

## The Vernacular Scripture Fallacy and the Failure of Early Protestant Mission

Alec Ryrie

In 1774, a pseudonymous Methodist pamphlet entitled *The conversion of an Indian, in a letter to a friend* was published in London: the first of what would be four editions over the following two decades. There is no knowing quite what made it such a success, but one thing is clear: despite its late date and its plainly eighteenth-century subject matter and denominational affiliation, this is a pleasingly old-fashioned little book, with distinctive Reformation themes. The 'letter', which is transparently a fiction, purports to be an account written by a young Native American named Laurence Harlow to a kinsman back home in Maryland. The author describes how he had undertaken a voyage to England 'in quest of the Christian's God'. He wanted 'to enquire who their God was, and how they worship him'. However, he then tells of how repugnant all of the actual Christians he met were; the blaspheming sailors on the voyage, the gossips at the church he visited, the minister with his 'slow, faint, dull manner'. When he met a learned theologian and asked him to explain Christian doctrine to an unbeliever, the man fled the town rather than attempt such a conversation. After this build-up, you might expect that the narrative would turn to how wonderfully and thrillingly different he discovered the Methodists to be, and that is indeed how the pamphlet ends; but the pivot of the narrative is something else. In his lodgings in England, he discovers, 'almost buried in lumber and dust', a Bible. His landlady tells him, offhanded, that no-one wants it and he can borrow it if he wants to. He spends three weeks reading it and is thunderstruck. 'Reading this book had such effect upon my mind, as I never felt before'; he found himself weeping for his sins. Then a dismaying thought occurred to him: what if the book's claims were not true? So he took it up again, this time to examine it 'to find out the fallacy. ... Within twenty minutes reading, I was perfectly satisfied that this book was founded upon the Rock of Ages. For it not only militated against the practices of the children of men, but ... even described and exposed the abominable thoughts of the heart.' Only then did he fall in with the Methodists.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the late eighteenth century, then, one of the central convictions of the Protestant Reformation's book culture was alive and well. Harlow's transfixing encounter with Scripture recalls Luther's notorious claim that 'I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends ... the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it.'<sup>2</sup> One of the driving ideas of the Protestant Reformation was of the agency and intrinsic power of the Word of God, which was a pneumatological conviction and also the riveting inward experience of many converts, but which was not an empirically proven sociological fact. It is why William Tyndale famously told Henry VIII that if an English Bible could be freely published he would happily never write another word. Once the Word was set forth, its plain truths self-evident, the battle was all but won; it would surely sweep all before it.

Awkwardly, it became clear during the first generation that this was not quite so, but it was possible to explain away some degree of undershooting the mark. This is after all about the work of the Spirit, not the mechanical effect of a printed book, and the wind blows where it wills; if the Word

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Harlow, *The conversion of an Indian, in a letter to a friend* ([London?]: s.n., 1778), ESTC T105918, quotations at pp. 4-5, 10-13.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 45: The Christian in Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 70-1.

does not speak to you, perhaps you are not one of the elect. And there are also the machinations of Antichrist, keeping the people in wilful blindness even as the sun beat down on them. And, crucially, if the Protestants' hopes for the impact of vernacular Bibles were overblown, they were not baseless. There was a genuine hunger for Bibles; the wariness of Counter-Reformation Catholicism about vernacular scripture is ample confirmation that it was a powerful weapon for the other side. Yet it is also plain that Protestants were inclined to over-read the phenomenon. If printed vernacular Scripture proved powerful in much of Europe, it was because these were societies which already revered the Bible, and which also already had significant literate minorities and a fairly well-developed book culture. Remove those conditions and the story looks rather different.

This article is about how this Protestant presupposition about the intrinsic power of printed vernacular Scripture fared in, and shaped, a different set of contexts, namely those implied by *The conversion of an Indian*: the encounter between Protestants and non-Christians who those Protestants hoped to convert. The old truism that there was no serious early Protestant missionary effort now looks a good deal shakier than it once did, but there is no getting around the fact that those Protestant missionary projects which did take place before the late eighteenth century were in general not very successful.<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons for the change of tempo around 1800, ranging from the mundane (mere accumulation of experience and the greater opportunities offered by expanding empires) to the more intriguing (a shift away from mere inculcation of orthodoxy to more experiential and less normatively acculturated forms of Protestantism).<sup>4</sup> This article, however, focuses on one specific problem which I argue contributed to this widespread pattern of Protestant missionary failure in the pre-1800 period: namely, that Protestants carried their Reformation assumptions about the power of vernacular printed scripture with them into different contexts where they no longer applied, in some cases significantly distorting their approach to the cross-cultural religious encounter.

Medieval Europe provides a warning. Vernacular translations of Scripture in the high Middle Ages were not uncommon. Nor were they generally prohibited; the well-known ban on the English translation associated with the Lollards is an exception. And yet the Latin Vulgate outcompeted its vernacular counterparts for centuries. This was not solely because the Church favoured it. Vernacular translations only appealed to one slice of the population: those who were literate in their own tongue but not in Latin. For most of the medieval era this was a narrow slice of the population indeed. Most of those who could read anything could also read Latin. The principal reason that vernacular Scripture remained marginal in medieval Europe was not that it was repressed, but that the market for it was too thin.

Protestants met the same logic when they began to take their gospel to the minority, low-literacy language zones of the far west and north of Europe: the Celtic-speaking regions of Britain and Ireland, the Sámi-speaking far north of Scandinavia and the Estonian- and Latvian-speaking

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<sup>3</sup> Amongst other recent scholarship exploring these issues, see especially D.L. Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Ulinka Rublack (ed.), *Protestant Empires: Globalizing the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Edward E. Andrews, *Native Apostles: Black and Indian Missionaries in the British Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Many of these issues are discussed in a forthcoming essay by A. Ryrie and D. J. B. Trim, 'Four axes of mission: conversion and the purposes of mission in Protestant history'.

regions of the Swedish monarchy.<sup>5</sup> For a series of Protestant idealists who repeatedly tried to take the gospel to these peoples, it was a self-evident truth that a vernacular Bible would have to be the heart of the project. But this was easier said than done. Biblical translation into Sámi was repeatedly delayed, with a full New Testament in northern Sámi only appearing in 1755, after heated disagreements over which variant of what was a diverse language ought to be used: rival grammars had been published in the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>6</sup> The first attempt to translate the Bible into Welsh foundered on the same problem of standardisation: there was no unified Welsh language, but a series of regional variations, not always mutually comprehensible, alongside a learned, bardic version of the language marked by archaisms which was some distance from any of the spoken versions. It was genuinely unclear whether translators would be better off picking one version of the language and sticking with it, or attempting some sort of synthesis.<sup>7</sup> A petition urging a Welsh translation of the Bible in 1587 boldly asserted that ‘the dialect that euery sheire hath almost proper vnto it selfe, should not hinder this woorke. For if preaching were in euery Parish, the people would be stirred vp to read the worde priuatly in their houses, and so become acquainted with the phrase.’ In other words, this would not be a Bible the people could read from the outset, but one that would teach them a new version of their own language. If they could not understand it, the petitioner added revealingly, they could simply ask their ministers: because all the ministers would speak English, and so could cross-check the difficult passages with their own English Bibles and help with the translation.<sup>8</sup> This clumsy procedure might have been workable, but plainly this would not produce a Bible of the kind that gripped the narrator of *The conversion of an Indian*.

This invocation of the mediating role of multilingual ministers also admits the route that seems in fact to have been one of the most important vectors for Protestantism in the Celtic world, including in those parts of Gaelic Scotland that became assertively Calvinist: multilingual preachers mediating texts to the literate and illiterate alike. When vernacular texts were set forth, there was often not very much demand for them. There has been much attention given to the first Gaelic edition of the Book of Common Order, in 1567, but the most noteworthy fact about this book is that, unlike its very frequently republished Lowland Scots counterpart, it never made it to a second edition.<sup>9</sup> On the Isle of Man, likewise, Bishop John Phillips undertook to translate the Book of Common Prayer into Manx in the early seventeenth century, but the effort seems to have borne little fruit. Various Manx people, including those literate in English, claimed to find this version of what they had only ever encountered as a spoken language incomprehensible. One bishop of Man in the 1660s claimed that his clergy relied exclusively on oral instruction, since the Manx-speaking population was entirely illiterate. Some clergy read the service in Manx, others in English; there was no discernible lay market for Manx books. The impetus to produce vernacular religious works for

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<sup>5</sup> On the Estonian and Latvian case, see especially Arthur der Weduwen and Barnaby Cullen, ‘A Nordic Press: the development of printing in Scandinavia and the Baltic States before 1700 in a European perspective’, DETAILS. I am grateful to Dr der Weduwen for introducing me to this material.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Kent, *The Sámi Peoples of the North: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014), pp. 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> This issue is authoritatively discussed in Felicity Heal, ‘Mediating the Word: Language and Dialects in the British and Irish Reformations’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 56 (2005), pp. 261-86.

<sup>8</sup> John Penry, *A treatise concerning the aeqvity of an hvmbble svpplication ... in the behalfe of the Countrey of Wales, that some order may be taken for the preaching of the Gospell among those people* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587), ESTC 19611, USTC 510821, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> J. Carswell, *Foirm na nurrnuidheadh agas freasdal na sacramuinteadh* (Edinburgh: R. Lekprewik, 1567), ESTC 16604, USTC 515610. See the invaluable discussion of this text in Jane Dawson, ‘Calvinism and the Gaidhealtachd in Scotland’ in Andrew Pettegree, et al. (eds), *Calvinism in Europe 1540-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

these minority language groups – whether the Manx Bible of the 1720s, the Icelandic Bible of 1584, or the Estonian New Testament of 1686 – invariably came from outside idealists or confessionalising governments rather than from any sense of local demand.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, one advocate of Protestant printing in Irish Gaelic in the early eighteenth century had to concede that there was an alternative, namely that ministers ‘translate the Bible and Common-Prayer-Book, *extempore*, while they are officiating’. He worried that this process was error-prone, but it could scarcely be more so than putting a printed page before a population who could not read it.<sup>11</sup>

In predominantly or even exclusively illiterate societies, early Protestants might have been wise to pursue missionary strategies which did not depend on literacy. But as I have argued elsewhere, early Protestantism did not have theological or even really conceptual space for the notion of illiterate Christianity. Within Europe, illiterates who protested at their exclusion from Protestantism’s bookish culture were either ignored, firmly told to learn to read, or at best to find someone who could read to them.<sup>12</sup> Learning and godliness were very closely entwined in Protestant pastoral assumption and practice. ‘Christian Knowledge,’ it was widely assumed, was something ‘which very few Illiterate Persons attain to, in any tolerable Measure or Degree’.<sup>13</sup> What this meant for the missionary project was neatly summarised in the vernacular edition of Matthew’s Gospel printed in Amsterdam in one of the languages of southern Formosa (Taiwan). The Dutch-language preface to this volume claimed that the people of the island, although ‘neither lettered nor very Polite by nature’, were also ‘not incapable for having something of good planted in them, nor unlike a blank page fit for receiving any kind of writing’. It is a vivid portrayal of the power writing was assumed to have over the illiterate.<sup>14</sup>

There is only one major sphere where some early modern Protestants were willing to contemplate working with illiteracy: enslaved people. A few Protestants who were trying to find a way of Christianising slaves during the eighteenth century contemplated bypassing reading. When the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in London solicited its American correspondents’ views on how best to evangelise the enslaved in 1735, William Johnson, an Anglican minister in Barbados, recommended that they

instruct the Negroes in the Grounds and Principles of Religion without teaching them to read or write. This method will enable a Teacher to instruct more Negroes, and ... will incline the Owners of Negroes sooner to send them to be instructed, because less of their time will be taken up, in hearing their Duty taught them so, than in learning to read and write. Besides ... it doth not qualify them to turn Rogues.

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<sup>10</sup> A.W. Moore (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer in Manx Gaelic* (Oxford: Manx Society, 1895), pp. xi, xii, xxi; Heal, ‘Mediating the Word’, pp. 280-1.

<sup>11</sup> John Richardson, *A short history of the attempts that have been made to convert the popish natives of Ireland, to the establish’d religion; with a proposal for their conversion; and a vindication of Arch-Bishop Usher’s opinion, concerning the Performance of Divine Offices to them in their own Language* (London: Joseph Downing, 1713), ESTC T067067, pp. 123-4.

<sup>12</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 259-70.

<sup>13</sup> Richardson, *A short history*, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> W.M. Campbell (ed.), *The Gospel of St Matthew in Formosan edited from Gravius’ edition of 1661* (London: Trubner & Co, 1888), p. xii.

This would, he pointed out, save money as well as time, since there would be no need for expenditure on books.<sup>15</sup> Another Caribbean Anglican minister, Robert Robertson of Nevis, likewise recommended that most of the enslaved should simply be taught to recite prayers and ‘to understand and remember the most necessary and plainest Points of Christian Doctrine’, with only ‘some few favourite young Slaves’ being selected by their owners to be taught to read.<sup>16</sup> This grimly practical approach took recognition of an unavoidable fact: as Johnson correctly pointed out, most slave-holders were immovably opposed to the teaching of literacy. Yet even in this case, most Protestants nevertheless took it as axiomatic that Christianisation had to begin with the ABC. The SPG rejected Johnson’s advice and founded a school for enslaved children in Charleston instead.

Indeed, throughout the various theatres of early modern Protestant missionary activity, a constant theme is that an enormous proportion of the severely limited resources of money, time and attention available were invested in vernacular printing, especially of the Bible – usually without any sustained attention apparently given to the question of who might actually read the books thus produced. Ireland sets the stage. An Irish New Testament was printed in 1602, with some fanfare but to no very dramatic effect. A translation of the Old Testament was completed but not printed in the 1630s, and in the 1670s the manuscript fell into the hands of the visionary Irish Protestant scientist and missionary entrepreneur, Robert Boyle, who, in the face of formidable practical and political obstacles, oversaw the first printing of a complete Irish Bible. Boyle spent over £700 of his own money on it, partly because he intended to distribute as many copies as he could for free.<sup>17</sup> In the face of such generosity it seems churlish to point out the obvious fact: there was not much apparent demand for these books, nor is there much evidence that merely providing a few hundred Irish Bibles could or did move the needle for the island’s Gaelic population very far towards Protestantism. In fact, this phenomenon – the declared intention to distribute vernacular books for free, without much clear guidance as to quite how – is quite widespread, and ought to be a warning sign that these may be books that no-one particularly wanted to read.

Yet the question was scarcely asked. A generation later, another enthusiast for Irish Bible-printing does seem at least to have wondered whether his project was likely to be effective. John Richardson wrote to an American acquaintance, Jeremy Dummer, to ask him ‘what Success the Translation of the Bible into the *Indian* Language had among the *Indian* Natives of *America*.’ Dummer was able to assure him that ‘it had this happy Effect, that the *Indians* thereby arriv’d to such a Competency of Christian Knowledge, that their Ministers were able to preach profitably, and their People to understand and prize the Doctrine of the Gospel.’<sup>18</sup>

This was, to put it mildly, an exaggeration. What was not in doubt was the scale of the effort in New England. John Eliot had begun overseeing printing in Algonquin in Massachusetts in 1654, and in 1658 he procured a new press and some extra type from England. This was the beginning of an extraordinary surge of Algonquin publication in the later seventeenth century, the production of what came to be known as the Indian Library. We know that some 4,000 New Testaments and at least 3,000 full Bibles were produced, in addition to single Gospels and psalters. The 1663 Algonquin

<sup>15</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, USPG Papers 2: Committee Minutes, vol. 7 (1735-8), pp. 135-7.

<sup>16</sup> [Robert Robertson], *A letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London, from An Inhabitant of His Majesty’s Leeward-Caribbee-Islands* (London: for J. Wilford, 1730), ESTC T011660, pp. 25-6.

<sup>17</sup> R.E.W. Maddison, ‘Robert Boyle and the Irish Bible’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 41 (1958), pp. 81-101, at p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Richardson, *A short history*, p. 68. Such references to ‘the *Indian* language’, apparently not recognising that North America had a great many mutually incomprehensible languages, were all too common even deep into the eighteenth century.

Bible was the first complete Bible printed in the New World. More than half of the *total* amount of paper used by the colonial printing press at Cambridge, Massachusetts before 1685 was used to print Algonquin Bibles.<sup>19</sup> It was funded by waves of enthusiastic public donations from England, cheered on by the government of King Charles II, which encouraged its subjects to give generously towards what it called 'soo Costly and yet necessary a Work as y<sup>e</sup> perfecting y<sup>e</sup> Translation and printing of y<sup>e</sup> Bible'.<sup>20</sup>

Costly, certainly: but necessary? There were, probably, more Native American converts than there were Bibles printed for them, but it is a close-run thing. Eliot's mission centred around a group of so-called 'praying towns', Christian settlements for Native peoples. In 1674, close to the praying towns' peak prosperity, the ones in the Plymouth Colony had a total population of 497 souls, of whom 142 were said to be able to read their own language (and nine could read English). The praying towns in the Massachusetts Bay colony were somewhat larger but not by an order of magnitude. So, a few hundred readers; a few thousand Bibles.<sup>21</sup>

The same pattern persisted into the next century, when some of the SPG's American missionaries devoted substantial resource and effort to vernacular print. William Andrews, the SPG's missionary to the Mohawks in the New York colony in the 1710s, had the Society pay to print hundreds of copies of a series of Mohawk books, even though overseeing the printing in New York City kept him away from his mission for months at a time. These books were being printed for people who were only on the very verge of literacy; Andrews had recently confidently promised the Society that 'some of the Indians will begin to write in a short time'. Even that proved optimistic. Two years later he was reporting that 'there is not above six or seven that come to learn their own language and they come so seldom that they make but little of it'. When he eventually abandoned the mission in 1719, he left a stash of printed books with five children, a boy and four girls, which, he said, 'are all that can read', and the rest with a clergyman in New York. He indignantly denied the reports that the texts he had produced were unintelligible, claiming that they were in a creole understood by all of the Iroquois nations.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, one of the most important long-term consequences of Protestant missionary projects in many parts of the world has been the codification and printing of previously non-written languages, with dramatic and often broadly beneficial effects in many cultural contexts. Vernacular print could be a powerful and perhaps even a necessary tool. What is peculiar about these early efforts is not the ambition to print vernacular Scripture per se, but the investment of disproportionate time and money into flooding printed texts into a community before there were enough potential readers for even a fraction of them, and before the language of those texts could be properly modulated.

Similar problems emerged in other parts of the world, even when dealing with more literate cultures. The 1629 Malay edition of John's Gospel, the 1668 Malay New Testament, and the 1731-4 complete Malay Bible, all printed in the Netherlands, were all dogged by unresolved problems over the difference between 'low', vernacular Malay and the 'high' literary version; the script, too, was

<sup>19</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 34-5.

<sup>20</sup> National Archives CO 5/903, f. 10r (CSP Colonial 2 no. 319).

<sup>21</sup> Lepore, *The Name of War*, pp. 35-7. For a moderately more optimistic view of the impact of Eliot's Bibles, arguing that 'at least some of the books' show signs of use, see Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians 1620-1675* (revised edn, New York: Norton, 1979. Cf. first edn. 1965), p. 279.

<sup>22</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, USPG Papers 2: Committee Minutes, vol. 2 (1711-14), p. 353; vol. 3 (1714-18), pp. 95, 112, 196-8; vol. 4 (1718-24), pp. 79-80.

disputed, with the 1731-4 edition being printed in the Latin alphabet, with a version in Arabic script following a quarter of a century later.<sup>23</sup> By that time, missionary printing in the Arabic language itself had a long pedigree. Robert Boyle, again, paid for an Arabic translation of Grotius' *De veritate religionis Christianae* to be printed in 1660, in the hope that amongst the Muslims there might be 'some well-meaning People, who would entertain favourable Thoughts of Christianity, were they sufficiently made acquainted with the Reasonableness and Excellency of it'. English merchants undertook 'to disperse, as discreetly as they could, as many Books as should be put into their Hands', and a number of copies were apparently distributed in Aleppo. But an English ambassador in Constantinople in 1668 believed that not a single copy had reached that city; nor did he think there was any purpose in the exercise, since Muslims' 'prodigious and intolerable Obstinacy and Pride, had hardended them against all Conviction, and rendered them impenetrable to any Argument'. An enthusiastic retrospective account of the project was forced to admit that 'after all possible Enquiry, we are able to give but a slender Account' of its success.<sup>24</sup> Also in the 1660s, rival Dutch and English efforts to produce a Turkish-language New Testament resulted in an edition printed in Oxford in 1664-6, again largely paid for by the ever-generous Robert Boyle. The translator's ambition was for them to be 'generallie dispersed'. And again, according to the most careful modern scholar of the project, 'almost nothing is known about the ultimate fate of these volumes'.<sup>25</sup> Several other printing projects aimed at the Levant followed over the next few decades, mostly aimed principally at Eastern rite Christians rather than Muslims, but with equally meagre results. An Arabic edition of the English Book of Common Prayer shipped to Aleppo in 1698 did at least alarm the local Jesuits, who took care to acquire and destroy as many of the copies as they could. The project's chief backer, the royal secretary Henry William Ludolf, admitted to London's Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1700 that the book 'did not meet wth so kind a reception there as could be wished'. Ludolf's next initiative, a 1703 edition of the New Testament in modern Greek which enjoyed the public support of both English archbishops and which cost £150, was ordered burned by the patriarch of Constantinople.<sup>26</sup>

And yet the enthusiasm for Protestant print for the Middle East persisted. In 1720, the SPCK received a proposal, implicitly backed by Athanasius III (Paul Dabbas), the recently enthroned Orthodox patriarch of Antioch, to produce an Arabic New Testament and Psalter for the use of Eastern Christian communities. A pamphlet was quickly printed to stir up interest in the proposal, insisting 'how useful a better Edition of the *Arabick* New Testament would be ... what happy Effects, by the Blessing of GOD, it might produce among those several Nations, and how readily it would be received by them'. But the numerous witnesses who offered their support to the project, some of them men with long Levantine experience, struggled to offer any actual evidence of this. Or rather, the evidence that they cited – the lack of any market for books in the region; the fact that Dabbas

<sup>23</sup> Karel Steenbrink, 'The arrival of Protestantism and the consolidation of Christianity in the Moluccas 1605-1800', in Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (eds), *A History of Christianity in Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 127-8; Olaf Schumann, 'Christianity and Colonialism in the Malay World', in Susan Schröter (ed.), *Christianity in Indonesia: Perspectives of Power* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Pococke, *The theological works of the learned Dr. Pocock* (London: for Leonard Twells, 1740), ESTC T147484, pp. 56-8.

<sup>25</sup> Noel Malcolm, 'Comenius, Boyle, Oldenburg, and the Translation of the Bible into Turkish', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 87 (2007), pp. 327-362, at p. 359.

<sup>26</sup> Nabil Matar, 'The Protestant Reformation through Arab Eyes, 1517-1698', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72 (2019), pp. 788-9; Daniel L. Brunner, *Halle Pietists in England: Anthony William Boehm and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 157-8.

had had a printing press in Aleppo for a decade and a half but had never used it even for liturgical texts – seems in fact to demonstrate that there was no clamour for vernacular Christian Scripture in the Ottoman Empire. Samuel Lisle, who had been the English merchants' chaplain in Aleppo until the previous year, did claim that literacy was widespread in eastern Christian communities, which was a start; but most supporters struggled to move beyond the claim, which appeared to them self-evident, that 'the distributing a large Quantity of Testaments in *Arabick* among those *Eastern* Christians, who are generally poor, must be a signal Benefit'. Behind this, once again, lay the sly and almost unspoken hope that 'as to the *Mahometans* ... if some Copies of this Edition happen to fall into the Hands of the Learned among them, they may conceive better Thoughts of the Christian Religion than now they have'. And once again, the least well-developed part of this scheme was the plans for distributing the books once printed. The only suggestion was to send them in batches to the English consul in Aleppo, 'who, with the Assistance of the Chaplain, might easily order and regulate the dispersing of them'. The support and cooperation of Patriarch Athanasius and his peers was taken for granted, and his unofficial representative was paid £24 annually by the SPCK to oversee the project. In fact, however, Athanasius' overture to the SPCK seems to have been merely tactical, a search for allies against the rival faction in the Syrian church who were reaching out to Rome: he was well-enough informed about Protestants to know what sort of venture they could be seduced into. After his death in 1724 his successors consolidated Orthodox control over the patriarchate, and felt no need to resume his dalliances with western schismatics. It was on the basis of this quarter-baked plan that the SPCK set out to raise an eye-watering £2,400 to print 8,000 copies, a sum which included the forging of a new set of Arabic type.<sup>27</sup>

Remarkably, the Society not only stuck to the plan following the death of its sponsor but overshot the mark. By 1737 the SPCK had produced over 6,000 Arabic Psalters, 10,000 Arabic New Testaments and 5,000 Arabic catechisms, at a total cost of some £3,000, by far the single most expensive project the Society had ever undertaken. And then they sat and mouldered in storage. Many were sent to Aleppo for distribution, where to the best of our knowledge they sank without trace. Others were sent to SPCK correspondents in Russia, Persia and India, where we may presume demand for Arabic-language Christian materials was weak. But in the 1770s well over half of the New Testaments and catechisms were still sitting in the Society's warehouses in London awaiting anyone who might be interested in them. Hundreds of copies from that same print run were being distributed by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1822. We might contrast this with the SPCK's Welsh Bible project of the 1740s, which, on the back of the first wave of Welsh Methodism, saw an edition of 15,000 copies sell out within a matter of weeks.<sup>28</sup>

Thoe SPCK's Arabic books were printed in England and shipped out, but a common aspiration of early missionaries was to have a printing press on site, as Eliot had in Massachusetts. The Dutch in Formosa aspired to this, trying (vainly) to persuade a sceptical East India Company

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<sup>27</sup> [Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge], *An Extract of Several Letters relating to the Great Charity and Usefulness of Printing the New Testament and Psalter in the Arabick Language* (London: J. Downing, 1721), ESTC T122872, esp. pp. 7-9, 13-14, 16-17, 22-3, 27; Andrew J. Lake, 'The First Protestants in the Arab World: the contribution to Christian mission of the English Aleppo chaplains (1597-1782)', *Melbourne School of Theology PhD thesis (2015)*, pp. 132-7.

<sup>28</sup> Brunner, *Halle Pietists in England*, pp. 157-61; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *An account of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* (London: J. and W. Oliver, 1773), pp. 8, 11; Lake, 'The First Protestants', pp. 137-8.



(VOC) that to fail to provide vernacular Bibles was popish.<sup>29</sup> The VOC was in general rather more hard-headed about assessing the costs and benefits of vernacular print than were most ministers, and for decades carefully guarded the monopoly over print in the Dutch East which it enjoyed through its press in Batavia. In the 1660s the Dutch Reformed minister in Jaffna had his ambitious plans for vernacular print in Tamil vetoed by the VOC on the grounds that 'to propagate Christianity by reading and writing ... will prove both tedious and chargeable to the Company'. A press was eventually set up in Colombo in 1737, by which time there was a broad enough Protestant educational system that its products had a ready market.<sup>30</sup> An earlier South Asian Protestant press was again a gift of the SPCK, supporting the Danish-German mission to Tranquebar in modern Tamil Nadu. In 1710-11, the Society found a schoolmaster at the German school in London named Jonas Fincke who was willing to go. He was given a press and a crash course in operating it. Unfortunately the ship was captured by the French and taken to Rio de Janeiro. The SPCK had to pay £150 in ransom; Fincke was then drowned in an accident en route home. The press finally reached Tranquebar in 1713, and an English soldier in Madras turned out to have some competence in printing and operated it for the missionaries. A Tamil tract was produced in the first year, and in 1715 the Society sent fresh equipment and no less than three printers. One can certainly admire their persistence and determination; indeed the Tamil mission comes better out of this story than some of the other contemporary projects we have considered, since many of the Tamil Christian texts that were produced over the course of the eighteenth century were praised by Tamil scholars, and were used to grow an indigenous and literate Christian community steadily from the ground up.<sup>31</sup> Even so, the almost absolute priority given on securing a printing press is striking.

One clue to the reasons for that priority comes from the fact that, when the Tranquebar missionaries proudly produced a printed Tamil New Testament in 1715, they sent a copy to Cotton Mather in Boston. Mather was in fact something of a sceptic of vernacular missionary print, at least in his own context, on the grounds of linguistic prejudice: he famously argued that 'the best thing we can do for our Indians is to Anglicise them', on the grounds that their language was inextricably linked to their 'other Savage Inclinations'. But he greeted this Tamil text, in a script he could of course not begin to decipher, with considerable excitement.<sup>32</sup> In the same spirit, a visitor to the

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Heylen, 'Dutch Language Policy and Early Formosan Literacy (1624-1662)', in Ku Wei-ying (ed.), *Missionary Approaches and Linguistics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), pp. 229-30; William Campbell (ed.), *An Account of Missionary Success in the Island of Formosa: Published in London in 1650 and Now Reprinted with Copious Appendices* (London: Trübner & Co, 1889), pp. 113-16.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Baldaeus, 'A True and Exact Description of the Most Celebrated East-India Coasts of Malabar and Coromandel, as also of the Isle of Ceylon', in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (4 vols., London: for Awnsham and John Churchill, 1704), ESTC T097848, III, p. 811; Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, 'The Beginnings of the Sinhalese Printing Press', in Leelananda Prematilleke, Karthigesu Indrapala and J.E. van Lohuizen-De Leeuw (eds.), *Studies in South Asian Culture VII: Senarat Paranavitana Commemoration Volume* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 19, 283; Jurrien van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster: Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690-1795* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhof, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> W.K. Lowther Clarke, *A History of the S.P.C.K.* (London: SPCK, 1959), pp. 65-6; Brunner, *Halle Pietists in England*, pp. 105-6; Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 148-50.

<sup>32</sup> Cotton Mather, *India Christiana. A discourse, delivered unto the Commissioners, for the Propagation of the Gospel among the American Indians which is accompanied with several instruments relating to the glorious design of propagating our holy religion, in the Eastern as well as the Western, Indies* (Boston: B. Green, 1721), ESTC W020523, pp. 75-87; Donald E. Meek, 'Scottish Highlanders, North American Indians and the SSPCK: Some Cultural Perspectives', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 23 (1989), pp. 378-396, at pp. 384-5.

Dutch East India Company's Amsterdam headquarters in around 1690 was proudly shown 'the several Books of Divinity, Printed in the Indian Language, that are sent to the several Colonies of the Company'.<sup>33</sup> One of those books will have been the Taiwanese edition of Matthew's Gospel. The fact that that book was printed with a Dutch-language preface, addressed 'To the Godly and Discreet Reader', indicates a dual market: it was not only a practical missionary tool but also an exotic curiosity and a prestige object for its sponsors.<sup>34</sup> Eliot's Algonquin Bible of 1663 laboured this point. It has two title-pages, the second in Algonquin, but the first in English; and it includes an English-language dedication to King Charles II, asserting the novelty of the project and the sponsors' commitment to the cause. The Spanish, the preface declared, had sent gold and silver home from the Americas; they chose instead to 'Present this, and other Concomitant Fruits of our poor endeavours to Plant and Propagate the Gospel here ... a Nobler Fruit ... of *Columbus* his Adventure.'<sup>35</sup> And whatever indigenous readers it may or may not have found, it was certainly valued in these terms. In 1689 a Dutch Reformed minister in New York named Henry Selyns bought a copy of Eliot's Algonquin Bible and sent it as a gift to the classis of Amsterdam, 'in order thus to give you a memento of my membership of your Classis for sixteen years. It shows how God, in order to convert the savages, speaks to them in their own language.' Unfortunately, the outbreak of war meant that the book was lost in transit, although Selyns enquired after it anxiously – it had not been cheap. Undaunted, when peace was concluded in 1698, he bought another copy, 'that you may see how God teaches in a savage tongue for the conversion of the Indians, and in order to bring Japheth into the tents of Shem'. For Selyns, it seems, the mere existence of the book demonstrated that it was achieving its goal – even if in fact unsold copies were being sent as curios to the Netherlands.<sup>36</sup>

It was, at the very least, clear that those who produced such texts were proud of them, and proud of them as achievements *in themselves*, not simply as means to a conversionary end. Eliot described the Algonquin Bible as the *fruit* of his efforts to propagate the Gospel in America, not (as we might expect) the seed of such efforts: the book itself was an end product. It is of course well-known that the ostensible and the real audiences of a text are often not the same. This may apply particularly to new ventures into print across language barriers. In 1627 the mystical Flemish merchant Joan Aventroot wrote an open letter to the people of Peru, urging them to convert to Protestantism and revolt against the Spanish; the text was translated into Spanish and an edition of some 8,000 copies was mooted. But the planned Dutch expedition to the Pacific was delayed and there is no evidence a single copy ever reached the New World. Eventually a Dutch translation was published. That, perhaps, was always its true audience.<sup>37</sup>

Fostering an indigenous print culture, and if necessary creating standardised written forms of previously oral and plural languages in order to do so, has been a regular part of Protestant

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<sup>33</sup> William Carr, *An accurate description of the United Netherlands, and of the most considerable parts of Germany, Sweden, & Denmark containing a succinct account of what is most remarkable in these countries, and necessary instructions for travellers* (London: for Timothy Childe, 1691), Wing C361, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell (ed.), *The Gospel of St Matthew in Formosan*, p. xx.

<sup>35</sup> *The Holy Bible: containing the Old Testament and the New. Translated into the Indian language, and ordered to be printed by the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New-England, at the charge, and with the consent of the Corporation in England for the Propagation of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson, 1663), Wing B2748, ff. A3r-4r.

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Hastings (ed.), *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York*, vol. II (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1901), pp. 1007, 1233.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Schmidt, 'Exotic Allies: The Dutch-Chilean Encounter and the (Failed) Conquest of America', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 52 (1999), pp. 440-473, at pp. 457-60.

missionary efforts down to the present, and over the long term its effects have been culturally transformative. The faith that the early Protestant missionaries had in the power of print was not wholly misplaced. However, the dominant picture from this early period is not the VOC's pattern of vernacular print being deployed in a shrewdly cautious fashion, but rather its being poured into every theatre of operation in the conviction that it represented the universal solution to the missionary problem. One could summarise the early Protestant missionary method as: if you print it, they will come. Or to use a different image: they were not so much putting the cart before the horse as simply building an elaborate and expensive cart in the confident hope that a horse who wished to be put in harness would appear sooner or later, proudly displaying their cart to their admiring sponsors and sometimes scarcely noticing that it was not clocking up very much actual mileage.

We should not be too hard on these early Protestant missionaries. Of course they approached their task with preconceptions derived from their former experience and their underpinning convictions: that is what people do. The significance of the quixotic ventures this essay has surveyed is that, if we are to understand the course of early Protestant missionary history, it needs to be framed, not as the beginning of a new historical subject but as the continuation of an old one. As the charmingly unrealistic tale told in *The conversion of an Indian* suggests, we are better seeing these cross-cultural encounters not as the early history of Protestant global missions, but as a continuation of the drama and the logic of the Protestant Reformation.