

Lessons on Ministry among Muslims taken from the life of Thomas Valpy French

By Vivienne Stacey, September 1979

1 Introduction

My biography of Thomas Valpy French, the first Bishop of Lahore, is soon to be published in Urdu in Lahore, Pakistan. Today few have heard of Thomas Valpy French and his remarkable ministry. From him we can learn so much, especially in relation to evangelism among Muslims. Let us first look briefly at his life and then at the lessons.

2 His Life (1825-1891)

Thomas French was essentially a pioneer. He arrived in India in 1851 at the age of 26, sent out from England by the Church Missionary Society. He and a colleague founded St. John's College in Agra to educate children from the upper classes of society. He always took time from his administrative and teaching duties for evangelistic tours in the areas around Agra no matter how busy he was.

His next pioneer effort was the founding of the Derajat Mission in what is now the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. This new work included Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu. Sir Robert Montgomery, an able Christian administrator in India, wrote: "We now are at peace with all the tribes. Now is the time to hold out the hand of friendship and to offer through the missionaries the bread of life...I rejoice to see Missions sprading." Inspired by Christian Government officers who also contributed generous finance and prayer backing the Drajat Mission started in 1862. French first visited Bannu that year but there was no resident missionary until 1873 when the Rev. T. Mayer arrived. A school was soon started. Mayer was active in evangelism publicly and privately and worked on translations of parts of the Bible into Pushtu. As I now live in Bannu, a city in which there has been no public baptism of a Muslim for twenty years—the last convert was murdered—I cannot help reflecting on its past. We have in our home a leather-bound, largely hand-written old book containing the records of "the Mission" in Bannu. "One of the most arresting sections contains a list of converts: 21 are noted between 1876 and 1897, and there are brief but telling descriptions of the tremendous pressures put on many of these and of persecution. As a result at least four recanted, while others remained firm in their faith. The main influences mentioned in bringing people to Christ were bazaar preaching (in four instances), the witness of relatives (4), the witness of Christian friends (3) and the Christian school (1)." (From an article by Ruth Coggan, doctor at the Pennell Memorial Hospital, Bannu, Published in the C.M.S. Magazine "Yes").

French's third pioneer work was the founding of the Lahore Divinity School for training men for the ministry. Then in 1877 when the Diocese of Lahore was created out of the Diocese of Calcutta, French was chosen as its first Bishop. In fact he was the first missionary bishop in the subcontinent. This appointment gave him many opportunities for adventuring with God. As a former CMS missionary French was truly a mission representative. In being approved by the Queen, the Secretary of State for

India and the Archbishop of Canterbury he was the appointee of the British Raj. He had the warm support of many individual Christian soldiers and administrators as well as leaders of other missions. A new diocese could develop new patterns. Added to this, French was, as Bishop Westcott wrote, “a true apostle”. A new diocese and a new bishop—here lay the hopes for the emergence of an Indian church in which Christians of all races could join. French had his responsibilities to the British troops, to the Government and the Establishment, but he was, above all an evangelist and church planter—a ‘missionary bishop’ in the widest sense of those words.

French’s interest extended beyond his large diocese. He saw the reform of the ancient churches of the Middle East and the Anglican connection with them as significant in reaching Muslims for Christ. These churches tended to turn for help to the Anglican church rather than to the Roman Catholics. They did not want to get absorbed in the Roman Catholic system. French noted that the American Presbyterians stressed separation from the ancient churches but that their schools, hospitals and chapels have helped the Eastern churches. Perhaps French’s interest in the area stemmed from the time when Robert Bruce left India to start the C. M.S. Persia Mission. French was commissioned to visit C.M.S. missions in Persia. He also toured Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. French has left us four volumes of sermons. They are Biblically based and not too long. One feels that French was better as a personal evangelist than as a public preacher. He was a scholar bishop with the heart of an evangelist. Writing to a friend about a visit to Afghanistan he said: “I am taking a small stock of books with me for the English soldiers in Candahar, as well as for any enquiring Persian or Afghan mullah I may come across.”

Founding and establishing a new diocese was his fourth pioneer work but in 1887, broken in health and having found a suitable successor, he resigned his Bishopric and retired to England. However, when in 1891 C.M.S. appealed for volunteers for Arabia and no one responded, Bishop French at the age of 66 volunteered. He wrote to his successor in Lahore: “My present object partly countenanced by C.M.S., 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.”

French thus entered on the fifth and last phase of his career. After three months he died of exhaustion and fever at Muscat and lies buried on the seashore near Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman. On his tombstone is written: “Thomas Valpy French, first Bishop of Lahore and first missionary to Muscat.” Then follow the words of John chapter 12 verse 24 written in English and Arabic: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Today many Pakistani Christians work in Oman and the fruit of French’s labours are seen in the Diocese of which he was the first bishop and also in the Arabian Gulf areas for which he had a vision so long ago.

3 Lessons from his life

3.1 His life of devotion, holiness, self-sacrifice, prayer and identification with his fellows.

One outstanding example of French’s identification with Indians relates to his service in Agra. During the testing days of War of Independence or the Indian Mutiny in 1857 he refused to take shelter with other expatriates in the Fort unless Indian Christians could have the same privilege. This was granted eventually. Some years later speaking of his work in the North West frontier area of what is now Pakistan he wrote: “I felt a pang of deep regret at being withdrawn from that work. It has been begun in great weakness, but prayerfully, and on scriptural principals. None can say how important a bearing its future

may have on the entrance of the light of the glorious gospel of Christ into the regions of Central Asia.” Since French’s pioneer efforts the work continues at Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan and in other newer centres, but it is hampered by lack of staff. As French’s first biographer wrote: “Perhaps the devotion of French may still bear fruit in calling forth recruits”. More are still needed—people of devotion and self sacrifice like French, willing to identify themselves with the people they seek to serve.

3.2 His co-operation with other individuals, missions and officials

“The dear Presbyterian brethren Newton and Forman” welcomed him warmly—the same two who had invited the C.M.S. to the Punjab a quarter of a century before. The regard was mutual and French later wrote that he “rejoiced and praised God for the devoted labours and successful ministries of men and women of other bodies than our own”. Early in his career, in Agra, he wrote of his fellow missionaries: “We get on very pleasantly with them. They are Germans, and all in Lutheran orders; three in number now that Mr. Pfander is gone home.” French was on friendly terms with the Baptist and American Presbyterians in Agra. Throughout his life he maintained cordial relations with other groups helping and co-operating where possible. When he was appointed Bishop of Lahore one of the judges’ wives said: “The whole Punjab is hailing your appointment.” French expressed surprise as he had been so utterly unsociable. The lady replied: “Yes, but then, we all know your work.” This ability to co-operate and maintain good relations with many types of Christians, with diverse nationalities and with the wider public merits our study. However his preaching in the streets of Lahore a few years before drew opposition from those antagonistic to the gospel. He was also publicly attacked in the correspondence columns of ‘The Civil and Military Gazette’ by an extreme Christian fundamentalist. He defended himself publicly and courteously.

3.3 His knowledge of Indian languages, Indian literature and Islam

French from the outset was keen to learn local languages so that he could communicate freely. He spoke seven Indian languages and was known as “the seven-tonued man”. He once gave the following counsel to a young missionary: “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 6 or 8 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 to Arabic, so as to be able to read the Qur’an.” Maybe French was realistic enough to realize that every new missionary could not cope with such a programme. However, he certainly made his point.

French was not entirely academic in his approach to language learning. One of his uncles questioned whether his preoccupation with evangelism did not hinder his language study. He replied: “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.”

French appreciated the wide range and wealth of Indian literature. He wrote: “Is it more profitable to Christianity...that this store should be thrown away as valueless for the purpose of Gospel extension?” He quoted the Biblical text: ‘I will consecrate their gain unto the Lord, and their substance unto the Lord of the whole earth’. (Micah chapter 4 verse 13) and asked “Is the wealth of India’s literary treasures less

available, less capable of consecration to the highest and holiest purposes than the merchant spoil of Tyre? Is not the attempt to use it for the Lord's service worth the making?"

French was well-versed in Muslim religious literature and Islam. He declares: "I was reading a hymn of theirs a few days ago, in which were abasing confessions of sin but the meaning of the last stanza was, whatever our shortcomings, we have this to fall back upon, we are ahl-i-Islam (Muslims)". During the first phase of his career he engaged in public debate. Such debate between Muslim and Christian religious leaders may not be appropriate or popular today but in the 1850s Pfander and French engaged in such debate in Agra. The Bible, the divinity of Christ, the Holy Trinity, Muhammad's mission and the Qur'an were the subjects discussed. That French could participate in such public debating illustrates his knowledge and competence. It is interesting to note that two minor assistants on the Muslim side became outstanding Christians –Saftar Ali, a high-up government official, and Imam ud-Din, who became a Christian writer and received the degree of doctor of Divinity from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

After his brief work in the Bannu area he reported: "After so short an experience it is premature to hazard an opinion as to the probable results of missions to the Afghans..." Through his preaching and conversations he had become acquainted with twelve Sufi sects in this frontier area. He found that skepticism and extreme mysticism contributed to a free-thinking spirit. People were willing to hear, tolerated and even examine Christian teaching. French wrote: "I think I have discovered traces also of a higher view of the character and work of Christ, than is common among Muslims." French was undoubtedly a scholar but he gained much of his information from first-hand discussion and practical evangelism.

3.4 His use of popular literary forms

Recitation—Muslims are particularly familiar with recitation of scripture. French realized that they might listen with almost equal reverence to the recitation of the Bible. His companion on an evangelistic tour described how he "found him sitting on the boundary wall of a mosque, reading some Scripture aloud, though not a soul was visible. I waited on and on in surprise for more than an hour before he stopped. Then on our way back to camp he told me how he had gathered a great crowd of eager listeners, and how a passing mullah had given the word, and in a very few minutes it vanished away, but that there were very many still listening, though concealed from view."

Poetry—French realized the value of poetry as a way of communicating Christian truth. While travelling and preaching in the state of Bahawalpur he found an enquirer who had memorized a poem about the Christian faith. French noted: "Most of the knowledge these poor people have of anything bearing on religion is couched in poetical couplets and I long to see some good Christian poet arise who can represent Christian voice in song. Few things under God would carry the Gospel wider and fix it deeper."

Story-telling—Colonel Taylor, one of French's supporters, wrote: "The kind of man I picture to myself as likely to do good is one who should be well acquainted with Muslim history, creed etc.; one who could say, 'Come, I have got a story to tell you which is we worth your hearing'. He would certainly get hearers, as the whole community are idle enough, and if the speaker be equal to telling his tale with all the force that belongs to it, and his telling be blessed, there would be results sooner or later, but whether in our time in India or not it would be hard to say."

3.5 His use of the Bible and Christian literature.

French always took parts of the Bible, Christian and literature and tracts with him. He recalls how up in the mountains of Kashmir while on an evangelistic trek he met an enquirer. The man had read one of Dr. Pfander's books and wanted a gospel, or the Law or the Psalms. After testing him French gave him his last Persian gospel. He paid tribute many times to the help and co-operation of the Bible Societies.

French realizing the value of Christian literature became a member of the Agra Tract Committee and published his first tract in 1856 in Urdu. It was entitled, "The Mirror of the Character of Jesus Christ". It was an attempt to illustrate the character, offices, and disposition of our Lord, from the prophecies of Him, the titles ascribed to Him, the nature of His teaching and of His works. At the end of his life he was still distributing Bibles. Writing to his wife about his visit to Jiddah in Arabia he said: "I put an Arabic bible in each of my large pockets, and so 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 other opportunity was in a more open space, sitting on the doorstep of an old blind man, whose friends gathered round to listen....The mullah wished to have a Bible, so I left it with him. I seldom leave the New Testament without the Psalms and the Prophets."

3.6 His evangelizing of key people

One day when French was travelling alone on an evangelistic tour a tailor came running to him in the wood, saying, "Oh, sir, I know who you are; you are the Lord's servant." French enquired, "Whom do you mean by the Lord?" "I mean the Lord Jesus Christ," the man replied. French then asked him how he came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. The man said that some time ago an Indian preacher had visited his village and told them about the Lord Jesus Christ. At the close of the message he gave a tract to a man who immediately tore it up and threw it on the ground. The tailor picked it up, pieced it together, and learned to read it. He talked to his friends about it and a number of them became his disciples. The tailor requested French to visit his home. He found the tailor's courtyard filled with enquirers. Every time he travelled that way French visited the tailor who also came several times to Agra for teaching. Finally, French baptized him.

French had a continual stream of individual enquirers coming to him for various motives. He received them all with patience and courtesy. During his last year at Agra French records: "I have baptized seven adult converts myself....Two of the converts are teachers of considerable ability and attainments, and are entrusted with the leading of Persian and Arabic classes in the College. It may please God eventually to make use of 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 through the greater part of the year, and are now sharing in the daily instruction which Paul (a convert from Meerut) is receiving from me preparatory to ordination. The regularity of their attendance at all Christian ordinances and intelligent appreciation of the Word preached is really edifying; all of them have forsaken all for Christ, and have suffered very bitter reproaches for His Name's sake.

French identified and often approached key people and leaders. Writing of some of his evangelistic tours he said: "I found no plan so successful for gathering a good and attentive audience as making straight for the mosque and inquiring 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 congregate in the mosque."

At the very end of his life he continued this policy of seeking out the leaders but he neglected no one. He wrote to his wife a few months before he died: "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...I sat an hour in what is evidently the chief mosque of this suburb of Muttrah (in Oman)....The dresses of the sheikh and head imam were all to match, tasteful and handsome. I told them that 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 (Luke 2 and 3)...it was the most learned and aristocratic audience I have yet come across, and to be allowed to read and comment on such chapters in a chief mosque speaks hopefully for the prospect of a mission here being now or eventually opened; but one must speak humbly and softly..."

3.7 His training of others

French put a high priority on training others to do the work of evangelism and teaching. His proposals for the founding of the Lahore Divinity School and his establishment of it are sufficient proof of this. Even so, French was not keen that every able Christian young man should enter the ministry. He felt that the future growth of the church depended on people of high caliber being active for Christ in every department of secular life. Writing of those who became students he says: "As regards the character of our students, I think we have cause to feel cheered and encouraged. Intellectually, the average excellence is far superior to what I expected. We have promise of two or three excellent linguists as far as original languages of the Bible go. On the whole, their religious growth and advance in knowledge and love and obedience of the truth has been gratifying and edifying to us." The students came from different racial groups – Pathans, Rajputs, Persians, Punjabis and Kashmiris. Most had been brought up as Muslims, some as Hindus and at least one as a Sikh. They came from different social ranks. Some had come to Christ through much suffering, others had been influenced gradually in Christian schools, while others were children of Indian Christians.

The training was practical as well as theoretical. French wrote: "I am trying to perfect more our arrangements for giving a practical training in preaching and other ministerial work to our students. 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 into the villages around Lahore, and to distribute books, converse with the people, bring in inquirers if possible, and learn the state of things as regards the preparation of the people for the gospel. One or two are very zealous in this matter, others will be so, I believe. On Sunday morning, before our bazaar service, they stand at the doors and gather the people together by preaching. It will be bad for them to be too exclusively occupied in learning and reading without exercise and practice.

Thomas Valpy French evangelized, taught, preached, wrote and exhorted a century ago. We can all learn from his life and example. Might we not also learn from his methods? He worked in hard soil. He had many trials and sufferings. God gave him some fruit.