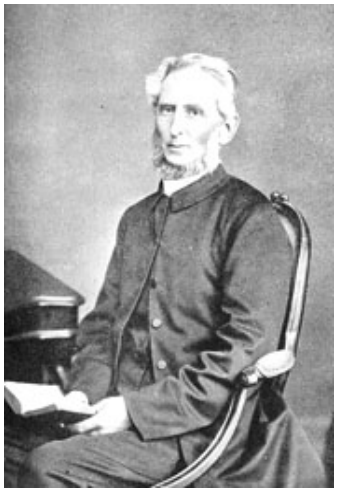
Thomas Valpy French



Not many have heard of this man. Stephen Neil, who wrote 'A History of Christian Missions', described him as one of the most distinguished of all workers. His legacy of communicating the Gospel to Muslims is precious.

His Life: 1825-1891

Thomas was born on January 1, 1825. He was the first child of an Anglican clergyman. His father, Peter French, was the pastor of a church in the English midland town of Burton-on-Trent. This was before the industrial revolution when it was a small country town. Thomas had four brothers and two sisters. He liked walking with his father to visit the various villages where there were church schools. This was before the days of public education. Even as a child he wrote sermons and preached them to his nurse! Occasionally Christian workers from Africa and Asia visited their home. This stimulated Thomas' interest and he learned to pray for the work in those places.

Thomas was sent to Rugby – one of England's most famous boarding schools where the game of rugby was invented. Dr. Matthew Arnold was the headmaster. Thomas was better at academic work than sport. In 1843 he won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. Three years later he got a First in Classics. Two years later he was appointed as a fellow (equivalent of Assistant Professor) to an Oxford college at the age of 23!

In 1849 he became an Anglican minister helping in St Ebbe's Church in Oxford. Later one of Thomas' students wrote that nobody would have predicted that the quiet scholar, without doubt clever and able, would one day develop into the heroic apostolic figure that he became. At Oxford he appeared to others a bit aloof and very serious.

H.W. Fox was an Anglican who had started the Telegu Mission in South India. He came to speak at Oxford churches urging young men to join him in South India. He realised Thomas' growing influence in Oxford University and urged him to go to India. Thomas decided to stay in England. A short while later Fox died prematurely and this made Thomas re-think the question. A message by Bishop Wilberforce clinched the matter. Thomas decided to dedicate himself to missions and applied to CMS.

Before he sailed to India in 1850 he needed to attend to another matter. He was attracted to a lady he had met at Oxford – Miss Mary Janson. Twice her parents refused permission for them to get engaged. They didn't want their daughter to go to India. Just before Thomas sailed, her father withdrew his objections and they got engaged. Thomas left without her. She followed a year later and they got married in Calcutta at the end of 1852. Throughout his life she was a support to him. They had eight children and their educational needs often caused them long periods of separation.

Five Pioneer Works

1. The Founding of St. John's College Agra 1851-58

Thomas started this secondary school for upper class Muslim boys together with a colleague, Edward Stuart. Agra was largely a Muslim city and was then the seat of government for north west India. Thomas threw himself into learning languages. He became fluent in seven: Urdu, Punjabi, Persian, Arabic, Pushtu, Kashmiri and Sindhi. As well as his leadership and administrative responsibilities, Thomas always found time for evangelistic tours in and around the district of Agra. He saw a number of Muslims come to faith. In 1858 he baptised seven adult believers from a Muslim background including two lecturers in Persian and Arabic.

It was during his time in Agra that he joined Karl Pfander in the famous public, religious debate in Agra in 1854. Tensions were very high politically and religiously in northern India – the area that erupted in 1857 with what the British Raj called The Great Mutiny. The Moguls were still in nominal power in Agra. Indians call this The War of Liberation. Much of the cause of the problem was due to

the way that British administrators and businessmen despised Indian culture and religions. Thomas came under severe criticism in a British Raj newspaper for championing ethical principles that were Biblical, but were also found in the Vedas, Grunths and in the Quran and Hadith.

He was caught up in The War of Liberation in Agra in 1857 and, with other Indian Christians and British subjects, he and his family took refuge in Agra Fort. Much of the rest of Agra was burned. Thomas' fourth child was born during the siege of the fort. The buildings of St. John's College were ruined. After the fighting ended, Thomas started to rebuild the college. His health began to fail – very bad dysentery, a severe fall off his horse etc. It seemed a good time to go back to England for a break. The college in Agra is still going.

2. Pioneer development in the North West Frontier (now Pakistan) 1862-68

The Founding of Derajat Mission

Thomas' next pioneer development was the founding of the Derajat Mission together with Robert Bruce who later developed work in Iran.

When the British Raj annexed the Punjab in 1849, a number of the military and civil administrators were fine evangelicals – John and Henry Lawrence, Herbert Edwards, Robert Montgomery and many others. These urged Thomas to start work in "the Derajat" (all the land west of the Indus Valley including the North West Frontier Province, Quetta and Baluchistan as well as the northern areas like Gilgit and the passes into China). All these peoples were totally unreached with the Gospel and nearly all were Muslim.

Thomas threw himself into learning Pushtu when he arrived at Karachi. On the slow boat up to Multan on the Indus he began preaching to the crew! Then he travelled by camel from Multan to Dera Ismail Khan. Sir Robert Montgomery's advice was, "***Study the language and make yourselves masters of it. Till you know the language, you will be weak. It is uphill work at first, but you have all Central Asia before you. Be very discrete in all you do***".

Thomas decided that, as much as possible, he would cut himself off from Europeans and live, dress and eat as much as possible with the nationals. He spent the first six months travelling in this huge area. He got a lot of fever and he was found collapsed and unconscious in the desert. By God's grace he was brought to good medical treatment. Permanent work, which is still going on today, was begun in Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan. The great difficulty was to recruit personnel to man these hospitals.

Eventually ill health caused Thomas to withdraw and go back to England to his family. This is what he wrote concerning Afghans and Pushtuns: "***After so short an experience, it is premature to hazard an opinion as to the probable results of missions to Afghans. The wide diffusion of the tenets of Sufism, which number 12 different sects (tariqa), has induced a free-thinking spirit among them which, though not favourable to depth of conviction, yet renders them disposed to hear, to tolerate and in some even to examine. I think I have discovered traces also of a higher view of the character and work of Christ than is common among Muslims. I felt a pang of deep regret at being withdrawn from that work. It has begun in great weakness, but under prayerful auspices and the highest and most scriptural principles. 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.***"

3. The Founding of the St. John's Divinity School, Lahore 1869

This new school was for training men to be pastors **and** training them as workers to return to secular work and have an impact in those spheres. It took quite a lot of time to convince other Christian workers of the need for such a school. Where would the students come from? In the end a site was bought in Mahan Singh Bagh, Lahore. Today most of the site is gardens, but some of the buildings still stand. Thomas wrote this: "***What we want for this school is that it should be a house of prayer – a home of prayerful, simple Bible students; a place where earnest intercession goes up night and day for the growth of Christ's Kingdom.***" They started with four students. The studies consisted of church/missionary history, general history, doctrine, Christian apologetics, Biblical exegesis and Islamics. The school started in November 1870. By the end of the year there were 10 students. The next year there were 13 and in the third year there were 20.

In the first year there were five baptisms, including an Arabic teacher and his wife, as a result of the ministry of the students. Thomas felt that the growth of the church among Muslims depended on people of high calibre being active for Jesus in every department of secular life. The wives of the students also had to study at the school.

In 1872 Thomas' health deteriorated. He admitted that some of his lectures were given while he was writhing in pain. He worked on against the advice of doctors. His mission, CMS, tried to recall him back to England. He refused and kept teaching for a few more years. He was well aware of missionary failure and saw that the evangelisation of Muslims was best done by well-trained, well-educated Believers from a Muslim background.

Evangelism was a weekly part of the curriculum and in the holidays both staff and students divided into teams and went on longer evangelistic treks.

Interestingly, the United Bible Training Centre in Gujranwala and the Open Theological School in Lahore both derive their basic principles of education from Thomas' ideas.

4. The First Bishop of Lahore 1878-87

In 1813 the Anglican Church founded the diocese of Calcutta. One of its first bishops was Reginald Heber wrote that great hymn, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty'.

The diocese was huge. It included South Africa, most of Asia and Australia! In 1877 a new diocese was formed called the diocese of Lahore. It was still quite big. It included all of north west India (what is now Pakistan, Kashmir, Punjab and Delhi). It also included the countries surrounding the Gulf and Iran.

Thomas was everyone's choice to be the first Bishop of Lahore. Technically he was an appointee of the British Raj with the task of ministering to expatriate Anglicans. Thomas saw himself primarily as an evangelist and church planter among Muslims. He had a cathedral built in Lahore. It looked very 'Early English' in style. In other towns, such as Peshawar, the Anglican Church was adapted to look like a mosque. I think the Afghan war of 1879-1880 helped Thomas to see the wisdom of this.

The passion of Thomas' heart was not buildings, but the lack of workers. He wrote; "**My most anxious concern of all is that it has not pleased God to grant me a group of men mighty in word and deed for pulling down the strongholds of sin and planting and building up churches. What are walls without words of power, love and truth re-echoing around them?**"

Being a bishop frustrated Thomas because of the enormous amount of administrative work and the fund raising that was required. Seven new Anglican churches were built in Lahore by Thomas. Others were built in Peshawar, Mardan, Muree, Rawalpindi, Abbotabad and Bannu. He had 34 pastors including two Indians. He wanted to appoint more lay people.

In 1887 he appointed an Archdeacon to take over much of the administration. He strongly encouraged women to get involved in ministry. He also started a Christian school in Muree. He spent a great deal of his time travelling in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan (Kabul and Kandahar). In 1882 he spent some months visiting Iran (Bushire, Shiraz, Isfahan, Qum and Tehran). In 1883, in Iran, he spoke to workers. This is what he said, "**If we would win these Muslim lands for Christ, we must die for them**".

After 10 years, Thomas was exhausted and ill. He was 63 years old. People feared he would die if he kept up his incessant travelling on evangelistic tours. The Archbishop of Canterbury was very reluctant to accept Thomas' resignation, but he finally agreed. So Thomas resigned, leaving Karachi in January 1888. He went back to England.

5. Starting work in Arabia 1888-91

The final phase of Thomas' ministry was in Arabia. He sailed for Bushire from Karachi in January 1888. From Bushire he travelled to Baghdad up the Gulf and then by river boat. He wrote to his daughter, "**Medical missions seem the one legal and unforbidden mode of reaching Muslims**". He then travelled to Syria and Lebanon and stayed some while in Beirut. He noted the need for many more personnel. On his travels he usually stayed in local inns, preferring to live among the people rather than with diplomats or missionaries. This enabled him to talk to people about Jesus.

Finally, he made his way to Istanbul. He wrote a booklet: "Notes on Travel". This outlined a strategy for this area. Then he set out for England arriving four months later. He was meant to retire but he found it impossible to do so. He spoke frequently seeking to send out others to the Muslim World. After a year in England, he started to prepare himself to go again, sensing that his gifts and abilities were best used in the Muslim World. He prayed about Tunis and about Cairo. CMS thought he was too old and worn out. But he remembered Henry Martyn's Arabic studies and his attempt to translate the New Testament into Arabic and Arabia came strongly on his heart.

He did visit Tunis and Cairo. In Cairo he met the young Samuel Zwemer who also had a vision for Arabia. They travelled together down the Red Sea, visiting and doing evangelism in Jeddah and as far as Aden. Finally Thomas reached Muscat (Oman) on February 8, 1891. He settled in Mutrah three miles from Muscat. He wrote to his wife, **"My Afghan experiences came nearest to this, but I think this beats all!"** He tried to go up into the mountains and over into the desert, but wild tribes and no roads made it very difficult. He saw a carpenter come to faith. He reported a happy morning preaching to a number of lepers and wondered if some of them would form the first church in Oman.

Thomas saw himself as a doorkeeper opening the door to Arabia for others to enter. A few years later Peter Zwemer and others arrived in Muscat and they did start a work among lepers. They built a hospital for them and some did come to faith.

In May 1891 he set out on an evangelistic tour to go to a little town called Seeb 28 miles north west of Mutrah. (The University of Oman and the international airport are there today.) From there he planned to go to Nizwa up in the mountains "To prepare the way for the Lord". But he was recovering from fever and rather weak. He left for Seeb on the afternoon of the May 6 in a fishing boat. He arrived May 8 and began early in the morning to preach and give out books. By midday it was very hot and Thomas went to sleep in a date grove. He became unconscious. People poured water over him and he regained consciousness. The next day he found a fishing boat to take him to Muscat. On arrival in Muscat, he was taken to the British Residency. Thomas was unconscious again with extreme exhaustion and he died on May 14. A funeral was held that evening with a few Christians at a little cemetery on the seashore in a cove near Muscat.

A Punjabi daily paper wrote this about Thomas, **"He was indeed a saintly character, utterly self-denying and unworldly. He was single hearted, devout and humble. The fire of enthusiasm for the propagation of the Gospel burned as brightly in his heart in those last lonely days in Muscat, as it did when he turned his back on Oxford and all it offered to give himself for India."**

The grave is still there. On either side of the gravestone there are verses from the Bible engraved in English and in Arabic.

"Truly, truly I say to you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit."

"The Son of Man came not to be served to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Thomas Valpy French D.D.
Entered into rest May 14, 1891
First missionary to Muscat, Oman