

HISTORICAL PARADIGMS
HANDOUT #3

The Social Impact of Christian Missions

Robert D. Woodberry

There is currently a great deal of controversy about missions. Some of this reaction is related to recent trends, like the sometimes violent response to missions in the Middle East, India and elsewhere. Much of the controversy, however, is simply a resurgence of a popular perception about missions that characterizes the missions movement as the handmaiden of colonialism and an existential enemy of indigenous cultures. The problem with these imperial connotations of missions, however, is that they are usually based on novels, movies, anecdotes and subjective impressions. Even when anecdotes can be confirmed, they often do little more than reinforce the person's preexisting assumptions. What's missing is a comprehensive and balanced examination of broad historical and statistical evidence about the average cumulative effect of missions.

Have Missionaries Helped or Hurt?

In order to make such an examination, I (together with a team of students¹) compiled data on Protestant and Catholic missionary activity from the early-19th century through the mid-20th century and carefully reviewed current historical research on missions. We identified patterns in the historical record and compared conditions in places where missionaries were more prevalent with conditions in places where they were less prevalent or did not go. This helped us measure the social effects missions had. If missionaries primarily hurt the cultures where they went, we would expect conditions to be worse where missionaries had more influence; but we find exactly the opposite. In this chapter I first discuss the historical evidence and then how this history shaped the long-term wellbeing of societies.

Missionaries Promoted Mass Education, Printing and Western Medicine

In most religious traditions, lay people can fully participate in religious life without being able to read. This is not true for Protestants. Protestant missionaries wanted people to read the Bible in their own language. Thus, wherever they went, they quickly developed written forms of oral languages, created fonts, imported printing technology and printed Bibles, tracts and textbooks. In the process they created the written form of most languages, often introduced the first printing presses and usually printed the first newspapers



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and textbooks. They also sponsored mass literacy and were especially important in educating women, non-elites and slaves.

Colonial governments, settlers and business people were generally leery of mass education. They preferred dealing with a small, educated elite that they could control. They felt that others should be educated only in practical skills like masonry and carpentry. For example, in South East Asia, the French shut indigenous schools, barred Protestant education and blocked Southeast Asians from getting education in other countries. As an explicit policy, they only educated as many people beyond elementary school as they could hire into the colonial government. Prior to missionary lobbying, the British did

not invest in mass education either. In areas where the British successfully kept missionaries out—e.g., interior Nigeria, British Somaliland, Nepal and the Maldives—they educated at most a few children of the existing elite.

Protestant mission education provoked other religious groups to provide mass education as well. When competing with Protestants, Catholic missionaries educated broadly and often had the best schools. However, prior to Vatican II in 1965 or where isolated from Protestant competition, they predominantly invested in schools for priests and the elite. Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists were similar.

Early missionary efforts demonstrated the economic benefits of education and so spurred demand. Missionaries also wrote and translated books, built buildings and trained teachers, which made future educational expansion easier. Post-colonial governments often nationalized mission schools to create

a state-run educational system. Creating a high-quality educational system takes a lot of time and money. Thus, countries in which this process started earlier and more broadly have had a decided advantage. Even when we look at regions of the world with similar pre-colonial literacy rates, sub-regions that had more Protestant missionary activity have higher literacy now (for example in West Africa, Oceania and the Middle East). This same pattern holds when we compare education between regions of the same country (for example, India, Nigeria and Ghana).

Protestant missions were also the primary factor that stimulated mass printing internationally. For example, most societies in Asia and North Africa had

printed material in their own languages and were exposed to functioning printing presses by foreigners and minorities for two or three hundred years before they printed anything. Initially, Jews and Catholic missionaries printed small numbers of texts. Later, trade companies and colonial governments printed treaties and administrative documents, but no one copied them either. In virtually every case, indigenous people began printing only in response to mass printing by Protestant missionaries. For example, within 32 years of their

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arrival, the first British Protestant missionaries to India printed over 212,000 books in 40 languages. This spurred Muslims and Hindus to do the same.

Even in China and Korea—societies that had movable font metal type before Europe

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, missionaries were more often criticized for thinking *too highly* of indigenous people, especially by anthropologists.

did—Protestant missionaries and their converts printed the first newspapers and radically altered the availability of texts. This produced a revolution both in printing and the education of non-elites. The source of change was not knowledge of technology or economic growth, but a radically different idea about who should read and have access to texts. Without the catalyst of religious ideas, thriving markets and technological knowledge were not enough to spur either mass education or mass printing.

Missionaries were also central to the spread of Western medicine, medical education and voluntary social reform organizations. Missionaries introduced new crops, new technical skills and new ideas about politics and the economy. I have treated these and other issues in greater detail elsewhere.²

Missionaries Mobilized Colonial Reform

Missionaries are often accused of a close association with colonial states. At times this was true, particularly in colonies where the state controlled missionary appointments and finances. However, when missionaries were independent from direct state control, they behaved differently. In fact, non-state missionaries were central to most major colonial reform movements.

Most missionaries were not strongly anti-colonial. They were willing to live with moderate forms of colonialism and were not primarily concerned with politics. However, colonial abuses angered local people against the West—which many associated with Christianity—and thus made missionaries' work

more difficult. Missionary writings are full of complaints about how colonial abuses undermined their best efforts. Thus, missionaries had (1) incentives to fight colonial abuses, (2) personnel throughout the world directly exposed to abuses, (3) a base of supporters in many colonizing countries, and (4) a massive network of religious media to mobilize the faithful against policies that hampered mission interests and that hurt people they had grown to love. Thus, missionaries were central to campaigns against slavery and forced labor, the rise of foreign aid programs, the creation of international relief organizations, banning the opium trade, protecting indigenous land rights and many other reforms.³

Missionaries Resisted "Scientific" Views about Race

One of the most consistent critiques against missionaries is their ethnocentrism. Missionaries of the 19th and early 20th centuries were products of an era in which both Christians and secularists assumed the superiority of Western civilization. Historic missionary literature often emphasized problems with other cultures and religions in ways that many modern readers find distasteful. Yet this should be viewed in comparison to the "scientific" racism that flourished in academia and among European settlers at this time. The main missionary critiques of other people were cultural and religious, not racial. William Carey argued that Britons had been barbarians before the coming of Christianity and that the gospel could transform other cultures just as it had England.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, missionaries were more often criticized for thinking *too highly* of indigenous peoples than *visa versa*, especially by anthropologists. For example, James Hunt—who coined the word "anthropology," founded the first anthropological society and edited the first two anthropological journals—argued that dark skinned peoples were a different species, mentally inferior to whites and could not be "civilized" through education. He argued that anthropologists had to fight missionaries to establish their discipline. In the 1866 volume of the *Anthropological Review* he wrote:

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In this endeavor to commend Anthropology to more general acceptance, we must not hide from ourselves that two great schools are, on principle, decidedly opposed to our pretensions. These two influential parties...cordially agree in discarding and even denouncing the truths of Anthropology. They do so because these truths are directly opposed to their cardinal principle of absolute and original equality among mankind. The parties to which we refer are the orthodox, and more especially the evangelical body, in religion, and the ultra-liberal and democratic party in politics.

The article gets more derogatory and racist, but the snippet above must suffice. Many modern, secular

anthropologists still have tension with missionaries, but for very different reasons. However, in critiquing ethnocentric attitudes of missionaries, it would be more helpful to compare them to others of their time (e.g., early anthropologists) rather than to the standards of today. To do otherwise is its own kind of ethnocentrism. As the Harvard historian William Hutchison writes, "If deficient from a modern point of view in sensitivity to foreign cultures, [19th and early 20th century] missionaries were measurably superior in that regard to most contemporaries at home or abroad" (Hutchison 1987:1).

What is the Cumulative Effect?

One might wonder if in the discussion above I merely selected anecdotes and made generalizations that fit my presuppositions. Perhaps others could select anecdotes and make generalizations that make missionaries look far worse. How do we evaluate what the average, cumulative effect of missions was? One way is with statistics.

From a statistical standpoint, societies where Protestant missionaries arrived earlier and were more prevalent ended up better off on all the indicators of human thriving I have studied: literacy, educational enrollment, infant mortality, life expectancy, economic development, corruption and political democracy.⁴ These results are consistent both between

countries and between different regions of the same country (e.g., India, China, Nigeria, Ghana). If the main effect of missions had been destructive, we would not expect this.

The following statistics illustrate these claims. For countries in the Global South, each additional missionary per 10,000 population in 1923 is associated with an average of 4.3 percentage points more educational enrollment between 1960 and 1985 and 1.3 years of

additional life expectancy in 2000 (net of statistical controls). Similarly in the provinces of India, each additional missionary per 10,000 in 1923 is associated with 1.1 percentage points more literacy in 2001, etc. The historic prevalence of Protestant

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missionaries is also associated with democracy and other outcomes. My research suggests that Protestant missions explains about half the variation in democracy in the Global South and removes the effect of most other factors thought to predict it.

Demonstrating that missionaries caused these positive outcomes is more difficult than showing the statistical associations. Perhaps missionaries were more likely to go to places that were already better off. For example, what if most missionaries went to healthy climates? If so, the current health in these places would not indicate a benefit brought about by mission work. Thus, to isolate the impact of Protestant missions on development, I applied statistical controls related to the climate, geography, disease prevalence, colonizers, European settlement and pre-colonial conditions.⁵ None of these controls removed the positive linkages, and the coefficients in the previous paragraph are what remain *after* I applied these controls. The association between missions and multiple forms of well-being is extremely robust.

The spatial locations of these positive outcomes are also revealing. In Nigeria, the British restricted missionaries from entering territories in the north and literacy is lower there than on the coast. In Kenya, missionaries were restricted near the coast and literacy is higher in the interior. In India, literacy is highest in Kerala, Nagaland, Mizoram and

Goa—regions that have almost nothing in common except the prevalence of Christians and historic missionary activity. The people of Nagaland and Mizoram were hunter-gatherers with no written language prior to missionary contact in the late 19th century. Thus,

regardless of how one assesses the overall influence of colonialism, imperialism and today's multinational corporations on the Global South, the affected countries would be far worse off if missionaries had not been present and engaged. ☉

Photo

Photographer: Dr. Mattheus Carl Vischer. Caption: Dr. Vischer, nurse Maria Hörsch and patient in the old polyclinic in Kuala Kapuas (Kalimantan), 1929. From the mission 21 / Basel Mission archive (www.bmpix.org) B-30.65.119.

Endnotes

1. Find more about the Project on Religion and Economic Change at www.prec-online.com.
2. See Woodberry 2004 and 2006 for more details about studies in different areas of human thriving.
3. For more on how missionaries influenced colonial reform movements and foreign policy see Woodberry (2004; 2006); Etherington (2005); Grant (2005); Turner (1998) and Oddie (1978). For more on immediate abolitionism see Turner (1998) and Woodberry (2006). For more on land reform in India see Oddie (1978). For more on campaigns to fight forced labor see Woodberry (2004) and Grant (2005).
4. The association between 19th and early 20th century Catholic missions and these outcomes is minor (i.e., not statistically significant). These seem to be because prior to Vatican II (1965) Catholic missions were more likely to be under state control and were less likely to invest in mass education, etc., unless they were competing with Protestants.
5. In the regressions discussed in this section I controlled for colonizer, latitude, being an island, being land-locked, % European, % Muslim, having a written language prior to missionary contact and being a major oil producer. For regressions related to democracy I also controlled for 24 additional variables related to the climate, colonial mortality and the process of European exploration and colonization. The coefficients discussed in the text of this paper are net of these controls; the percent of variation explained (R-squared) is without controls.

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Study Questions

1. Woodberry's article describes ways that Christian missions have had a positive social impact on global societies. What are five of the most significant contributions made by missionaries?
2. Woodberry mentions a resurgence in the perception that the mission movement has been the handmaiden of colonialism and the enemy of indigenous cultures. How does this article show the opposite to be true?
3. Were the missionaries of the 19th and early 20th centuries ethnocentric? Explain your answer.

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