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The Vision of a Christian Higher Education for India: 200 Years of Serampore College History

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The Vision of a Christian Higher Education for India: 200 Years of Serampore College History¹

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ABSTRACT

The two hundred years of Serampore College history have been marked by a number of ambiguities that can be traced back to the vision of its founders. The College was intended to be an institution that would train Christian Indians as missionaries to their own people – yet it was also committed from the outset to the admission of non-Christian students. The original curriculum was to be based on Sanskrit learning with teaching delivered in Bengali, but increasingly student demand pushed the College towards an emphasis on English-medium teaching. The vision of the College was an ecumenical one from the beginning, but in practice the Baptist Missionary Society found few partners willing to shoulder the burden of an expensive institution. Serampore aimed to teach both Christian theology and European science in a synthesis that proved hard to maintain in a more secular age. Despite these challenges, the College has survived and made a lasting contribution to theological education in India.

KEYWORDS

India; Serampore College; Baptist Missionary Society; theological education; William Carey; Joshua Marshman; John Clark Marshman; Lesslie Newbigin.

I have chosen to begin the story, not at the beginning in 1818, but over 150 years later, in 1970, at a turbulent period in the history of Serampore College. Student unrest was endemic. The great imbalance in numbers between the large but under-resourced arts and science departments and the tiny yet historically privileged theological department was problematic. There were practical difficulties in defining the appropriate relationship between the Serampore College Council (the ultimate governing authority, located in India since 1948), the Senate (set up in 1918 to

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¹ This article was delivered as the opening lecture of the conference commemorating the bicentenary of Serampore College, held at Regents Park College, Oxford, 19-21 October 2018.

represent the interests of the whole family of Indian Protestant theological institutions whose degrees are awarded under the authority of the Serampore Charter), and the Faculty (the body that wielded day-to-day executive power).

The Newbigin Commission, 1969-70

These problems led to the appointment in March 1969 of a Commission charged with making recommendations designed to secure a more effective and harmonious operation of the College. The chairman of the five-member Commission was the Presbyterian Lesslie Newbigin, then Bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. The Commission's report, presented to the Council and Senate in January 1970, began with a review of the early history of the College. It is worth quoting at length, for it identifies with some precision what is perhaps the central question raised by the history of Serampore College, to which much of this article will be addressed:

Carey and his colleagues were the heirs of a magnificent cultural synthesis which had shaped Europe for more than one thousand years. It is easy for us to recognize, with the benefit of hindsight, that by the time Carey left the shores of England this synthesis was already on the way to dissolution. But it was this synthesis which shaped the thinking and policy of Carey, as of the other missionary pioneers. They saw truth as one single whole, of which the Bible was the cornerstone. True education was to introduce young minds to this truth as a whole. ... Education was not simply theological education in the sense which the phrase now carries, nor was it 'secular education' with some periods of bible study added. It was an introduction to the truth as a whole, with the Bible at its centre.²

Secularisation, reflected Newbigin in terms that clearly anticipated the preoccupations of his later missiological writings on Western culture, had destroyed this synthesis:

'There is no longer available to the educator any unified world view which can embrace science, the humanities and theology in a single perspective'. This was supremely the case in Europe, but according to Newbigin, Indian Christianity was not exempt from this regrettable erosion of an integrated Christian worldview. He continued:

The Christian Colleges of India have long ago accepted this fact. They have become essentially secular institutions intimately related to the secular universities which are

² Oxford, Regents Park College, Angus Library, Baptist Missionary Society archives, Commission on Serampore College: Report presented to the Council and Senate of Serampore College on 28th January 1970.

the degree-giving authorities. The theological colleges, on the other hand, have developed quite separately, with no organic relation to the other Christian colleges. The only exception to this generalisation is Serampore where, to this day, a theological college remains physically part of an institution teaching secular subjects.³

Newbiggin's poignant observations carried a particular resonance when this paper was first delivered as a lecture at Regent's Park College, which is both a denominational theological college and a constituent part of a large secular university; the same dual identity is true of New College, Edinburgh, where I teach. The irony is that the central recommendation of the 1970 Commission's report was that the theological department of Serampore College should be removed from Serampore to Calcutta (Kolkata), to form a federal theological institution with Bishop's College, Calcutta, then still an Anglican institution. The premises at Serampore would thus be left entirely in the hands of an expanded, and predominantly non-Christian Arts and Science Department. Such a marriage of two theological institutions, it was argued, would lead to a more economical deployment of resources in theological education in Bengal, and would underpin the imminent formation of the Church of North India. Yet, of course, it seemed to imply accepting the permanence of the post-Enlightenment divorce between Christian and secular learning that Newbiggin had identified with his characteristic combination of perception and wistfulness.

The Serampore College Council rejected the main recommendations of the report. Indeed its principal recommendation was so unpopular in Bengal that someone placed a bomb in the College premises as a mark of their disapproval, though this seems an odd way of signalling a desire to keep the College going in its present form. Happily, the bomb failed to explode, and Newbiggin was left to reflect in his autobiography that 'Like the bomb, the report was a failure, and the college authorities were so diligent in destroying all known copies that I doubt if any survive.'⁴ In fact, one does survive in the BMS archives in the Angus Library. Serampore College today retains its Faculty of Theology alongside the much larger Faculty of Arts, Science and Commerce. It is the latter that has an organic relationship to the University of Calcutta, which awarded the College's degrees in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lesslie Newbiggin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1993), 216.

non-theological subjects from 1857 to 1883, and has done so again (with some interruptions) from 1911 onwards. Serampore College and Bishop's College remain as separate theological institutions. The Serampore Royal Charter of 1827, bestowed by Frederick VI of Denmark, empowered the College to award its own degrees without restriction of subject. Indeed it specified that such degrees should be conferred *only* on those students 'that testify their proficiency in Science'. This clause reflected William Carey's personal conviction of the unique apologetic value of scientific knowledge,⁵ but was also broadly typical of the approaches to knowledge taken by eighteenth-century Pietists and their early evangelical successors. The Halle Lutheran mission to Tranquebar, for instance, reproduced August Hermann Franke's emphasis on the empirical study of the natural world as a pathway towards knowledge of the Creator.⁶

The Serampore College Act of 1918 was rather more cautious about scientific learning, prescribing that if the Council wished to award degrees in subjects other than theology, it could do so only to students who had received regular instruction at the College, and if it met standards certified by the state government of Bengal.⁷ In fact, the College did not award any degrees of its own until 1915, and since then has restricted itself to the award of its own degrees in theology. Nevertheless, half a century on from Lesslie Newbigin's report, Serampore College today continues to aspire to exemplify that vision of a unified Christian higher education that he so admired, yet regarded as ultimately unworkable in the context of modern India.

The Purpose of the Founders of Serampore College

So what, more precisely, was the purpose uppermost in the minds of the founders of Serampore College, and what broader reflections might that purpose suggest about what Christian higher education can and should be about? It would be accurate to say that the College was founded by 'the Serampore Trio', but only if we redefine that famous title so that it comprised William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and, *not* William

⁵ W. S. Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore and its College* (Serampore: Serampore College, 1961), 118.

⁶ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, 'Tanjore, Tranquebar, and Halle: European Science and German Missionary Education in the Lives of Two Indian Intellectuals in the Early Nineteenth Century', in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1700* (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, and London: Wm. B. Eerdmans and RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 93-126.

⁷ Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore*, 115.

Ward, but rather Marshman's son John Clark Marshman (1794-1877). Carey and the two Marshmans together formed the first Council of the College. Although William Ward, the third member of the Serampore Trio as conventionally defined, was fully committed to the vision that inspired the College, his role in its foundation was largely restricted to a fund-raising one. He spent the years from 1818 to 1821 in Britain and the United States, raising support for the new institution, and in March 1823, some months after returning to Bengal, died of cholera.

The founders of the College were committed to three closely associated beliefs. First, they believed that the evangelisation of India must lie primarily in the hands of Indian rather than European Christians. The College was from its foundation conceived as a missionary institution for the education of Indian evangelists. As early as 1805 Carey, Marshman, and Ward had reached the conclusion that

It is only by means of native preachers that we can hope for the universal spread of the gospel among this immense continent. Europeans are too few, and their subsistence costs too much, for us ever to hope that they can possibly be the instruments of the universal diffusion of the word amongst so many millions of souls.⁸

Second, the founders of the College were convinced that, in the words of Joshua Marshman, this would require the translation 'into the vernacular dialects of India, as well as into its most learned and most widely extended language [namely Sanskrit], [of] that Sacred Volume which dispelled the darkness of Idolatry throughout Europe'.⁹ Carey's well-known emphasis on the priority of translating the Bible into Sanskrit and the principal vernaculars of the Indian sub-continent led logically to the intent to found an institution that would lay the educational foundations for advanced linguistic study.

Thus, in the third place, the Serampore missionaries were persuaded that high-quality education was necessary to enable Indians to acquire the skills of literacy necessary to read the Bible in their own languages. This third goal required a network of elementary schools, but also much more than that, as the Bristol educationalist, Joshua Marshman, well realised.

⁸ 'Form of Agreement', in *Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 3, pp. 205-6.

⁹ [Joshua Marshman], *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries, Bengal, with an Appendix* (London: Parbury, Allen, & Co, 1828), 18.

Joshua Marshman's educational manifesto

In his *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries, Bengal, with an Appendix* (1827), which is perhaps the fullest early statement of the goals of the College, Joshua Marshman explained that literacy alone could not win what he called the 'sacred warfare' or 'struggle between light and darkness in India'. Indian Christian teachers and evangelists had to be equipped to engage as equals in intellectual combat with learned Hindu pandits over fundamental questions of revelation and morality. This was why a college was so urgently needed: its 'great object' was that of 'effectually promoting the progress of vital Christianity, as revealed in the Scriptures'.¹⁰ 'Vital Christianity', that in-house code word beloved of early nineteenth-century English evangelicals, was linked indissolubly to sound learning in a way that reflected the educational vision of evangelical Calvinists in England in the same period. Marshman then proceeded to outline five specific ways in which the College was intended to fulfill this overall objective.

The first was 'By giving a superior education to the children of Christian natives.'¹¹ Previous missionary efforts, whether by Catholics or by Protestant missions in South India, had, in Marshman's view, paid insufficient attention to this task. Since he described 'the Hindoo system' as resting on 'the most absurd mistakes' in history, geography, and science, sound instruction in these disciplines could be expected to undermine the structures of the religion. Chemistry had what is, to our minds, a surprising role to play in the conceptual battle with Hindu idolatry, for it would demonstrate that even sacred venerated matter was no more than matter:

... as all their objects of worship are formed of matter, the very experiments of this science will tend to shake belief in them altogether. Thus it is, in India especially, that knowledge may be made a most powerful auxiliary to religion, in the gradual dissolution of such a system of idolatry.¹²

It should be noted that chemistry – along with botany and agriculture (both taught by Carey) and geography – was duly an integral feature of the first curriculum of Serampore College. Chemistry was taught by John Mack, the son of an Edinburgh solicitor, and graduate of the University of Edinburgh; he was the first foreign missionary to be supported by Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh. Mack, originally

¹⁰ Ibid., 18-19.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Ibid., 20.

destined for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, had become a Baptist while serving as an usher at a school in Gloucestershire. He went on to study at Bristol Baptist Academy, where William Ward recruited him for the mission when he visited Bristol in 1821. A further brief period of study in Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh was funded directly by the Serampore missionaries.¹³

Although Joshua Marshman shared Carey's confidence in the enlightening function of scientific knowledge, he described the second respect in which the College would assist in the conversion of India as 'far more important'. It would, he believed, impart to future Indian evangelists 'that instruction which may enable them to propagate Christianity in the most effectual manner.' Church history showed that 'Christianity has never taken deep root in any country until it has been propagated by the *natives* themselves.'¹⁴ The task of the College was to ensure that the Indian labourers sent out into the harvest fields were properly equipped for their mission.

The third, fourth, and fifth aspects of the College's missionary purpose were broadly supportive of the second. The College had, third, the potential to develop a class of Indian Christian linguistic scholars, who would become experts in biblical languages as well as their own. Fourth, it would also gradually induce 'natives of weight' to lend their influence to the Christian cause. And, finally, it would raise up a body of Indian Christian scholars who would provide the professorial staff of the College for the future.¹⁵

A synthesis of Hindu sacred literature and Western science

We should note that an important facet of the College's aim to equip Indian Christians for mission to their fellow Indians was to make them adept in the languages and sacred literature of India. Sanskrit was originally to occupy pride of place in the curriculum, both for its importance in understanding the Hindu sacred epics and as a means to mastering a variety of Indian languages. Another original emphasis was that teaching was to be in the Bengali vernacular rather than in English – a feature that was unique to Serampore and distinguished it very clearly from the Anglicizing philosophy that characterized both the Hindu College (now Presidency University),

¹³ Donald Meek, 'Christopher Anderson's Missionaries to India', in Donald E. Meek, ed., *A Mind for Mission: Essays in Appreciation of the Rev. Christopher Anderson (1782-1852)* (Edinburgh: Scottish Baptist History Project), 38-9.

¹⁴ [Marshman], *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries*, 20-21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

established in Calcutta in 1817 by a group of Hindu reformers associated with Ram Mohun Roy, and Alexander Duff's General Assembly's Institution (now Scottish Church College), founded in 1830. Familiarity with Hindu sacred literature held the key to unlocking the Hindu minds that Indian missionaries needed to capture for Christ. The First Report of Serampore College (1819) also made mention of the desirability of teaching *indigenous* scientific knowledge, but this aspiration thereafter sunk without trace.¹⁶ In practice the Serampore missionaries conceived of *Western* scientific knowledge as the divinely appointed means of dispelling Indian ignorance and superstition. Paradoxically, therefore, the College, according to its original prospectus, was to teach an inter-cultural synthesis of 'Eastern Literature and European Science'.¹⁷ Christianity was to draw upon *Indian* tradition for cultural access to minds shaped by Hinduism, but upon *Western* tradition for the intellectual weaponry required to recast those minds in a Christian mould.

A missionary institution that would be open to non-Christian students

It should also be noted that four out of the five dimensions of the purpose of the College were phrased in terms of the training it could provide to Christian students to equip them for their future mission. Yet from the outset the College admitted Hindu and Muslim as well as Christian students. In part this was a reflection of economic necessity. There were too few Protestant Christians of any denomination in Bengal to furnish a student body of the size that was needed to support such a grand institution as Serampore College, and those that did exist, were mostly too poor or lived too far away from Serampore to consider enrolment. But the Serampore missionaries were also convinced that if Christian students were to study alongside Hindu or Muslim ones, they would benefit from a closer acquaintance with the 'character, the feelings, and the prejudices of the heathen among whom they were designed to labour.'¹⁸

For the majority of the BMS Committee in London and equally for some younger BMS colleagues in Calcutta, the admission of non-Christian students represented a deplorable dilution of the missionary character of the institution. In March 1823 the BMS Committee resolved its willingness to support 'pious natives' in

¹⁶ M. A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal, 1793-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 143, 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁸ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859), 1, p. 463.

their education at Serampore for the Christian ministry, but only on the understanding that they were ‘members of approved Baptist Churches’.¹⁹ For Carey and the Marshmans, on the other hand, such egalitarian diversity in the student body was integral to their missionary vision for the College. The 1833 Statutes and Regulations of the College specified that

Students are admissible at the discretion of the Council from any body of Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek, or the Armenian Church, and for the purpose of study, from the Musalman and Hindu youth, whose habits forbid their living in the College. No caste, colour or country shall bar any man from admission.²⁰

This may appear as a remarkable example of religious tolerance for a group of early nineteenth-century Particular Baptists. Nonetheless, we should note that the Statutes equally insisted that all professors and members of the Council must hold throughout their tenure of office to those doctrines of the divinity of Christ and his atoning work that the founders deemed ‘essential to vital Christianity’.²¹ The shadow lay long over the Serampore mission of William Adam, the former BMS missionary from Dunfermline who, under the influence of Ram Mohun Roy, had disastrously succumbed to Unitarian views in 1821: Carey wryly described him as ‘the second Fallen Adam’.²²

The history of Serampore College over two centuries is a sustained narrative of the complex outworking of the ambiguities – critics might say, the inconsistencies – that were inherent in its remarkable original vision. Four dimensions of ambiguity that recur throughout the two hundred years need particular comment in the remainder of this article – language, finance, ecumenicity, and the relationship of theology to secular learning.

Vernacular versus English-medium education

In the realm of language policy, the College faced a difficulty that missionary exponents of vernacular languages have encountered repeatedly. In the colonial context of nineteenth-century Bengal higher education in the Bengali vernacular possessed little vocational attraction. English was the language of opportunity, the

¹⁹ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 147-8.

²⁰ Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore and its College*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²² E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 234.

passport to social and economic advancement. For a missionary strategist coming from outside, the vernacular is a unique cultural resource to be carefully preserved and put to evangelistic purpose. For the native insider, by contrast, a trade or global language beckons as the means to access wider connections, new markets, and more lucrative employment. By the mid-1830s the currents of political and educational change in Bengal under East India Company rule favoured the Anglicist philosophy of Alexander Duff rather than the Orientalist preferences of Serampore. T. B. Macaulay's famous Minute on Indian Education of 1835 marked the final victory of the Anglicist lobby over their Orientalist opponents: English, Macaulay confidently asserted, was 'what is best worth knowing'.²³ Perhaps we should not be too hard on Macaulay: in accordance with his observations in the Minute, most of the students at Serampore indeed showed little appetite for the dead language of Sanskrit. By 1834 the Serampore College Annual Report found it necessary to explain 'the little prominence given to the Sungskrita studies': students were too busy studying English, and European science, to have much time for such abstruse Oriental learning.²⁴ Those few converts to Christianity in nineteenth-century Bengal who did come from a high-caste background had severed themselves by their ritually polluting act of conversion from the customs and social networks of a caste society. It is not surprising that relatively few of them wished to reconnect themselves with their abandoned Hindu heritage by immersing themselves in the study of Sanskritic sacred texts. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, it was abundantly clear that the great majority of converts to Christianity in modern India were coming from sectors of the population for whom Sanskritic Hinduism possessed no attraction at all, since it appeared to be the legitimating source of their oppression – the *avarna* or Dalit peoples on the one hand and the *adivāsi* or tribal peoples on the other.

The challenge of funding the College

The second and probably the most serious challenge that Serampore College has had to face throughout its history is that of funding. The College faced financial problems from the outset. The BMS was inclined to support itinerant preaching, tract

²³ Minute by the Honourable T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February, 1835, paragraph 33: available at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html (accessed 08.02.2019).

²⁴ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 145.

distribution, the support of elementary schools with a strong Christian emphasis, and theological education, but only provided that it was targeted at promising candidates for Baptist pastoral ministry. The grand scale of the imposing College buildings attracted criticism, both from BMS supporters in England and from the group of younger missionaries in Calcutta who became increasingly estranged from their seniors in Serampore. John Clark Marshman in particular attracted scarcely veiled criticism – in the words of Carey’s nephew Eustace – as ‘a pleasant, worldly young gentleman’.²⁵ Issues relating to the high costs of the College lay at the heart of the painful severance of the Serampore Mission from the BMS in 1827. The funding shortfall of the College became more severe following a series of bank failures in Calcutta between 1830 and 1833. Much of its early funding came from the pockets of Carey himself, as a result of his lucrative employment as professor at the East India Company’s Fort William College and Bengali translator for the Presidency government. When these posts were abolished following the bank crashes, Carey’s annual income fell from £1,560 to £600 in eight months, and there was correspondingly less available for the College.²⁶

The separation of Serampore College from the BMS lasted from 1827 to 1855. The College was specifically excluded from the reunion between the Serampore Mission and the Society that was negotiated in 1837. Between 1837 and 1855 the College survived thanks to the considerable personal largesse of John Clark Marshman, who was a newspaper publisher, owner of a paper mill (the first of its kind in India), and holder of the restored post of Bengali translator for the Presidency government. By 1855, when he handed the College back to the BMS, he had contributed more than £30,000 of his own resources to the College, equivalent to over £3 million pounds today.

Over the decades that followed, the Committee and treasurers of the BMS consistently took the view that the entire or even the primary burden of supporting the College ought not to rest on its hard-pressed supporters in Baptist churches in Britain. Influenced by such concerns, in 1883 the then general secretary, Alfred H. Baynes, persuaded the Society to close the arts and science department, sever the link to the University of Calcutta, and run the College purely as a vernacular and low-level

²⁵ Ibid., 148.

²⁶ Ibid., 147.

Christian Training Institution. In 1890 Baynes visited Serampore and formed the more drastic opinion that the BMS should abandon the College altogether: it was too expensive, fatal to the development of self-supporting churches, and fostered among its students a life-style ill-suited to preparing them for ministry among the rural poor of East Bengal. These were uncomfortable but telling criticisms. Baynes was thwarted by a desperate intervention by his predecessor as secretary, Edward Bean Underhill, one-time member of New Road Baptist Church in Oxford. Underhill wrote to all members of the BMS Committee, protesting that to close the College would be a betrayal of the liberal educational ideals of its founders. Although initially he lost the vote, in the long run Underhill's arguments won the day, but the critical financial position of the College continued.²⁷ In the BMS Centenary Year of 1892, the then principal of Serampore, Edward S. Summers, submitted an extensive memorandum to the BMS Committee pleading for £5,000 of the Society's Centenary Fund target of £100,000 to be devoted to urgent repairs and endowment funding for the College. His pleas were unsuccessful: the College was not listed in the seven objects of the Centenary Fund.²⁸

The search for ecumenical partners

By the early years of the twentieth century it had become plain that Underhill's vision of a premier Indian institution of Christian higher education was unsustainable on the basis of BMS funding alone. The most prominent and recurring question in the history of the College in the course of the twentieth century thus became whether a broader range of missions and churches could be induced to lend their support. A new and potentially more hopeful era of ecumenical cooperation for the College began in 1906. In that year a member of faculty of the College, Charles Edward Wilson, succeeded Baynes as general secretary of the BMS, and a new principal of the College was appointed in the person of the Welshman George Howells. Howells, a former student of Regents Park College, was a gifted and markedly progressive theologian who had served previously on the staff of the former General Baptist theological college at Cuttack in Orissa. Under his leadership a higher theological

²⁷ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 158-60.

²⁸ BMS archives, D/GCA 4/3, Edward S. Summers, Memorandum on the Serampore College, 23 August 1892; John Brown Myers (ed.) *The Centenary Volume of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1892*, 2nd edition, (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1892), 339.

department was opened in 1910, and the arts department was revived and re-affiliated to the University of Calcutta in 1911. Seven years later the governance of the College was thoroughly overhauled by the Serampore College Act of 1918. The Council was reconstituted so that Baptists no longer had a guaranteed majority, though they had to comprise at least one-third of the members. A Senate was created, meeting in India, whose membership was to include at least one and no more than three representatives of each of the following denominations: Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and, most notably, Syrian Orthodox.²⁹ By 1920 almost half of the ninety-two Christian students at Serampore were from the Syrian Orthodox tradition. The total student body had grown to 351, the majority of them being Hindus studying in the arts department.

The denominational and indeed religious composition of the College was broadening, but the base of financial support remained perilously narrow, almost entirely within the Baptist denomination. In December 1924 J. H. Oldham, secretary of the International Missionary Council and newly appointed Master of Serampore College, submitted to the Council of the College a hard-hitting paper on 'The Future of Serampore College'. Oldham listed sixteen mission agencies – seven British, seven American, and two Canadian – that might in theory be expected to contribute to the support of Serampore, but concluded that there was little realistic prospect of their doing so: most were already committed to supporting other institutions such as Bishop's College or the United Theological College established at Bangalore in 1910. In the end Oldham could see little alternative than for the poor old BMS to assume 'full responsibility for maintaining Serampore College in full efficiency on its present basis'.³⁰ Amazingly, the BMS Committee in January 1925 accepted the joint recommendation of its India and Ceylon and Finance Sub-Committees that the Society should indeed accept full responsibility for supporting the full range of educational programmes offered at Serampore, and pledged to find an additional £2,500 a year to meet this objective.³¹ If the BMS had foreseen that it was, along with other Protestant mission agencies, about to be plunged into the most acute and prolonged period of financial crisis to have afflicted the Western missionary

²⁹ Stewart (ed.), *The Story of Serampore and its College*, 115.

³⁰ BMS archives, IN/130, [J. H. Oldham], 'The Future of Serampore College: A Review of the Position, Adopted by the Council of Serampore College, December 19th, 1924'.

³¹ BMS archives, General Committee Minutes, 21 January 1925, pp. 9-10.

movement in the twentieth century, it would surely have had second thoughts. The result was that Serampore limped on through the Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s in a state of perpetual underfunding.

The coming of Indian independence in 1947 supplied the necessary stimulus for the College to broaden its ecumenical range and increase its distance from the Western missionary partner with which it had been so closely linked since 1855. The crucial step was taken in 1949, when the Council was relocated to Serampore from London, where it had met ever since 1855. The Council would henceforth reflect a range of Indian churches. At its first meeting to be held in Serampore for ninety-four years, in June 1949, the Council appointed the first Indian principal of the College, Dr C. E. Abraham, of the Mar Thoma Church of Travancore, a nineteenth-century offshoot of the Syrian tradition that combined fidelity to the Orthodox legacy with an indebtedness to the evangelical Anglican emphases of the Church Missionary Society. Abraham was a former student of the College, and was the first member of the Mar Thoma Church to gain a B.D. Honours degree. A strong supporter of Mohandas K. Gandhi's Indian nationalist movement, he first joined the college staff in 1922; he served as principal until 1959.³²

Although the denominational constituency of Serampore broadened after 1949, the long-standing problems of establishing a secure base of financial support did not disappear, and in many ways have continued to this day. From India itself, the Baptist churches of Mizoram and Nagaland make periodic grants to the College. Small and occasional amounts are occasionally received from individual congregations in the Church of North India, Church of South India and the Mar Thoma Church. But there is no regular support from the Indian Christian constituency. From overseas, occasional financial support was received until 2015 from the BMS, the Carey Family Association UK, Evangelisches Missionwerk in Germany, the Friends of Serampore in the UK and from a few individual Baptist churches in the United States and Britain. Since 2015 only the Friends of Serampore in UK have maintained occasional financial contributions.³³

The era of Serampore College's dependence on a British Baptist constituency that never completely shared the vision of its founders came to an end after 1949,

³² See K. V. Mathew, *Walking Humbly with God: A Biography of the Rev. C. E. Abraham* (Kottayam, C. M. S. Press, 1986).

³³ Information received from Dr Dipankar Haldar of Serampore College, email, 8 September 2018.

though, as the Newbigin Commission Report of 1970 clearly testifies, pressing questions relating to the purpose and governance of the institution remained.

The relationship of vocational theological education to ‘secular’ knowledge

We thus return in conclusion to the fourth and final dimension of ambiguity inherent in the history of the College – the relationship of vocational theological education to ‘secular’ knowledge. Critics of Serampore’s endeavours to combine direct training for pastoral and evangelistic ministry with a wider apologetic programme of learning in the sciences and humanities have not been lacking, perhaps most notably among those Particular Baptists who drew the boundaries of their confessional fellowship more tightly than did others. It was the notable closed-union Baptist minister, Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich, who complained at the BMS Annual General Meeting in 1827 that ‘literary institutions had infringed upon the kingdom of Christ’.³⁴ Serampore College may aptly be described as a dissenting academy for India.³⁵ It shared the commitment of the dissenting academies of England and Wales to provide Nonconformist ministers with a broad and liberal education in natural and human philosophy that could rival and indeed surpass the quality of the decidedly antique learning imparted to the clergy of the established church by the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But it combined that commitment with a passionate enthusiasm for evangelistic mission within the Indian sub-continent in a way that was entirely characteristic of the later dissenting academies shaped by the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival: the profound influence of Bristol Baptist Academy, now Bristol Baptist College, on Joshua Marshman and John Mack, both former students of the Academy, cannot be discounted. Students at Bristol were taught not simply divinity and the art of evangelistic preaching, but also geography, astronomy, and natural and moral philosophy.³⁶

Commitment to learning and commitment to education for Christian ministry and evangelism, as Lesslie Newbigin observed in 1970, have been widely forced asunder by the process of the secularisation of modern society and education.

³⁴ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 149 n.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁶ Karen E. Smith, ‘Baptists’, in Andrew C. Thompson, ed., *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions. Volume II: The Long Eighteenth Century, c. 1689-c. 1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 70.

Training for mission remains the poor relation in much Christian theological education. Conversely, those Christian colleges that unashamedly train students for missional ministry tend to be weak in the more stretching intellectual disciplines of culture, philosophy, and apologetics. It is easy to poke fun at the unfounded optimism of evangelical missionaries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the teaching of Western science would lead inevitably to the erosion of Hindu ‘superstition’. Our generation is much more inclined to the view that scientific knowledge and religious belief belong to two quite distinct realms, and that there is no reason why increase in the former should have any impact on the latter. Nevertheless, there is a respectable scholarly argument that the rise of modern experimental science was logically dependent on the influence of a Christian and more particularly a Protestant understanding of the relationship between the Creator revealed in Scripture, the material world he has created, and human faculties of rational investigation.³⁷ It may not be irrelevant to observe that the militant Hindu party that has formed the government of India since 2014, the Bharatiya Janatha Party, has been an enthusiastic propagator of so-called ‘vedic science’ as a superior and more ‘spiritual’ alternative to the materialistic science that has come from the West. Appeal to Hindu *dharma* is being used to subvert science as understood in the global academy.³⁸ But that is a topic for another article and indeed another author.

When we consider the ambitious goals and scale of Serampore College, the small size, social marginalization, and impoverishment of its surrounding Christian community, the fact that the institution founded by William Carey, Joshua and John Clark Marshman has survived to this day is little short of a miracle. For all of its ups and downs, its remarkable story ought to provide cause for deep reflection as well as much thanksgiving.

The testimony of a former student, 1941

In conclusion, I cite a personal testimony from a former student of Serampore, most likely hailing from the North-East of India. In 1941 Lal Khan Cheema wrote to

³⁷ Reijer Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972); Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God : How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); idem, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005).

³⁸ See Wendy Doniger, *Against Dharma: Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

his former College Principal, Dr G. H. C. (Christopher) Angus, and addressed to ‘My dear teacher’. It survives in Angus’s papers in the BMS archives pinned to other letters together with a note by Angus: ‘Too interesting to destroy’. The extract that follows is the testimony of only one student who has just completed his studies, and eloquently expresses the liberal evangelical theological ethos of the College in the late 1930s, but it is a moving tribute, and forms a fitting end to this article:

I went to Serampore a raw convert. I have come out with my foundations stronger than ever before. I went with little to tell the people, I have come out with much to tell. Serampore has set me on a track which will be mine in my journey of life.

As I compared myself with other students – faithful sons of their respective denominations, in certain aspects I counted myself fortunate. I was lucky in having no preconceived or pre-settled notions and conclusions on articles of faith. I went to Serampore knowing only whom I had believed – I had founded solely on that rock – the Person of ‘Christ’ [.] I am glad and grateful to tell you that Rock has not failed me. As I saw the lesser rocks of creed usually associated with Christianity fall one by one in the face of advanced knowledge and more enlightened Christian conscience I could see the agony of those friends who had built on them.

More than ever it has become clear to me that our Book, our creed and our Church are ‘but earthen vessels holding the treasure.’ Perhaps historically less accurate, philosophically a little unsound and organically less strong, yet they hold a treasure – they themselves are not the treasure. If it is the historicity of the Bible, the metaphysics of the creed and organisations of the Church that we prize most, then we are missing the mark – for these things are not the treasure. The treasure is the Love of God and His glory seen in the face of Jesus Christ. It is this on which I have staked my all and on which I have depended with all the fibre of my soul. The education and life at Serampore have confirmed my faith. And as I go forth ‘to tell the people what great thing the Lord hath done unto me’ I only hope and pray that I may take to them something of the beauty of His vission [*sic*], as seen in the Christian life and knowledge in Serampore. For all this ‘Thank you’ once again. ...³⁹

Notes on contributor

³⁹ BMS archives, D/GCA 4/5, Letter to [Dr G. H. C. Angus] from Lal Khan Cheema [??], Lalthiba Cottage, Landore, Mussorie, 13 May 1941.

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The Vision of a Christian Higher Education for India: 200 Years of Serampore College History¹

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ABSTRACT

The two hundred years of Serampore College history have been marked by a number of ambiguities that can be traced back to the vision of its founders. The College was intended to be an institution that would train Christian Indians as missionaries to their own people – yet it was also committed from the outset to the admission of non-Christian students. The original curriculum was to be based on Sanskrit learning with teaching delivered in Bengali, but increasingly student demand pushed the College towards an emphasis on English-medium teaching. The vision of the College was an ecumenical one from the beginning, but in practice the Baptist Missionary Society found few partners willing to shoulder the burden of an expensive institution. Serampore aimed to teach both Christian theology and European science in a synthesis that proved hard to maintain in a more secular age. Despite these challenges, the College has survived and made a lasting contribution to theological education in India.

KEYWORDS

India; Serampore College; Baptist Missionary Society; theological education; William Carey; Joshua Marshman; John Clark Marshman; Lesslie Newbigin.

I have chosen to begin the story, not at the beginning in 1818, but over 150 years later, in 1970, at a turbulent period in the history of Serampore College. Student unrest was endemic. The great imbalance in numbers between the large but under-resourced arts and science departments and the tiny yet historically privileged theological department was problematic. There were practical difficulties in defining the appropriate relationship between the Serampore College Council (the ultimate governing authority, located in India since 1948), the Senate (set up in 1918 to

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¹ This article was delivered as the opening lecture of the conference commemorating the bicentenary of Serampore College, held at Regents Park College, Oxford, 19-21 October 2018.

represent the interests of the whole family of Indian Protestant theological institutions whose degrees are awarded under the authority of the Serampore Charter), and the Faculty (the body that wielded day-to-day executive power).

The Newbigin Commission, 1969-70

These problems led to the appointment in March 1969 of a Commission charged with making recommendations designed to secure a more effective and harmonious operation of the College. The chairman of the five-member Commission was the Presbyterian Lesslie Newbigin, then Bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. The Commission's report, presented to the Council and Senate in January 1970, began with a review of the early history of the College. It is worth quoting at length, for it identifies with some precision what is perhaps the central question raised by the history of Serampore College, to which much of this article will be addressed:

Carey and his colleagues were the heirs of a magnificent cultural synthesis which had shaped Europe for more than one thousand years. It is easy for us to recognize, with the benefit of hindsight, that by the time Carey left the shores of England this synthesis was already on the way to dissolution. But it was this synthesis which shaped the thinking and policy of Carey, as of the other missionary pioneers. They saw truth as one single whole, of which the Bible was the cornerstone. True education was to introduce young minds to this truth as a whole. ... Education was not simply theological education in the sense which the phrase now carries, nor was it 'secular education' with some periods of bible study added. It was an introduction to the truth as a whole, with the Bible at its centre.²

Secularisation, reflected Newbigin in terms that clearly anticipated the preoccupations of his later missiological writings on Western culture, had destroyed this synthesis:

'There is no longer available to the educator any unified world view which can embrace science, the humanities and theology in a single perspective'. This was supremely the case in Europe, but according to Newbigin, Indian Christianity was not exempt from this regrettable erosion of an integrated Christian worldview. He continued:

The Christian Colleges of India have long ago accepted this fact. They have become essentially secular institutions intimately related to the secular universities which are

² Oxford, Regents Park College, Angus Library, Baptist Missionary Society archives, Commission on Serampore College: Report presented to the Council and Senate of Serampore College on 28th January 1970.

the degree-giving authorities. The theological colleges, on the other hand, have developed quite separately, with no organic relation to the other Christian colleges. The only exception to this generalisation is Serampore where, to this day, a theological college remains physically part of an institution teaching secular subjects.³

Newbigin's poignant observations carried a particular resonance when this paper was first delivered as a lecture at Regent's Park College, which is both a denominational theological college and a constituent part of a large secular university; the same dual identity is true of New College, Edinburgh, where I teach. The irony is that the central recommendation of the 1970 Commission's report was that the theological department of Serampore College should be removed from Serampore to Calcutta (Kolkata), to form a federal theological institution with Bishop's College, Calcutta, then still an Anglican institution. The premises at Serampore would thus be left entirely in the hands of an expanded, and predominantly non-Christian Arts and Science Department. Such a marriage of two theological institutions, it was argued, would lead to a more economical deployment of resources in theological education in Bengal, and would underpin the imminent formation of the Church of North India. Yet, of course, it seemed to imply accepting the permanence of the post-Enlightenment divorce between Christian and secular learning that Newbigin had identified with his characteristic combination of perception and wistfulness.

The Serampore College Council rejected the main recommendations of the report. Indeed its principal recommendation was so unpopular in Bengal that someone placed a bomb in the College premises as a mark of their disapproval, though this seems an odd way of signalling a desire to keep the College going in its present form. Happily, the bomb failed to explode, and Newbigin was left to reflect in his autobiography that 'Like the bomb, the report was a failure, and the college authorities were so diligent in destroying all known copies that I doubt if any survive.'⁴ In fact, one does survive in the BMS archives in the Angus Library. Serampore College today retains its Faculty of Theology alongside the much larger Faculty of Arts, Science and Commerce. It is the latter that has an organic relationship to the University of Calcutta, which awarded the College's degrees in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1993), 216.

non-theological subjects from 1857 to 1883, and has done so again (with some interruptions) from 1911 onwards. Serampore College and Bishop's College remain as separate theological institutions. The Serampore Royal Charter of 1827, bestowed by Frederick VI of Denmark, empowered the College to award its own degrees without restriction of subject. Indeed it specified that such degrees should be conferred *only* on those students 'that testify their proficiency in Science'. This clause reflected William Carey's personal conviction of the unique apologetic value of scientific knowledge,⁵ but was also broadly typical of the approaches to knowledge taken by eighteenth-century Pietists and their early evangelical successors. The Halle Lutheran mission to Tranquebar, for instance, reproduced August Hermann Franke's emphasis on the empirical study of the natural world as a pathway towards knowledge of the Creator.⁶

The Serampore College Act of 1918 was rather more cautious about scientific learning, prescribing that if the Council wished to award degrees in subjects other than theology, it could do so only to students who had received regular instruction at the College, and if it met standards certified by the state government of Bengal.⁷ In fact, the College did not award any degrees of its own until 1915, and since then has restricted itself to the award of its own degrees in theology. Nevertheless, half a century on from Lesslie Newbigin's report, Serampore College today continues to aspire to exemplify that vision of a unified Christian higher education that he so admired, yet regarded as ultimately unworkable in the context of modern India.

The Purpose of the Founders of Serampore College

So what, more precisely, was the purpose uppermost in the minds of the founders of Serampore College, and what broader reflections might that purpose suggest about what Christian higher education can and should be about? It would be accurate to say that the College was founded by 'the Serampore Trio', but only if we redefine that famous title so that it comprised William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and, *not* William

⁵ W. S. Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore and its College* (Serampore: Serampore College, 1961), 118.

⁶ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, 'Tanjore, Tranquebar, and Halle: European Science and German Missionary Education in the Lives of Two Indian Intellectuals in the Early Nineteenth Century', in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1700* (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, and London: Wm. B. Eerdmans and RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 93-126.

⁷ Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore*, 115.

Ward, but rather Marshman's son John Clark Marshman (1794-1877). Carey and the two Marshmans together formed the first Council of the College. Although William Ward, the third member of the Serampore Trio as conventionally defined, was fully committed to the vision that inspired the College, his role in its foundation was largely restricted to a fund-raising one. He spent the years from 1818 to 1821 in Britain and the United States, raising support for the new institution, and in March 1823, some months after returning to Bengal, died of cholera.

The founders of the College were committed to three closely associated beliefs. First, they believed that the evangelisation of India must lie primarily in the hands of Indian rather than European Christians. The College was from its foundation conceived as a missionary institution for the education of Indian evangelists. As early as 1805 Carey, Marshman, and Ward had reached the conclusion that

It is only by means of native preachers that we can hope for the universal spread of the gospel among this immense continent. Europeans are too few, and their subsistence costs too much, for us ever to hope that they can possibly be the instruments of the universal diffusion of the word amongst so many millions of souls.⁸

Second, the founders of the College were convinced that, in the words of Joshua Marshman, this would require the translation 'into the vernacular dialects of India, as well as into its most learned and most widely extended language [namely Sanskrit], [of] that Sacred Volume which dispelled the darkness of Idolatry throughout Europe'.⁹ Carey's well-known emphasis on the priority of translating the Bible into Sanskrit and the principal vernaculars of the Indian sub-continent led logically to the intent to found an institution that would lay the educational foundations for advanced linguistic study.

Thus, in the third place, the Serampore missionaries were persuaded that high-quality education was necessary to enable Indians to acquire the skills of literacy necessary to read the Bible in their own languages. This third goal required a network of elementary schools, but also much more than that, as the Bristol educationalist, Joshua Marshman, well realised.

⁸ 'Form of Agreement', in *Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 3, pp. 205-6.

⁹ [Joshua Marshman], *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries, Bengal, with an Appendix* (London: Parbury, Allen, & Co, 1828), 18.

Joshua Marshman's educational manifesto

In his *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries, Bengal, with an Appendix* (1827), which is perhaps the fullest early statement of the goals of the College, Joshua Marshman explained that literacy alone could not win what he called the 'sacred warfare' or 'struggle between light and darkness in India'. Indian Christian teachers and evangelists had to be equipped to engage as equals in intellectual combat with learned Hindu pandits over fundamental questions of revelation and morality. This was why a college was so urgently needed: its 'great object' was that of 'effectually promoting the progress of vital Christianity, as revealed in the Scriptures'.¹⁰ 'Vital Christianity', that in-house code word beloved of early nineteenth-century English evangelicals, was linked indissolubly to sound learning in a way that reflected the educational vision of evangelical Calvinists in England in the same period. Marshman then proceeded to outline five specific ways in which the College was intended to fulfill this overall objective.

The first was 'By giving a superior education to the children of Christian natives.'¹¹ Previous missionary efforts, whether by Catholics or by Protestant missions in South India, had, in Marshman's view, paid insufficient attention to this task. Since he described 'the Hindoo system' as resting on 'the most absurd mistakes' in history, geography, and science, sound instruction in these disciplines could be expected to undermine the structures of the religion. Chemistry had what is, to our minds, a surprising role to play in the conceptual battle with Hindu idolatry, for it would demonstrate that even sacred venerated matter was no more than matter:

... as all their objects of worship are formed of matter, the very experiments of this science will tend to shake belief in them altogether. Thus it is, in India especially, that knowledge may be made a most powerful auxiliary to religion, in the gradual dissolution of such a system of idolatry.¹²

It should be noted that chemistry – along with botany and agriculture (both taught by Carey) and geography – was duly an integral feature of the first curriculum of Serampore College. Chemistry was taught by John Mack, the son of an Edinburgh solicitor, and graduate of the University of Edinburgh; he was the first foreign missionary to be supported by Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh. Mack, originally

¹⁰ Ibid., 18-19.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Ibid., 20.

destined for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, had become a Baptist while serving as an usher at a school in Gloucestershire. He went on to study at Bristol Baptist Academy, where William Ward recruited him for the mission when he visited Bristol in 1821. A further brief period of study in Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh was funded directly by the Serampore missionaries.¹³

Although Joshua Marshman shared Carey's confidence in the enlightening function of scientific knowledge, he described the second respect in which the College would assist in the conversion of India as 'far more important'. It would, he believed, impart to future Indian evangelists 'that instruction which may enable them to propagate Christianity in the most effectual manner.' Church history showed that 'Christianity has never taken deep root in any country until it has been propagated by the *natives* themselves.'¹⁴ The task of the College was to ensure that the Indian labourers sent out into the harvest fields were properly equipped for their mission.

The third, fourth, and fifth aspects of the College's missionary purpose were broadly supportive of the second. The College had, third, the potential to develop a class of Indian Christian linguistic scholars, who would become experts in biblical languages as well as their own. Fourth, it would also gradually induce 'natives of weight' to lend their influence to the Christian cause. And, finally, it would raise up a body of Indian Christian scholars who would provide the professorial staff of the College for the future.¹⁵

A synthesis of Hindu sacred literature and Western science

We should note that an important facet of the College's aim to equip Indian Christians for mission to their fellow Indians was to make them adept in the languages and sacred literature of India. Sanskrit was originally to occupy pride of place in the curriculum, both for its importance in understanding the Hindu sacred epics and as a means to mastering a variety of Indian languages. Another original emphasis was that teaching was to be in the Bengali vernacular rather than in English – a feature that was unique to Serampore and distinguished it very clearly from the Anglicizing philosophy that characterized both the Hindu College (now Presidency University),

¹³ Donald Meek, 'Christopher Anderson's Missionaries to India', in Donald E. Meek, ed., *A Mind for Mission: Essays in Appreciation of the Rev. Christopher Anderson (1782-1852)* (Edinburgh: Scottish Baptist History Project), 38-9.

¹⁴ [Marshman], *Brief Memoir Relative to the Operations of the Serampore Missionaries*, 20-21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

established in Calcutta in 1817 by a group of Hindu reformers associated with Ram Mohun Roy, and Alexander Duff's General Assembly's Institution (now Scottish Church College), founded in 1830. Familiarity with Hindu sacred literature held the key to unlocking the Hindu minds that Indian missionaries needed to capture for Christ. The First Report of Serampore College (1819) also made mention of the desirability of teaching *indigenous* scientific knowledge, but this aspiration thereafter sunk without trace.¹⁶ In practice the Serampore missionaries conceived of *Western* scientific knowledge as the divinely appointed means of dispelling Indian ignorance and superstition. Paradoxically, therefore, the College, according to its original prospectus, was to teach an inter-cultural synthesis of 'Eastern Literature and European Science'.¹⁷ Christianity was to draw upon *Indian* tradition for cultural access to minds shaped by Hinduism, but upon *Western* tradition for the intellectual weaponry required to recast those minds in a Christian mould.

A missionary institution that would be open to non-Christian students

It should also be noted that four out of the five dimensions of the purpose of the College were phrased in terms of the training it could provide to Christian students to equip them for their future mission. Yet from the outset the College admitted Hindu and Muslim as well as Christian students. In part this was a reflection of economic necessity. There were too few Protestant Christians of any denomination in Bengal to furnish a student body of the size that was needed to support such a grand institution as Serampore College, and those that did exist, were mostly too poor or lived too far away from Serampore to consider enrolment. But the Serampore missionaries were also convinced that if Christian students were to study alongside Hindu or Muslim ones, they would benefit from a closer acquaintance with the 'character, the feelings, and the prejudices of the heathen among whom they were designed to labour.'¹⁸

For the majority of the BMS Committee in London and equally for some younger BMS colleagues in Calcutta, the admission of non-Christian students represented a deplorable dilution of the missionary character of the institution. In March 1823 the BMS Committee resolved its willingness to support 'pious natives' in

¹⁶ M. A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal, 1793-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 143, 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁸ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859), 1, p. 463.

their education at Serampore for the Christian ministry, but only on the understanding that they were ‘members of approved Baptist Churches’.¹⁹ For Carey and the Marshmans, on the other hand, such egalitarian diversity in the student body was integral to their missionary vision for the College. The 1833 Statutes and Regulations of the College specified that

Students are admissible at the discretion of the Council from any body of Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek, or the Armenian Church, and for the purpose of study, from the Musalman and Hindu youth, whose habits forbid their living in the College. No caste, colour or country shall bar any man from admission.²⁰

This may appear as a remarkable example of religious tolerance for a group of early nineteenth-century Particular Baptists. Nonetheless, we should note that the Statutes equally insisted that all professors and members of the Council must hold throughout their tenure of office to those doctrines of the divinity of Christ and his atoning work that the founders deemed ‘essential to vital Christianity’.²¹ The shadow lay long over the Serampore mission of William Adam, the former BMS missionary from Dunfermline who, under the influence of Ram Mohun Roy, had disastrously succumbed to Unitarian views in 1821: Carey wryly described him as ‘the second Fallen Adam’.²²

The history of Serampore College over two centuries is a sustained narrative of the complex outworking of the ambiguities – critics might say, the inconsistencies – that were inherent in its remarkable original vision. Four dimensions of ambiguity that recur throughout the two hundred years need particular comment in the remainder of this article – language, finance, ecumenicity, and the relationship of theology to secular learning.

Vernacular versus English-medium education

In the realm of language policy, the College faced a difficulty that missionary exponents of vernacular languages have encountered repeatedly. In the colonial context of nineteenth-century Bengal higher education in the Bengali vernacular possessed little vocational attraction. English was the language of opportunity, the

¹⁹ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 147-8.

²⁰ Stewart, ed., *The Story of Serampore and its College*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²² E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 234.

passport to social and economic advancement. For a missionary strategist coming from outside, the vernacular is a unique cultural resource to be carefully preserved and put to evangelistic purpose. For the native insider, by contrast, a trade or global language beckons as the means to access wider connections, new markets, and more lucrative employment. By the mid-1830s the currents of political and educational change in Bengal under East India Company rule favoured the Anglicist philosophy of Alexander Duff rather than the Orientalist preferences of Serampore. T. B. Macaulay's famous Minute on Indian Education of 1835 marked the final victory of the Anglicist lobby over their Orientalist opponents: English, Macaulay confidently asserted, was 'what is best worth knowing'.²³ Perhaps we should not be too hard on Macaulay: in accordance with his observations in the Minute, most of the students at Serampore indeed showed little appetite for the dead language of Sanskrit. By 1834 the Serampore College Annual Report found it necessary to explain 'the little prominence given to the Sungskrita studies': students were too busy studying English, and European science, to have much time for such abstruse Oriental learning.²⁴ Those few converts to Christianity in nineteenth-century Bengal who did come from a high-caste background had severed themselves by their ritually polluting act of conversion from the customs and social networks of a caste society. It is not surprising that relatively few of them wished to reconnect themselves with their abandoned Hindu heritage by immersing themselves in the study of Sanskritic sacred texts. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, it was abundantly clear that the great majority of converts to Christianity in modern India were coming from sectors of the population for whom Sanskritic Hinduism possessed no attraction at all, since it appeared to be the legitimating source of their oppression – the *avarna* or Dalit peoples on the one hand and the *adivāsi* or tribal peoples on the other.

The challenge of funding the College

The second and probably the most serious challenge that Serampore College has had to face throughout its history is that of funding. The College faced financial problems from the outset. The BMS was inclined to support itinerant preaching, tract

²³ Minute by the Honourable T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February, 1835, paragraph 33: available at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mea/la/pritchett/00general/links/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html (accessed 08.02.2019).

²⁴ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 145.

1 distribution, the support of elementary schools with a strong Christian emphasis, and
 2 theological education, but only provided that it was targeted at promising candidates
 3 for Baptist pastoral ministry. The grand scale of the imposing College buildings
 4 attracted criticism, both from BMS supporters in England and from the group of
 5 younger missionaries in Calcutta who became increasingly estranged from their
 6 seniors in Serampore. John Clark Marshman in particular attracted scarcely veiled
 7 criticism – in the words of Carey’s nephew Eustace – as ‘a pleasant, worldly young
 8 gentleman’.²⁵ Issues relating to the high costs of the College lay at the heart of the
 9 painful severance of the Serampore Mission from the BMS in 1827. The funding
 10 shortfall of the College became more severe following a series of bank failures in
 11 Calcutta between 1830 and 1833. Much of its early funding came from the pockets of
 12 Carey himself, as a result of his lucrative employment as professor at the East India
 13 Company’s Fort William College and Bengali translator for the Presidency
 14 government. When these posts were abolished following the bank crashes, Carey’s
 15 annual income fell from £1,560 to £600 in eight months, and there was
 16 correspondingly less available for the College.²⁶

27 The separation of Serampore College from the BMS lasted from 1827 to 1855.
 28 The College was specifically excluded from the reunion between the Serampore
 29 Mission and the Society that was negotiated in 1837. Between 1837 and 1855 the
 30 College survived thanks to the considerable personal largesse of John Clark
 31 Marshman, who was a newspaper publisher, owner of a paper mill (the first of its kind
 32 in India), and holder of the restored post of Bengali translator for the Presidency
 33 government. By 1855, when he handed the College back to the BMS, he had
 34 contributed more than £30,000 of his own resources to the College, equivalent to over
 35 £3 million pounds today.

36 Over the decades that followed, the Committee and treasurers of the BMS
 37 consistently took the view that the entire or even the primary burden of supporting the
 38 College ought not to rest on its hard-pressed supporters in Baptist churches in Britain.
 39 Influenced by such concerns, in 1883 the then general secretary, Alfred H. Baynes,
 40 persuaded the Society to close the arts and science department, sever the link to the
 41 University of Calcutta, and run the College purely as a vernacular and low-level

42 ²⁵ Ibid., 148.

43 ²⁶ Ibid., 147.

Christian Training Institution. In 1890 Baynes visited Serampore and formed the more drastic opinion that the BMS should abandon the College altogether: it was too expensive, fatal to the development of self-supporting churches, and fostered among its students a life-style ill-suited to preparing them for ministry among the rural poor of East Bengal. These were uncomfortable but telling criticisms. Baynes was thwarted by a desperate intervention by his predecessor as secretary, Edward Bean Underhill, one-time member of New Road Baptist Church in Oxford. Underhill wrote to all members of the BMS Committee, protesting that to close the College would be a betrayal of the liberal educational ideals of its founders. Although initially he lost the vote, in the long run Underhill's arguments won the day, but the critical financial position of the College continued.²⁷ In the BMS Centenary Year of 1892, the then principal of Serampore, Edward S. Summers, submitted an extensive memorandum to the BMS Committee pleading for £5,000 of the Society's Centenary Fund target of £100,000 to be devoted to urgent repairs and endowment funding for the College. His pleas were unsuccessful: the College was not listed in the seven objects of the Centenary Fund.²⁸

The search for ecumenical partners

By the early years of the twentieth century it had become plain that Underhill's vision of a premier Indian institution of Christian higher education was unsustainable on the basis of BMS funding alone. The most prominent and recurring question in the history of the College in the course of the twentieth century thus became whether a broader range of missions and churches could be induced to lend their support. A new and potentially more hopeful era of ecumenical cooperation for the College began in 1906. In that year a member of faculty of the College, Charles Edward Wilson, succeeded Baynes as general secretary of the BMS, and a new principal of the College was appointed in the person of the Welshman George Howells. Howells, a former student of Regents Park College, was a gifted and markedly progressive theologian who had served previously on the staff of the former General Baptist theological college at Cuttack in Orissa. Under his leadership a higher theological

²⁷ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 158-60.

²⁸ BMS archives, D/GCA 4/3, Edward S. Summers, Memorandum on the Serampore College, 23 August 1892; John Brown Myers (ed.) *The Centenary Volume of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1892*, 2nd edition, (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1892), 339.

department was opened in 1910, and the arts department was revived and re-affiliated to the University of Calcutta in 1911. Seven years later the governance of the College was thoroughly overhauled by the Serampore College Act of 1918. The Council was reconstituted so that Baptists no longer had a guaranteed majority, though they had to comprise at least one-third of the members. A Senate was created, meeting in India, whose membership was to include at least one and no more than three representatives of each of the following denominations: Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and, most notably, Syrian Orthodox.²⁹ By 1920 almost half of the ninety-two Christian students at Serampore were from the Syrian Orthodox tradition. The total student body had grown to 351, the majority of them being Hindus studying in the arts department.

The denominational and indeed religious composition of the College was broadening, but the base of financial support remained perilously narrow, almost entirely within the Baptist denomination. In December 1924 J. H. Oldham, secretary of the International Missionary Council and newly appointed Master of Serampore College, submitted to the Council of the College a hard-hitting paper on 'The Future of Serampore College'. Oldham listed sixteen mission agencies – seven British, seven American, and two Canadian – that might in theory be expected to contribute to the support of Serampore, but concluded that there was little realistic prospect of their doing so: most were already committed to supporting other institutions such as Bishop's College or the United Theological College established at Bangalore in 1910. In the end Oldham could see little alternative than for the poor old BMS to assume 'full responsibility for maintaining Serampore College in full efficiency on its present basis'.³⁰ Amazingly, the BMS Committee in January 1925 accepted the joint recommendation of its India and Ceylon and Finance Sub-Committees that the Society should indeed accept full responsibility for supporting the full range of educational programmes offered at Serampore, and pledged to find an additional £2,500 a year to meet this objective.³¹ If the BMS had foreseen that it was, along with other Protestant mission agencies, about to be plunged into the most acute and prolonged period of financial crisis to have afflicted the Western missionary

²⁹ Stewart (ed.), *The Story of Serampore and its College*, 115.

³⁰ BMS archives, IN/130, [J. H. Oldham], 'The Future of Serampore College: A Review of the Position, Adopted by the Council of Serampore College, December 19th, 1924'.

³¹ BMS archives, General Committee Minutes, 21 January 1925, pp. 9-10.

movement in the twentieth century, it would surely have had second thoughts. The result was that Serampore limped on through the Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s in a state of perpetual underfunding.

The coming of Indian independence in 1947 supplied the necessary stimulus for the College to broaden its ecumenical range and increase its distance from the Western missionary partner with which it had been so closely linked since 1855. The crucial step was taken in 1949, when the Council was relocated to Serampore from London, where it had met ever since 1855. The Council would henceforth reflect a range of Indian churches. At its first meeting to be held in Serampore for ninety-four years, in June 1949, the Council appointed the first Indian principal of the College, Dr C. E. Abraham, of the Mar Thoma Church of Travancore, a nineteenth-century offshoot of the Syrian tradition that combined fidelity to the Orthodox legacy with an indebtedness to the evangelical Anglican emphases of the Church Missionary Society. Abraham was a former student of the College, and was the first member of the Mar Thoma Church to gain a B.D. Honours degree. A strong supporter of Mohandas K. Gandhi's Indian nationalist movement, he first joined the college staff in 1922; he served as principal until 1959.³²

Although the denominational constituency of Serampore broadened after 1949, the long-standing problems of establishing a secure base of financial support did not disappear, and in many ways have continued to this day. From India itself, the Baptist churches of Mizoram and Nagaland make periodic grants to the College. Small and occasional amounts are occasionally received from individual congregations in the Church of North India, Church of South India and the Mar Thoma Church. But there is no regular support from the Indian Christian constituency. From overseas, occasional financial support was received until 2015 from the BMS, the Carey Family Association UK, Evangelisches Missionwerk in Germany, the Friends of Serampore in the UK and from a few individual Baptist churches in the United States and Britain. Since 2015 only the Friends of Serampore in UK have maintained occasional financial contributions.³³

The era of Serampore College's dependence on a British Baptist constituency that never completely shared the vision of its founders came to an end after 1949,

³² See K. V. Mathew, *Walking Humbly with God: A Biography of the Rev. C. E. Abraham* (Kottayam, C. M. S. Press, 1986).

³³ Information received from Dr Dipankar Haldar of Serampore College, email, 8 September 2018.

though, as the Newbigin Commission Report of 1970 clearly testifies, pressing questions relating to the purpose and governance of the institution remained.

The relationship of vocational theological education to ‘secular’ knowledge

We thus return in conclusion to the fourth and final dimension of ambiguity inherent in the history of the College – the relationship of vocational theological education to ‘secular’ knowledge. Critics of Serampore’s endeavours to combine direct training for pastoral and evangelistic ministry with a wider apologetic programme of learning in the sciences and humanities have not been lacking, perhaps most notably among those Particular Baptists who drew the boundaries of their confessional fellowship more tightly than did others. It was the notable closed-union Baptist minister, Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich, who complained at the BMS Annual General Meeting in 1827 that ‘literary institutions had infringed upon the kingdom of Christ’.³⁴ Serampore College may aptly be described as a dissenting academy for India.³⁵ It shared the commitment of the dissenting academies of England and Wales to provide Nonconformist ministers with a broad and liberal education in natural and human philosophy that could rival and indeed surpass the quality of the decidedly antique learning imparted to the clergy of the established church by the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But it combined that commitment with a passionate enthusiasm for evangelistic mission within the Indian sub-continent in a way that was entirely characteristic of the later dissenting academies shaped by the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival: the profound influence of Bristol Baptist Academy, now Bristol Baptist College, on Joshua Marshman and John Mack, both former students of the Academy, cannot be discounted. Students at Bristol were taught not simply divinity and the art of evangelistic preaching, but also geography, astronomy, and natural and moral philosophy.³⁶

Commitment to learning and commitment to education for Christian ministry and evangelism, as Lesslie Newbigin observed in 1970, have been widely forced asunder by the process of the secularisation of modern society and education.

³⁴ Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal*, 149 n.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁶ Karen E. Smith, ‘Baptists’, in Andrew C. Thompson, ed., *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions. Volume II: The Long Eighteenth Century, c. 1689-c. 1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 70.

Training for mission remains the poor relation in much Christian theological education. Conversely, those Christian colleges that unashamedly train students for missional ministry tend to be weak in the more stretching intellectual disciplines of culture, philosophy, and apologetics. It is easy to poke fun at the unfounded optimism of evangelical missionaries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the teaching of Western science would lead inevitably to the erosion of Hindu ‘superstition’. Our generation is much more inclined to the view that scientific knowledge and religious belief belong to two quite distinct realms, and that there is no reason why increase in the former should have any impact on the latter. Nevertheless, there is a respectable scholarly argument that the rise of modern experimental science was logically dependent on the influence of a Christian and more particularly a Protestant understanding of the relationship between the Creator revealed in Scripture, the material world he has created, and human faculties of rational investigation.³⁷ It may not be irrelevant to observe that the militant Hindu party that has formed the government of India since 2014, the Bharatiya Janatha Party, has been an enthusiastic propagator of so-called ‘vedic science’ as a superior and more ‘spiritual’ alternative to the materialistic science that has come from the West. Appeal to Hindu *dharma* is being used to subvert science as understood in the global academy.³⁸ But that is a topic for another article and indeed another author.

When we consider the ambitious goals and scale of Serampore College, the small size, social marginalization, and impoverishment of its surrounding Christian community, the fact that the institution founded by William Carey, Joshua and John Clark Marshman has survived to this day is little short of a miracle. For all of its ups and downs, its remarkable story ought to provide cause for deep reflection as well as much thanksgiving.

The testimony of a former student, 1941

In conclusion, I cite a personal testimony from a former student of Serampore, most likely hailing from the North-East of India. In 1941 Lal Khan Cheema wrote to

³⁷ Reijer Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972); Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God : How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); idem, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005).

³⁸ See Wendy Doniger, *Against Dharma: Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

his former College Principal, Dr G. H. C. (Christopher) Angus, and addressed to ‘My dear teacher’. It survives in Angus’s papers in the BMS archives pinned to other letters together with a note by Angus: ‘Too interesting to destroy’. The extract that follows is the testimony of only one student who has just completed his studies, and eloquently expresses the liberal evangelical theological ethos of the College in the late 1930s, but it is a moving tribute, and forms a fitting end to this article:

I went to Serampore a raw convert. I have come out with my foundations stronger than ever before. I went with little to tell the people, I have come out with much to tell. Serampore has set me on a track which will be mine in my journey of life.

As I compared myself with other students – faithful sons of their respective denominations, in certain aspects I counted myself fortunate. I was lucky in having no preconceived or pre-settled notions and conclusions on articles of faith. I went to Serampore knowing only whom I had believed – I had founded solely on that rock – the Person of ‘Christ’ [.] I am glad and grateful to tell you that Rock has not failed me. As I saw the lesser rocks of creed usually associated with Christianity fall one by one in the face of advanced knowledge and more enlightened Christian conscience I could see the agony of those friends who had built on them.

More than ever it has become clear to me that our Book, our creed and our Church are ‘but earthen vessels holding the treasure.’ Perhaps historically less accurate, philosophically a little unsound and organically less strong, yet they hold a treasure – they themselves are not the treasure. If it is the historicity of the Bible, the metaphysics of the creed and organisations of the Church that we prize most, then we are missing the mark – for these things are not the treasure. The treasure is the Love of God and His glory seen in the face of Jesus Christ. It is this on which I have staked my all and on which I have depended with all the fibre of my soul. The education and life at Serampore have confirmed my faith. And as I go forth ‘to tell the people what great thing the Lord hath done unto me’ I only hope and pray that I may take to them something of the beauty of His vission [*sic*], as seen in the Christian life and knowledge in Serampore. For all this ‘Thank you’ once again. ...³⁹

Notes on contributor

³⁹ BMS archives, D/GCA 4/5, Letter to [Dr G. H. C. Angus] from Lal Khan Cheema [??], Lalthiba Cottage, Landore, Mussorie, 13 May 1941.

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