

A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN LITERATURE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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THE recently compiled surveys of all the available Christian literature in the languages of India and China have prepared the way for a new programme of advance in the publication of books, the lack of which has been discovered to be a serious weakness to the missionary enterprise in those lands.

But the condition of African missions in the matter of literature is far worse than that of either India or China. The babel of tongues is greater, the darkness is more dense, and apart from the missionary societies there is practically no education or literature for the natives of the great equatorial belt of the continent. Nothing was more impressive to the present writer in a recent visit to the Congo than the fact that over large areas of the country and for whole tribes of people, the missionary society is not only an embodiment of benevolence and social uplift but the source of all intellectual enlightenment. Every book the people possess in their language was made for them by the missionary. Their speech was first committed to writing by the Christian pioneers, and in many cases the whole process of authorship, printing, binding of books, as well as the actual teaching is being carried out by the same group of missionaries on a single station.

It is a very notable achievement that already in more than 180 African languages Christian books have been published. The British and Foreign Bible Society in its Report for 1920 has 150 African languages on its list of translations. Of these 22 have the whole Bible, 36 have the whole New Testament and 92 have portions only.

Other agencies have been engaged in Scripture translation on some languages not included in the B. & F.B.S. list.

It is no easy task to survey all these languages and discover what books exist in addition to the Bible. A beginning has been made, on behalf of the Committee on Christian Literature appointed by the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, and as the result of many months' correspondence with the headquarters of the missionary societies and with missionaries in Africa, book lists have now been obtained in 130 languages. These include all the chief tongues of tropical and South Africa. The lists are probably incomplete in many cases. Some of them include books which are now out of print and have been, or are about to be, superseded. It has not yet been possible to obtain sufficient information about the books on some of the lists to get a clear idea as to their scope—as for instance in the case of such vague titles as *Stories from General History*, or *Things that should be known*. But from all the material thus far received a card catalogue has been carefully made which will be the foundation of a more complete record as further replies are received. It is obvious that anything like an adequate survey can only be obtained when for every section of Africa in which there is a representative and co-operative missionary organization, a literature committee is appointed which shall undertake a full investigation of all the vernacular literature within its area.

Some of the languages on our lists are mere local dialects spoken within small areas, and are likely to disappear with the progress of civilization and the literary development of stronger neighbouring languages. In some instances a few small books have been prepared in the separate speech of an outlying tribe, with the hope of bringing it within the good influence of the main activities of the mission and opening the way for children to come to the school of the central station, there to receive their education in the language of the larger tribe or group of tribes. With the

success of that effort all further publication in the lesser dialect tends to become unnecessary. This would seem to be a very desirable result, for to any one who seriously studies the situation it is abundantly clear that a full supply of Christian literature in all the existing languages of Africa, including a complete version of the Scriptures, would take centuries to accomplish.

There is at present a pitifully meagre stock of books in most of the African missions. In many of them a native teacher might easily tie up the whole library in a pocket handkerchief. Intelligent converts soon exhaust the supply of reading matter, and it is not exceptional for a candidate for baptism to have read everything that has ever been printed in his language.

We may classify the books entered on our lists as follows :—First School Readers ; Books for Worship and Elementary Religious Teaching ; Bible Study Helps, Commentaries, etc. ; Christian Doctrine and Morals ; Science, History and Geography ; Stories ; Language Study. Judging by the length of the list of books published, the following languages would seem to be the best provided :—Arabic, Swahili, Ganda, Nyanja, Malagasy, Ronga, Chuana, Xosa (Kafir), Zulu, Suto, Ashanti, Hausa, Bangi, Yoruba, Kongo, Mbundu and Mongo-Nkundu.

Of the first two classes there is not much to be said. Quite half of the languages contain each no more than an elementary primer, school reader, hymn and prayer book, with a catechism and perhaps a book of Bible stories and such translations as *Line upon Line*, *Peep of Day*, and *More about Jesus*. It is impressive to find in so many lists *The Pilgrim's Progress*, translated and adapted, probably in an abridged form, as almost the only volume of religious literature for the infant Church, apart from actual versions of Scripture. The generosity of the Christian publishing societies that has made it possible to provide this and other European evangelical books in many African versions is a cause of true gratitude. But it ought to stimulate yet

wider plans for producing books specially written for African readers by authors who understand their mental outlook.

Of commentaries or expository lessons on the Bible there are few. Suto is the best provided with expositions of twelve New Testament books. The Uganda Church has notes on the four Gospels and on the Epistle of St James. The Kafir Church has the former and an exposition of the Epistle to Galatians. In Swahili there are commentaries on St Matthew and St Mark; in Mbundu, St Matthew only. Lessons on the Acts have been published in Yao; lessons on the Gospels and Psalms in Kongo and on Joshua in Mbundu. Of other books for Bible study only in Ganda is there anything so extensive as a translation of the Oxford *Helps*. In Suto is a small Bible dictionary and handbooks of introduction have been published in Ashanti, Chuana and Ronga. Books bearing the title *Life of Christ* are reported in half-a-dozen lists, and *Life of Paul* in two besides. In Ronga and also in Mongo appears the entry *Harmony of the Gospels*.

A great field lies open for the preparation of a series of Bible manuals specially edited by experienced African missionaries for the guidance and edification of the native Church.

It is difficult to form an opinion as to the scope and value of books bearing titles that fall beneath the classification of Christian Doctrine and Morals without being able to read them in their African speech. One would think that some of them ought to be of great service in a far wider area than that of the particular language in which they have been published if only they could be translated. Contact with Islam is indicated in a number of entries. In Swahili are several books of Christian evidence and controversy with Islam, which might equally well serve the purpose of other areas in which Moslems are found, as also books and tracts dealing with Christian marriage, polygamy and alcoholism. But this entire section is very poorly

provided for by African missions as a whole. There is in Ganda a handbook on the Holy Spirit. Nyanja has *Helps for Christians* and also *Helps for Hearers*. Kongo has a book of Scripture passages to refute Romanism and there are several manuals of Church rules and practices.

It is beyond doubt that by co-operation the missionary societies working among tribes under similar conditions of civilization and Christian development could produce and profitably use much common literature of this order.

In both General History and Church History the range of knowledge open to the great mass of African Christians is extremely limited. Most of the languages have no books of history or biography outside the Bible. How difficult it must be for a convert to relate himself to the remote or recent past or to fill up the interval between the period of the Acts of the Apostles and the coming of the missionaries to Africa in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Only fifteen languages on the list seem to be furnished with any historical works. Uganda readers have a small volume of forty-four pages with the ambitious title of *The History of the World*. In Ashanti and in Accra there are *Stories from General History*, and in Swahili a *History Reader* and a translation of Creighton's *Rome*. There are several entries of the *Life of Mahomet*, one of the *Life of Luther* and two of the *Life of Livingstone*. For the church history such provision as has been made for the instruction of African Christians has been chiefly in manuals translated from English. Robertson's *Church History* appears in several lists. Cowan's *Landmarks of Church History* and Milner's *Church History* also appear. The title of one book, *Heroes of the Faith* in Chiswina, is specially suggestive of what might be expected to prove useful to African Christians.

There is evidently a great opportunity in this department for co-operative publishing by the missionary societies of short life stories of outstanding Christian men and women of many lands.

Geography is deplorably deficient. There are only

eight language lists in which it is mentioned. The most interesting title is one in Dualla, *The Country of the White Man as seen by the Black Man*. In Zulu have been published some accounts of missionary success in New Guinea and the South Sea Islands.

In Elementary Natural Science only eleven of the languages boast any publication. Judging from the few specimen copies of those that have come to hand the standard attained is not yet wholly satisfactory. Illustrations should be adequate and of good quality.

Of Stories, Proverbs and Folk-Lore there is a large supply, and a good many of the lists include one or more entries under this heading. They are probably the books most characteristic of Africa in the whole list, and one would like to be able to read them in the original. A large amount of interesting and valuable material for the enrichment of native African literature generally must be now confined to the separate languages which under a scheme of bilingual publication might be made a common possession.

For the learning of European languages, English, French or Portuguese, only six of the lists include books of grammar and conversation. There will certainly be a demand for more of these as Africa opens up.

It must be recognized that Christian missionary agencies by their very success as civilizing and educating forces are under obligation to provide with good literature the African readers whom they have trained. No time should be lost in establishing so strong a defence against the advance of Islam, and so sure a means of progressive strength for the African Church. It is a minor but not unimportant consideration that among African Christians there is a readiness to pay a fair price for their books. This fact relieves the burden of cost of production which is so serious in other parts of the world.

Perhaps it has been inevitable under all the circumstances that African Christian publications up to the present time have been foreign translations for the most part.

But we ought not to be content with that condition. We have to make progress toward the development of native authorship, and as an intermediate stage we must secure the preparation of literature specially for African use by competent and sympathetic writers who are familiar with African life and thought. The Literature Committee before referred to has very definitely committed itself to this policy.

What, then, about the future in the light of our present knowledge? Plans must be made for hastening the production of what is needed for general education and Biblical teaching. To leave each separate language to the isolated efforts of the small group of workers in that language is to postpone for centuries the provision of literature for African people. By two processes the problem may be simplified.

The first is co-operation, by means of translations, to make available to all the best material that exists in any African tongue. The second is the employment of the European languages that prevail so widely in Africa under European colonial dominion.

By combining these two processes a still more rapid and effectual advance may be made. If in the production of literature, whether as school text-books or for the more advanced study of teachers, pastors and the general Christian community we could all agree to make common property of every manuscript and publish it not only for the restricted use of one African tribe, but in a bi-lingual edition having one of the European languages, English, French or Portuguese, as its companion version, we should immediately produce several important results.

1. We should make the subject matter available for use in other African languages, and so hasten the provision of what is most needed for all the Christian communities in the same stage of growth living under similar conditions.

2. We should make every publication saleable in a larger area.

3. We should further the learning of European languages by Africans and the learning of African languages by Europeans.

4. We should in the most natural manner promote the selection and survival of the fittest of the African languages themselves.

Bi-lingual books, as every student knows, are a very old institution, well consecrated to Christian uses and they have already been proved a practical success in Africa. The Literature Committee is now promoting an experimental issue of bi-lingual editions of text-books in French and Congo languages. A handbook on Tropical Hygiene, First Aid and Home Nursing prepared for use in the Yakusu Mission of the Baptist Missionary Society near Stanley Falls, Upper Congo, has been revised and edited in French by Dr Henri Anet and a Belgian physician, and is being printed, fully illustrated. The standard version, in French, is on the left-hand page of the book, the corresponding Lokele version on the right-hand page. The French will be stereotyped and used with various other Congo versions in successive editions. A Portuguese edition will also be prepared in a similar manner for use in Portuguese Angola. If this experiment meets with the success that is expected it will open up the way for rapid advance with similar publications.

Within British territory, the opportunity of getting their books in bi-lingual English and African editions would be eagerly welcomed by the members of the native Church and the principle would be certainly approved by the officials and commercial classes from their different points of view. Every original new book so issued would be sought after by missions in every part of Africa. As a means of teaching English and so opening up the highways of universal literature to Africans, the method is self-evident. Missionaries from French-speaking countries who are working in any part of Africa could multiply the effectiveness of all they do for African literature if they

would prepare all their work in the French language and issue it in bi-lingual French-African editions.

The incomplete survey which has now been made has revealed immeasurable possibilities. For example, French-speaking Swiss scholars working as missionaries in Portuguese African territory are now producing books exclusively in the native language; if these were available in French, Portuguese and English bi-lingual editions they might help to spread light over the whole dark continent.

Even within the borders of any one large missionary organization working in different language areas of Africa, the establishment of a common policy and the setting up of a literary clearing-house would be great practical economy. Sometimes missionaries do not know what books are being written and published by their fellow-workers of the same society in other African languages, and months or years of laborious effort might be saved and better results achieved under such a system as the Literature Committee proposes to set up.

This summary of the result thus far obtained in the exploration of so vast a territory may deepen interest in the whole subject and may serve in bringing together into fruitful combination the devoted work that is being given in such unstinted measure to the enlightenment of the African mind. Here as elsewhere there remaineth yet much land to be possessed.

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