

Lessons in Mission from Henry Martyn (1781–1812)

Edward L. Smither¹

This article examines the mission strategies of Henry Martyn (1781–1812), whose work as a chaplain for the British East India Company was marked by groundbreaking contributions to Bible translation in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. The article reflects on Martyn’s legacy and offers suggestions for modern mission practice, including the integration of academic and practical ministry, the importance of cross-cultural relationships, and the enduring need for missionaries to maintain a contemplative spiritual life.

Keywords: missionary, missiology, Henry Martyn, Bible translation

Introduction

As we look to the future of mission and new frontiers in missiology, it’s often wise to first look back. In this article, I explore the ground-breaking innovation of nineteenth-century Bible translator Henry Martyn (1781–1812). Never an official missionary, Martyn went to India and Persia as an Anglican chaplain for the British East India Company. Trained in classical and biblical languages and math at Cambridge, Martyn was ahead of his time as a linguist and Bible translator and broke new ground by working on three different languages (Urdu, Persian, Arabic) simultaneously. A student of culture and Islam in particular, he forged a model for being a missionary scholar. In addition, he demonstrated an incarnational approach to ministry and actively collaborated with others in mission work. After reflecting on these innovative nineteenth-century mission approaches, I will make practical suggestions for what can be gleaned from Martyn for mission practice today.

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Background²

Martyn hailed from Truro (Cornwall) in the western tip of England. Martyn was raised in a strong Anglican parish, but his family was also influenced by the evangelical Methodist movement in the region. In addition to Sunday services, his father attended Bible studies and prayer meetings. Despite his family's faithful witness, Martyn did not fully commit his life to Christ until his father's sudden passing during his studies at Cambridge. At Cambridge, Martyn was mentored by Charles Simeon (1759–1836), the rector of Holy Trinity Church and leader in the Anglican evangelical movement. Under Simeon's leadership, Martyn was ordained to ministry in the Church of England and set his sights on mission work in India.

After a nine-month journey aboard the *Union* (Martyn served as the ship's chaplain), he landed in India in 1806. As a chaplain for the British East India Company, he pastored the international community in Dinapore (Bihar) and Cawnpore (Uttar Pradesh) where he also focused on Bible translation. After completing the Urdu New Testament in 1810, he journeyed to Persia and spent a year there checking and finalizing the Persian translation.

While traveling on horseback from Persia to Istanbul (before intending to sail home to England) Martyn died from tuberculosis and was buried in Tokat, Turkey by Armenian Orthodox clergy. Having only served six years in mission, Martyn accomplished his life mission statement, "Let me burn out for God."³

Lessons from Henry Martyn

Tentmaking

Martyn went to India not as a missionary but as a strategically placed religious professional. He initially wanted to join the recently launched Church Missionary Society, but because his father's inheritance had been lost and he was responsible for providing for his younger sister, he accepted a chaplaincy post with the British East India Company. Through the influence of Simeon, Martyn secured a post directly through the company director, Charles Grant, who was interested in placing Anglican evangelical chaplains in India.

² See further Clinton Bennett, "The Legacy of Henry Martyn." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 1 (1992): 10–13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/239693939201600102>.

³ Cited in George Smith, *Henry Martyn* (The Religious Tract Society, 1892), 150.

Since most British expatriates in India had little spiritual interest, Martyn's work as a pastor was challenging. Nevertheless, he faithfully led services, preached, led Bible studies, and visited the sick.

His chaplaincy role allowed him some freedom to minister to Indians. He organized church services for Urdu-speaking women and beggars. He also started a school to teach children how to read. Since evangelism was forbidden in British-controlled Indian territories before 1813, Martyn had more freedom to minister to Indians as a chaplain than as a missionary. His service in India probably influenced the British decision to reverse its policy on evangelism in 1813.

Innovation in Translation

Martyn's duties as a chaplain afforded him much time to give to what became his first love in ministry—Bible translation. Along with David Brown from the associated clergy, Martyn cultivated a vision for a groundbreaking project—simultaneously translating three related languages (Urdu, Persian, Arabic). Despite his health challenges, Martyn gave himself wholeheartedly to the translation work. He wrote: "My soul much impressed with the immeasurable importance of my work, and the wickedness and cruelty of wasting a moment, when so many nations are, as it were, waiting while I do my work."⁴ As he wrestled deeply with the nuances of language toward a faithful rendering of Scripture, the translation work seemed to make Martyn forget about his failing health.⁵

Martyn worked directly on the Urdu translation. This project was closely aligned to his pastoral ministry in Dinapore and Cawnpore where he preached and led services in Urdu for women and beggars. The Urdu New Testament was the first translation Martyn completed in 1810. Because of a fire at Serampore that destroyed the community's printing press, publication was delayed until 1814. In addition to the New Testament, Martyn also translated the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and a commentary on the parables of Jesus into Urdu. Between 1814 and 1847, sixteen editions of the Urdu Scriptures were published

⁴ John Sargent, *Life and Letters of Henry Martyn* (Banner of Truth, 1985), 182.

⁵ See further Constance Padwick, *Henry Martyn: Confessor of the Faith* (Doran, 1923), 198, https://archive.org/details/henrymartynconfe00padw_0; also Graham Kings, "Foundations for Mission and the Study of World Christianity: The Legacy of Henry Martyn." *Mission Studies* 14, no. 1 (1997): 250, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157338397X00167>.

for India's fifty million Urdu-speaking Muslims. A revised edition was completed in 1869.⁶

Martyn oversaw the Arabic and Persian translations, which involved managing a team of consultants. In Dinapore, Cawnpore, and Persia, he worked with a young Muslim background believer named Sabat. Though the two fiercely debated over translation matters and struggled to get along at times, they cultivated a wonderful relationship in the process.⁷

As Martyn began to understand Islam and increasingly encountered Muslims in India, his vision for translating the Arabic New Testament grew. Constance Padwick wrote: "The possibilities of his work in Arabic, the great religious tongue of the Moslem world, fired his imagination."⁸ Based on initial feedback, Martyn became greatly concerned about the quality of the Arabic translation and wanted to check it with scholars in Arabia. Upon arriving in Bushehr (Persia), he quickly discovered that Arabic scholars were pleased with the work. In 1816, the Arabic New Testament was published in Calcutta by the Serampore community. Later, in 1860, eminent Arabic scholar Cornelius Van Dyck (1818–1895) revised the translation. Van Dyck's translation continues to be used by churches around the Arab world to the present day.⁹

Through Martyn's leadership, the Persian New Testament was translated in just thirty-four months. As shown, though the project began in India, Martyn was convinced that the text needed to be checked and reviewed by Persian scholars, which led to an arduous journey through the country and a year of consultation and translation work. With the New Testament complete and Martyn waiting for the Persian scribes to make copies, he took those six months to translate the Psalms into Persian. The Persian New Testament was published in two places. Through the British ambassador's advocacy, it was first published in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1815. The following year, it was also printed and distributed by the Serampore team in Calcutta.¹⁰

⁶ See further Bennett, "The Legacy of Henry Martyn," 12; Will Brooks, *Love Lost for the Cause of Christ: Three Missionaries and Their Sacrifices for the Great Commission* (Wipf & Stock, 2018), 22; Avril A. Powell, "The Legacy of Henry Martyn to the Study of India's Muslims and Islam in the Nineteenth Century," 10, <https://www.cccw.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Powell-Dr-Avril.pdf>; Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 427–33; and Kings, "Foundations for Mission," 251.

⁷ See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 208–10.

⁸ Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 205.

⁹ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 434–35.

¹⁰ See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 276–77; Brooks, *Love Lost*, 14, 24; Kings, "Foundations for Mission," 252; and Powell, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 10.

A Missionary Scholar

Martyn possessed a great mind and a passion for learning that he leveraged for global mission. His training in math and languages at Cambridge prepared him to make unprecedented advances in linguistics and translation work. George Smith, one of Martyn's nineteenth-century biographers, declared that Martyn was the most well-trained nineteenth-century missionary in Biblical Hebrew and Greek. His natural abilities and training set him apart from William Carey (1761–1834) and the Serampore community. Though Martyn admired these colleagues, he recognized that they were greatly handicapped because of their limited education.¹¹

In addition to his training and abilities, Martyn demonstrated a tireless work ethic. According to Smith, throughout his life, he “never knew an idle moment.”¹² Martyn buried himself in study and translation even while traveling aboard ships. He dug deep into the methodical and meticulous work with his translation teams, and he insisted on checking the translated texts for accuracy, which led to his trips to Arabia and Persia.¹³

Regarding study and translation as a spiritual discipline, Martyn seemed to be refreshed by it. Even as he battled significant health challenges, especially toward the end of his life, he wrote: “Study never makes me ill.”¹⁴ An admirer of Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and the Jesuits, Martyn seemed to adopt his own evangelical monastic habits for study and the work of translation.

Martyn also demonstrated missionary scholarship by engaging primary sources. Going back to his Cambridge days, he enjoyed reading Persian literature. Before leaving England, he was encouraged by John Gilchrist (1759–1841), who taught with William Carey at Fort William College in Calcutta, to study a language deeply before making any attempts to do any Bible translation. Similarly, regarding Islam, he insisted on reading the Qur'an and Muslim theologians as well as listening to and debating Muslim thinkers. Through this, he cultivated a faithful Muslim perspective before he presented the gospel. His

¹¹ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 418, 425; Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 165–66; and Bennett, “Legacy of Henry Martyn,” 12.

¹² Cited in Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 419.

¹³ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 426; Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 202–3; and Kenneth Cragg, *Troubled by Truth: Biographies in the Presence of Mystery* (Pentland, 1992), 20–22.

¹⁴ Cited in Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 229.

Controversial Tracts, published in response to Persian Muslim objections to the gospel, illustrate this value.¹⁵

Martyn's passion for academics was driven by a passion for mission. Though his health was failing, he could not be stopped from traveling to Persia to provide Arab and Persian readers with an accurate and beautiful translation of Scripture. Given the praise the Persian New Testament received from the Shah (king) of Persia, Martyn's mission was a success.¹⁶

Incarnational Ministry

Though Martyn preferred a quiet life of prayer and study, he also demonstrated a commitment to incarnational ministry—imitating Christ by striving to identify with and live among those he came to serve. Serving as the *Union's* chaplain during the initial nine-month voyage from England to India, he strived to connect with soldiers and sailors with whom he had little in common, by going below deck and ministering to their needs. During stops in Brazil and South Africa, he went ashore, made contact with local people, and observed ongoing ministries. In Cawnpore, he transformed his home into a worship space for hundreds of poor, Urdu-speaking Indians. He cared for their physical needs and preached very simple messages. Through this ministry, one of his Muslim translation assistants believed the gospel and was later baptized. Taking the name Abd al-Masih (servant of the Messiah), the man was later ordained an Anglican priest.¹⁷

Martyn also proved to be incarnational in how he approached language learning. While he studied the Urdu dictionary and grammar on the way to India, he also built relationships with Urdu speakers and worked on his listening comprehension and pronunciation. During the six-week cruise from Calcutta to Dinapore, he stopped into villages to visit and talk with local people, observing the changes in the spoken dialect. Later, while sailing to Persia via Arabia, he practiced speaking Arabic with Arab sailors aboard the ship the *Bunares*. Unlike many skilled linguists, he grasped languages in their written *and* spoken forms, which allowed him to move closer to people.¹⁸

¹⁵ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 72; Powell, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 5–6; Bennett, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 13–14; Cragg, *Troubled by Truth*, 27; and Henry Martyn, *Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Mohammedanism* (Cambridge, 1824), <https://archive.org/details/controversialtra00mart>.

¹⁶ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 426, 486–87.

¹⁷ See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 143–50, 225–28, 235; also Powell, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 18–19.

¹⁸ See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 243, 252–53; also Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 348.

Martyn was also incarnational in his general regard for Indians. Unlike many of his countrymen, he respected Indians and did not believe that the English were a superior people. He wrote: "I learnt that the power of gentleness is irresistible and also that these men are not fools. Clearness of reasoning is not confined to Europe."¹⁹ This posture toward Indians allowed him to build significant relationships, including friends who would become collaborators on Bible translation work.

Through practicing hospitality, Martyn also proved to be incarnational. During his fellowship at Cambridge, though he would have been happy to stay in his room and pray or read, Martyn deliberately chose to welcome visitors. These habits continued in Dinapore and Cawnpore when Martyn's salon was often filled with an eclectic group of guests—Muslim scholars, Catholic priests, Armenian clergy, and Indian translation helpers. Over meals in India and later Persia, Martyn enjoyed hours of rich conversation about the gospel. Because he welcomed Indians into his home, his countrymen mocked him, calling Martyn the "black clergyman."²⁰

Finally, Martyn's apologetic encounters with Muslims were also incarnational. To be sure, Martyn debated Muslims about the divinity of Christ and other topics and his *Controversial Tracts* were polemical in tone. Some of his followers, such as Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803–1865), went further, seeking to destroy Indian Islam through polemics. For Martyn, however, debates and polemics always occurred in the context of relationships. He connected with Indian and Persian Muslims by strongly defending the gospel and the person and work of Christ. Amid these encounters, Martyn spoke of a mutual love that developed between himself and his Muslim friends. Padwick observed Martyn's "tender concern . . . for their souls."²¹ Ultimately, Martyn believed that Muslims were drawn to Christ through love; not through winning arguments.²²

Collaboration

Following the example of earlier Anglican missionaries, Martyn valued collaborating with other Christians in the work of mission. On his first day in Calcutta, Martyn met William Carey. Soon after, he became close friends with

¹⁹ Cited in Kings, "Foundations for Mission," 250.

²⁰ Bennett, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 13; see further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 243.

²¹ Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 205.

²² See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 203–5; Bennett, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 12–14; and Cragg, *Troubled by Truth*, 23–31.

Joshua Marshman and the other Baptists at Serampore and regularly visited them while in Calcutta. Though Martyn's linguistic and translation skills were superior to those of his Baptist colleagues and the fact that the Urdu, Arabic, and Persian translations were pursued outside of Serampore was a sensitive matter, Martyn always sent his translation works to Serampore for publication and distribution.²³

An Anglican evangelical, Martyn also partnered with broader global Christians, including Roman Catholics and Armenian Orthodox believers. Like Carey, Martyn valued collaborating with Catholics on Bible translation projects. During his service in Dinapore, he built relationships with Armenian priests, who helped facilitate his journey through Persia. When he died, Armenian priests in Tokat took his body and provided a Christian burial. As Martyn labored to present the gospel and Scriptures to Muslims, he valued showing Muslims that Christians (Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox) were united in one faith.²⁴

Reflections for Mission Today

How was Martyn a groundbreaking missionary, and what can Anglican and other missionaries recover from him today? First, as a chaplain and not an official missionary, he demonstrated a viable model for tentmaking. Driven to the chaplaincy route because of his family's financial needs, Martyn faithfully worked as a pastor for the international community in India, a role that allowed him ample time to pursue his passion for Bible translation. In today's global mission context where it is increasingly difficult to raise funds for mission, especially for believers from the majority (non-western) world, Martyn continues to be a model for reflection.

While tentmaking and business as mission initiatives have been in the works for decades, why not consider Martyn's approach of being a pastor for the international community? Some denominations (e.g., Anglicans, Southern Baptists) have established international churches around the world. In other contexts, even restricted ones such as the Gulf countries or North Africa, new churches have been planted to serve the international expatriate community. While pastoring a church is certainly full-time work, many international pastors also collaborate in ministry with the local indigenous churches. Though there

²³ See further Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, 199–200; Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 160–65; and Bennett, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 12.

²⁴ See further Smith, *Henry Martyn*, 219; also Bennett, "Legacy of Henry Martyn," 13.

are more opportunities in international business or other professional sectors, the need for pastors for the expatriate community remains.

Second, with his excellent university training and daily habits for study, Martyn remains a model of a missionary scholar. Martyn inspired the twentieth-century Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg (1913–2012) to become a scholar of Islam and to forge meaningful dialogues with Muslims.²⁵ In the world of Bible translation, Martyn set the stage for the emergence of SIL International (1934) and Wycliffe Bible Translators (1942). These two organizations have pioneered breakthroughs in the science of linguistics and have trained and sent out some of the world's finest linguists to promote literacy and translate Scripture into the world's languages. Missionary scholars have also led the way in medicine, community development, international law, and education while serving in global mission.

Though many contemporary mission organizations prefer to focus on mission practice and may even shy away from academics, there is still much space today for missionary scholars to use their academic abilities for the sake of the gospel. When I completed seminary and went back to the field in France and then North Africa, I had a lingering desire to do further academic studies; however, I could not see how this fit with our mission organization's vision for evangelism and discipleship. Eventually, I was accepted into a historical theology program in Great Britain, and I carried out my research on early African Christianity while living near ancient Carthage. While I greatly enjoyed studying the African church fathers (Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine), I also began to receive invitations to give lectures and papers about this period of North African history. Through these opportunities, I also had many "Nicodemus" moments where North African Muslims approached me to talk more about the gospel. Through this experience, I learned that academics and mission could be compatible.²⁶

While Christian academics can have a personal witness, others have adopted this strategy on an organizational level. In 1986, Danny McCain moved to Nigeria to launch the work of Global Scholars. To date, Global Scholars has placed 800 Christian professors in various academic disciplines in public universities in sixty different countries. Through their present work and partnerships, these

²⁵ See further Kenneth Cragg, *Troubled by Truth: Biographies in the Presence of Mystery* (Pentland, 1992), 15–31.

²⁶ See further Edward L. Smither, "Remembering the Story: Historical Reflection Leading to Spiritual Dialogue," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2009): 298–303.

Christian professors have a witness for Christ to over 130,000 students around the world.²⁷

Third, given his commitment to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, prayer walking, and journaling, as well as the ministry tasks of study, preaching, and translation, Martyn lived as an Anglican evangelical monk of sorts. Inspired by the lives of Francis Xavier and the Jesuits and shaped by his relationship with Roman Catholic and Armenian Orthodox Christians, Martyn cultivated a contemplative life to balance the rigors of missionary work and translation. Though his physical health failed, Martyn demonstrated a resilience that allowed him to press on and finish the task. Martyn's values for balancing activism with contemplation should challenge and inform how global missionaries approach their calling and spend their days. His model ought to promote longevity on the field and persistence in the face of hardship.

One of the hallmarks and drawbacks of evangelical mission is activism. Evangelicals work hard to learn culture, share the gospel, lead discipleship groups, facilitate church planting, and translate Scripture while also caring for our families. In some restricted places in the world, missionaries also run businesses or work jobs. One Brazilian mission leader admitted that during his time living in North Africa, amid the myriad of challenges with cross-cultural living and ministry, he would go weeks without spending any time with the Lord. Martyn's model reminds us that daily quiet times, prayer days, sabbaths, and retreats must be valued and scheduled for the missionary to flourish and persist on the field. Some mission consultations are beginning to address the need for a healthy spirituality amid the work of mission.²⁸

Fourth, Martyn's approach to translating Scripture into multiple languages at once remains a great model for Bible translation. He was wise to work on languages like Arabic and Persian that had similar grammatical structures, vocabulary, and scripts. Martyn was a gifted administrator able to manage multiple translation teams and oversee personnel who did not always get along.

In the last twenty years, through the aid of advanced technology, groups like Wycliffe have adopted a cluster language approach to finish the task of making Scripture available in all the world's languages. Consider John and Bonnie Nystrom's work in Papua New Guinea:

²⁷ See further Danny McCain, "Building God's Kingdom in Public Universities," in *Mission in Praise, Word, and Deed: Reflections on the Past and Future of Global Mission*, edited by Edward L. Smither and Jessica A. Udall, (William Carey, 2023), 61–68; also Global Scholars, www.global-scholars.org.

²⁸ See further John Amalraj, Geoffrey W. Hahn, and William D. Taylor, eds. *Spirituality in Mission: Embracing the Lifelong Journey* (William Carey, 2017).

John and Bonnie, along with several other Wycliffe members, work in a cluster project that focuses on 10 different languages in their region of Papua New Guinea. Local pastors work alongside them to help with the translation for their language. It's incredibly helpful for the team to be able to use a translation of a nearby language as a source text. Native speakers of one language can use specialized software to adapt a translation in a related language to fit the words and speech patterns of their own language. This ultimately allows the pastors to create translations in their language much faster.²⁹

Finally, Martyn's incarnational apologetic model for witness to Muslims remains important. Martyn showed a love for the gospel and his Muslim friends by providing clear answers to Muslim concerns about the gospel. In the Muslim world, taking a confrontational approach means showing you care about what you believe. That said, Martyn's aim was not to destroy Islam or win an argument but rather to win his friends to the gospel through love. Today more than ever, followers of Christ can witness effectively by speaking the truth in love.³⁰

Martyn's value reminds me of the experience of a Christian worker friend in North Africa. Peter (not his real name) was invited for a conversation at the local mosque. He and his ministry partner sat in a circle with the imam and Muslim men and mostly listened politely. In the days that followed, word came from the mosque that Christians don't care about what they believe because they're not willing to defend their faith. Sometime later Peter gave an Arabic New Testament to a neighbor. A family member learned of it and angrily confronted Peter, burning the Scripture in a very public square in their neighborhood. Learning from the mosque experience, Peter responded with his own confrontation, rebuking the man for disrespecting a holy book and burning the words of the Living God. Peter's response drew respect from his Muslim neighbors who visited him in his home and stopped him in the street to apologize for how the Muslim neighbor had shamed them and dishonored Holy Scripture. This also led to further opportunities for Peter to share the gospel in love, gentleness, and boldness.

²⁹ Melissa Paredes, "Translation and Technology: How Advances in Technology and Software Development Have Impacted Translation," March 2, 2020, Wycliffe Bible Translators, <https://www.wycliffe.org/blog/featured/translation-and-technology>.

³⁰ See further Trevor Castor, "Muslim Evangelism: 7 Ways to Share the Gospel," Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies, accessed December 29, 2024, <https://www.zwemercenter.com/guide/muslim-evangelism/>.

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