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Recent Christian Theological Publications in the Regional Languages

3. BENGALI

A. P. CARLETON

Christian Theology in Bengali. Most people do not realize how much labour has been put into it and how much has been done. Most of it has been irrevocably lost. It is a long story, about which I really know very little until we come to the most recent chapter. But most people know very much less. The need arose when missionaries began to train catechists, teachers and pastors for the churches they had founded. Among these missionaries were able men, many of them no mean scholars. Generally it was the best qualified among them who were given this task, and they did it carefully and enthusiastically. They had no textbook but the Bible to give their pupils and so they had to set about making their own books. These were carefully dictated and preserved by the students in exercise books. I have often seen in parsonages in distant villages a shelf of well bound note books which represent the best part of the Pastor's library, and they are often taken down and used. In this age of printed books we tend to dismiss these manuscript note books as of little value, and we make a great mistake. They contain works quite as good and often very much better than much that is published in English in England or America. In the days before printing they would have been preserved very carefully from generation to generation and copied. Now who cares for old note books after the owner is dead?—If indeed they do not predecease their owner, succumbing to one or another of the deadly enemies of books in Bengal, insects, termites, fire, flood, and, not least, children. So the work of notable scholars, writing with an intimate knowledge of the country and the needs of their pupils, has irrevocably perished. And if anything survives in out-of-the-way places nothing is being done to prevent it having a similar fate. This training work was not only done by missionaries; they had Bengali assistants, but most of them men of mediocre powers, whose theological

writing was probably not of first-class quality, but there were among them one or two very able men. How we have been able to rescue the work of one of these will be told below.

We have mentioned this MSS. material because most people think in terms of printed books. However a certain number of these theological works were printed. The number of copies required was small and the number likely to be paid for was smaller still. The missionary societies had to finance the entire publication, either directly or through publishing societies. But once these books get out of print, they rapidly share the fate of the MSS., for the expectation of life for books in Bengal, particularly in the villages, is not long. Occasionally one comes across these old books ; they are treasures, but few realize their value. There should be an effort to preserve copies in libraries before it is too late. None of the Christian Libraries in Bengal has made an effort to make a systematic collection of Bengali Theological Books, not Bishop's College, nor Serampore, nor the Oxford Mission. The Bengali Theological Schools have been such mushroom growths that they have seldom survived for long the departure of their vigorous founders. Each must have made an attempt to collect a library, but these have not survived the Schools. The present library at the Union Theological School, which has a few old books, should be very carefully preserved, and special effort should be made by the authorities to get copies of books now out of print. Also a MSS. library should be considered. The new Bengal Christian Literature Board has passed a resolution to keep copies of all published books for reference purposes (not for lending out). It is to be hoped that this resolution will be vigorously carried through and the library become a permanent institution.

So far we have spoken of books prepared for those training for the ministry. There is another class that should be mentioned, translations and adaptations from English. This work was done mainly by the Christian publishing societies, particularly the Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society, and on a smaller scale the S.P.C.K. In the heyday of missionary activity the former was a very vigorous society and had many publications to its credit. Most notable was the work of the Rev. J. M. B. Duncan, who produced adaptations of standard books, particularly Biblical Commentaries, over a long period, some of which are still available, though the best have long been sold out. It would need considerable research to give a complete list of these translations. I am familiar with such of them as have been preserved in the U.T.S. library. These translations were mostly of a more popular kind than the books mentioned above and were intended for a wider circle of readers than strictly theological students.

The value of this older theological literature is somewhat curtailed by certain factors.

1. Missionaries were writing in a foreign tongue, and though they were successful in getting their meaning across, their writing for the most part had no literary value. There were however some

exceptions where they availed themselves of competent Bengali collaboration.

2. The art of translation was often imperfectly understood, and many translations are either too literal or inaccurate.

3. Even when the Bengali was good for the time, it is now very much out of date, as the language has gone through remarkable development in recent years. It is difficult for a modern Bengali to read this old-fashioned language with pleasure.

4. Until recently the vernacular training institutions were on strict denominational lines, and in the Anglican Church on party lines. The teachers were mostly intent on preserving their own tradition and isolating their pupils from possible infection from other traditions. Often books were chosen for translation for this reason. This means that many of the books are 'dated' and their usefulness curtailed.

In the period after the second war the C.C.T.B.S. lost much of its former vigour, and came in for a great deal of criticism. The critics however should remember that in the place of vigorous Missionary direction and control, the responsibility was put into the hands of voluntary workers from the Bengali Christian community. The 'willing horses' who were persuaded to take over the charge, often against their will, were busy men, with no particular experience in publishing or editing, and having to gather their experience in the very complex business of producing Christian literature as they went along. Some think that the Missionary societies who were still providing the finance directly or indirectly ought to have pooled their resources and operated one sound publishing business on the lines of the C.L.S., Madras, staffed with professionals. This is still, in my opinion, the best solution of the problem. The Bengali Christian community is too small for financially solvent Christian publishing agencies to grow up of themselves. Everything that is published is heavily subsidized, directly or indirectly and will be for many years. The spending of this money should be in professional hands. It does not matter whether the hands are Indian or foreign provided they are competent. It would cost more but would be well worth the expense, moreover. Literature is one of the best ways of laying out money given for the propagation of the Gospel.

The Bengali Theological Literature Committee, of which I am the Secretary, came into existence on 1st November, 1954, as a result of the visit of the Rev. W. Scopes, the vigorous Literature Secretary of the N.C.C. He realized that in order to carry out the programme of the N.C.C. it was advisable to put the publication of the more technical theological literature into the hands of those who were particularly interested in it, mainly the staffs of the theological training institutions. So this special committee of the C.C.T.B.S. was appointed and has so far been able to produce ten books. They may be analysed as follows:—

1. Reprints or retranlations of books that had already been published and were out of print. *Village Preaching* by McNair ;

Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ by James Stewart ; *Christian Giving* by Bishop Azariah.

2. We were very fortunate in finding a collection of MSS. of books prepared for theological students by the late Father Chakravarty of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, a competent theologian and an accomplished Bengali writer. So far we have published a translation of extracts from the Apocrypha, and an adaptation of *The Apostles of India* by Ogilvie. We have in hand a history of the Medieval Church and an adaptation of Father Holmes' *Life of a Priest*. I had also published by cyclostyle duplication some years before a small work on moral theology.

3. We have published translations of two books written by theological teachers for Indian students in vernacular training schools. Bishop Newbigin had prepared a book on the Atonement in Tamil which was very highly valued in the South. We were fortunate in obtaining from him the unpublished English original. This, we are glad to say, has since appeared in English under the title *Sin and Salvation*. I had written an introduction to the New Testament with a view to translation into Bengali. This had been published in English under the title, *How shall I study the New Testament ?* A Bengali translation was prepared. We hope to be able to publish further books of this type.

4. Two series of books have been published in recent years with the special hope that they might be useful for translation into vernaculars all over the world, the World Christian Books and the Christian Students' Library. We have found the former the more useful for our purpose, and have already published translations of *Christian Giving* (mentioned above), *Christian Character* and *Who is Jesus Christ ?* both by Bishop Stephen Neil, and *Christianity and Science* by Dr. Raven. Others are in preparation, and many others of the series might well be on our publication programme. The C.S.L. books are not so suitable as they are written for more advanced students than we cater for, and therefore require much more adaptation. We have in preparation free adaptations of the following: *History of the Reformation*, *Parables of Jesus*, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, *The Meaning and Practice of Prayer*.

We have tried to make our publications as popular as possible and attractive as literature, in the hope that they will appeal not only to the educated member of the Christian Community but also to non-Christians, and have in faith printed comparatively large editions, thereby sinking a great deal of our available capital. Sales have not come up to expectation. But that aspect of the problem of Christian literature need not be discussed here. Much more ought to be produced, but the rate of publication is not likely to be increased as long as the work depends upon the spare-time labour of voluntary workers and amateurs.

Since the establishment of the Theological Literature Committee other agencies as well have made their contribution. The C.C.T.B.S. also published an Introduction to the New Testament,

a translation of Clogg's book on that subject which had been commissioned some time before. We did not take it over as we considered that it was not the type of book needed by our readers. However it is a useful addition to the library of Bengali theological books.

The Bengali Christian Book Club, a vigorous organization, has planned, and already partly carried out, a project for a Commentary on the whole Bible. This will fill a gap. Its usefulness however is diminished by the fact that the series is dominated by a narrow, fundamentalist outlook.

The Roman Catholic Church has also made some important contributions. Particularly, those resolute soldiers of Christ, the Jesuit Fathers, have adopted the long-term strategy of giving picked men a thorough training in the vernaculars of India so that they can themselves produce work of a first-class literary character. This wise investment is already beginning to pay handsome dividends. They are not interested in theological literature for the training of their clergy, which is not done through the medium of the vernacular, but in providing suitable reading material for the educated, Christian and non-Christian alike. This is a notable contribution to the work of evangelism.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NUMBER

The Revd. Dr. V. C. Samuel and the Revd. J. C. Hindley are on the staff of Serampore College.

The Revd. Fr. A. P. Carleton is a member of the Oxford Mission Brotherhood of the Epiphany.

The Revd. A. C. M. Hargreaves is on the staff of Bishop's College, Calcutta.