philosophies of any particular period.

How are the Bible Societies, which are traditionally called the handmaids of the churches, meeting the challenge in the contemporary missionary situation? The most recent table of statistics assembled from all continents shows below in actual figures what scriptural distribution by the National Bible Societies of the world means.

It should be pointed out that although the following circulation figures are given under countries, in most of these the work is not done by national Bible Societies but by the Agencies of the larger Societies. Even where the work is carried out by a national Society, the latter is in many cases supported from abroad. These figures represent circulation by Bible Societies only and do not include that done by commercial publishers, nor do they represent the total number of Scriptures published by the Bible Societies in the various countries.

Country	Bibles	Testaments	Portions	1958 Total	1957 Total
AFRICA					
<i>Areas (countries unspecified)</i>					
North	5,455	6,541	54,009	66,005	61,416
South	233,042	84,927	188,210	506,179	723,735
East	52,976	55,669	50,651	159,296	145,360
British West ...	190,018	30,264	394,416	614,698	566,528
French West ...	13,144	29,307	7,879	50,330	54,821
Congo and Angola ...	33,857	71,204	53,916	158,977	429,277
Egypt	8,647	18,312	96,907	123,866	95,372
Ethiopia (incl. Eritrea, Aden and Somalilands) ...	3,810	2,939	22,075	28,824	27,651
Liberia	1,038	1,281	1,599	3,918	6,876
Madagascar	10,000	5,000	—	15,000	25,152
Rhodesias	51,785	35,600	20,662	108,047	291,940
Sudan	653	4,338	4,788	9,779	8,220

<i>Country</i>	<i>Bibles</i>	<i>Testaments</i>	<i>Portions</i>	<i>1958 Total</i>	<i>1957 Total</i>
AMERICAS					
Argentina	52,498	46,990	474,068	573,556	424,946
Bolivia	10,071	10,630	98,473	119,174	114,610
Brazil	122,513	62,211	1,350,310	1,535,034	1,646,175
Canada	123,161	44,249	144,166	311,576	349,669
Canal Zone	1,128	745	6,905	8,778	8,691
Chile	24,275	29,010	181,070	234,355	220,628
Colombia	17,233	16,067	235,175	268,475	175,880
Costa Rica	2,457	1,776	20,507	24,740	35,215
Cuba	15,621	17,672	256,297	289,590	381,370
Curacao and Nether- lands Antilles	318	166	1,179	1,663	2,062
Dominican Republic	4,871	5,404	112,673	122,948	55,367
Ecuador	1,935	1,394	23,492	26,821	66,256
El Salvador	3,928	3,119	71,896	78,943	149,949
Guatemala	12,218	11,466	194,272	217,956	243,217
Haiti	2,608	3,127	8,549	14,284	11,192
Honduras	2,445	1,518	12,181	16,144	46,871
Mexico	37,650	16,286	283,784	337,720	372,335
Nicaragua	2,338	1,419	26,043	29,800	49,590
Panama	2,678	1,319	25,479	29,476	23,882
Paraguay	3,628	3,299	30,990	37,917	36,617
Peru	18,185	9,730	118,568	146,483	136,570
Puerto Rico	13,906	17,288	145,787	176,981	183,311
U.S.A.	540,126	1,051,997	7,596,855	9,188,978	7,450,926
Uruguay	7,814	4,736	70,946	83,496	111,114
Venezuela	12,201	12,026	239,565	263,792	228,079
Virgin Islands	796	473	3,610	4,879	3,441
West Indies (<i>Br.</i>)	36,875	14,325	65,770	116,970	112,553
ASIA					
Burma	6,911	13,187	24,474	44,572	33,615
Ceylon	3,916	1,535	37,694	43,145	74,757
Hong Kong and Taiwan	41,501	34,466	426,323	502,290	617,984
India	70,104	85,623	1,098,814	1,254,541	1,075,945
Indo-China	1,690	722	95,762	98,174	127,186
Indonesia	27,511	34,616	117,665	179,792	148,393
Japan	70,195	391,039	1,425,161	1,886,395	1,767,710
Korea	28,436	143,695	635,488	807,619	756,266
Malaya	13,155	6,388	79,581	99,124	98,290
Okinawa	3,095	4,600	20,227	27,922	24,643
Pakistan	4,788	4,168	68,349	77,305	59,091
Philippines	20,461	19,234	151,646	191,341	139,410
Thailand	1,243	2,701	536,512	540,456	497,775
AUSTRALASIA					
Australia (<i>incl. New Guinea</i>)	77,299	31,491	113,628	222,418	230,798
New Zealand	18,055	3,282	62,943	84,280	36,291
Pacific Islands	4,238	2,958	—	7,196	12,029
EUROPE					
<i>(incl. Near East)</i>					
Austria	21,038	12,700	48,971	82,709	120,409
Belgium	9,827	7,496	52,492	69,815	55,669
Cyprus	675	826	1,441	2,942	5,493
Denmark	20,335	49,715	8,630	78,680	132,484
England and Wales	354,898	68,168	230,626	653,692	684,522
Finland	66,680	50,615	12,712	130,007	136,030
France	56,157	52,664	182,672	291,493	179,103
Germany	463,131	261,055	648,575	1,372,761	1,174,783
Greece	5,935	13,626	39,055	58,616	92,513

<i>Country</i>	<i>Bibles</i>	<i>Testaments</i>	<i>Portions</i>	<i>1958 Total</i>	<i>1957 Total</i>
Hashemite Kingdom	2,770	5,882	16,595	25,247	19,373
Iceland	1,012	3,524	525	5,061	1,818
Iran	1,018	1,915	34,677	37,610	32,750
Iraq	898	1,051	9,180	11,129	18,164
Ireland (9 months only)	9,647	6,579	17,785	34,011	44,958
Israel	6,369	7,234	2,329	15,932	7,020
Italy	11,888	5,384	183,130	200,402	193,601
Netherlands	99,049	18,726	106,690	224,465	207,865
Norway	29,895	81,636	1,580	113,111	122,434
Poland	22,471	3,648	119,493	145,612	260,494
Portugal	5,793	8,504	197,143	211,440	252,619
Scotland	17,244	6,407	15,800	39,451	92,983
Spain	2,273	4,519	242	7,034	19,117
Sweden... ..	88,310	36,038	4,828	129,176	118,100
Switzerland	69,042	28,869	29,743	127,654	132,873
Syria and Lebanon ...	4,257	4,622	31,236	40,115	47,967
Turkey	2,136	2,311	19,432	23,879	22,586
Yugoslavia	6,446	8,130	13,225	27,801	14,101
MISCELLANEOUS	2,233	410	10,450	13,093	—
Grand Totals ...	3,449,694	3,265,373	19,616,796	26,331,863	24,966,876

WORLD TOTALS

1957 ...	3,599,347	3,240,936	18,126,593	24,966,876
1956 ...	3,219,495	3,204,846	19,954,801	26,379,142

TOTALS FOR
CONTINENTS

Africa					
1958 ...	604,425	345,382	895,112	1,844,919	
1957 ...	742,222	371,191	1,322,935	2,436,348	
Americas					
1958 ...	1,073,477	1,388,442	11,798,610	14,260,529	
1957 ...	1,098,520	1,291,411	10,250,585	12,640,516	
Asia					
1958 ...	293,006	741,974	4,717,696	5,752,676	
1957 ...	281,437	731,834	4,407,794	5,421,065	
Australasia					
1958 ...	99,592	37,731	176,571	313,894	
1957 ...	95,531	51,412	132,175	279,118	
Europe					
1958 ...	2,379,194	751,844	1,028,807	4,159,845	
1957 ...	2,381,637	795,088	1,013,104	4,189,829	

These figures impressively indicate how the Christian Scriptures are still the most widely circulated books in the world today. No other literature is conveyed so widely to so many of mankind in regions both far and near.

* * * *

Scriptural circulation is to be considered as part, and possibly the essential part, of Christian witness. Both the Christian individual and the Christian Church are meant to indicate or declare to others the truth about Christ. In all witness is involved the effort of persuading other people to see in Christ the Supreme Victor, the One Who

gives in His Living Person the answers to all the basic problems which are common to mankind. While it is true that the example of a Christian life which clearly reflects the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ is the best form of witness, yet it remains evident that effective communication of a knowledge of Christ is done by spoken or written word. What better way whereby to impart the truth as it is in Jesus than by the circulation of the basic documents of the Christian faith, the Holy Scriptures?

There are two ways in which Christians, in the present stage of their divisions, seek to witness. The first way is the ecclesiastical. The individual is invited to enter the fellowship of one of the long-established existing ecclesiastical bodies. Here he is introduced to the Scriptures, both by way of private study and reading, but also by public declaration in the liturgical form of the traditional Church he is made to feel his membership in the Church as the Body of Christ.

The other way of witness is that more individualistic approach, in which the individual is challenged to meet Christ immediately and directly in the Scriptures and to give a response which constitutes conversion. This method is largely used by these many bodies of Christians who may be classified as sectarian. Against this background of the church type and sect type of Christian we must see the special problems and opportunities connected with the two approaches.

During the last thirty years there has been inside the established ("established" not with the special meaning of connection with the State, but as possessing a long tradition in history) churches a growing realization of the need to provide the ordinary church member, who is also a Scripture reader, with some kind of helpful commentary to the text. In our own country we need cite only the great successes of the Scripture Union and the Bible Reading Fellowship as well as numerous other similar organizations which are so effectively meeting this need.

In the early Church there accompanied the sacred text of Scripture the commentary provided by Sunday sermons and by the writings of the Fathers of the Church. It was only later, when the divisions of the churches gave rise to contradictory interpretations of the meaning of Scripture, that there arose a separation between text and comment. In our own country, King James made it a condition of the translation which appeared in 1611 that it avoid the notes and comments which had marked the tendentious character of the different great precursors such as the Geneva Bible, Bishops' Bible, etc. In order to avoid entering the field of doctrinal controversy, the Bible Societies took up King James's phrase and made it their rule to circulate the text "without note or comment". Today, however, on all fields there is being recognized the need to assist the individual reader of the Scriptures with note and comment. The field of circulation in the missionary situation today, however, is still too full of divisions for the Bible Societies to depart from their traditional rule.

* * * *

In most parts of the mission field, a considerable number of Scriptures are generally circulated by organizations which are generically covered

by the term "faith missions". Characteristically they are not connected with any of the regular well-known established Church traditions and their very character is conveyed by the word "Pentecostal", which most of them prefer to select as distinct from baptismal or eucharistical types of churches. With these Pentecostal churches are associated for the most part campaigns for mass distribution of the Scriptures. Around this matter a great deal of heart-seaching and controversy has occurred inside Christian circles. It is recognized that the flooding of an area with a vast number of Scriptures may, indeed, be an effective way of scattering the seed of the Word; on the other hand, these campaigns have been criticized because of their costliness and the undoubted great waste and the failure on the part of their initiators to see the wider vision which includes the work of the churches already at work labouring in that area. As an illustration of wastefulness, it may be pointed out how, in one Mau Mau detainees' camp, after a mass distribution visit, there were swept up from the floors more than 700 scriptural portions. In Japan buses have been stopped, conductors questioned to give the number of their passengers, and then presented with a mass package for distribution along with the collecting of the fares. Such methods do not conduce to increase reverence and respect for the Scriptures.

On the other hand, great appreciation ought to be felt for the positive work achieved by organizations undertaking intelligently directed courses of instruction conjoined with scriptural circulation. To give an example, Dr. J. H. Piet of Vellore in India has over 100,000 correspondents, the vast majority of whom are non-Christians. Many, after completing their course, sell eighteen copies of one or other of the four Gospels. Generally speaking, what is required is the development of a spirit of mutual appreciation between the churches and the faith missions, that they may become united in the vision of one task under one God to the glory of one Jesus Christ.

Proselytism is a word which, in the course of time, has degenerated: it is the corrupt form of witness. In proselytization undue pressure is brought to bear upon the individual to bring about an apparent conversion; the success of one's own enterprise is placed before the honest presentation of Christ; the seeking of circulation records, the drawing away of individuals from Christian loyalties already formed—all these are involved in the corrupt form of witness which is proselytism. It is due to these divisions among the churches, with the consequent loss of energy through internal strife, that the cause of Christ as a whole does not make greater progress today. In all this activity, scriptural circulation is involved. Everyone is agreed that the Scriptures contain the truth; everyone holds a conviction that the circulation is blessed by God. Yet, nonetheless, we must see that, in point of fact, the Scriptures are often circulated perversely, that is, not in order to strengthen the whole truth of the whole Church about the whole Christ, but in order to uphold and defend a narrow and sectarian outlook.

It is to the credit of the Bible Societies that, in seeking to serve all the churches, they seek to keep out of all sectarian differences and squabbles concerning translation, production, and distribution of the Word of God.

One great difference between Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church concerns the circulation of the Scriptures. In some countries the Roman Catholic Church forbids the circulation of Scriptures by any religious community or organization other than herself. This is not the place to set forth the arguments which each side uses to maintain the reasonableness of their policy. It is, however, important to state that a great change of outlook during the last fifty years has occurred inside the Roman Catholic Church. Leadership in this has been given through the Papal Encyclicals "*Providentissimus Deus*", 1893, "*Spiritus Paracletus*", 1920, and "*Divino afflante Spiritu*", 1946. In these Encyclicals the basic principles concerning the translation, production, and distribution of the Scriptures which have been held by Protestants are virtually endorsed. Resulting from this, many excellent modern translations of the Scriptures have been produced by scholars inside the Roman Catholic Church and circulated within her own confines. Familiar examples are the Jerusalem Bible, the Maredsous Bible, and Monseigneur Knox's English translation so greatly admired in our own country. These translations are all part of the missionary activity of scriptural circulation inside the Roman Church today. The call for these Scriptures has in some instances come from the people and been endorsed by the hierarchy, though not without resistance in certain quarters.

So ardent and devoted is the support given to the scriptural circulation movement today that there has just been sounded in America a clarion call by Roman Catholics for the possession of a common Bible with Protestants. That such a suggestion should occur indicates so clearly the change of climate that has occurred in recent years. It indicates also that the Roman Catholic Church has seen the great importance of scriptural circulation both at home and abroad in the missionary situation of today.

* * * *

It is quite impossible to touch all the topics which could be discussed with interest around this matter. We will, however, draw to a close with this last thought. The great historic religions of mankind are all showing signs of revival. At the present moment it is mostly of a nationalistic or political kind. It is possible, however, that in another twenty or thirty years their revival will constitute the re-emergence of the basic religious elements of which they consist. Already Buddhists have sought to revive on a wide scale the circulation of their Scriptures with a view to proselytizing. Is it not encouraging to note that in this challenging situation the Christian religion has prepared for itself the world-wide dissemination of the basic documents of its faith in over 1,130 languages, through which the truth of the Christian faith has been made available? Even though at times we may be disappointed when we consider the sectarian motives and sometimes selfish interests which inspire the circulation of the Scriptures, we can never forget that permanently behind the written Word of God exists the Spirit of Truth Himself whose will is to impart Himself as the Spirit of Jesus Christ to every living individual and to the new humanity which is the Church of God.