

Charles August Blackburn

DATE OF BIRTH	About 1845
PLACE OF BIRTH	Chamarel, Mauritius
DATE OF DEATH	1918
PLACE OF DEATH	Mauritius, possibly Port Louis

BIOGRAPHY

Charles August Blackburn was an ordained minister of the Church of England, and Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary to his native country, Mauritius. Born around 1845 of Anglo-French parents, he grew up on his father's estate in Chamarel, Mauritius. He studied theology at St John's Theological College, Islington, and was ordained deacon in 1873 and priest in 1878. From 1877 to 1881, he served as superintendent of the Anglican church on the island of Praslin in the Seychelles. He later studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he specialised in Indian languages while simultaneously serving as curate of the embassy church in Paris. In 1883, he returned to his home country to serve as a local CMS missionary among indentured Indian labourers.

Blackburn was renowned for his linguistic versatility. He appears to have been fluent in a number of Indian dialects, which he used to preach to the Indian population; he also learned Chinese and Arabic in order to reach out to the Arab and Chinese merchant community. Both his reputation and his publications indicate that he had an extensive knowledge of Islam, and he is known to have engaged in public debates with Muslims.

In 1903, Blackburn retired from active ministry due to illness; he died in 1918. In his monumental *The history of the Church Missionary Society*, Eugene Stock lauds Blackburn for both his expertise and his piety, describing him as 'a local clergyman of excellent qualifications [...] especially competent to deal with Mohammedans' (p. 548).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- E. Stock, *The history of the Church Missionary Society. Its environment, its men and its work*, vol. 3, London, 1899, p. 548
C.F. Pascoe, *Two hundred years of the S.P.G.*, London, 1901, p. 902
D.E. Anderson, *The epidemics of Mauritius*, London, 1918, p. 284

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Mahomet et le koran comparés au Christ et à l'évangile, and other works

DATE 1894, 1897

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

Blackburn wrote several books in various languages. Three of his publications, in French, Urdu and Arabic respectively, address Islam and Muslims. In 1894, he published *Mahomet et le koran comparés au Christ et à l'évangile. Réponse aux musulmans*, 111 pages long, which compares Muḥammad and the Qur'an with Jesus and the gospels. A revised and somewhat shorter edition (95 pages) was issued a year later. Blackburn possibly composed the book in response to the Muslim polemical tracts that were in circulation in Mauritius in the early 1890s and also as a reply to the public attacks against Christianity by a Mr Wilson, an itinerant British Muslim convert, who visited Mauritius in 1891. Because both editions of the book were printed locally in Mauritius, copies of it are extremely rare and its content is unknown.

In 1897, the Punjab Religious Book Society (PRBS) in Lahore published an Urdu tract written by Blackburn entitled *Ek likkar: jo Pādri Blaik'baran [...] ne jazīrah-yi Mārīshis ke Muḥammadīyon ko diyā* ('A lecture that Rev. Blackburn gave to the Muslims of the Island of Mauritius'). The only copy known to have survived was once part of the Free Reading Room collection of the CMS in Hyderabad (Sind) and is currently kept at the McGill University Library. The tract consists of a 16-page lecture and two short overviews of kindred publications by the PRBS. The lecture is explicitly polemical and endeavours to argue that only Christ can reconcile humankind with God. In the first part of the lecture, Blackburn outlines that Muḥammad, being a sinner, cannot serve as an intercessor between God and humankind, repeatedly referencing the Qur'an (in Arabic as well as in an improvised Urdu translation) to underscore his argument. In presenting this position, Blackburn uses well-known polemical arguments to discredit Muḥammad, such as that he resorted to violence, that he was polygamous, that he was sensual and succumbed to temptation (specifically referencing the Zaynab affair), and that he repeatedly strayed from the straight path. In the second part of the lecture, which mainly cites the Bible, Blackburn aims to convince his audience that Jesus is the Messiah, the only one who can reconcile humans with God. Throughout his lecture,

Blackburn consistently uses the word *Muhammadi* (Muḥammadans) rather than Muslims. Also, the Urdu form of addressing the audience somewhat condescendingly underscores the presumed superiority of the speaker (in terms of social standing) vis-à-vis the listeners. (I gratefully acknowledge the aid of Dr Jan Slomp in summarising the content of *Ek likcar*.)

According to an obituary by Anderson, Blackburn also published 'An appeal to Mohammedans in Arabic' (*Epidemics of Mauritius*, p. 284), of which no extant copy seems to exist. It is unclear whether Anderson mistook the Urdu tract for Arabic or whether there were indeed two versions of the pamphlet. It is also uncertain whether the Urdu tract was printed in Lahore solely for practical purposes (the existence of an Urdu printing press) and that Mauritius was considered to be the main distribution market, or whether it was also intended to serve the Indian subcontinent. The extant copy in the McGill library, which was once part of the collection of the Free Reading Room of the CMS in Hyderabad, Sind, would seem to suggest the latter.

SIGNIFICANCE

Blackburn's publications seem to have been aimed at evangelising the newly-arrived Hindu and Muslim indentured labourers on the plantations in the Indian Ocean. If *Ek likcar* is indicative of his other two works, they seem to be local examples of a well-worn polemical tradition. In a broader context, Blackburn's publications show that indigenous clergy produced and published materials for the local market to support their missionary work among Muslims. Further, the fact that Blackburn's Urdu pamphlet was published in Lahore and seems to have circulated in the Indian subcontinent as well as in Madagascar, suggests that locally produced materials were shared in missionary networks to be utilised in other parts of the world.

PUBLICATIONS

- C.A. Blackburn, *Mahomet et le koran comparés au Christ et à l'évangile. Réponse aux musulmans*, Mauritius, 1894
- C.A. Blackburn, *Mahomet et le koran comparés au Christ et à l'évangile. Réponse aux musulmans* (new revised and augmented edition with the aid of the venerable A.D. Mathews), Mauritius, 1895
- C.A. Blackburn, *Ek likcar: jo Pādri Blaik'baran [...] ne jazīrah-yi Mārīshis ke Muḥammadīyon ko diyā*, Lahore: Punjab Religious Book Society Press, 1897 (abbreviated version in Urdu); BV2625B51897-20021 (digitised version available through McGill University Library)

STUDIES

Anderson, *Epidemics of Mauritius*, p. 284

'Annual Letter from Charles Blackburn', in *Extracts from Annual Letters for the year 1891-92*, Part 2, London, pp. 80-1

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