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**Conversion and conflict in Palestine : the missions of the
Church Missionary Society and the protestant bishop
Samuel Gobat**

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Conclusion

The Protestant British-Prussian bishopric in Jerusalem has served as the entry into this study, because its establishment brought the rivalry between Protestants and Roman Catholics to the surface. An examination of this foundation process has demonstrated that from the start the mission of the Protestant bishopric was accompanied by anti-Roman Catholic sentiments. Its guidelines for future bishops were very negative about the Roman Catholic Church, emphasizing the 'encroachments' of the Roman See, which tried to 'pervert' the Eastern Christians. The guidelines stipulated that the aim of the bishopric should be the mission to the Jews. During the Alexander years these guidelines were followed. In his mission to the Jews, Alexander closely cooperated with the LJS. Although this cooperation resulted in the foundation of several missionary institutions, the Protestant community was still very small when Alexander died.

During Gobat's episcopate the missionary policy of the bishopric changed. From the start Gobat directed his missionary efforts towards Christians of other denominations. He regularly stressed that he only wanted to reform the churches, but Gobat's letters and autobiography demonstrate that the bishop actually worked towards making converts to (Evangelical) Protestantism, and forming Protestant communities instead of reforming the Eastern churches. Although in the early 1850s the Tractarians in Britain fiercely opposed Gobat's proselytizing activities among Eastern Christians the mission among Christians remained the primary objective during the Gobat years, probably because the bishop was supported by various important people, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Gobat was deeply involved in the intercontinental Evangelical movement; he had been a student at the Basel Mission and had worked for the CMS for years. The importance of Evangelical principles to his actions and views already became evident in the discussion with the Tractarians about rebirth through baptism at the time of his appointment. During his entire episcopate Gobat closely collaborated with the Evangelical CMS missionaries, who shared his missionary views and orientation. Gobat's change of missionary policy soon evoked reactions from the other churches. For instance, his opening a Protestant school in Nablus in 1848 led to opposition from the Greek patriarch. The establishment of the Protestant bishopric and Gobat's arrival in Palestine had been an impetus for the restoration of the Latin patriarchate. During the

Gobat years the relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants became strained, as both were fishing in the same pond, directing their efforts towards the Eastern Christians. In addition, the Protestant missionaries tried to make converts among Roman Catholic church members.

One of the major findings of this research is the strong influence of Evangelicalism on the missionary work of Gobat and the CMS missionaries. This element is frequently overlooked or taken for granted in literature about Protestant missions in nineteenth-century Palestine. Stockdale's study on English missionary women, for instance, evaluates the British missionary activities from the colonial perspective rather than paying attention to the influence of the missionaries' Evangelical principles on their efforts, and so seems in danger of underestimating the importance of these principles. Although many German studies on the Prussian mission in nineteenth-century Palestine (such as those by Lückhoff and Sinno) discuss its Evangelical background, the majority do not specifically go into the importance of Evangelicalism to the Prussian missionaries' labours, probably because they already presuppose this. However, if we are to understand Gobat's and the CMS missionaries' actions correctly, the strong influence of Evangelicalism cannot be ignored. I hope to have shown in this study that all their activities were strongly coloured by their Evangelical principles. The mission's policy and actions can be traced back directly to its Evangelicalism.

The importance of Evangelicalism to the missionaries' work is especially reflected in their view of the Bible: it held a central position in all their efforts. Gobat's reports strongly suggest that he was convinced that a deeper knowledge of the Bible would encourage people to leave their original churches and to join the Protestants. The biblicism of Gobat and the CMS missionaries was a leading principle especially in their educational activities. The Bible was at the centre of education during Gobat's episcopate. In some smaller village schools the education in fact chiefly consisted of reading the Bible. In the catechizing in the schools, as well as the conversations the CMS missionaries had with local people, Evangelical doctrines were stressed, such as justification by faith alone through Christ's atoning death on the cross and Christ being the only mediator.

The Evangelicalism of Gobat and the CMS missionaries also deeply influenced the kind of conversion they expected from local Christians. They came to Palestine expecting to make 'true' converts, or 'true Christians', in line with the conversions typical in

Evangelical circles. 'True Christianity' was about a 'true conversion of the heart' and real piety; it was a 'spiritual' religion. However, their Evangelical expectations regarding conversion collided with the reality of the mission field. The missionary accounts have shown us that a 'true conversion of the heart' in missionary terms was a rare exception. In reaction, the missionaries adjusted their expectations to reality and chose a pragmatic approach. Admitting people into the Protestant Church without demanding a 'true' conversion of them offered a better chance that Protestant communities could be established and the Protestant mission would turn into a success. The fact that the missionaries modified their expectations about conversion might give the impression that they had discarded their Evangelical beliefs. However, although they had adjusted their expectations, the missionaries did stick to these principles, believing that admitting people who had not been 'truly converted' into the Protestant church was the best way to create 'true' Christians in the end. Although they remained faithful to their Evangelical ideas, their pragmatic approach also had a downside. The result of their lenient policy regarding admission into the Protestant church was that the missionaries regularly doubted whether the motives of their new church members were 'spiritual'.

A second major finding of this study is the apparent fierceness of the rivalry between Gobat and the CMS missionaries and the other churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. As mentioned earlier, this competition has so far only been the subject of a limited number of articles or has been briefly discussed in a few books, which generally deal with only the Protestant or the Roman Catholic side. Nevertheless, the rivalry Gobat and the CMS missionaries experienced in their work cannot be ignored in an evaluation of their missionary efforts, as it influenced their actions and was inextricably bound up with their Evangelicalism. In this book I have not only discussed the rivalry Gobat and the CMS missionaries experienced with the other churches, but also contrasted the Protestant anti-Catholic writings with the Roman Catholic anti-Protestant polemics. This comparison has provided a clear impression of the specific bones of contention.

The writings by Gobat and the CMS missionaries point to a number of elements of the competition between Protestants and Catholics. First of all, they indicate that the CMS missionaries cherished the position of underdog. The Protestant missionaries' anti-Catholic polemics picture a small, sincere, persecuted community up against the giant corrupted Roman Catholic Church. Secondly, the missionaries' complaints about

bribing on the part of the Roman Catholics and the material support they offered to their own church members implicitly reflect the CMS missionaries' conviction that many more members of other churches would probably become Protestants if they were not prevented from doing so by their clergy, and if the people were not dependent on the material support their churches offered. The Protestants supported this view with accounts of people who had read the Bible and wanted to become Protestant, but remained in their own church, for instance because their clergy threatened them or because they lived in houses owned by their church. At the same time the missionaries were often also convinced that people's lack of faith and craving for 'worldly advantage' would induce them to remain in or return to their original churches. A third aspect of the rivalry between Protestants and Catholics is the fact that it sometimes led to physical violence, ranging from small wrangles to violent riots. A remarkable example of the ferocity of the competition between the two is the Nazareth riot in 1852. The descriptions from both denominational sides contain all elements of Protestant anti-Roman Catholic and Roman Catholic anti-Protestant polemics. A fourth element of the competition is the ease with which Gobat and the CMS missionaries expected the Ottoman authorities to observe the Tanzimat reforms, if necessary under European pressure. Their writings indicate that in interdenominational conflicts both the Prussian and British representatives and the representatives of Roman Catholic countries felt free to interfere in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

Although the number of documents in the Roman Catholic archives dedicated to the Protestants is smaller than the other way around, the rivalry between Protestants and Roman Catholics is also reflected in Roman Catholic anti-Protestant polemics. These writings demonstrate the Roman Catholics' frustration about the enormous financial resources the Protestants had at their disposal, their taking advantage of the Catholic poor, and the expansion of the Protestant mission. Although the Roman Catholic Church had been an established church in Palestine for centuries and the Protestants did not threaten its identity, it was seriously concerned about the Protestant presence and missionary efforts among Catholics and Orthodox.

A last finding of this study is the close connection between the Evangelical views held by Gobat and the CMS missionaries and the rivalry they experienced. Their Evangelical principles went hand in hand with criticism of the other churches. In their conversations and teaching they contrasted their own Evangelical Protestant values with the

doctrines and rituals of the other denominations: justification through faith alone versus good works, Christ as the only mediator instead of Mary and the Saints, sound biblical knowledge versus so-called 'ignorance', etcetera. All these themes had been traditional subjects of dispute between Protestants and Roman Catholics since the Reformation. By stressing the so-called 'errors' of the other churches Gobat and the CMS missionaries in fact confirmed their own Evangelical Protestant identity. The emphasis on their Evangelical identity was also reflected in the missionaries' 'conversion' narratives and other 'success' stories. In all such stories the 'errors' of the other churches were compared with their own 'superior' Evangelical beliefs.

Gobat's and the CMS missionaries' concept of 'true Christianity' as a 'spiritual' religion made them criticise the material support offered by the other churches to their own members. In the missionaries' eyes this 'material' religion was the opposite of 'spiritual' religion, because it made people dependent. However, the reality of the mission field, i.e., people's poverty, led to the missionaries' also providing people with education, medical care, alms, and so on. They did not view the help they offered as similar to the support provided by the other churches, as they believed their own activities to be diaconal work, which was generally accepted in Evangelical circles. Their strong disapproval of the other churches' housing and feeding of their own church members continued throughout Gobat's episcopate.

Looking back on the Gobat years we may conclude that his mission in cooperation with the CMS has been successful in terms of its own goals. The Protestant community in Palestine had increased considerably during Gobat's episcopate. Many schools and mission stations were opened in towns and villages, and were maintained and further expanded by the CMS.

After Gobat's death in 1879, it fell to Britain to nominate a new Protestant bishop. This was Joseph Barclay (1831-1881), a former LJS missionary who had worked in Jerusalem from 1861 to 1870. Consecrated on 25 July 1879, he arrived in Jerusalem on 3 February 1880. Barclay had no mission stations and schools under his control, because Gobat had handed them over to the CMS. By his death in October 1881 Barclay had not yet been able to put his stamp on the bishopric.¹

¹ Tibawi, *British Interests*, 215-216; Lückhoff, *Anglikaner*, 273-274.

After this, it was the turn of Germany to choose a new candidate. However, no new Protestant bishop was appointed, because in 1886 the bishopric as a joint enterprise came to an end, for reasons ranging from German foreign policy to objections against the bishopric from German church leaders.² From then on the Jerusalem bishopric was to continue as an Anglican bishopric. The first Anglican bishop was George Francis Popham Blyth, consecrated on 25 March 1887. Under Blyth the bishopric's object became the mission among Jews, Muslims and Druses; the mission among Christians of other churches was abandoned. With the new bishop, the cooperation between the bishopric and the CMS also came to an end.³

² For information about the end of the joint Protestant bishopric, see Tibawi, *British Interests*, 216-219; Lückhoff, *Anglikaner*, 285-293.

³ Tibawi, *British Interests*, 222, 224-225. The relations between Blyth and the CMS were strained. For more information, see Tibawi, *British Interest*, 236-250.