

***Mission and Meaning  
Essays Presented to Peter  
Cotterell***

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## A Model Missionary to Muslims: Thomas Valpy French (1825-1891)

Michael Griffiths

### 1. Introduction

The subject of this essay was a deeply committed missionary to Muslims, regarded in his own day as stoical to a fault, and who would today be labelled as a 'workaholic'. Such qualities will appeal to Peter Cotterell, himself an indefatigable worker. At the same time, I am conscious that for Peter, the contemporary thrust, where we are now, and even more where we ought to be soon, must always be more important than an antiquarian interest in where missions used to be. We deplore a common result of reading nineteenth century hagiography, that people imagine mission to be as it was then, rather than as it is now. It could be argued, however, that Valpy French was making more progress with Muslims than many of us are today, and that his approaches may give us a useful paradigm for pioneer situations still. It is not only over-enthusiastic biographers who can be selective with truth: some classic mission histories give us a one-sided picture – Stephen Neill, for instance, in his *Penguin* history, regards only one or two Christian women as worthy of mention by name, and gives little space to American interdenominational, as compared with European ecumenical mission agencies.

However, what we may call Historical Missiology (parallel to Historical Theology) can be useful. It embodies a study of the principles developed by thoughtful practitioners: how did they develop such ideas in terms of their own inevitably limited experience, and why? For example, the much criticised McGavran begins to make sense when one discovers his missionary labours began as the headmaster of a school for high class Brahmin boys,

which proved utterly fruitless. His Homogeneous Unit Principle becomes a logical form of contextualisation to those working in India. By the same token, it seems an abomination to René Padilla from a Latin American context, where Christian faith is by definition egalitarian, against the background of collusion between church, wealth and military; and where there are only two main languages, Spanish and Portuguese, in a whole continent. The environment of mission, whether in India, or China, or Africa seems to shape (and limit) the thinking of missiologists who have worked there.

I therefore offer as an attempt at Historical Missiology, a brief study of one missionary to Muslims: a scholar, at first sight more of an activist eager to bring the gospel to Muslims, than a strategic mission thinker: in fact, he turns out to be a creative pioneer of theological education. It was, and still is, the nature of mission agencies, that field missionaries cannot always influence central policies, which has been a great frustration to many including Peter Cotterell. Just at the point when French might have begun to influence CMS (Church Missionary Society) policy, he had to resign from CMS in order to become a colonial bishop. He should appeal to Peter too, because though a gifted academic, he never sat upon a pluralist fence, but laboured indefatigably to lead Muslims to saving faith in Christ. Had there been professors of missiology in Britain then (Alexander Duff was the first, appointed in 1867 and not replaced after he died), French might have become one. Today there are more professors of missiology in Korea than there are in Britain. British universities and theological colleges have been laggardly in recognising missiology as a discipline that both integrates existing disciplines, and may even influence them for good, if allowed to do so. Among the handful of British lecturers on Mission, Peter Cotterell has made a significant contribution.

## 2. Early Life

Thomas Valpy French was born 1 January, 1825, in Staffordshire, son of Peter French, vicar for forty-seven years of Holy Trinity, Burton on Trent, at that time a small county town. His mother Penelope Arabella (née Valpy) was said to be an embodiment of 1 Corinthians 13 'with the single exception of a slight want of charity towards Tractarians'! Both parents shared their deep faith with their five sons and two daughters with whom Thomas learned to pray for visiting missionaries. He was educated at Reading Grammar School (where his uncle Valpy was headmaster) and Rugby School under Thomas Arnold, though puzzled that Arnold's preaching was not 'the

Gospel' as he had received it. He was a serious student, rather than a rugby player, and won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, though he did take up rowing and riding there.

At Oxford from 1843-46 he studied hard, took a first in 'Greats', and at age 23, was made in 1848 a Fellow of University College. He had men in his rooms to study Greek New Testament, is thought<sup>1</sup> to have 'formed a little missionary union', and assisted in Holywell Sunday School. In 1848 he was ordained deacon, as curate to his father, though during Oxford term he worked among students on the staff of St. Ebbe's Church. 'He could have looked forward to a distinguished and comfortable career in the academic world',<sup>2</sup> but abandoned it in favour of missionary service in India. H.W. Fox, the pioneer of the Telugu Mission (which in 30 years brought a million Indians into the church), whom French met when he addressed a breakfast meeting for students, had urged him to come to India, and Fox's subsequent premature death moved French deeply. This sense of call was confirmed by a sermon of bishop 'Soapy' Sam Wilberforce. French and his friend Arthur Lea talked, prayed, dedicated themselves for service abroad – and then Lea died as a result of a railway accident. It was following this that French got in touch with CMS.

After overcoming her parents' objections, he courted and won a Miss M.A. Janson,<sup>3</sup> and they became engaged before he sailed. She went out to India a year later, and they were married by bishop Daniel Wilson in Calcutta Cathedral at the end of 1852. They had eight children, whose health and education, necessitated long periods of separation for Thomas and his wife. He wrote to her in 1858 reminiscing about Oxford: 'It was there I was fixed for *you* and there too fixed for *India*, which you are almost disposed at times to think a rival in my affections, are you not?' In a letter to her in 1890, he spoke of 'those happy days of your close companionship, with the tent all to ourselves and our babes. It brings them back so fresh again, and all you bore and ventured for my sake, and for the Gospel's.'

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1 Eugene Stock, *An Heroic Bishop: The Life Story of French of Lahore* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), 4.

2 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), Vol. 2, 342.

3 Mrs French's Christian name is not mentioned in any biography, nor can CMS say what it was.

### 3. First Term (eight years) 1850-58

French's first term of service was eight years – not particularly unusual at that time – for those who managed to survive the first two years and build up resistance to endemic disease. In 1850 he joined the CMS, and his farewell meeting was attended by the great Ludwig Krapf, the East African pioneer.

The Indian work in Agra, seat of government for the Northwest Frontier provinces, and second only to Calcutta, had been started by Daniel Corrie (one of the famous Five Chaplains, all of them Charles Simeon's proteges from Holy Trinity, Cambridge, two of them his curates) and by a Muslim convert of Henry Martyn's, Sheikh Salih, baptised as Abdul Masih. Because the East India Company still did not permit missionaries to work within its territories, Abdul Masih was the first CMS worker in India and subsequently the first ordained Indian clergyman. A striking portrait of him in a turban, somewhat incongruously surrounded by nineteenth century English clerics, hangs in the CMS offices in Friendship House, London. Alexander Duff had shown in Calcutta what could be done through Christian higher education. The Lieutenant Governor of the North West provinces, James Thomason (the son of another member of Simeon's famous five) urged CMS to open an educational institution for Indian upper classes in Agra: and with the aid of Jubilee funds raised in 1849, CMS was able to invite French and Edward Stuart to begin a College.

They arrived 13 February, 1851, and settled down to language study. French preached his first sermon in Hindustani in August! Stuart was forced to leave in 1853 owing to his wife's ill health, later becoming bishop of Waiapu, New Zealand, but resigning in 1893 in order to resume work among Muslims in Persia. St. John's College, Agra (named after Henry Martyn's College at Cambridge 'with additional reference to St. John as the Apostle of Oriental Churches'<sup>4</sup>) opened in 1853 with French as first Principal. French had written in 1850 to his fellow curate:

I hope to set vigorously to work, first of all to master the languages; then to labour among the *youths* and endeavour to establish a *character* which they can appreciate, if it please God to grant us consistency; and then to learn to sympathise with them, to make them feel that one is come, not only to *teach* them, but to be their friend, with their best interests at heart.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work* (London: CMS, 1899), Vol. 2, 168.

Though busy with administration and teaching, he used school holidays both in the cold and rainy seasons to make arduous evangelistic tours with camels or ponies to the Rajput states, Gwalior, Jaipur and Tonk. Leighton describes how carefully he prepared his messages, and afterwards followed up talking with individuals in village squares, urging them to accept Christ Jesus. He found it painful to be associated with the oppressive British raj.<sup>5</sup> In one year three Muslim munshis were baptised.<sup>6</sup> In letters to Henry Venn, CMS secretary in London, he proposed that those who had served an apprenticeship at St. John's might then be released for evangelism and pastoral work.<sup>7</sup> In one such letter,<sup>8</sup> he expresses ideas remarkably like McGavran's on the ineffectiveness of schools: 'we continue stationary in a city where the gospel has been heard for many years.' Common frustrations within a similar environment hatch out similar responses: Hudson Taylor, John Livingstone Nevius and Roland Allen develop parallel policies in China. French proposed sending out of itinerating bands made up of missionaries and nationals to do evangelism.

In 1854 assisting Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803-65), he took part in a debate with Muslim theologians, notably Rahmat Ullah, who had been reading damaging liberal Christian criticisms of the Bible, and was using these to support the contention that the Scriptures had been corrupted by Christians. Some arguments had been fed to them by the Roman Catholic bishop and priests.<sup>9</sup> French was able to show that the New Testament Greek text at the time of Muhammad was virtually the same text as they had in 1854.<sup>10</sup> Pfander demanded that the Muslims produce a copy of the alleged uncorrupted Scripture, which they, of course, were unable to do. Both sides claimed victory, so the result appeared inconclusive. However in the long term there were some notable conversions among Muslims present: a government official Saftar Ali (baptised 1865), and Imad-ud-Din, (baptised 1866) who became a leading Christian controversialist writer, was ordained and awarded a Lambeth DD.<sup>11</sup> Pfander

5 H. Birks, *Life and Correspondence of T.V. French* (London: John Murray, 1895), 2 Vols, Vol. 1, 77-78.

6 Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 16.

7 Vivienne Stacey, *Thomas Valpy French, First Bishop of Lahore* (Rawalpindi: The Christian Study Centre, 1982), 4.

8 Birks, *Life*, 1:64.

9 Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 17.

10 Stock, *History*, Vol. 2, gives a fascinatingly full account.

11 M.E. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India 1600-1970* (Delhi, 1972), 189.

continued bazaar preaching right through the Mutiny, retired 1858, and then worked in Istanbul until his death in 1865.

By 1857 the new College was a flourishing concern with 320 enrolled students. The whole college assembled for prayer at the beginning and end of each working day, and each day began with forty minutes of religious instruction, which under French's direction was thorough and stimulating.<sup>12</sup> Stewart had favoured English as the medium of instruction (as Duff had done), while French favoured the vernacular. It ended up half and half especially where missionary vocabulary was not up to it. The lower classes were wholly in the vernacular and the upper classes mainly in English.

French, of course, aimed at conversions, and constantly prayed for them; and he soon discerned tokens of the Spirit's working among his pupils. His boys, he told the English congregation when preaching to them, knew Scripture better than the average Oxford undergraduate; and some of them though unbaptised had 'endured more for Jesus', than any of the English in Agra.<sup>13</sup>

French only saw one young Brahmin actually converted through the college during this period, but others came to Christ later (one was baptised by French in the Punjab twenty years later) and two ordained. However as a result of other evangelism, during his last year French recorded, 'I have baptised seven adult converts myself.'

French was still in India in 1857 when the War of Liberation<sup>14</sup> broke out – 90,000 trained Indian troops rebelled. The two native regiments in Agra were disarmed, but the city was sacked and the fort, one and a half miles in circumference (with walls 70 foot high of rubble, faced with stone), containing six thousand persons, besieged for six months. French took the opportunity to start an Anglo-Indian congregation. Charles Raikes, the Agra judge wrote:

I must here pause to record the impression made on me by the calmness and coolness of Mr. French. Every Englishman was handling his sword or his revolver. Outside the college, all alarm, hurry and confusion – within calmly sat the good missionary, hundreds of young natives at his feet, hanging on the lips which taught them the simple lessons of the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Gibbs, *Anglican Church*, 187.

13 Stock, *History*, 2:169.

14 The British have always called it the Indian Mutiny.

15 Birks, *Life*, 1:91.

Indian Christians from Secundra had fled to Agra, but were kept outside the walls until French insisted they too should be allowed to shelter in Akbar's Fortress, threatening to stay outside the walls himself, if they were not admitted. They then took their share of nursing the wounded. He organised prayer meetings for safety and peace. While all this was going on Mrs French had given birth to their fourth child, and was dangerously ill. On New Year's Day, 1958, his thirty-third birthday, French moved back to the ruined college buildings and sent his wife and children back to England. St. John's was the last to close (and then only for two weeks, watched over by senior boys) and the first to reopen. He remained a further year rebuilding and restoring the college, continuing bazaar preaching and pastoring the Indian congregation. Feeling his need of rest after attacks of dysentery, a severe fall from his horse and eye trouble, he sailed from Karachi, for England and his family: 'a year's absence from one's wife is a sufficient trial to begin with. I long to know my two *unknown* children.'<sup>16</sup> Some words of Leighton sum up this first term of service:

The influence which he exercised through St. John's College, combined with itinerations, was felt from east to west of that great belt of historic India. He has left an example which, by its lofty excellence and incredible labours, almost depresses ordinary men.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. 1859-61 First Furlough

After a vortex of deputation meetings 'which I will not call religious dissipation' he took some holiday in Italy with his family, and commented 'I am disposed to be cast down by the apparent uselessness of the missionary in his capacity of deputation' and goes on to long for a year of quiet rest.<sup>18</sup> However, from March, 1860, he became curate in Clifton Parish Church, Bristol, where his sermons were biblical, expository, often drawn from the Old Testament, but less appreciated by less thoughtful people. He preached in the open air every week throughout the summer.<sup>19</sup> After pursuing some medical studies (which he thought might be valuable!), he set out for the Northwest frontier in February, 1862, leaving his wife behind. Birks devotes a moving chapter to quotations from French's letters to his wife, showing what this separation cost them both.

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<sup>16</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:116, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:119.

<sup>18</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:121.

<sup>19</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:122.



### 5. Second Term (one year) 1862-63

The British had only annexed the Punjab in 1849. There were committed Christian administrators and soldiers like John and Henry Lawrence, and Sir Herbert Edwardes who wrote to Henry Venn urging the CMS to start a mission in the Derajat,<sup>20</sup> the three hundred mile border with Afghanistan on the right bank of the Indus. The Christian commissioner of the region Colonel Reynall Taylor, said to be the best swordsman in India, gave generously to CMS to fund the project. French and Robert Bruce were sent to start this Derajat Mission to Muslims on the North West Frontier, where Britain was at last at peace with the tribes, and stretching out 'the hand of friendship, and to offer, though the missionaries, the bread of life'. On the trip out French was studying Pushtu with characteristic enthusiasm. They arrived on 20 April.

French lived among the Afghans and grew a beard since 'they measured a man as much by his beard as his brains'.<sup>21</sup> He was much shocked by the antipathy and hostility of Muslims, the 'fiendish malice' with which the mullahs read passages from the gospels 'mocking and blaspheming.' Village chieftains would ask whether the English ever prayed, implying, in fact, whether they had any religion, for religion and the stated seasons for prayer are synonymous in the Afghan mind. 'The English only worship God once a week and then they do not kneel down to worship him.'<sup>22</sup> At the same time he felt that Afghans were more open to warm-heartedness and friendship than Indian Muslims. His delay in going up to the hills to avoid the heat, and his return before the heat had abated, was totally in character, but contributory to the early collapse of his health. His ministry only lasted from May to December, when he developed 'intermittent fever'<sup>23</sup> and dysentery. He was found unconscious with 'sunstroke' and shipped home. He was reunited with his wife after only a year's absence in February, 1863.

His eager spirit was constantly outrunning the limits of his physical strength and his life was punctuated by breakdowns which sometimes looked like defeat.<sup>24</sup>

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20 Means literally 'the camps'.

21 An interesting anticipation of P. Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 25.

22 Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 25.

23 The connection of the mosquito with malaria was not discovered by Ross until 1897.

24 Gibbs, *Anglican Church*, 284.

## 6. 1863-69 Second Furlough

Having been invalided home, he was to spend six years back in England. He served first as curate at Beddington, Surrey (where he recruited his fellow curate George Maxwell Gordon for the Punjab), and then as Vicar of St. John's, and then St. Paul's, Cheltenham for four years, engaging in CMS deputation as he was able. The hymn 'Hills of the North, rejoice' was composed for French. His curate commented, 'he never seemed satisfied till he was exhausted.' (The word 'workaholic' had not yet been coined.)

French was a thinker, as well as an activist, a significant pioneer in missionary theological education. How could the Muslims of the North West Frontier be reached? It was now that the idea of a theological college in Lahore developed in his mind and in 1866 he presented a paper before Venn and seventy clergy on theological education: 'Proposed Plan for a Training College of Native Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers for North West India and the Punjab', a condensed version of which was published in 1867.

The plan of instructing our native teachers in English without putting them in possession of the power to express themselves on Christian doctrine correctly in the vernacular is quite abhorrent to the general practice of the Church of Christ from the beginning, as well as to right reason itself.

French had few if any English models, so it seems that missionary thinking was running ahead of the church in Britain. French had been impressed by Islamic institutional models,<sup>25</sup> though his own experience of his theological class in Agra played a part too. He wrote from Lahore in 1870.

It seems clear that antipathy to the English lies at the door of much opposition to the Gospel. If we could get an exclusively native church, emancipated from British control, with all orders of ministry complete, there would be much more hope.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of his paper, and long discussion with Venn, he himself was asked to go out and implement it. Because of his ill health many felt he ought not to return, but as Robert Clark (CMS Punjab) said: 'If those who ought to go, won't, then those who *ought not, must!*'<sup>27</sup> To go with him they appointed J.W. Knott, a Fellow of Brazenose, a

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25 Birks, *Life*, 1:162.

26 Birks, *Life*, 1:205.

27 Birks, *Life*, 1:159.

Tractarian converted to evangelicalism, aged 46, who was forsaking a benefice of £800 a year. Their farewell meeting made quite a stir in Oxford, which attracted 'most of the principal men in Oxford'. 'An event precisely similar had never before occurred in the history of the University.' Reynolds fails to mention that Alexander Duff spoke at the meeting,<sup>28</sup> and that French (quoting Livy!) mentions the sacrifice made by his wife and eight children in the separation.<sup>29</sup> He wrote to his wife on the voyage: 'most nights you are vividly present to me in my dreams.'

### 7. Third Term (five years) 1869-74

When French arrived in Lahore on 14 March, nobody met him, so after finding someone to wheel his luggage in a hand barrow, he slept the night on a sofa in the dak bungalow. News of his mother's death reached him not long after. Sadly his gifted colleague Knott died suddenly in June, 1870. The expatriate community was not so enthusiastic about training native clergy, fearing that a higher education would only 'spoil' native Christians and fill their heads with wind.<sup>30</sup> The home committee seems to have delayed its sending of funds for purchasing a site for the college, and it was 22 November, 1870 before St. John's Divinity School opened classes, to train men for ministry.

In contrast to Agra, English was used as little as possible, but the original languages of the Christian Scriptures were thoroughly taught. Students were to read Ezekiel in Hebrew and Ephesians in Greek, and French and his helpers were to lecture them in Urdu, with occasional use of Persian, Pushtu, Punjabi, Sanskrit, and Arabic.

A Mohammedan convert, brought up all his life in distaste of and prejudice against English, should find that his want of English does not disqualify him for perfecting his curriculum of theology. Christianity should be domesticated on Indian soil.<sup>31</sup>

Indian dress was compulsory. The curriculum included practice in preaching and itinerating with French himself. The college grounds were planted with fruit trees, and full of nesting birds. A pool for baptism by immersion was created in the grounds, and five baptised in it during the first year, for which they were persecuted. By the end

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28 John S. Reynolds, *Canon Christopher* (Abingdon: The Abbey Press, 1967), 154.

29 Birks, *Life*, 1:169.

30 Birks, *Life*, 1:220.

31 Birks, *Life*, 1:223.

of the first year there were ten students, and by the third year there were twenty Afghans, Pathans, Rajputs, Persians, Punjabis and Kashmiris, most having been brought up as Muslims, some as Hindus or Sikhs: some instruction was also given to the wives of the students. His first two students were ordained in December, 1872, by bishop Milman of Calcutta.

In spite of recurrent bouts of illness, French taught and led students out on evangelistic tours. In July, 1871, he and Robert Clark spent two months travelling and preaching in Kashmir. Later he became quite ill and London actually sent him a recall telegram in April, 1873: 'Committee affectionately urge your immediate return home. Your health absolutely necessitates this.' But he determined to stay another year, if possible, feeling the work was in too early a stage for him to leave it. It was said that as a patient he was impossible to manage, and as a nurse, helpless when others were ill! He left Lahore March, 1874, and was reunited with his wife 1 May after a five year absence. The personal cost to them all was considerable.

### 8. 1874-77 Third Furlough

He gave a good deal of time to preaching in the universities, and Professor Westcott at Cambridge was an enthusiastic supporter. He served briefly as vicar of Erith, Kent and then as Rector of his old church of St. Ebbe's, Oxford. He ran a Greek Testament class for undergraduates on Sunday evenings, assisted two future bishops in studying Sanskrit (the curate of St. Aldate's was the future bishop Poole of Japan), and started the Oxford Missionary Association of Graduates c. 1875 with Sir William Herschel as chairman.<sup>32</sup> By May, 1877, he had determined to go out to India again as a missionary, but on 30 August during his summer holiday a letter arrived from Archbishop Tait inviting him to become the first bishop of Lahore. French agreed, but characteristically, only on the understanding that he was not to be prohibited from missionary work! The diocese of Calcutta had originally included both Ceylon and Australia, but Bombay, Madras and Sydney had been divided off in 1835-37. Now in 1877 it was proposed to separate Rangoon and Lahore, and the bishopric of the Punjab was endowed by £20,000 raised in memory of bishop Milman. Archbishop Tait (Arnold's successor as headmaster of Rugby – no less than three Indian bishops were Old Rugbeans), consecrated him 21 December, when he was awarded an Honorary Oxford DD. After preaching a farewell sermon on New

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<sup>32</sup> Reynolds, *Canon Christopher*, 194.

Year's Day, 1878, his fifty-third birthday, he left for India. Arriving in Calcutta he heard of his father's death. This time Mrs French and two daughters were able to follow him out in November.

### 9. Fourth Term (nine years) 1878-88

French was the first missionary to become a bishop in the sub-continent, though he had to resign from the CMS in order to accept the appointment. Raikes (of Agra) wrote:

This is a rare instance of the right man in the right place... I do earnestly beg of you not to stay in the plains of the Punjab after April or before October; then you may with God's blessing, be strong and useful. If, with your wonted zeal, you insist on facing hot weather and rains in that most treacherous climate, you will be laid by in a very short time.<sup>33</sup>

On arriving in Lahore, a judge's wife said: 'The whole Punjab is hailing your appointment.' French expressed surprise, feeling he had been utterly unsociable. She replied, 'Yes, but then we all know your work.'<sup>34</sup> The American Presbyterians, whose station Lahore was, welcomed him. As a colonial bishop, he had responsibilities towards British troops, government and establishment. The proportion of expatriate to national Christians was then about ten to one, but French was above all an evangelist and churchplanter: a genuinely 'missionary bishop'. The diocese then covered all North West India: Delhi and the Punjab, Kashmir, Sindh, Baluchistan and the North West Frontier, and consisted of 20 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; 20 thousand Europeans, including more British troops than any other Indian diocese; 1,100 Indian Christians and 60 clergymen. French was not a gifted administrator, had not the gift of working through others, but his own individual labours were untiring.

He did feel they needed a cathedral, as the church had been meeting in the large tomb of a Muslim begum, who had been a dancing girl.<sup>35</sup> 'In the presence of the great religious edifices of heathen and Muslim to erect a mean and unsightly building would be a great disgrace to us and a stigma on the church of God.'<sup>36</sup> He worked tirelessly in fund raising and gave half his own income to the fund. The cathedral was consecrated January, 1887, and there was an Urdu service at which Imad-ud-din, fruit of the Agra disputation preached. No symbol or ornament was to be allowed

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<sup>33</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:333.

<sup>34</sup> Birks, *Life*, 1:345.

<sup>35</sup> Gibbs, *Anglican Church*, 281.

<sup>36</sup> Birks, *Life*, 2:97.

that could 'offend the Muslims horror of images, or foster superstition in any recent convert from a base idolatry'.<sup>37</sup> He took especial joy in ordaining eleven Indian clergymen, one of whom had been a learned Sikh pundit. He strongly deprecated the notion of a 'native Church' separate from the English church of India: one Church for India was his ideal. Bestowing the Lambeth degree on his especial friend Imad-ud-Din he said this title is to signify 'that if the British and Hindu are two in race, in the Church they are one, linked and knit in an inseparable, indivisible bond of love, friendship and fellowship'.<sup>38</sup> He did take home leave from March, 1883 till September, 1884, collecting funds for his cathedral, but in response to a request of the CMS and the bishop of London, visited Iran which had officially been a CMS field only since 1876. In fact, Bruce, French's colleague in Derajat days, had been there since 1868, with a commission from Venn to improve Henry Martyn's New Testament translation and by the time French got there had baptised thirty Muslims secretly. French travelled via Muscat (where he was to die eight years later), and was delighted to visit several places associated with his hero Henry Martyn. In Oxford he spoke to two hundred undergraduates at a missionary breakfast.<sup>39</sup>

He was a scholar-bishop, but a better personal evangelist than public preacher, though he left four volumes of sermons – very biblical and not too long. This may explain why Neill suggests he was not altogether happy in his episcopal role, for he was above all an evangelist and churchplanter. His rather puritanical standards were irksome to some of the British:

He was always conscious of his obligation to preach the Word in season and out of season... his attempts to introduce religious subjects at the frequent entertainments to which he was invited were not always well judged... French had been a teetotaler for some time before he became a bishop.<sup>40</sup>

He preached fearlessly against adultery among the English establishment. He was only really disliked by worldly English people, who resented his faithful preaching.<sup>41</sup> His health was described by Archbishop Benson as 'precarious... he cannot bear his

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<sup>37</sup> Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, *Canon Christopher*, 258.

<sup>40</sup> Gibbs, *Anglican History*, 281-82.

<sup>41</sup> Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 53.

present strains; he would himself gladly resume the place of Mission preacher among native tribes who know and revere him'.

Finally, having his Archdeacon Matthews appointed in his place, his resignation was reluctantly accepted in December, 1887 (shortly before his sixty-third birthday). On the way home he visited Persia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine (staying in local inns rather than with Europeans) and Turkey. He wrote a pamphlet, *Notes on Travel*, giving some reflections on this year spent in travel.<sup>42</sup>

Back at home, French was restless, finding no settled job, and feeling his linguistic gifts and study were not being used. He wanted to make a short trip 'to perfect myself more in the Arabic tongue, and to inquire what is being done for Muslim missions most effectively in those parts. The CMS think me too worn out to attempt any fresh mission work, and I am *almost* of the same mind with them'.<sup>43</sup>

Then, Alexander Mackay of Uganda (1849-90) wrote an article which appeared in the CMS *Intelligencer* in January 1889, appealing to CMS to open a Mission to Arabs in Muscat for

Muscat is the key to Central Africa... It is almost needless to say that the outlook in Africa will be considerably brightened by the establishment of a Mission to Arabs in Muscat... It is solely due to the enterprise of Muscat Arabs, who, penetrating inland from Zanzibar, with wares of Manchester manufacture, established peaceful relations with hosts of native tribes, that travellers first and missionaries afterwards, have found a highway into the far interior.

Thousands of African slaves were purchased by the Arabs each year. Mackay believed such a mission to Muscat would be one of the best possible means to counteract Muslim influence in Africa.

I do not deny that the task is difficult; and the men selected for work in Muscat must be endowed with no small measure of the Spirit of Jesus, besides possessing such linguistic capacity as to be able to reach not only the ears, but the very hearts of men. Is it credible that the English

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42 *Notes on Travel* (London: David Nutt, 1890). For other works written by French, see: *Sermon preached on Occasion of the Death of the Honourable James Thomason, Esq. etc. Lt. Governor of the N.W. Provinces*, 2 October, 1853 (Agra: Secundra Press, 1853); *The Lord's Voice unto the City* (Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, n.d.), including sermons preached during the siege of Agra; *Remember How Thou Hast Heard* (London, 1862); *Missionary Addresses Reprinted from 'The Clergyman's Magazine'* (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, 1890).

43 Birks, *Life*, 2:323-24.

universities will fail to supply us with a sufficient number of men able to enter upon this work at once?<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately it was. So Valpy French volunteered to go.

### 10. Final Term (three months) 1890-91

Stephen Neill's comments are significant:

In 1891 distressed by the failure of the churches to carry out any direct missionary work in Arabia, the cradle of Islam he decided to carry out a one man mission to Muscat.<sup>45</sup>

In him zeal was not always matched with prudence, but it is fortunate for the Church that its greatest men are not always prudent. In his old age French decided on an apparently reckless and hopeless venture.<sup>46</sup>

French at sixty five wrote to his successor in Lahore: 'My present object, partly countenanced by CMS, but timidly and indecisively, is to spend a few weeks or months at Muscat and the adjoining parts to discover and report upon present openings and possibilities of entrance for our missions.' On the way he visited Tunis and Egypt (the young Temple Gairdner was about to start at Oxford), and travelled on with the young Samuel Zwemer to Jiddah, the port of Mecca, where Zwemer reported:

At once bishop French went to a coffee shop, and opening a large Arabic Bible, began to read to the men seated there. Although Zwemer had been fearful that direct preaching might lead to violence, the patrons of the coffee shop listened intently as French expounded the Scripture in high classical Arabic.<sup>47</sup>

Zwemer was to live another sixty years.

Travelling on down the Red Sea French called in at Aden and visited the grave of Keith-Falconer, who started the Scotch Free Mission there in 1885, and died after only two years in May, 1887. In order to reach Muscat, on the Gulf, French's ship even touched in at Karachi, so he was that close to being back in India again.

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<sup>44</sup> His Sister, *Mackay of Uganda* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), 418-30.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Neill, *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* (London: Lutterworth, 1970), 219.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 311.

<sup>47</sup> Christy Wilson, 'The Legacy of Samuel Zwemer', *IBMR* July 1986.



French finally reached Muscat, 8 February, where his companion Maitland said 'the sandflies and mosquitoes were terrible'. French took great comfort from the double reference to Arabia in the Prayer Book version of Psalm 72:10, 15. He used his opportunities to the end: on 9 March he wrote to his wife:

Beyond all my expectations I am permitted to witness here to companies of educated and thoughtful Arab sheikhs and their followers, as e.g. last evening I sat an hour in a circle of them... going through very many of the most vital Gospel truths and listened to with very marked attention and seriousness.<sup>48</sup>

The letters and diary from those last days (Birks quotes from them extensively) are a model of daily commitment to reaching Muslims with the Gospel, reminiscent of his hero, Henry Martyn's, final journal entries.

On 8 May he went out with some books to distribute, but later was found insensible. He regained consciousness, but died of exhaustion on returning to Muscat, 14 May. The doctor said: 'He attempted a mode of life which would have taxed a young man's strength in a climate which crushed him.' He lies buried on the seashore in a cove near Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman. His tombstone reads:

Thomas Valpy French, First Bishop of Lahore and First Missionary to Muscat.

Then follows John 12:24 in English and Arabic, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone, but if it dies, it produces many seeds.' One of the 'seeds' was his great nephew Dr. Lionel Gurney who founded the Red Sea Mission Team and has given the whole of his life to evangelism among Muslims.

## 11. Lessons from his Life<sup>49</sup>

### (a) *As a Model of Linguistic Application*

He was known as 'haft-zaban padri' (seven-tongued man) as he spoke seven Indian languages (including Hindi and Urdu) in addition to French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Persian and Arabic. Even in the heat of India 'I generally manage daily about ten hours work'.

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<sup>48</sup> Birks, *Life*, 2:374.

<sup>49</sup> I owe much of the framework here to Vivienne Stacey, 'The Legacy of Thomas Valpy French', *IBMR* January 1989, 22-27.

However he knew private study needs to be reinforced by practical use:

I always spend from three to four hours in the direct study of the languages daily, besides what I gain in teaching others and in conversation in the bazaars. It is essential for a thorough knowledge of the languages that they should be learned in this practical way.<sup>50</sup>

However 'he was probably unrivalled in his acquaintance with abstruse theological terms, but he was sometimes ignorant of ordinary colloquial expressions'.<sup>51</sup> His marvellously daunting advice to another was as follows:

You must, of course, commence with Urdu or Hindustani, so as to be able to talk to your servants, to help in the services of the church and in the schools. You had better give some six or eight hours a day to that, and also spend two or three hours at Punjabi, to be able to talk with villagers. You should also try to give two or three hours to the study of Persian, which you will find invaluable in the schools, and all your spare time (*sic*) to the study of Arabic, so as to be able to read the Qur'an.<sup>52</sup>

At Lahore Theological college French was known to translate Chrysostom or Augustine straight from Greek or Latin into the native Hindustani (Urdu). Just a few months before he died he wrote to his wife:

I am pushing on very hard with Arabic, copying out verses to give hopeful enquirers to carry home, and preparing a tract on the leading articles of the creed... The work is a great effort and one has to hang upon God hourly for strength.<sup>53</sup>

*(b) As a User of Popular Literary Forms*

French was well versed in Muslim and Indian religious literature and unusual at this period among expatriates, feeling that this wealth of literary treasures could be used and consecrated to holy purposes for Gospel extension. He was publicly criticised for a textbook of ethics he wrote based on Theism for use in schools and Government colleges in the Punjab, and replied:

If I found a passage in the Vedas or Grunths or Mohammedan work of morals, which in its precepts, though not perhaps in its starting point,

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50 Birks, *Life*, 1:74.

51 Gibbs, *Anglican Church*, 186.

52 Birks, *Life*, 1:47.

53 Birks, *Life*, 2:372.

was in harmony with the Ten Commandments, portions of the Proverbs and much of the Sermon on the Mount... I should feel at liberty to give it a place, not only because it was fair and truthful to do so, but because it was a witness to Christian truth in non-Christian records.<sup>54</sup>

Muslims appreciate beauty in literature, and are familiar with the recitation of the Qur'an. French wondered if they might not listen with equal reverence to the recitation of the Prophets and Gospel from the Christian scriptures.<sup>55</sup> On one occasion his companion on an evangelistic tour found him seated on the boundary wall of a mosque, reading Scripture aloud. French explained that a great crowd of listeners had gathered, until a passing mullah dispersed them, yet many were still listening, though concealed from view. He noted that most of what Indians knew of religion was all couched in poetical couplets, and wished we had good Indian Christian poets, who could express Christian truth in poetry and music.<sup>56</sup> At the end of his life we find him modelling this approach to the young Samuel Zwemer as he read the Gospels aloud in the coffee shop in Jiddah, the port of Mecca.

*(c) As a Distributor of the Scriptures*

French writing to his wife about his visit to Jiddah says:

I put an Arabic Bible in each of my large pockets, and ventured forth. I got two occasions to give short Arabic addresses within the city, one in a learned mullah's house, whom I induced to invite me in and listen to the story of God's plan of salvation... The Mullah wished to have a Bible so I left it with him.<sup>57</sup>

French was a member of the Agra Tract committee and published his first Urdu tract in 1856, 'The Mirror of the Character of Jesus Christ', when he had been a missionary for six years. Later in his life he was involved in the translation of the Old Testament and Luke in the Afghan language, Pushtu.

*(d) A Model of Remarkably Courageous Direct Evangelism*

In his last year in Agra, when the mutiny was over, French wrote:

I have baptised seven adult converts myself... Two of the converts are teachers of considerable ability and attainments, and are entrusted with

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54 *Civil and Military Gazette*, a Punjab daily newspaper, 9 August, 1882.

55 Stacey, *Thomas Valpy French*, 25.

56 Birks, *Life*, 1:202.

57 Birks, *Life*, 2:50.

the leading of Persian and Arabic classes in the college. It may please God eventually to use both of them as evangelists or pastors in his church. They have paid very great attention to the vernacular theological and scriptural lectures which I held twice a week during the greater part of the year... all of them have forsaken all for Christ, and have suffered very bitter reproaches for His Name's sake.<sup>58</sup>

It was not only that some of those who came to him were very able people, but that he deliberately sought out able people to share the gospel with.

I found no plan so successful for gathering a good and attentive audience as making straight for the mosque and enquiring for the mullah. Instead of hanging about the village and having one's object suspected, this was a definite and straightforward object; and besides often meeting in this way on equal terms with the mullah, the chiefs and other respectable villagers would gather in the mosque.<sup>59</sup>

In a chief mosque in Oman:

I told them I was come to see the head teacher and I loved all lovers of God and those who sought the true knowledge of Him. I also said that as this was our great festival time and I had no brother in Christ to read his services with me, I was come to read the lessons for the season or some of them with him and his friends... it was the most learned and aristocratic audience I have yet come across, and to be allowed to read and comment on such chapters [Luke chs. 23 and 24] in a chief mosque speaks hopefully for the prospect of a mission here.<sup>60</sup>

In Tehran on his 1883 visit to the American Presbyterians 'French often impressed this upon me: "If we would win these Muslim lands for Christ, we must die for them."<sup>61</sup>

(e) *As a Trainer of Others and a Creative Thinker in Theological Education*

He wrote at the end of his first term: 'My great hope would be in returning to India to get a few promising youths to travel with me, and thoroughly to initiate them into the work of an evangelising ministry.'<sup>62</sup> French started something new in each term of service – a teacher training college, a mission, a theological college and a

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58 Birks, *Life*, 1:82-83.

59 Birks, *Life*, 1:197.

60 Birks, *Life*, 2:379.

61 Dr. Bruce in *Punjab Mission News*.

62 Birks, *Life*, 1:116.

diocese. And two of these projects speak of his commitment to the training of others. And that training was not theoretical, but practical – following the models of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul:

Mr. Clark and I take one or more in turns out with us to preach at the gates and in the bazaars, letting them preach a little also. I encourage them on Saturday to go out two and two by themselves to the village around Lahore, and to distribute books, converse with the people, bring in enquirers if possible... it will be bad for them to be too exclusively occupied in learning and reading without exercise and practice.<sup>63</sup>

For all his own scholarship, French was (like the apostle Paul) a theologian of the streets, and not just the library. It is sad that the lessons learned by such pioneers have not always been a priority with ministerial training colleges in Britain. French was an original creative thinker regarding theological education. He wrote his paper envisaging a college for Lahore at a time when there were few models of theological colleges in England: CMS had started a college in Islington for non-graduates in 1825; and diocesan colleges for non-graduates had been started at St Bees, Chester, 1816; Queen's, Birmingham, 1828; Chichester, 1839; graduates from Oxford and Cambridge did theology at university, supplemented by student missionary associations, with Durham added from 1832, and King's London the previous year. French wrote: 'We must not compromise the future character of the native church, by attempting to trammel it with too rigid adherence to our institutions... Its growth in the main must be free and spontaneous, natural and unwarped.' Its teachers must not be part timers, but 'the best instructors... drawn chiefly from among the ripest and most practised veterans'.

He asked for £5000 to be raised for this purpose: £500 for land, £2000 for the building, £500 for the library and £2000 to an endowment fund for junior (native) professors.

Here Christianity should be domesticated on the Indian soil... (taught by men) who by a severe and close attention bestowed on Muslim and Hindu literature, can express the delicate shades, the nice distinctions of thought, which some at least of our standard works of theology involve.

He insisted on the necessity of a good library 'when sharp, shrewd objectors are buzzing like bees all around him, taunting him with seeming discrepancies in the sacred text'. His aims were visionary and reached far beyond India: 'It is for Persia and Afghanistan that

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63 Birks, *Life*, 1:256.

we have specially framed this project.' He saw what Hindu gurus and Muslim mullahs had practised was the way:

The very last thing which has been practised among us as missionaries was what the greatest stress was laid and effort expended upon by Hindu sect-leaders, and by the earliest British and Anglo-Saxon missionaries, as well as by Mohammedan moolahs everywhere: I mean, giving a few instruments the finest polish possible; imbuing a few select disciples with all that we ourselves have been taught of truth, and trying to train and build them up to the highest reach of knowledge attainable to us.<sup>64</sup>

It is, French said, what the Sufi called lighting the scholar's lamp at the master's light. The mixture he designed of the highest standards of academic study, blended with active itineration and bazaar evangelism, with the direct participation of their teachers as examples of passionate commitment was quite outstanding, and few colleges since have achieved as much.

*(f) A Humble Christian of Extraordinary Commitment*

'You know it was part of his plan of life everywhere and more than ever in Muscat, not to allow others to serve him either in health or sickness.'<sup>65</sup>

He was indeed a saintly character, utterly self-denying and unworldly. Singlehearted, devout and humble, the fire of enthusiasm for the propagation of the Gospel burned as brightly in his breast in those last lonely days in Muscat, as it did when he turned his back on Oxford and all it offered, to give himself to India.<sup>66</sup>

Of his ministry to British troops, to whom his sermons seemed over-long and shooting over their heads somewhat, 'every soldier could appreciate his manifest sincerity, and when he went miles out of his way in the burning sun to minister to two or three in their sickness, or stripped off his coat in hospital to rub the limbs of some poor fellow writhing with pains of cholera, they recognised that in their own chief pastor they had one who understood their troubles'.<sup>67</sup> In 1878 as the new bishop returning to India he wrote: 'As I passed... Amritsar, I could only cast myself as a very helpless and insufficient and unworthy servant on the forbearance and grace of our dear Lord and Master.'

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64 Birks, *Life*, 1:254.

65 Birks, *Life*, 2:397-98.

66 *The Civil and Military Gazette*, 22 May, 1891.

67 Stock, *Heroic Bishop*, 56.

In 1883 he read a paper at the Reading Congress, in which he urged that the work of the century called for 'the deepest contrition, humiliation and genuine heartfelt confession on the part of the labourers for past neglects and defects', and pleaded for 'more apostles'. Samuel Zwemer in one of the first papers of the American mission alludes touchingly to French:

The appeal of Mackay from Uganda and General Haig's report were trumpet calls to duty. Thomas Valpy French responded and that broken box of exceeding precious ointment was fragrant from Muscat to the whole missionary world. It was not what he accomplished, but what he purposed that made the late bishop of Lahore the Henry Martyn of Arabia.

French's selfless life undoubtedly stirred up many Christians: we conclude therefore with some lines by Handley Moule on hearing of French's death:

Far from fair Oxford's groves and towers,  
Her scholar-bishop dies apart;  
He blames the ease of cultured hours,  
In death's still tones that shake the heart.  
Brave saint! for dark Arabia dead,  
I go to fight the fight instead!