

## **Nineteenth-Century Bible Society Colporteurs in Eastern Europe**

The British and Foreign Bible Society, formed in 1804, became 'one of the most dynamic and successful institutions spawned by the great evangelical awakening'. In its first 50 years the Bible Society issued nearly 28 million copies of the Scriptures (in whole or part) in 152 languages and dialects, the majority in the languages of Europe and Asia. The Bible Society was one very important channel through which currents of evangelical Christianity flowed into Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. It founded a system of agencies in Europe and elsewhere, subordinate to the central office in London. In the second half of the nineteenth century a pattern of territorial 'agencies' developed, with the establishment of permanent depots and the employment of travelling salesman - 'colporteurs'. The responsibility of colporteurs was to sell and distribute Bibles, but evangelism was prohibited. The Bibles sold were to be 'without note or comment', so that there could be no allegations of denominational bias. In the period I am looking at there were well-known agents – William Nicholson for European Russia and much of Eurasia, Alexander Thomson in the Turkish Empire and Edward Millard in the Austrian Empire. My focus in this paper is on colportage, the means by which Bibles were distributed. In 1877 the BFBS stated that colportage was 'the backbone of the Society's work'. I am examining the period of the 1860s and 1870s, when Bible Society activities expanded considerably in the Central and Eastern areas of Europe. My particular interest is how the colporteurs engaged with the prevailing religious cultures.

### **Orthodox Russia**

William Nicholson was appointed to St Petersburg by the BFBS in 1860 and the St Petersburg Agency of the BFBS became especially important.

Another important centre, serving the South of Russia and later the Caucasus, was Odessa, on the Black Sea. Here the major figure in the early 1860s was John Melville.

The colporteur in Russia on whom I want to focus is Jacob Delyakov or Yacob Dillakoff. He was very well known across many parts of Russia and issues for the BFBS in Russia.

BFBS colporteurs were realising the potential of the splinter groups from the Russian Orthodox Church – Russian sectarians – since many wanted to read the Bible in Russian.

Questions about water baptism among Molokans created considerable tension in 1867. A decade later Dillakoff, the Nostorian colporteur, became a Baptist.

### **Wider Orthodoxy**

The situation in Bulgaria was a relatively open one. BFBS progress in Bulgarian was linked with advance in education. People were interested in Bible reading.

Although there were Orthodox priests who were sympathetic to the Bible Society, in the minds of many Bulgarians colporteurs were suspect because they were Protestants.

As the evangelical movement began to spread in Bulgaria, Protestant churches began to be formed. Stefan Kurdov, a colporteur, is an example of how this worked.

Bible Society agents were always seeking to recruit those who transdenominational understanding. Alexander Thomson identified the potential of Franz Tabory.

Peter Kuzmic has argued that the work of the BFBS and its colporteurs 'made a significant contribution to the religious and cultural progress of the South Slav peoples'.

### **The Catholic context**

Edward Millard, BFBS representative in Vienna, covering the Austrian Empire, was highly significant for Society activity in the majority Catholic countries of Central/Eastern Europe.

What Millard wanted was for the Austrian authorities to recognise that he was seeking to co-operate with all denominations, not least with Catholics.

By the end of the 1860s Millard had forty-four colporteurs working for his agency. They were recruited from various denominations, with Lutherans, at twenty-two, the largest group.

Millard encouraged the view that spiritual life was to be nurtured in the Catholic Church. At the same time it was evident that evangelical conversion led some away from Catholicism.

As far as possible, Millard gave accounts not of those who left the Catholic Church but rather of those Catholics who were deeply affected by reading the scriptures.

Millard applauded intrepid colporteurs. Some went into factories with the scriptures. Some engaged in debates.

### **Protestantism**

In 1870 Millard described Austrian Protestantism as 'mostly very cold'. But Antal Novák, a colporteur, spoke of 'remarkable awakenings' in Hungary.

The Nováks worked Gyoma, which is in the South East of Hungary, at the invitation of the local Reformed minister. In 1870 they travelled to Vienna and were baptised.

Another Baptist colporteur who was seeking to negotiate his way through Hungarian Reformed communities was Johann Rottmayer.

Millard had mutually supportive contacts within Lutheranism. During the Russo-Turkish war the Bible Society became part of a relief effort supported by the wider Protestant world.

### **The Bible Society and Evangelicals**

The evangelical movement gave strength to the Society, but could also cause tensions because of the tendency to fissiparity. Dunlop Moore clashed with Millard.

There were further tensions over Heinrich Meyer, a charismatic Baptist figure.

The Bible Society colporteurs were often central to evangelical growth.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that a particular challenge for colporteurs of the Bible Society in Eastern Europe was seeking to work non-denominationally in the differing Christian settings.