A Tale of Many Models: The Missiological Significance of the Serampore Trio

A. CHRISTOPHER SMITH

What were the mission models that Carey and his company at Serampore worked from, worked with, worked at, and then bequeathed to the so-called modern missionary movement? In what senses was their mission in Bengal, 200 years ago, part of a unique period of transition between contrasting eras of Protestant mission history? Inquiry into such questions leads one to distinguish between model-making and myth-making in mission promotion and mission history. This sheds entirely new light on the missiological significance of a venerable Baptist trinity: William Carey, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman.

From the outset, it will be clear that this presentation is not about a beauty contest at the beginning of the so-called modern missionary movement! Of course, each of the models we will look at was in vogue at some time or another. Some, no doubt, were more striking than others and retained their good looks for a surprisingly long time. But fashions and glamour come and go, depending very much on the culture, sub-culture, and the generation one belongs to.

Perhaps much the same can be said of Anglo (Saxophone) and other European denominations. Each ecclesial model has had its day and still has its own supporters and devotees, for a variety of reasons. Most have had their own noble mission pioneers. The Puritans had their Roger Williams and John Eliot in native North America 150 years before Carey. During the trans-Atlantic Great Awakening fifty years before Carey, the Edwardsian figure of David Brainerd caught the headlines; so too did the Methodist

A. Christopher Smith is Program Officer in the Religion Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A Scottish Baptist, he was, until 1991, Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

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John Wesley and the Reformed revivalist George Whitefield. Wesley’s lieutenant, Thomas Coke was, in the words of his recent biographer, “mad about mission” (Davey 1985) in the West Indies and farther afield, long before Carey set eyes on the coast of his island home—let alone the oceans beyond. Moravian pacesetters, from the Pietist heartland of Central Europe, had already been in the field for several decades, moving from continent to continent in God’s mission. They even spent some time at Serampore (in the 1780s). Pious Lutheran missioners, such as Ziegenbalg, Plutschau, and Schwartz, had made their mark in South India decades before any Baptists showed up in the North. Besides them, a few Anglican evangelicals (laymen and one chaplain) were to be found in Bengal, planning to advance the gospel among the Hindus, before Carey and his cohort ever arrived there. Thus, Protestant forerunners of differing types of “attractiveness” were on parade long before the 1790s.

Several books contained information about these early models and extolled their virtues. They circulated around in the Dissenting world of the 1780s that Carey and his colleagues inhabited. First published was The History of the Propagation of Christianity, and Overthrow of Paganism (1723). It was written by Robert Millar, “a minister of the Gospel” who has recently been dubbed “an Eighteenth-Century Scottish Latourette” (Davies 1990). John Gillies, a Scottish friend of George Whitefield, came next with his Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel (1754 and 1761), which was published just before Carey was born. It too set forth the sacred precedents in Christian history that stirred evangelical Calvinistic Baptist pastors into action during the tumultuous period of the French Revolution.

My point is that mission was being done in different ways long before a young craftsman emerged from a rural backwater in the Midlands of England to become a Particular Baptist missionary to the East Indies. A fair supply of information about those European models, as well as on famous explorers such as Captain Cook, thus made all the difference to William Carey and his brethren. Without it, he may never have launched out into the deep—or headed off for the backwoods of Bengal. Without narratives of their exploits in hand, his 1792 Enquiry might never have seen the light of day. However, Providence smiled upon him. The necessary literature did come his way and he managed to set off, at the age of 29, to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of “heathendom.”

As is well known, Carey ran into difficulties before he ever left British waters. His voyage and mission were almost aborted because of the company he kept. It was 1793, only a year after he had uttered those memorable words which sprang from the heart of post-millennial, Enlightenment faith: “Expect great things. Attempt great things.” To his great relief, he was enabled to circumvent many threats to the fulfillment of his purpose, and he managed to reach Bengal on the second attempt. Thus, his heroic venture began, through much trial and tribulation, in the territories of India occupied by British forces.

Late in 1799 he was compelled to relocate from inland Bengal to the
seedy, Danish colonial enclave or entrepot of Serampore. That was where he, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman teamed up to constitute a troika that biographers have dubbed “the Serampore Trio.” Serampore was the contraband center frequented by Europeans who wanted to evade the quasi-imperial, Anglo authorities of Calcutta, 12 miles along the River Hooghli. It proved to be the only place in British India where the Baptist mission leaders could establish a base, at least until 1813. There they invested heavily in buildings and Western technology in a way that was to have far-reaching implications for the course of missions in the Victorian era and beyond. This marked the beginning of the great mission-estate in Protestant history, founded in line with the catalytic watchword that was embellished by British Baptist pastors to read, “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God” (Smith 1990a:231-232).

In many respects, it may be argued that this Baptist mission project in Bengal was established at a turning point in the course of world history—or at least of Christian history. It may even be held that the Serampore mission, in an uncanny way, came to symbolize the passage of Western Christianity from the era of European mercantilism and into the age of Victorian-style imperialism or Western “modernity.” Perhaps this will stimulate us to consider whether or not the experience and enterprise of the Serampore Trio reflected something of a significant, though tricky, pre-Victorian, socio-religious “paradigm shift” in Western-dominated world affairs (cf. Bosch 1991:183-188).

To help us in our inquiry, we will turn, shortly, to consider (a) the models that Carey and his colleagues drew inspiration and ideas from; (b) the model-making that the threesome themselves engaged in; and (c) the impact that their expensive experiment had on mission enterprises during the following 200 years. But first we must make some general methodological observations.

**Historical Quest**

I have written about my scholarly “quest for the historical Carey” and his colleagues elsewhere (Smith 1992:2). Here I have room to mention only a few salient points. First, it is amazing how little, in-depth missiological research has been carried out on the Serampore Trio. A fine array of primary sources is waiting for use by a new generation of mission scholars. Likewise, the value remains to be discovered of many fine inter-disciplinary studies (produced since the 1960s) that shed copious light on the contexts in which the troika operated. Failure to realize this has resulted in the perpetuation of tunnel vision, misunderstanding, and unfounded mythology by mission promoters and most popular biographers of the Carey phenomenon. All it will take to begin to rectify this is careful examination of the correspondence of Carey’s team, of their secular associates, and of other missionaries. Along with this body of first-class evidence, we need to take seriously the voluminous statements and accounts of the altercations between the Trio, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) leadership, and the second generation of Baptist missionaries to India, especially in the 1820s. Taken together, these disclose
that myths about Serampore were already in the making several decades before Carey passed away, and that their exposure in the mid-1820s caused something of a furor, leading to the split between the Trio and the BMS in 1827.

Secondly, we need to be trinitarian in our approach to the Serampore-based mission. Historical authenticity requires us to avoid undue centricity wherever possible. Without Joshua Marshman and William Ward, the godly shoemaker would never have been writ large in Protestant mission history. This has led me to believe that the long neglect of his two close colleagues by historians has cost us dearly, even resulting in the misreading of history. Factors contributing liberally to this lack of representation have included: prevailing trends of popular tradition, the tendency of too many mission promoters and biographers to build on inadequate biographical foundations, the daunting amount of spadework required for writing their story properly, and the lack of a market for ideologically unfashionable biographies, particularly in Ward’s case (Smith 1991). This calls for serious hermeneutical readjustments to be made; otherwise, we will not manage to be faithful to the evidence which is plentifully available in the BMS Archives (and its impressive series of microfilm reproductions).

Third, and finally, we need to be very careful about assessing the Trio’s achievements and relevance according to Western, materialistic criteria that are alien to the life and spirit of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible. Instead, the Serampore saga needs to be re-read with help from scholars of the Two-Thirds World. This has led me to discover that the implications of the resulting, demythologized, historical record are fundamental and far-reaching for virtually every aspect of “modern” and “post-modern” mission activity. It also leads me to record with gratitude that I have found digging down to the bicentennial roots of today’s missiological assumptions to be an eminently edifying activity per se. It provides penetrating lessons for both now and the twenty-first century.

With that by way of orientation, I suggest we now proceed to identify the models that Carey and his cohort worked from, worked with, worked at, and bequeathed to succeeding generations as part of their pre-Victorian, evangelical legacy. Given the shortness of this essay, I hope it will be accepted that my observations are simply some of the analytical conclusions that I have drawn from in-depth research, part of which has been and will be published elsewhere.

New Testament Models?

Throughout the correspondence and mission reports that Carey and his closest partners produced, there is ample evidence of the “apostolic” nature of their self-understanding and missionary identity. From the outset, Carey in particular wished to emulate the great apostle Paul, whom he considered to be the biblical ideal for “propagating the Gospel.” Attitudinally, both were fired by an infectious eschatological desire to act as Christ’s ambassador to idolatrous heathendom. Ward and Marshman soon caught this enthusiastic spirit and allowed themselves almost no relaxation (cf. Bosch 1991:134-139)
in their drive to win lost souls for Christ. One has to read only the Trio's annual mission reports and Marshman's 1827 Thoughts on Propagating Christianity More Effectually among the Heathen (cf. Smith 1990b) to realize how deeply they came to believe that a spiritual harvest could never be reaped in India without the evangelizers' practicing a profoundly Pauline type of Christ-centered spirituality. However, while it was one thing to be inspired by a Pauline model of missionary motivation, it was quite another to carry out the sort of mission strategy that was practiced by the New Testament church in the Roman world.

The historical record reveals that the Trio's attempts to advance the Redeemer's cause in India diverged considerably from what they read in "the Epistles" and "The Acts of the Apostles." Their problem was how to integrate a "primitive" (New Testament) type of spontaneous spirituality with the demands and privileges of a "professional" lifestyle characteristic of sophisticated, sub-imperial circles eighteen hundred years later. The practical outcome of the missionaries' willingness to "become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23) thus needs to be scrutinized carefully. In particular, one needs to identify who most of the beneficiaries of this policy actually were, given the fact that Carey's cohorts spent most of their life in Bengal within the radius of Anglo-Danish metropolitanism.

To the Trio, the work of the early church's peripatetic apostles constituted a logical hermeneutical base from which to work. However, they did not have analytical tools on hand to help them realize that the apostles' cross-cultural experience was fairly limited in scope when compared with their own task of translating Christian faith from Anglo-Saxon to Indian culture(s) in the so-called modern era. Stephen Neill realized something of this in his survey of the overall mission scene in the subcontinent in the first half of the nineteenth century:

Following the example of St. Paul..., the missionaries almost without exception settled in the cities, believing that from these centres of wealth and education the Christian faith would radiate out to the rural areas beyond. [However,] in point of fact, the situation in India was very different from that in the Roman empire. The Indian village carried on an almost self-subsistent existence of its own, ... singularly little influenced by the larger centres of population. City populations showed themselves on the whole highly resistant to the Gospel.... Tied down by expensive buildings and institutions, the missionaries lost the mobility that made of the apostle Paul the great missionary that he was. (1985:335)

Admittedly, Paul had to express Christian convictions in Hellenistic garb, but he did not feel the need to launch out into an overt ministry of Bible translation. Again, Paul was forever on the move in mission, founding indigenous churches and mobilizing the laity for evangelistic witness—in contrast to the Trio who were tied down in professional activities at the axis mundi Orientalis. There they raised large amounts of money by engaging in projects and careers that were distinctly secular and at times rather un-apos-
tolic in style. Therefore, we are driven to conclude that the Trio operated simultaneously in two very different worlds: in both the spiritual world of personal pietyism and in the commercial world of technologically impressive capitalism. This they found to be very awkward and by no means a swift path to evangelistic success. Arguably, it lay at the roots of the inter-mission discord that resulted in the costly rupture between Serampore and the British-based BMS in the 1820s. Yet to the Trio’s credit, one can assert that they and some of their close colleagues—such as Christopher Anderson of Edinburgh, Scotland—did anticipate some of the theological and missiological thinking carried out in later decades by mission leaders such as Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, J. Hudson Taylor, and C. H. Spurgeon (Smith 1990b:201-202, 205).

**Protestant Models and Secular Precedents**

The Baptist troika at Serampore also turned for inspiration to precedents that they found in the history of European Protestantism since the Reformation. Thus, we find Carey declaring quite frankly in 1810: “In point of zeal [Marshman] is Luther; I am Erasmus.” This remark betrayed something of the *modus operandi* of the Serampore triumvirate, corroborating other evidence which pictures Carey as a pious, iringa, hard working, low-key leader who maintained a rather retiring, literary life style in Bengal. Following the Erasmian model, Carey set a premium on Bible translation into the vernacular—or “vulgar tongues”—so that people at the grassroots of any given society would be able to find solace and salvation in Christ directly for themselves (Smith 1992:4-5; Sanneh 1990:2). Marshman, on the other hand, was an aggressive evangelical, ever ready to contend “up front” for the mission, in a Luther-like manner. Temperamentally, he was very different from Carey, was a more meditative person who preferred to “sit on the fence” in times of strife. Both men, however, were profoundly in tune with the 1689 (Particular) Baptist Confession of Faith which declared that because Hebrew and Greek “are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto . . . the Scriptures, . . . they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come. . . .” (Waldron 1989:27).

Specific mission models from the sixteenth century onward were available to the Trio (through the works of Millar and Gillies) in the person of Puritan figures such as the Congregationalist John Eliot (the “Apostle to the Indians”), the Edwardsian David Brainerd, and the independent part-time Baptist Roger Williams. These men were noted for their heroic ventures into the so-called “wilderness” of native America. Williams’ story, however, was largely suppressed by Calvinists who disapproved, *inter alia*, of his avant-garde, cross-cultural approach to “the Indians” (cf. Garrett 1970:133-143; Hutchison 1987:29, 36-38; Gausat 1991:27-31). The psychological or spiritual legacy of Scottish-backed Brainerd was very evident in the pre-Serampore experience of the BMS’ first missionaries to Bengal. His heroic motivation and sacrificial life style spurred Carey, and later Marshman and Ward, to endure great hardship for Christ (cf. Oussoren 1945:226-239, 277; Conforti 1985:189-
201). But Brainerd had little to teach on how to communicate the gospel effectively over large cross-cultural gaps or barriers. When it came to establishing a mission base in the midst of adverse circumstances in India, Carey and his colleagues consequently turned to the model of pioneer Moravian missions, though here too the points of divergence (between Pietist and Calvinist missions) proved to be almost as great as the points of convergence. Removal of the Baptist mission base from the indigo scene in North Bengal to the colonial port of Serampore in 1799 dramatically changed the Dissenting missionaries' way of living. The founding and running of an impressive mission estate there, as well as continuous commuting to Calcutta, put them at an increasing distance from indigenous cultural life and people groups. However, records of the Moravians' sensitive presentation of Christ to "the heathen" did make an impact on the troika, with the result that they decided, after a number of fairly fruitless years, to focus on the redemptive love of Christ, in evangelistic preaching, rather than majoring on denouncing the falsehood of Indian religious beliefs and practices.

Enlightenment influences, or at least concerns, undoubtedly featured in the theological reasoning and writings of figures such as Jonathan Edwards, Philip Doddridge, Andrew Fuller, and John Ryland who did much of the Calvinistic intellectual thinking that Carey and his partners drew from (cf. Bebbington 1989:47-74; Bosch 1980:143; Edwards 1984:38-44). Neither before nor after arriving in India did the Baptist missionaries themselves have time to do much in-depth study in order to understand the English worldview of their particular day and sub-culture. They simply worked from "the King James" version of the Bible and hoped to draw wisdom from it to help them carry out their mission faithfully and effectively.

As heirs of both the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, Carey and his cohort unself-consciously demonstrated over and over again that they were pragmatists who were ready to employ all sorts of means, and were prepared to exploit all sorts of opportunities, to advance "the Redeemer's cause" in British India and beyond. There they proved to be wide-open to adapting for mission purposes the techniques and technologies that other Britshiers had pioneered in the secular sphere, be it in translating, printing, Oriental studies, education, manufacturing, or fund-raising. Pre-Victorian Bengal simply abounded in all sorts of expatriate intellectual, scientific, and capitalist initiatives. These sparked off a plethora of practical ideas in the missionaries' minds and eventually issued in a wide range of mission projects and ambitious schemes, the likes and boldness of which must have surprised many parochial and quasi-sectarian souls in the British "home" constituency.

Such "secular" precedents were of incalculable significance in the Serampore Trio's formation—if not intellectual "awakening"—in Bengal. But how could adoption of such forms of activity be communicated successfully to Baptist and other evangelical churches back in Britain? The answer is complex. For one thing, the amount of time (or degree of priority) given to some of their professional involvements, such as Carey's extensive labors in Calcutta's quasi-colonial Civil Service college, was downplayed in
their reports. Second, the Trio were praised for earning and raising large amounts of money in Bengal for mission projects. Most of their requests to the BMS and other British Christians were portrayed as being for Bible translation and printing, rather than for other types of activity that drew adverse reactions even from prime supporters such as Andrew Fuller. Thirdly, because the Trio raised the bulk of their operational income in Bengal by themselves, they did not have to secure British Baptist authorization for engaging in capital-intensive projects. However, when they got into financial difficulties after 1818 (in the post-Fuller era) and turned to the BMS for support for their hybrid college, they encountered stiff questioning, and trans-oceanic relations between Serampore and the London base soured to the point of rupture in 1827.

Yet there is something puzzling about this historical scenario, namely this: Why did the courageous troika not appeal to a well-known pious Protestant precedent, albeit in continental Europe, for their enterprise in Asia? Why did they not make much of the magnificent model provided by August Hermann Francke’s Stiftungen, or philanthropic “Foundations,” that were erected in the Halle area of Saxon, in Prussia, a century earlier? Was it because the triumvirate established Serampore College by way of reaction to other experiments in college-building and education, rather than treating Francke’s model and legacy as the prime source of their inspiration? Was it because most British Baptists were at best willing to support only their own type of denominational college? These questions are addressed in my forthcoming book. We have time at present to consider only the intriguing precedent that Francke set for investing heavily in professional plant and pursuits—aimed at advancing the kingdom of God as it was then understood.

Francke’s Extraordinary Model

Francke’s “Foundations” consisted of a large college and a nexus of practical ministries, the significance and scope of which has not been taken seriously by any of Carey’s biographers. Admittedly, evidence is not yet on hand to establish that the Trio drew substantial or direct inspiration from Francke’s extraordinary enterprise, but the parallels between it and Serampore’s multi-faceted mission business are at times very striking. Without further comment, S. P. Carey observed en passant that the Trio

pursued, they said, to make “Serampore” “a Christian Benares” and “an Indian Halle”; as potent a centre of Christian learning as was Benares of Sanskrit, and as serviceful to India and God as Professor Francke, the inspirer of Schwartz, … and others had made the University of Halle.” (1923:330)

Interestingly, Francke was simultaneously Professor of the Greek and Oriental languages at the new Prussian university from 1691, and was entrusted with a pastoral charge in nearby Glaucha—where he launched out into caring business (Guerike 1847:36-184). Accounts of his full-orbed, Bible-based venture caught the imagination of the Rev. David Brown, the prominent Anglican chaplain in Calcutta until 1812 who “did not conceal
that he made Professor Frank [sic] his model" (Simeon 1816:112, 117). Brown was Provost of Fort William College, and it was to him that Carey directly owed so much of his initial institutional and financial "success." The Christian cause in India owed much to Francke, because he was the one who trained Ziegenbalg and Plutschau for the King of Denmark's Tranquebar mission in the early eighteenth century. Carey had surely read all about this in Gillies' (1754) and Millar's (1723) histories before he ever left Britain. Indeed, Francke's Piaetas Hallensis: Or . . . Historical Narration of the Orphan House, and Other Charitable Institutions had gone through many editions and had been available in English since the 1720s (cf. Davies 1990: 144-155). British Nonconformists, especially Methodists, were aware of Francke's legacy long before the Victorian era. Thus, the conclusion drawn by Professor W. R. Ward in 1980 is well worth noting:

[Francke] . . . established characteristic forms of charitable and educational activity which marked the whole subsequent history of evangelical religion. Everybody . . . knew from Francke's calculated propaganda at the time, of the Orphan House he created at Halle, of the dispensary, the schools, the teacher-training institutions, and the Bible Institute attached to it. . . . The Orphan House was one of the biggest buildings in Europe, if not the biggest—3,000 people were soon living and working there. . . . The great business of Halle lay in the supply of medicaments and Bibles and other religious literature. The press speedily became one of the chief in German. . . .

(236-237)

A business history comparing the scale and work of Francke's philanthropic "school city" and Serampore's mission-estate is badly needed. The famed Pietist made sizable contributions to the translation and distribution of the Bible in East European languages. He developed an international commercial enterprise in medicines, and a network of agents (living from their sales) fanned out, promoting his revivalist, reformist cause. Scores of pious Lutheran trainee-ministers graduated from Halle University under him, and his associated "Foundations" came to be regarded as an eminent European educational center. Surely Carey's cohort found it more than interesting to read how Francke's benevolent enterprise lived "from hand to mouth" and was frequently bailed out of extremities by Providence—as in the days of George Muller, who studied at Halle between 1825 and 1829, and was much influenced thereby. Francke's work may well have suggested to the Trio how one could run an ambitious enterprise in the strength of simple faith ("primitivist" spirituality?)! Perhaps it set a daring precedent for Christian workers to engage in expensive projects well before funds were available for paying creditors?

Again, both Francke and Carey depended greatly on backing from powerful European rulers. They both launched out into capital-intensive projects on a bold scale, with education, philanthropy, evangelism, mission, and Bible translation being closely inter-connected. But it took the Trio time to adopt such a wide-ranging model. This is evident from their reactions to Claudius Buchanan's proposals, in 1807-1808, to establish an expensive
institute for advancing Bible translation work in Bengal. As a Company chaplain, he was Vice-Provost of Fort William College and was influential in securing official favor for Carey. Nevertheless, the Trio were appalled by his audacious plan in 1807 for “instituting a College at Serampore, to be called the British Propaganda” (e.g., letter of Carey to Fuller, 11 August 1807; Marshman, J. C. 1859: 1:293-295). Buchanan subsequently produced an alternative plan, to establish in Calcutta “the Christian Institution in the East; or the Society for aiding the British and Foreign Bible Society.” This proposal to use large sums of money incensed his Baptist colleagues, who promptly denounced his “ambitious designs”—at their and the BFBS’s expense (see Carey’s letter to Andrew Fuller, 20 April 1808; and to John Sutcliffe, 31 August 1808). Clearly, the Trio were very relieved when Buchanan’s big ideas came to nothing. However, ten years later they themselves set out on a strangely similar path and went much farther than their Scottish colleague ever did!

We cannot tell yet whether Carey’s company consciously or deliberately followed the lead that Francke set in publicizing his grand enterprise. Nor can it be established that the so-called Baptist pioneers viewed Francke’s work as something approaching a comprehensive “master plan.” Extant archival evidence suggests that the troika developed their enterprise in “greater Calcutta” in a gradual, incremental manner and particularly in relation to the frequent twists and turns of their circumstances and intra-mission relationships. Yet this much is clear. Francke’s memory has been kept alive by the hallowed symbol of Halle (particularly its edifices). In a similar way, the legacy of the Serampore mission became popularly associated with the monument of a great white college—which functioned as an imposing symbol, a convenient shorthand, for conveying the idea of the sort of “great things” that Western missionaries could accomplish. Obviously, it is the business of mission historians to see beyond that. Our task is to dig deep: to understand the legendary and to penetrate beyond facile stereotypes, in order to get as close as possible to the truth and to historical reality. Thus, we move on now to consider the shape, or even shapes, of the Baptists’ rather unusual Anglo-Indian operation. This should help us anticipate the ambiguous nature of the promotional roles into which posterity has tried to cast Carey’s company.

The Serampore Hybrid

Taken together, the Serampore mission estate and Carey’s department in Fort William College constituted the major interface between the Particular Baptist world and India. Back in Britain and North America there was, however, very little at an institutional level that evangelical Calvinism had in common with the Trio’s expensive enterprise. Rhode Island’s Brown University and Bristol’s Baptist Academy were the only real points of contact, but that was virtually only at a monocultural, educational level. In other professional (and non-theological) areas, the Serampore mission complex stood out as a unique creation for which Baptist sympathy and support simply could not be taken for granted. This resulted in Carey and his close
colleagues adopting an awkward, two-track (some even suggested a two-faced) modus operandi. What I mean is that the reality of their operations in Bengal, and the presentation of their requests for assistance from faraway Britain, tended to emanate from two different models, which I have termed "primitive" (in ideal, theological terms) and "professional" (in mundane, entrepreneurial terms).

In the "primitive" model, the spontaneous mobilization and fellowship of enthusiastic, voluntary lay Christians was what mattered most. Contrasting with this was the "professional" model which gave much less time to direct evangelism and much more to civilizing and "enlightening" ministries. One tended to be ardently democratic in nature while the other moved in a rather bureaucratic, or at least managerial, direction. One was mobile while the other was much more sedentary. One was footloose and venturesome for the Lord while the other made much of Western technology and relied on a well-equipped central base for supplies. One was keen to do street evangelism while the other pondered over Oriental Scriptures and translated them as part of a quest for a meaningful encounter between the East and the West. What Carey's team endeavored to do was to unite these two approaches into a lasting, harmonious working relationship; but many were the difficulties they met as they sought to do so, particularly in the area of personnel management. With the possible exception of Bible translation work, younger missionaries and their British sponsors were adamantly against such policy, and they communicated this in no uncertain terms to every Serampore veteran who dared to return to Britain on furlough. (Carey was the only one who never left Bengal.) Such opposition slowed the Serampore enterprise down to such an extent that there is good reason for asking whether the troika's hybrid effort turned out to be an unfortunate, if not ultimately impossible, experiment.

The shift in life style, social alignment and cross-cultural posture that the Baptist triumvirate experienced between the 1790s and the 1810s was graphically described by William Carey in a long letter he wrote to John Dyer, the BMS Secretary in London in 1819. Note the imagery he used:

My situation in the College [of Fort William, in Calcutta], and brother Marshman's as superintending the first Academy [i.e., boarding school] in India,... have made our present situation widely different from what it was when first [sic] engaged in the mission. As a missionary, I could go in a straw hat and dine with the judge of the district, and often did so; but as a professor in the College, I cannot do so. Brother M. is placed in the same predicament. These circumstances impose upon us a necessity of making a different appearance to what we formerly did as simple missionaries; but they furnish us with opportunities of speaking to gentlemen of the first power and influence in government, upon matters of the highest importance to the great work in which we are engaged.... (Marshman, Joshua 1828:16)

In this and other ways, the Trio admitted in private that they found themselves in a "predicament." They felt torn between the need to live simply among the hoi polloi in keeping with a dynamic, apostolic type of spirituality,
and a competing desire to so cooperate with sympathetic East India company officials that they would gain acceptance in the corridors of colonial power. Only with assistance from the affluent British Company could they earn their living and finance their sophisticated mission enterprise. By taking the latter route, they could not avoid becoming increasingly identified with the British forces occupying Bengal. All of which demonstrated how difficult it was to try to be both a sahib and a sadhu.

To what extent Carey's company realized the precise nature of this problem, we cannot tell, although there is evidence that they were solemnly warned of their descent into "the ditch of patronage" by one of their staunchest supporters (Anderson 1854:301-302). With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that a form of creeping alienation, or gradual distancing, did occur between them and the people of India who most needed the gospel to be incarnated in their midst (Smith 1992:5-7). The result was that a mystified type of missiological angst took root at Serampore. Dialectic tension developed in the Trio's hearts as they stood with arms stretched out to two very different cultures. They were disturbed that they found it easier to gain converts from the British armed forces in India and from the offspring of illegitimate European and Indian unions than from the native population. But they were at a loss as to how to remedy this. Their financial and professional commitments seemed to make it all but impossible for them to develop a more satisfactory or appropriate type of mission strategy for the subcontinent.

Symptoms of Transition

This unresolved struggle between two diametrically different worlds—between a precious Dissenting heritage and contrary metropolitan opportunities, between the sphere of age-old apostolic principles and the pressures of realistic pragmatism in the early days of the British empire—can be observed quite clearly in the life and writings of Joshua Marshman in the mid-1820s (Smith 1990b:190-194, 198-200). No doubt, this was symptomatic of a process that many British missions and voluntary evangelical societies had to wrestle with as Britain began to flex its muscles around the world in a way that would soon be dubbed "imperial." Bureaucratic and financial power was developing on a new scale in its administrative centers. Protestant mission managers were affected by the changing socio-economic climate, particularly at the organizational level. That is why clarion calls were sounded in London by several leading evangelical churchmen, such as Edward Irvin (before the London Missionary Society) and Christopher Anderson (before the Baptist Missionary Society) from 1824 onwards (Smith 1990b:188-190, 203). Anderson of Edinburgh had already shared his concern privately with Marshman in 1823, even though he may not yet have realized the extent to which the Serampore Mission was beginning to get bogged down by institutionalizing forces. In a letter of 11 January 1823 Anderson made his point to Marshman as follows:
If Societies are not conducted in the spirit of Christianity, and with more of the simplicity of Christ about them, any share which they have had in aiding His cause will be taken from them, and given to a method more congenial with that which succeeded at the original planting of His kingdom.... Is not the simple apparatus originally provided by Himself amply sufficient, ...? Such is the ponderosity, the intricacy, the nice balancing of the [organizational] machinery which they have got up in the cities and towns [of Britain] ... that they themselves are oppressed by it.

Anderson was concerned that the managers of the BMS in England had begun to give too much space to "pomp and circumstance" in their efforts to forward "the interests of His [Christ's] blessed Kingdom" (cf. Anderson 1854:259). It is as if a secular mindset was invading the sacred sphere.

This pastoral reaction to a trend that was becoming observable in a number of London-based missions registered clearly with Marshman. After all, he and his close colleagues had been finding it increasingly difficult to act in confident partnership with the BMS's management committee ever since its first secretary, Andrew Fuller, had died in 1815. Anderson's diagnosis of ills evident in the "home" evangelical scene seemed to the Trio to get to the root of the misunderstandings that were straining relations between Serampore and Britain. It is therefore hardly surprising that Marshman produced a pamphlet in 1825 using similar "spiritual" reasoning—or faith-mission-style language—to express Serampore's misgivings over the way in which its "parent society" was promoting missions, administering funds, and directing its missionary personnel. Entitled *Thoughts on Missions to India*, this privately published missiological piece contained analytical reflection and proposals on how to conduct mission work more effectively. It advocated decentralizing initiatives in the face of depersonalizing, bureaucratic pressures. Its concern was to show how missionaries could make a much greater spiritual impact on, and have much more success among, heathen populations. It was essentially a fervent, though low-profile, appeal for the renewal of missions as a dynamic and much more voluntary Christian movement. With Carey's consent, Marshman wrote it in preparation for his furlough in Britain (between 1825 and 1827) as if it were a manifesto, or "declaration of intent," outlining biblical policy for the future of their independent mission. During that furlough, meetings were held in a highly charged atmosphere. The outcome was that Serampore and the BMS finally parted company. With assistance from Scottish supporters, Marshman then re-published his work under a bolder title, which suggested that a new chapter needed to begin in missions. It now read: *Thoughts on Propagating Christianity More Effectually among the Heathen* (Smith 1990b:190-195).

This invites the question: "What impact did this pamphlet, or booklet, have among British mission leaders and supporters?" The answer is, apparently, very little. Some may have thought that it was more "romantic" than "realistic" in tone. Whatever, the publication was not circulated widely, and it soon slipped out of most people's minds. Carey's small team of workers in Bengal was aging and weakening, while the Baptist mission organization in Britain felt confident and strong enough to forge ahead without them.
Vividly realizing that the tide had turned against them, the veterans wrote back to Britain in words that recalled Paul’s painful appeal to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:8-13): “times are altered [now]; they [Dr. Carey and Dr. Marshman] must soon finish their earthly course; [while] the Society is rich and flourishing; they are the butt of calumny from the friends and foes of missions, while the Society is high in renown” (letter of Carey and John Marshman to the BMS, 15 April 1826, emphases added).

History records that the rupture between Carey’s cohort and the BMS simply put the Serampore mission out on a limb where it struggled to survive for a decade, until it could do so no more. In light of this, one could argue that the Serampore manifesto was something of a “swan song,” a last but belated attempt to recapture a cherished past. Produced when Carey and his company were going through particularly difficult times, it embodied a vision which could not reach fulfilment until mission leaders turned their backs on highly centralized and highly capitalized mission structures and opted for a much bolder type of pioneer strategy, focusing on the unevangelized and unreached interiors of the non-Western world. In that sense, it can be argued that the Serampore manifesto subconsciously anticipated the rise of Victorian “faith missions” as well as basic elements of the mission theology and dynamic mission theory developed during the next century or more by leaders such as Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn, Roland Allen, and Max Warren (Smith 1990b:198-202). Curiously, however, the mid-1820s manifesto did not lead to much change at all occurring in the Serampore Mission. Presumably, the worn-out patriarchs did not have the energy to engage in a thorough re-structuring of their enterprise, though there is little evidence to suggest that they really expected or intended to do so anyway. Their public declaration in effect was directed primarily at external relations with Britain rather than calling for a determined overhauling of administrative procedures and prioritizing in Baptist mission fields, beginning in Serampore.

Without a doubt, all this was symptomatic of the transitional nature and strange significance of the Serampore enterprise during the last 300 years of Protestant mission history. What Marshman and Carey did between 1825 and 1827 was map out the way in which they felt Christian missions needed to develop, even though they were unable to disengage themselves from many burdensome institutional ventures in which they had invested so much. Their separation from the BMS thus can be seen as a watershed between different generations of Baptist workers and between contrary approaches to mission. The Serampore saga of 1815 to 1834 was, then, symbolic of an awkward time of transition, namely, the pre-Victorian phase of experimenting with mission models and mission methods. During that time, attempts were made to amalgamate models that sometimes proved to be poles apart. It was a time for working out how to correlate different lines of theological conviction and practical priorities, a time for testing ideas and “pleasing dreams” on the anvils of life overseas. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say it was a transitional period as Carey’s generation struggled loose from the world of Puritan Calvinism and embarked on a voyage that eventually became known as the “modern” missionary movement. It was a time of struggling to come
to terms with the nascent world of British imperialism—more than with the world of the Indian subcontinent. That was what actually happened, even though India posed by far the greatest real missiological challenge to the Serampore enterprise.

When viewed against a broad canvas, the Trio surely pioneered an unusual type of missionary enterprise in a turbulent period—between the revolutionary upheavals in North America and France, on the one hand, and the establishing of the British Raj in India, on the other. If they had arrived in Danish Serampore a decade earlier or later than the turn of the century, it is most probable that their mission venture would have turned out very differently. By that I mean that their mission would have taken on a much humbler and simpler appearance. However, cooperation with the grandiose Governor-General, Lord Wellesley, in the early 1800s changed the picture dramatically. He opened up metropolitan and professional opportunities for Carey’s company that were quite unique, enabling them to inhabit a segment of history and to live in a set of contexts that have been quite unparalleled.

Because of this, it is an open question whether or not the Trio were fortunate in securing assistance from top British administrators in Bengal from 1800 onwards. Certainly they were able to jump through a “window” of opportunity that was briefly opened to them by a powerful, expatriate, mercantile company that was momentarily short of professional personnel. Yet how different it all would have turned out had India itself provided the missionaries with “an open door for effective work” instead! (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:9). This implies that great care needs to be taken in identifying the peculiar nature of the Serampore saga. Varnish and veneers must be set aside if we are to recognize the far-reaching significance of that mission epic for the myth-making and the model-making of the last 200 years.

Myths, Methods, and Models Since Carey’s Day

It has been asserted recently that “Halle printed on the evangelical imagination certain standard kinds of good works as signs of vital religion” (letter of W. R. Ward to the author, 10 May 1991). Another eminent historian has argued that the Victorian mission promoter, Thomas Fowell Buxton spearheaded “the application of the Gospel to all of life and all the world” (Walls 1991:77). If that is so, then William Carey and his Serampore company occupied an intermediate (pre-Victorian) position as they used a novel variety of “means” to bring the gospel of Christ to non-Christian people in the lands around the Indian Ocean. The methods they utilized included philology, translation, education, distribution of Christian literature, preaching, publishing, journalism, poor relief, and social reform. This broad approach set an important precedent for approaching unevangelized peoples decades before the gospel of full salvation in Jesus Christ took root in Africa and Latin America. Many were the missions thereafter that decided to focus on institutional ministries and preparatory methods in India and elsewhere rather than on direct forms of evangelism.

But here we must pause for a moment in order to be precise in our
evaluation of the missiological significance of the Serampore Trio (cf. Smith 1992:2, 5-8). What I have been calling for, first and foremost, is differentiation between “the Carey of tradition” and “the historical Carey.” Frequently, we need to be reminded to distinguish between promotional rhetoric and actual results in the experience of his mission. Many there have been in “the First World” who have wished to hold him (alone) high as a missionary archetype, a legendary figurehead, or a perennial symbol of bold evangelical mission outreach. But that probably tells us much more about the promoters’ (and popular) interest in heroic figures than about “the reality of their subjects’ lives and work” (cf. Tienou 1991:295). Perhaps it also reflects some of the uses that “the hero-martyr myth” could be put to in recruitment and funding drives for missions (cf. Dries 1991:305-313). Whatever, the Carey saga was viewed as offering all sorts of captivating stories. It was intriguing because many diverse streams seemed to converge in his life and in the pilgrimage of his team (Smith 1992). Their brave early years in Bengal (1793 to 1813) furnished all sorts of symbols that could be used to appeal to the imagination and the generosity of the Christian public back in burgeoning Britain. Thus, I have concluded that it was preeminently as catalysts for world mission, rather than as mission strategists or successful evangelistic pioneers, that Carey and his Baptist band made their mark in mission history. Of course, Carey was celebrated for the work he got going in Bible translations, but such popular acclaim should be evaluated in light of the considerable debate, even controversy, that occurred over his translation methodology during his lifetime. All of which reminds us that there is a big difference between shallow-rooted enthusiasm and well-founded realism in our reading of history and doing of mission (cf. Smith 1990a:232-234).

Of course, the Serampore mission leaders constituted a remarkable team of highly motivated, hard-working, mutually supportive, closely collaborating, self-educated ministers who stuck together through thick and thin for several decades. That in itself was no mean achievement and it contributed not a little to the enthusiasm for missions they generated in First World churches and voluntary societies during their early years. But that was quite another thing from establishing a successful model for future mission operations. The very fact of Serampore’s swift demise after their decease bears testimony to that. Surely that is why so few mission thinkers or strategists after their time ever credited them with providing comprehensive, or holistic, guidelines for the prosecution or advance of mission efforts overseas. Mission leaders in the Victorian era and after selected only isolated aspects of the veterans’ methodology and experience as a source of inspiration; for missiological analysis they had to turn elsewhere. This undoubtedly reflected the fact that Carey and his colleagues did not bequeath to posterity any significant missiological work written from the foreign-missions coal-face. Joshua Marshman’s pious Thoughts (1827) did not have much cross-cultural wisdom to offer. Only Ward may have been equipped to produce some sort of missionary manual, but he was prematurely struck down by cholera. His loss, which was a terrible blow to Serampore, was aggravated by years of burdensome disputation with the BMS. As a result, the trio were
able to give very little time to analytical reflection on mission engagement or advancing "the Redeemer's cause" in Asia. Because of that, the legacy they left to succeeding generations was strangely circumscribed.

In light of that, I have felt obliged to set a high premium on historical veracity and missiological verification when assessing the significance of Carey's company for "modern" missions. Thus, while it may be pointed out that they had big ideas for territorial expansion in their early years, I have to remember that these were very vague and that the Trio never ceased to be acutely aware in private of their enterprise's failure to realize its basic objectives, not least within the limited region of Bengal. This they felt most keenly in the area of mobilizing converts and junior colleagues for direct evangelism and church planting among the *hoi polloi*. Unmitigated strife among personnel in that sphere meant that the Serampore Mission became dangerously lopsided: exceedingly few cross-culturally effective workers ever emerged to compensate for the Trio's commitment to metropolitan careers. A prestigious college (by colonial standards) and a costly mission estate did little to foster the rise of an indigenous church movement in India or anywhere else. These ambitious projects were undoubtedly undertaken in an attempt to lay a secure foundation for future penetration of India by the gospel; but they missed the mark altogether. India was unmoved by such expatriate grandeur (based on large supplies of secular earnings), because spirituality, for her people, was achieved by much humbler means. After all, Western education was only accepted for mundane reasons; large expenditure in that sphere did painfully little to bring Orientals to Christ.

"Enlightenment" of a very different sort surely was the issue. Mission models needed to be developed with cross-cultural insights and sensitivity quite unknown in the pre-Victorian era. Indigenous church life needed to spring up using all sorts of resources that God had imparted to Asian people, without their being bemused by the beguiling wonders of Western technology and finance. But that was a tall order, and it took Westerners and others a century or more to begin to appreciate the need for such awareness—learning the hard way.

Because of this, I wonder whether the hybrid Serampore model really has been of much help to mission leaders and strategists during the last 200 years. In reality, I believe it was a rather ambiguous phenomenon, many elements of which hagiographers have sought to cover up or re-draw, for their own reasons. Such embellishment [creative distortion?] of the historical picture led easily to the popularization of unrealistic notions about mission overseas. This has been to our undoing because it has made it very difficult for us to perceive the truth "on the other side of the coin" of the historical saga. It has impeded recognition of so many of the ambivalences, polarities, contradictions, and conflicts that plagued the early modern missionary movement. That has resulted in unrealistic perceptions of the past. Of course, a certain amount of myth-making may have been understandable in the initial, and even subsequent, phases of a denominational mission venture; but it surely has done very little, if anything, to further the effectiveness of Christian outreach. Christ's cause has only suffered when missions have
been built on the unstable sand of popular myths rather than on the hard rock of historical truth and contextual insight. As a result, far too many missioners (and not just Baptist ones), from Carey’s era onwards, appear to have been distracted by secondary concerns—perhaps even “pleasing dreams”—instead of giving prime attention to understanding the cross-cultural issues involved in Western attempts to communicate Christ to people with Oriental worldviews.

Outlook

All this calls for a broad-based, scholarly inquiry into an unusual enterprise located at the intersection of two very different eras—and worlds. Symbolic Serampore beckons.

Hopefully, a team of researchers will be forthcoming to engage in careful textual and multi-contextual study of this turning point in our mission heritage. Then the venerable, much-used, long-suffering Trio, who were willing to go to great lengths to honor Christ and to do others good, may be rescued from “the cloud of [popular] unknowing.” Then we may discover how their enterprise is, in fact, full of missiological instruction and significance for interpreting the conduct of mission work throughout the last 200 years. Such study will invite us to scrutinize some of the deepest assumptions from which we and our predecessors have operated in Christ’s name. It will involve constructive, biblically informed, missiological “demythologizing” which can help us break free from unrealistic notions about the past—and present. Hopefully, the resulting findings will be of real value to mission leaders, model makers, and strategists whose task it is to help God’s people discover faithful, realistic, and effective ways to further the interests of his kingdom—in the midst of the present “paradigm shift” in world history.

Notes

1. This essay is based on research carried out for my forthcoming The Mission Enterprise of Carey and His Colleagues, to be published by Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia. It should be noted that the Serampore Trio, given their theological outlook, generally paid scant attention to missions carried out by Roman Catholics in the previous three centuries, even though they (e.g., Jose de Acosta, Francis Xavier, Roberto de Nobili, and various Jesuits) were referred to in Millar’s 1723 compendium.

2. On the capitalist “sub-imperialism” that developed gradually in Bengal during the rule of the British East India Company after 1764, see P. J. Marshall (1987:70-136). He argues convincingly that Bengal became “a largely autonomous British-Indian state that was rather loosely connected with imperial Britain and pursued its own purposes [or course] of ‘safety and consolidation’” until the early 1830s (136).

3. On the extent to which an economy may be said to be “capitalistic,” see the thoughtful suggestions of Nicholas Wollerstorff (1983:28-33).

4. Between 1800 and 1834, Serampore’s operational costs and capital expenditure amounted to £72,000 (British pounds sterling). This was equivalent to approximately $3,000,000 (U.S. dollars), or £1,800,000 (sterling) in October 1991. In 1807, £1 (one British pound) was equal to 5 Sica Rupees in India. For the purchasing power of the pound sterling over the last seven centuries, see Douglas Jay (1985:273-279).

5. Much discussion could occur on the usage of the terms “primitive” and “primitivism” in missiology. Tienou, for example, in an essay on “The Invention of
The ‘Primitive’ and Stereotypes in Mission,” has justifiably critiqued anthropological usage of the term “primitive” (1991:295-303). In contrast to the disdainful categorization of the objects of mission work as “primitive,” church and mission historians have used the term “primitive” in a positive way to refer to the modus vivendi of the early church of the first century A.D. This notion was tied up with Protestant interpretations of “the apostolic practices” (cf. Hughes 1980:268-279). Carpenter (1988:113,n1) quotes Grant Wacker’s description of “Christian primitivism” as a somewhat idealistic “yearning for pure doctrines, pure beginnings, and pure fulfilments—all untouched by the limitations and corruptions of ordinary existence.”

My missiological employment of the term “primitive” is historical-theological, referring to a methodology or model of communication, viz., the general approach used to propagate the gospel by the first generations of followers of Jesus. This historical foundation need not be treated as if it were an artificial construct, a posteriori, even if some mythical/hagiographical accretions have surrounded the apostolic legacy over the centuries. During the nineteenth century, models of “primitive” Christianity and ecclesiology were developed by mission-minded leaders as they sought to identify a sound, biblical strategy for evangelism, church-planting, mission-promotion and social action. This was in opposition to the burgeoning of bureaucratic attitudes and procedures in the operation of Euro-American mission societies. The mind-set or humble spirituality espoused by such challengers of the Christian status quo, from the days of Roger Williams (cf. Gaustad 1991:243-244) and Andrew Fuller onwards, may be said to have been “primitivist,” as defined above. On “the ‘primitivist’ school of missionary thinking” that emerged in Victorian times, under the leadership of figures such as James Hudson Taylor, George Muller and C. H. Spurgeon—and comparable with earlier impulses from the British Reverends Christopher Anderson, Edward Irvin, and J. A. James—see Bebbington (1989:77-80); Shenk (1990:28); and Stanley (1987:373-374). Between the 1830s and 1940s, Rufus Anderson and Roland Allen were perhaps the two most distinguished missiologists who were eager to do and advance mission work in line with “primitive” principles.

6. Christopher Anderson of Edinburgh rebuked Joshua Marshman in the following terms in 1833: “I must see what can be done to redeem or dig you out of the ditch, of which long ago dear Fuller, long-sighted man, so solemnly warned you, the ditch of patronage. But no, you would go and play at societies and committees, and see what has come out of it! You do not think me so queer a man now, because I happened to have seen into all this before you. Indeed, what is very strange [sic] you have scarcely seen into it now” (letter to Joshua Marshman, dated 17 June 1833, in H. Anderson 1854:301-302, 305).

7. Without in any way belittling Carey’s 1792 Enquiry, it is only right to point out that it was written in the heart of England years before Carey ever saw the sea. Its forte was in urging Western Christians to engage in missions overseas; it had only very rudimentary advice to offer those who actually became missionaries. Although nobody had produced a pamphlet like this before, it still was essentially an “inquiry” carried out by a person without the benefit of firsthand observation of non-British people abroad. The Trio’s October 1805 “Form of Agreement” probably attracted more interest in Britain than did the Enquiry; however, according to John Dyer (BMS Secretary), Joshua Marshman declared in August 1826 that it “did not continue in force many months” at Serampore because the missionaries “found it altogether impracticable” (Dyer 1828:20-21).

8. Those who prefer to accept popular traditions about Carey’s mission, instead of insisting on first gathering all the historical evidence together and weighing it carefully, may well be in danger of reading the Serampore story in a [primitivist] manner comparable with the Baptists’ forlorn struggle to apply “apostolic times”
realities to the pre-Victorian era. Hughes wisely warns against the danger that a believer gets into when he or she “has already been grasped by the power of the myth which emanates from the particular history, and no amount of verification, or lack of verification, can possibly make any difference” (Hughes 1980:271). He alerts us to the tendency of Christianity to become ahistorical when its adherents either deny (that certain things happened in the past) or “attempt to transcend the very particular history that produced them” (1980:270-271). Students of Christian mission cannot afford to let any particular history (or historical episode) be “swallowed up in myth to such an extent that the believer loses the clear distinction between his own time and the primal time” (1980:270-271). Diachronic, as well as synchronic, cross-cultural understanding is a sine qua non in missiological reflection.

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