

# CHRISTIAN MISSION

HOW CHRISTIANITY BECAME A WORLD RELIGION

**Dana L. Robert**



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# Christian Mission

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# Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion

*Dana L. Robert*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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There is an old joke about a man who wrote a very long letter to his son, ending with the postscript, “I’m sorry I wrote such a long letter. I didn’t have enough time to write you a short one.” After twenty-five years of teaching mission history and finding it endlessly fascinating, I have taken an eternity to write a “brief” history of my major field of research. Part of the struggle lies in deciding what must be included, and what can be left out.

But another challenge is that the historiography of Christian mission has been changing rapidly. Before the mid twentieth century, a narrative of European expansion dominated the field. By the mid 1960s, the subject of Christian mission – if noticed at all – was treated as a form of western hegemonic discourse wedded to economic and cultural imperialism, or European colonialism. Studies by nonwestern historians often focused on the limitations and advantages of mission in relation to nation-building or the creation of communal identities. By the late twentieth century, mission historians emphasized the complexity of intercultural and interreligious encounters, including the need to put indigenous leaders at the center of the picture. Women’s studies have entered the field, with gender finally recognized as an important dynamic in the mission process. Postcolonial perspectives vary widely, but in general both the missionary and the convert are treated as agents of hybridity, as cultural brokers in the border-crossing production of worldviews. For theologians, the study of mission history has continued to emphasize missions’ role in the transmission and creation of theologies. For ordinary believers, the missionary remains an exemplar of piety and embodiment of Christian identity.

I am indebted to many scholars who have shaped the above-mentioned perspectives. I find much merit in multiple approaches, and a discerning reader will find traces of them in my text. But in this study, which is meant to introduce missions as the object of historical rather than theological analysis, I argue that mission history can be explained as a series of boundary

crossings, driven by a universalist logic. Thus the meaning of Christian mission is integral to Christianity as a world religion that exists across time, space, and cultures. Teachers and colleagues whose insights over the years have substantially helped me to reach these conclusions include Charles Forman, George Lindbeck, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Gerald Anderson, and Robert Hefner. I thank them all, though of course I take full blame for weaknesses in my arguments.

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I dedicate this book to my husband Inus, who is a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

Dana L. Robert  
Somerville, Massachusetts

# Introduction

Today roughly one-third of the people on earth are Christians. Not only is Christianity the largest religion in the world but it embraces a huge variety of forms, ranging from Catholics in Brazil, to Apostles in Zimbabwe, to Copts in Egypt, to Pentecostals in Ghana, to Lutherans in Germany, to House Church believers in China. The geographic range, cultural diversity, and organizational variety of Christianity surpass those of the other great world religions.

How did Christianity get to be so diverse and widespread? The movement of Christianity from one culture to another can be explained by the concept “mission.” The word “mission” comes from the biblical Greek words for “sending.” Christianity, like Islam, is a “sending” religion. Within its philosophical structure is the idea of universality – that the message it proclaims about Jesus Christ should be shared with all peoples. Its sacred text, the Bible, contains missionary documents that command Jesus’ followers to “go into all the world.” Within its 2,000-year history are myriad examples of Christians deliberately being sent or else informally crossing geographic or cultural barriers, and founding new groups of believers wherever they go. New groups in turn launch missions of their own. The history of Christian mission – and of churches’ particular missions – provides a useful framework for grasping the meaning of Christianity as a multicultural, global presence in the world today.

The stereotyped popular view of missions is at odds with their rich variety and fascinating realities. The word “mission” is often quickly reduced to western colonialism, rather than analyzed as a complex, multi-cultural historical process stretching across two millennia. The term “missionary” is caricatured as representing a white Anglo-Saxon man in a pith helmet, preaching to unwilling “natives” in a steamy jungle. Yet over the 2,000 years of Christianity, the “missionary” is likely to have been a Korean couple working among university students in China, or an Indian medical doctor

## 2 Introduction

tending to refugees, or a Tongan family living peaceably in a Fijian village, or a Nestorian trader making his living along the Silk Road.

This book is a brief thematic history of an endlessly complex and detailed process in the history of Christianity. It does not and cannot seek to be exhaustive. It begins with a chronological overview of how Christianity spread around the world. This way of narrating the history of Christianity differs from traditional approaches by focusing on shifts in methods of communication and changes in sociopolitical contexts that opened the way for the transmission of Christian faith across cultural boundaries. The details of the beliefs and practices of Christians in each culture, and the history of the various churches, are largely omitted. In this chronological overview, Christianity becomes interesting as a catalyst for new identity-formation rather than as a fixed institution. The second part of the book examines selected major themes in mission history, namely the complex relationship between missions and western colonialism; the role of women in mission; and the role of the missionary in conversion and in the creation of communal identities. The two halves of the book represent different approaches to the same subject, and thus overlap slightly.

The words “mission” and “missions” will be used somewhat interchangeably, though with an emphasis on “mission” as the overview term, as in “the mission of the church”; and an emphasis on “missions” to refer to specific manifestations of mission, as in “Anglican missions,” or “faith missions.” The discerning reader will also notice that a disproportionate number of examples in the book are drawn from Africa. Since the book is a selective rather than exhaustive treatment of the subject, I have naturally leaned more heavily upon my own areas of expertise.

A few caveats are in order. Although this book is not a history of theology, for Christians the practices of mission are driven by theological beliefs. Thus even if the subject of mission is historicized as a set of human actions within history, or as the movement of religious ideas from one culture to another, theology cannot be avoided entirely. Indeed, one of the goals of this book is to explain why Christians have continued to engage in missionary activity over the centuries. What will not happen in this book is an analysis of debates among mission theologians. The purpose of *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* is to understand how cross-cultural mission is a central historical process in the formation of Christianity as a world religion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Because this book is intended to be a brief history, footnotes have been kept to a minimum and are used primarily to document direct quotations or major sources. For details of sources on particular persons or ideas mentioned in each chapter, see the Bibliography.

It should be noted that the book's analytical framework is situated largely within the western traditions of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The chief reason for this is the need to focus on the last few hundred years of mission history, during which missionaries were largely westerners functioning in the contexts of western colonialism. Nevertheless, the assumption that Christianity is a multi-cultural religion guides the text from beginning to end. In global terms, mission is not primarily a rationale for western expansion, but the multi-directional movement of Christians who have crossed boundaries to share their faith.

# Part I

## The Making of a World Religion: Christian Mission through the Ages

# From Christ to Christendom

In 1970 the British rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* hit the shelves of record stores. The deceased Judas, who betrayed Jesus to the authorities who crucified him, appears in the afterlife and sings the title song, “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed? Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you’re what they say you are?” Referring to Jesus’ humble origins in Palestine, an obscure province conquered by the Roman Pompey in 63 BC, Judas asks him, “Why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you’d come today you would have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.”

The conservative Christian establishment found the portrayal of an earthy “rock and roll” Jesus with his long hair and hippie commune of male and female disciples to be disrespectful, if not sacrilegious. But for many American baby boomers in the 1970s, *Jesus Christ Superstar* blew like a fresh breeze across their predictable and boring suburban churches. Suddenly Jesus seemed like one of them. He defied authority, was filled with self-doubt, and “hung out” with a pack of friends. Even before the rock opera opened on Broadway and in London, American high school students bought the record and staged their own productions.

At the same time, behind the Iron Curtain in Estonia, Soviet communism persecuted religions and denied education to active Christians. In the early 1970s, teenagers huddled in secret, listening to illegal recordings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* smuggled from the United States. The combination of the outlawed religion with forbidden western rock music was a potent mixture. Years later, a leading Estonian Christian reminisced that his first real understanding of the faith had come from the humanity of the rock-and-roll Jesus he secretly encountered in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the decades since it opened, the rock opera has been performed in Central America, eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and around the world.

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**Map 1** Christians by region in 400

*Source:* Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

While on one level *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a money-making musical, on another level its transcendence of Cold War geopolitical divisions – and the appeal of its rock-and-roll Jesus to youth everywhere – exemplifies the remarkable cultural fluidity of the Christian religion across the centuries. Whether told through music, art, sermons, or books of theology, the story of Jesus is repeatedly translated anew. Because of its embodiment in human cultures – an idea that theologians refer to as “incarnation” – the Christian message has outlasted clans and tribes, nations and empires, monarchies, democracies, and military dictatorships. When a handful of Jesus’ Jewish followers reached out to non-Jews in the Roman empire, they unknowingly set their faith on the path toward becoming a world religion. It appears that Israel in 4 BC was not such a “backward” place after all.

By the third century AD, Christians could be found from Britannia in the north to North Africa in the south, from Spain in the west to the borders of Persia in the east. The eastward spread of Christianity was so extensive that the fourth-century Persian empire contained as high a percentage of Christians as the Roman, with a geographic spread from modern-day Iran to India. By the seventh century, Christians were living as far east as China and as far south as Nubia in Africa.

The rise of Islam in Arabia during the seventh century halted Christianity’s eastward and southward expansions. Although Arab armies conquered the country of Jesus’ birth, by the end of the first millennium after his death the Christian religion had pushed northward across Russia, Scandinavia, and Iceland. The first Christian arrived in North America in AD 986 when a

short-lived colony settled in Greenland. By the late sixteenth century, substantial groups of indigenous Christians were thriving in Angola, Japan, the Philippines, Brazil, and Central America. By the early seventeenth century, South Africa, Vietnam, and First Nations Canada all had significant Christian populations. During the nineteenth century Christianity spread across North America, North Asia, the South Pacific, and into different regions of Africa. The most rapid expansion of Christianity took place in the twentieth century, as pockets of Christians throughout Africa and Asia grew into widespread movements.

But the story of Christianity around the world is not that of a simple, linear progression. To become a world religion, Christianity first had to succeed on the local level. Specific groups of people had to understand and shape its meaning for themselves. What in totality is called a “world” religion is, on closer observation, a mosaic of local beliefs and practices in creative tension with a universal framework shaped by belief in the God of the Bible, as handed down through Jesus and his followers. As a world religion, Christianity thrives at the intersection between the global or universal, and the local or personal.

A complicating factor in charting the spread of Christianity is that its expansion has not been a matter of continuous progress. Rather, growth takes place at the edges or borderlands of Christian areas, even as Christian heartlands experience decline. Christianity has wilted under assault from hostile governments, ranging from the Zoroastrian Persians in the fourth century to the communist takeover of Russia that killed millions of believers in the twentieth century. When circumstances change, loss of meaning can hollow out the faith from within. In the wake of two devastating world wars, secularism swept over Europe in the late twentieth century, and the percentage of practicing Christians dropped. The pattern that historian Andrew Walls calls “serial progression,” including expansion and contraction over time, means that the history of Christianity cannot be treated as a monolithic enterprise, with its universal spread a foregone conclusion.<sup>1</sup> By the mid twenty-first century, the most populous Christian areas of the world are projected to be in the southern hemisphere, in Africa and South America.

The following chronology defines the history of Christianity as a movement rather than a set of doctrines or institutions, notwithstanding that doctrines and institutions are important markers of group identity. As a historical process, Christian mission involves the crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries by those who consider themselves followers of Jesus Christ, with the intention of sharing their faith. The ongoing boundary crossings raise the question of how the meaning of “Christian” continues to include culturally

<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

disparate groups of people: how does Christian identity change as it crosses cultures? The reverse question is also important, namely, how does Christianity shape the culture or worldviews of those who encounter it?

## From Jerusalem into “All the World”

The creation and expansion of Christianity began with Jesus, a devout Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago, never left Palestine, had a public ministry of only three years, and was executed by Roman authorities at age 33 by being nailed to a cross of wood in the manner of common criminals. Government officials hunted down and executed his most important followers. Yet within three centuries of his death, an estimated 10 percent of people in the Roman empire ordered their lives around communal memories of his life and teachings, faith in the defeat of death itself, and the affirmation that he was the “Christ” or “Lord,” the unique embodiment of the one true God.

The writings generated by Jesus’ disciples are the starting point for understanding the cross-cultural process of Christian adaptation. The New Testament was itself a collection of missionary writings written to help a scattered community remember its origins, and to provide a framework that described and justified the expansion of the faith beyond the first Hebrew believers. Documents were written in the commercial lingua franca of the Roman empire, common Greek, and then compiled into a portable book form, or *codex*. Greek was the language of philosophy, and so was well suited to the expression of theological ideas. By the second century after Jesus’ death, the Greek texts had been translated into Latin and Syriac, other major languages of the Mediterranean and western Asia.

The infrastructures of the Roman empire provided unprecedented opportunities for the spread of information from one region to another. With the *Pax Romana*, or peace enforced by Rome, followers of “the Way” – as early followers of Jesus called themselves – moved along the good Roman roads into the major cities of the empire, carrying letters of introduction from believers in other cities that convinced strangers to open their doors and host the traveling teachers.

Diaspora Jews scattered throughout the empire, in a wide variety of occupations, were interested in stories of one who had wandered as a teacher and healer in the mode of the biblical prophets, and who claimed to represent a fulfillment of Jewish destiny. And non-Jews, or “Gentiles” in Jewish parlance, sometimes admired the Jewish people for their ethical uprightness and belief in one God, and so were drawn to new interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures that welcomed non-Jewish members.

The idea of “mission” is carried through the New Testament by 206 references to the term “sending.” The main Greek verb for “to send” is *apostellein*.<sup>2</sup> Thus *apostles* were literally those sent to spread the “Good News” of Jesus’ life and message. Notable passages in the New Testament contain explicit commands to go into the world to announce the coming of God’s reign, such as when Jesus sent seventy followers to preach to the Jews (Luke 10:1–12). After his resurrection from death and appearance to Mary Magdalene and other women who had gone to his tomb, Jesus told the women to “go tell” his male followers that they had seen him alive.

The most famous biblical passage used by Christians to encourage each other to spread the word about Jesus’ life, work, and defeat of death occurred when after his resurrection Jesus ordered the gathered disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). The book of John phrased Jesus’ post-resurrection counsel to the disciples with the words, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

Despite intermittent opposition from the Roman authorities, from Jewish religious leaders, and from adherents of Greek and Roman gods, early followers of “the Way” organized themselves into gathered communities called *ekklesia*, or churches. Dozens of different biblical expressions were used to describe the public witness or missionary existence of the *ekklesia*, such as “light to the world,” “salt of the earth,” and “city on a hill.” Churches, therefore, were both the products of mission and the organizational network behind further spread of the message.

A century ago, theologian Martin Kähler remarked that mission is “the mother of theology.”<sup>3</sup> Although the New Testament is not a systematic handbook of theology, its missionary character reveals that the early followers of Jesus believed they had a divine mandate to bear witness to what they had seen of his ministry, of his message, and especially of his stunning reappearances after the crucifixion. Early Christians believed that Jesus was fulfilling the Jewish prophecies that someday a Savior or Messiah would come to save Israel and inaugurate God’s reign on earth. The significance for the history of Christian

<sup>2</sup> David Jacobus Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission,” in James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 176.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 177. For overviews of the biblical and historical development of mission theologies, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

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mission does not lie in the numerous modern debates over the historical accuracy of the events around Jesus' death and miraculous resurrection, but rather in what the New Testament shows about the missionary consciousness of the early Christians. The transformation of a cowed and defeated handful of Jewish followers into a death-defying, multi-cultural missionary community was an amazing beginning to what is now the largest religion in the world.

### *The Apostle Paul as missionary*

While the core followers of Jesus when he was alive were known as “disciples,” Paul is remembered as the “apostle” to the Gentiles, or in modern terms a “missionary” – “one who is sent.” Scores of books have been written about Paul as the archetype of the cross-cultural missionary, on Paul's mission strategy, or “Pauline” methods in missions. Yet Paul was only one of dozens of believers who traveled around the Roman empire, spreading the “Good News” about Jesus as Messiah, the chosen one of God. Paul has been remembered as the model missionary by Christians down through the centuries not just because he traveled an estimated 10,000 miles for his mission, but because the letters to the churches he founded are the oldest documents gathered into the New Testament and are foundational to Christian theology. The narrative of Paul's ministry is contained in the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book in the New Testament.

Paul's personal story makes gripping reading: a follower of a Jewish religious sect called the Pharisees, a law-abiding and duly circumcised member of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Greek-speaking Roman citizen, Paul began his relationship with Christians by persecuting them. The followers of Jesus were standing up in synagogues and proclaiming that Jesus represented the fulfillment of Jewish Scriptures about the coming Messiah. When one of the early church officers named Stephen was stoned to death for blasphemy, Paul held the coats of the mob.

Yet one day, on his way to arrest some Christians in Damascus, Paul was blinded by a flash of light and heard the voice of Jesus asking him why he was persecuting him. After three days of blindness, Paul was visited by a church leader who restored his eyesight and told him how Jesus had been resurrected from death (Acts 9:1–19). This transformative experience was interpreted by Paul as God calling him to preach to Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles on behalf of “the Way” of Jesus Christ.

Propelled by his vision, Paul traveled to provincial centers where he sought out the Jewish quarters and began proclaiming the message of Jesus as Messiah. Because the diaspora Jews scattered throughout the empire spoke Greek, and worked and traded in the wider Greek-speaking world, many

had forgotten their native Hebrew. In the third century BC Jewish Scriptures had been translated into a Greek version called the Septuagint. As Paul interpreted the salvific role of Jesus according to the Hebrew Scriptures, he could be understood both by ethnic Jews and by non-Jews. The common Greek language – as well as Paul’s theological interpretations – were bridges across which the meaning of Jesus’ defeat of death traveled from an oral, Aramaic-speaking local Hebrew culture into the cosmopolitan Greek world. The Greek word for Messiah, or Lord, is “Christ.”

In Antioch, where Paul spent a year, a decisive breakthrough among Greek-speaking Gentiles occurred, and the followers of the Way of Jesus began to be called “Christians.” Paul’s basic message was one of inclusion: through Jesus Christ, Gentiles were grafted on to God’s promises for Israel: “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ ” (Romans 10:12–13). The biculturality of the diaspora Jewish population, as exemplified by Paul himself – a Greek-speaking Jew – was essential for the expanded meaning of salvation that included both Jews and Greeks. After Paul had gathered a community of believers in a particular city he moved on, but sent other workers to help the fledgling churches he had visited. A network of Christians – linked together by correspondence and itinerant teachers like Paul – began emerging in the cities across the Roman empire.

As more non-Jews were attracted to the Christian community, tensions grew between the Jewish believers, who continued to worship in synagogues and to follow Jewish law, and the new believers from other ethnic backgrounds for whom the Jewish law was unimportant. Many of Paul’s letters dealt with the struggles of the infant churches to negotiate their internal cultural and economic differences. After fourteen years of successful ministry among the growing Gentile churches, Paul was summoned to Jerusalem to meet with the Hebrew Christians, directed by Jesus’ brother James. The Christians in Jerusalem were skeptical that the non-Jewish Christians could be fully accepted by God without obeying Jewish law. In a crucial discussion, described in Acts 15, Jesus’ chief disciple Peter, Paul, and his friend Barnabas convinced James and the Hebrew church elders that God was clearly speaking to the Gentiles. Evidence of God’s love for non-Jews was to be found in the miraculous healings and changed lives, the “signs and wonders,” being performed among them. The Jerusalem Christians sent off Paul and Barnabas with some minimal instructions and a generous blessing for the non-Jewish Christians. This approval by the “Jerusalem Council” of Jewish leaders who had been close to Jesus himself ratified Christianity’s already vigorous expansion into Syria, Cilicia, Antioch, and points eastward.

That so many non-Jewish believers were responding to the work of Paul and the other evangelists created a crisis for the original believers in Jerusalem, who sensed themselves losing control over the boundaries of the faith. This same dilemma has been repeated every time the gospel message makes itself at home among a new group of people. The cross-cultural spread of the message, including translating it into terms that made sense to a Gentile audience, set a pattern that not only separated Christianity from its Jewish background, but created a religion able to transcend cultural differences. The crucial decision to allow Greeks to become Christians and remain within their own cultural framework was the key that opened the future of Christianity to its global potential as a “world” religion, rather than remaining as a sect within Judaism.

The extent to which Christianity remains connected to its Jewish roots has been a source of disagreement throughout its history. Since Jesus was himself Jewish, as were his original disciples, Christianity was built upon Jewish foundations, upon continuity with Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called by Christians the “Old Testament.” Yet the fact of cross-cultural transmission immediately opened the question of what changes and what is retained each time Christianity crosses into new cultures. Some early Greek Christians, notably Marcion, a wealthy shipowner from Sinope in Pontus, tried to strip the sacred writings of their Jewish elements and rejected the Septuagint, believing that they were a barrier to understanding Jesus in light of Greek philosophy. The rejection of Marcion and others like him by the majority of churches resulted in the biblical books, or “canon”, being closed to further changes by the late fourth century. But the issue of authority, and how to define Christian tradition, even as Christian worldviews accommodate new cultural and generational understandings, is a perpetual balancing act in the Christian movement. The “first missionary,” Paul, set the balance between innovation and tradition when he welcomed the customs of both Jewish and Greek Christians, but insisted that the core message of belief in “Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) could not be compromised.

### *Expansion across the Roman empire and beyond*

The book of Acts in the New Testament voiced the early self-perception of Christians as a multi-cultural people on the move. First came “Pentecost,” the so-called birthday of the church, when a group of diaspora Jews in Jerusalem miraculously heard the good news of Jesus’ resurrection in their own languages, “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews

and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:9–11). The participants in Pentecost experienced a profound sense of the presence of the living God, the Holy Spirit, which they heard as a divine rush of wind (*ruah*). The empowered, multi-lingual messengers of the divine moved out from Jerusalem – and burst the seams of Jewish law and tradition.

By Acts 5, the Good News had reached the Samaritan people, a nontraditional and unpopular community north of Israel. In Acts 8, an Ethiopian eunuch, an African admirer of Judaism, became convinced by the apostle Philip that Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures and was baptized. In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit fell upon the household of Cornelius, a righteous Roman centurion. They were baptized and admitted into fellowship with the believers. Samaritans, African eunuchs, and Roman oppressors – all were the kind of marginal participants in Judaism who were attracted to the early Christian message that they, too, were welcome among the believers in the one God as mediated by his son and messenger, Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. According to Christian tradition, Jesus’ disciples took the message from Jerusalem into new regions in which they were eventually martyred – Mark to Egypt, Thomas to India, Philip to Africa, and Peter to Rome. Ancient churches today, including the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church of South India and the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, consider these early apostles to be their founders. The very existence of a growing, multi-cultural network of churches was seen by Paul and others as theological proof that the kingdom of God, the peaceful reign of the one God of Jews and Gentiles alike, was at hand.

The story of Christianity during its first three centuries was that of a steadily expanding urban network, often along extended family lines, under the leadership of strong local leaders known as “bishops,” or overseers.<sup>4</sup> Bishops ran social services, collected money for the poor, solved theological disputes, and were the first to be tortured and executed during waves of persecution. Gatherings of Christians met in house churches sponsored by wealthier members. Women played a prominent role as patrons of the movement that gained a reputation for female leadership and strict personal ethical codes.

Because of their loyalty to the one God, Christians refused to make sacrifices to the gods and emperor of the Roman empire. Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, the last church leader believed to have known Jesus’ disciples

<sup>4</sup> See Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Howard Clark Kee, “The Context, Birth, and Early Growth of Christianity,” in Kee et al., *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, 2nd edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

personally, was burned alive in AD 156 at age 86 because he refused to burn incense to Caesar. Christians were suspected of treason and suffered intermittent persecution, including being arrested, burned as torches by the Emperor Nero, and thrown into gladiatorial arenas to be torn apart by wild beasts. And yet the movement grew, as increasing numbers of people admired the Christians' strong community life and compassionate care for the poor. As the early church "father of Latin theology" Tertullian (d. 235) noted, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

During its first few centuries, Christianity spread through three main linguistic groups. North Africa became the stronghold of Latin-speaking Christians, with their headquarters in Rome. Greek speakers dominated the church in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. Syriac, the language most closely related to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself, became the sacred language of the eastern churches that spread beyond the Roman empire. Each linguistic grouping developed its own traditions of theology and worship. Strong ascetic practices marked believers' desire to identify with Jesus and his sufferings. Healings and miracles characterized the popular appropriation of the faith, with Christians particularly noted for their care of the sick during epidemics. Critics continued to accuse Christianity of being a superstitious cult that attracted marginal people – children, the poor, and women. Yet leading philosophers and intellectuals also joined the movement. By the end of the third century, Christianity had spread strongly into areas of Persian control, present-day Iran. Christian slaves, captured from Roman territory, began carrying their faith throughout Persia and along the Silk Road across central Asia.

#### *Fourth- and fifth-century Christianities*

In the fourth century, the scattered seeds of Christianity burst into bloom everywhere at once. Christianity became too widespread for political rulers to ignore. With persecution-tested bishops, a network of believers across cultural and political boundaries, schools for theological training, and sacred texts in the major literary languages, it seemed that Christianity's time had come.<sup>5</sup>

The most important major development of the fourth century was the legalization of Christianity in the Roman empire. Given that the traditional

<sup>5</sup> On the development of multiple Christianities during this period see Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

Roman pantheon and imperial rituals were strongest among the landed gentry of the Mediterranean area, it is not surprising that the pressure to legalize Christianity came not from the old Roman aristocracy but sweeping down from the distant provinces. Just as Christianity had grown at the margins of society, so did its political establishment come from outside the core of the empire, in the person of a soldier Constantine (d. 337), who had gone to the northernmost Roman province of Britannia to help his father, the tetrarch Constantius I, exert military control over a rebellion. When Constantius I died in 306, the Roman troops in Britain declared his son emperor. No doubt young Constantine's military prowess and shrewd social policies made him popular in Roman Britannia. By separating the civil from the military realms, Constantine granted *de facto* religious toleration to the Christians there. Although it is unclear what percentage of the British were Christians at the time, rough estimates for the number of Christians in the empire at the time of Constantine were up to 10 percent – a large enough percentage to make a difference to contenders for the throne. His army hardened by frontier service in Britannia, Constantine fought his way into Rome in AD 312.

According to Christian tradition, Constantine had a vision from God that he should place the chi-rho, a symbol representing the first two Greek letters of the word "Christ," on the shields of his men, and God would grant them the key victory over his rival for the throne. After marching as victor into the city, Constantine broke with expected practice and did not sacrifice to the Roman gods. Instead, he soon issued his famous edict of religious toleration for Christianity. Under Constantine the Great, Christianity went from being persecuted, to being tolerated, to being the favored religion of the Roman empire. This sea-change in socio-political context had broad implications for Christian identity. Instead of being destroyed, churches were now built with government funds. A new Christian capital, Constantinople, signified the start of the new era. Army officers and young nobles patronized the favored religion, and masses of people began needing baptism and religious instruction.

With the regime change, formerly persecuted and isolated theologians and bishops came into the open. Perhaps predictably, they fought among themselves over the theological meaning of Jesus' identity, the nature of his relationship to God the Creator, and themes of church order. The multi-lingual and multi-cultural variety of religious practices prevalent when Christianity was underground needed to be reconciled with its new public face. Constantine himself, though not yet baptized into formal church membership, called a major church council in 325 in Nicaea (now Iznik, Turkey) to lay the foundations of a common theological understanding of the nature of

Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine. The formal theology patronized by the emperor became the law, and other versions of Christianity became illegal.

Once sacrifices to the Roman gods were eliminated as a requirement for public service, Christians took leading roles in the government and military. In 391, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, and pagan religions were outlawed. Various emperors' determination that theologies were either "official" or "heretical" had profound implications for mission, as theologians judged to be heretics by major church councils fled beyond the areas of Roman control and spread their versions of Christianity there. In retrospect, some of the bitter theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries can be explained by cultural and linguistic differences among Christians.

Government recognition of Christianity was a two-edged sword, depending not only upon one's theology, but also upon the empire in which one lived. What was good for Christian fortunes in the Roman empire was bad for them in Persia, Rome's chief rival. Sponsorship by Rome meant that Christians in Persia appeared to be enemies of the state. As self-proclaimed patron of the Christians, Constantine sent a letter to Shapur II (d. 379), the "shah of shahs," asking him to treat Christians better. Shapur II, with the assistance of Zoroastrian priests, launched a major persecution of Christians in 339. Christians were double-taxed, and their churches destroyed. They were ordered to worship the sun, the center of Zoroastrian ritual. When they refused, tens of thousands were tortured and executed, especially those native Persians who had converted to Christianity. In the capital city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, every bishop selected in subsequent decades was immediately executed. The rage of the Zoroastrians was especially directed against the many ascetic Christians who had taken vows of celibacy and thus appeared to "drop out" from social responsibilities. Thousands of celibate women, many of them deaconesses and nuns who held high positions in the Syrian church, were martyred. Educated individual Christians retained value for their service to the Persian state, but their safety was tenuous and subject to arbitrary swings between persecution and patronage.

Even as it functioned within Roman and Persian imperial frameworks, fourth-century Christianity helped to reshape particular ethnic identities. As different linguistic groupings interacted with the Christian message in their own languages, they solidified into ethnicities or nations with a shared history and tradition. The range of potential theologies increased in tandem with ethnic and linguistic differences. Thus the emerging fourth-century variations of Christianity should be seen as plural "Christianities," with each form developing according to its own cultural and political dynamics.

While Edessa, now Şanlıurfa in modern-day Turkey, was the first city to register a Christian majority, the conversion of Armenia was noteworthy because it was the first independent ethnic nation to become Christian. According to tradition, Gregory the Illuminator (d. circa 337) was born of Parthian parents who lived in Armenia. He became a Christian in Cappadocia and returned to Armenia around 300. Like Paul, he was a bicultural bridge from a parochial ethnic culture into a more universal Christian worldview. He refused to sacrifice to the Armenian goddess and was imprisoned in a pit for thirteen years. But when the king fell ill, Gregory was brought out to pray for his healing. Upon his recovery, King Tiridates II was baptized.

In 314, around the time of Constantine's conversion, Gregory became a bishop and established the church in Armenia. An Armenian script was developed for the purpose of translating the Scriptures. In the early years of the fifth century, the patriarch (head bishop) developed an alphabet and assembled a team of scholars to translate the Bible and liturgical and theological materials that became foundational for a national church. With a national identity molded by the acquisition of their own written language, a written history, and Scriptures, the Armenians were able to maintain their ethnic solidarity over many centuries despite the loss of their political independence. The unity of the Armenians helped them to withstand attacks from the Zoroastrian Persians in the fifth century, and similar pressure by the surrounding Turkish and then Soviet empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During World War I, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed by the Ottoman Turks. The "Armenian massacres" became the modern prototype for ethno-religious genocide.

The fourth-century spread of Christianity into Africa also created an ethnic national Christianity that, despite pressure from Islam and then militant Marxism, has retained its identity to the present day. Axum was capital of a kingdom known as Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. In the early fourth century pirates on the Red Sea killed a Christian philosopher from Tyre. In the resulting shipwreck, his wards Frumentius (d. circa 380) and Aedesius were found by the Axumites sitting under a tree and studying. The king welcomed them and gave them high positions, as they were persons of knowledge. When the king died and left an infant son, the future King Ezana (d. circa 350), Frumentius became regent. Eventually Frumentius was consecrated by the bishop of Alexandria to organize the church in Axum. He converted the royal family, planted churches, ordained priests, and opened a school. Under King Ezana, the warrior kingdom of Axum shifted from worshiping various south Arabian pagan gods, to Christianity. A rich tradition of monasticism characterized Ethiopian Christianity, and Syriac-speaking missionaries translated the Bible into Ge'ez, the language of Axum.

In the fourth century the kingdom of Axum conquered Meroe, the combined kingdom giving birth to Nubia, another ancient African Christian nation.

Bicultural persons were the human bridges across which the “Good News” of Jesus traveled from one culture to another. In the 250s, Goths on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea took to ships and raided the shores of Asia Minor. They seized many Christians, who witnessed to their faith among their captors. The bicultural son of a Goth and a Christian slave, Ulfila (d. 383) studied Greek, Latin, and Gothic. At age 30 Ulfila was sent to Constantinople as a diplomat, and was there consecrated as a bishop for the Gothic Christians. Known as the Apostle to the Goths, he returned to the Gothic lands and became leader of the church. This role included creating a Gothic alphabet and translating the Scriptures into Gothic – the first central European language to have the Bible. Around 347, Ulfila took a group of Gothic Christian refugees onto Roman soil for protection. He led the negotiations to allow other Goths to cross into the Roman empire in 376, as they fled from other hostile tribes on the move in central Europe.

To the cultured Mediterranean heirs of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, the Germanic Goths were primitive, forest-dwelling, northern “barbarians.” Their theology was also seen as defective and inferior to the theological formulations of the Roman bishops. Known as Arianism, the Gothic theological system viewed Jesus as similar to a tribal chief’s counselor, or go-between, who carried people’s petitions to the ruler and who carried out the chief’s orders. In various forms of Arianism, Jesus was seen as subordinate to the Father God and less than divine.

The Arian Christology differed from the Orthodox, or Catholic version, settled at the Council of Nicaea in 325. To followers of Constantine and the official Orthodox Christianity of the empire, Jesus was *homoousios*, or “one nature” with and therefore fully equal to the Creator. The paradox behind Jesus’ miraculous life, death, and resurrection was expressed in the idea of his being simultaneously fully human and fully divine. Ultimately, the viewpoint of Ulfila and the Goths was condemned as heretical. Yet the creation of a Gothic Bible helped solidify Gothic identity in the same way that Armenian translations did for the Armenians in Asia Minor, and that the Ge’ez translation did for the Ethiopians in Africa. In 410, having gained in numbers and strength, a branch of the Goths invaded and sacked Rome. They credited their success in striking at the heart of the Roman empire to their superior “Arian” rather than “Catholic” theology. The theological problem of the exact relationship between religious beliefs and military victory or defeat was something that occupied famous theologians in the waning days of the empire.

By the fourth century, the story of Jesus Christ – with its varied theological interpretations – had moved outward from its beginnings in an Aramaic-speaking world through the wide geographic spread of common languages within the Greco-Roman and Persian empires, and even beyond. Bicultural apostles like the Jewish Roman citizen Paul, migrants like Gregory the Illuminator of Armenia and Frumentius of Axum, and even the slaves and their descendants like Ulfila of the Goths all translated the Christian message into the cultures of their own peoples.

## **The Creation of Catholic Europe, 400–1400**

In histories of western civilization, the fifth century is typically considered the end of antiquity and the beginning of a period of chaos and uncertainty. As the western Roman empire disintegrated and its cities were laid waste, warring clans and tribes swirled across the European continent. When Islam rose in the seventh century, a vigorous Arabian religion swept over the old Christian heartland of Palestine, North Africa, and the Near East (including modern-day Turkey). The eastern Roman empire, Byzantium, was surrounded by forces hostile to Christianity. Once the Zoroastrian Persian empire (centered in current-day Iran and Iraq) fell to Islam, the Greek-speaking eastern Roman empire entered a centuries-long struggle for survival. But what seemed like the “dark ages” for the ancient classical Roman and Greek civilizations was the beginning of the creation of Europe: tribe after tribe of outsiders or “barbarians” from the wooded north entered the orbit of Catholicism, and allied themselves with the bishop of Rome, known as the Pope. With the help of church leadership, they acquired written scholarship, adopted Latin as a cultural lingua franca, and crafted written legal systems.

In the history of Christianity, the creation of Catholic Europe accompanied a major demographic shift of Christian population northward, away from the Mediterranean and western Asia. Some of the Gothic tribes that invaded Rome and North Africa in the fifth century were already Christians, though of the heterodox “Arian” variety that had grown up beyond the boundaries of the Roman empire. As each tribe eventually adopted the universal or “catholic” version of Christianity, a trend started by the Franks when King Clovis was baptized in the 480s, they allied themselves with the traditions of old Rome and what it represented in terms of religion, social organization, and intellectual tradition. The meaning of “catholic” is “universal”: the attraction of Catholicism for the clan leaders and monarchs of Europe was that it welcomed them into a broader worldview, yet served

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their local needs. With the adoption of Catholicism, tribal elites attached themselves to the expanding concept of Christendom. Clusters of interlinked Christian tribes developed over the centuries into linguistic and cultural blocs – the forerunners of nation-states. In the fourteenth century the last non-Christian tribes of Europe were defeated, and the basic geographic outline of European Christendom was complete.

Conversion to Christianity in Europe took place on multiple levels. Ultimately a sense of sacred order permeated all of society, from the kings who claimed “divine right” to rule based on their continuity with the Old Testament kings of Israel, to the bishops who declared themselves ambassadors of Christ, to the peasants who experienced the healing power of God through the rituals of the church. Popes and bishops, holy men and monks, royal elites and their Christian wives – each played a part in adapting the Christian gospel to the cultures and peoples of what today is called Europe.<sup>6</sup>

### *Popes and bishops*

The creation of European Christendom was an immensely complex and multi-faceted process. But the role of ecclesiastical leadership was central in creating a context in which tribal groups decided to accept baptism and become Christian. According to a story recorded by the Venerable Bede (d. 735), the earliest historian of Britain, one day in the 590s Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) was walking among the Roman slave markets and spied two boys for sale. Struck by their blond hair, he asked where they came from. Upon being told they were “Angles,” he replied, “Not Angles, but Angels.” Inspired by this encounter, Pope Gregory the Great, former prefect of Rome, former papal ambassador to Constantinople, monk and pastoral theologian, launched an official mission to lands beyond his jurisdiction.<sup>7</sup>

The leader of Gregory’s own monastery traveled with forty men to Kent, located in the former Roman province of Britannia. The mission team processed before King Ethelbert (d. 616) with the pomp and glitter of Roman ecclesiastical garb and accouterments, thereby impressing the court with the magnificent resources available to those who would befriend the “holy catholic and apostolic church.” No doubt Queen Bertha (d. 612) was pleased to

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Medieval Source Book, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-book1.html>>.

see the monks, as she was a Frankish Christian who had persuaded her husband to be baptized and had sent messages to the Pope requesting the missionaries.

On Christmas Day 597, priests baptized the king and 10,000 English warriors. King Ethelbert gave the missionary Augustine (d. 604) the remains of an old Roman church at Canterbury for his use, and land on which to build a monastery. In the pattern of Roman leaders, monks assisted Ethelbert in drafting a set of laws for Kent. His legal code was the first composition ever written in English prose. Upon its adoption of Christianity and the codification of its laws, Kent became an ally of Roman civilization. Monks trained at Canterbury traveled far and wide as missionaries to other clans and kingdoms in northern Europe. Today, Canterbury remains the headquarters of the Church of England, under an archbishop whose historical lineage descends from the mission of Gregory the Great.

The story of Gregory, Augustine, Ethelbert, and Bertha reveals a great deal about the patterns of mission that prevailed during the early centuries of European conversion. As the western Roman empire crumbled, its beleaguered cities relied more heavily on the bishops, who took on responsibilities of civil administration in addition to their traditional care for the poor. Between the invasion of barbarians from the north and the surge of Islam from the Arabian peninsula during the seventh century, church officials gained greater authority as symbols of continuity with the old Roman civilization. Gregory the Great was a former prefect of Rome and thus brought considerable administrative skills to his office. The spiritual authority of the Pope was also assured by his claim to represent a biblical succession from Jesus to Peter, who according to tradition was the first leader of the church in Rome. Since the bishop of Rome was a central focus of resistance to northern invaders and to Muslims pushing from the south, the papal office gained prestige in direct relation to the collapse of civil government in the Mediterranean and to the Pope's ability to stave off invasion. Catholic Rome's need for allies – as well as its sense of spiritual responsibility to the unreached – made Gregory the Great's mission to Kent worth the expense and the risk.

Popes after Gregory also sponsored missions to the unconverted. Medieval popes made alliances with zealous northern rulers, especially the Franks, who traded physical support for Rome for the Pope's spiritual support and continuity with the early centuries of the faith. On Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo III (d. 816) crowned King Charlemagne (d. 814) of the Franks in Rome, thereby demonstrating papal ability to make or to break monarchs and, incidentally, founding the "Holy Roman Empire." Under papal sponsorship but paid by the Frankish king, in the 720s and 730s, the Saxon bishop

St. Boniface acted as missionary along the Germanic frontier, founding churches and drawing them under central control. His mission method included trying to demonstrate the greater power of the Christian God over druidic spiritual practices. He was finally axed to death by robbers in 754 while trying to evangelize Friesland on the North Sea.

The dark side of the growing power of Christendom was the increasing willingness of popes and kings to use force against groups that refused to accept the Catholic faith. This trend had begun with Constantine, but the conversion of the northern barbarians brought ethnic patterns of tribal violence into Christian culture. With the passing centuries the numbers of non-Christian tribes in Europe shrank. To combat the resistant pagans, church authorities ultimately embraced a violent crusade model of conquest over peaceful relationships with non-Christian peoples.

In 1095, Pope Urban II (d. 1099) delivered a speech urging the reconquest of the Holy Land from the Muslims. His speech launched thousands of European nobles and ordinary people in several waves of crusades to reconquer former Christian lands in Palestine, North Africa, Sicily, and other places that had come under Muslim control. In the medieval unity of church and state, coercion became intertwined with mission in both theory and practice. The spiritual devotion of the early Crusaders was undeniable, and they made huge financial sacrifices. But their medieval version of Christianity confused evangelization with violent conquest and the slaughter of people unlike themselves.

The relationship between the medieval European and Islamic worlds was just as competitive and troubled as was the enmity between the old Roman and Persian civilizations. As the descendant of Roman authority, the Pope remained the most visible public symbol of opposition to Islam. On the other side of the fence, while Islamic governments typically tolerated Christians and Jews as minorities, the lack of the ability to grow meant that churches in North Africa, the Middle East, and Turkey faced inevitable decline. Under Islamic law, conversion from Islam to Christianity was punished by execution, and mixed marriages always resulted in Muslim children.

On the eastern border between the old Roman empire and Asia, centuries of Byzantine resistance had held back the Huns and the Turks. Eastern Orthodox resistance to Islam allowed the time and space for the development of western Christendom. But the capture of Greek-speaking Constantinople by the Muslim Turks in 1453 ended the independence of Christian Byzantium. Constantinople was renamed Istanbul, and its beautiful Hagia Sophia cathedral converted into a mosque. Throughout the Muslim-controlled regions of the Near East, central Asia, and North Africa, ancient Christian churches faced inexorable pressure and gradually shrank

over the succeeding centuries. By the mid fifteenth century, Roman Catholic Europe found itself isolated from the Middle Eastern “Holy Land” that had given it birth.

### *Monks and holy men*

Monks were the grassroots missionaries in the conversion of Europe. From the early centuries of the church, wandering celibate holy men and women were honored witnesses to the peaceful lifestyle and suffering of Jesus. In the Syriac-speaking churches of the east, the ascetic feats and miracle-working of holy men caused people to admire Christianity and to seek baptism. Monasticism became a powerful countercultural witness during the age of Constantine in the fourth century, when holy celibates moved into the Egyptian desert in silent protest at the increasing prosperity and power of the now official legalized church. Groups of monks adopted rules to sustain themselves cooperatively under harsh conditions, often in dangerous settings.

As Roman outposts throughout North Africa and Europe collapsed under the weight of barbarian invasions, organized monasticism provided an anchor for the remains of Roman traditions and attracted ordinary people to Christianity through miracles and healings. St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) was a retired Roman military officer. He became a monk and built a monastery on the cliffs overlooking the Loire valley in rural Gaul. Pro-Roman Gaulish men of good education and family joined him as monks. Martin’s spiritual power lay in his role as exorcist and destroyer of pagan religious sites. With the wood obtained from the sacred groves of the pre-Christian religion he built monasteries and churches on the sites of the pagan holy places, thereby helping the people to transfer their ritual allegiance to Christianity while retaining their sense of sacred space. With his reputation as demon fighter, he became bishop of Tours. In the fifth century the tomb of Martin at Tours became a pilgrimage destination for people seeking to be healed, and a basilica was built over it.

A former monk himself, Gregory the Great understood the missionary potential of a disciplined monasticism. When he sent Augustine to Canterbury, it marked a new phase in missionary monasticism because it merged a popular countercultural witness with the structures of the Catholic Church. Under instructions from Gregory, Augustine and his monks built the foundation of English Christianity on the culture of the people, for example transforming animal sacrifices into prayers of thanksgiving at mealtime. The literacy of monks meant they introduced the technologies of reading and writing into the oral cultures of Europe. They compiled written

legal codes for new Christian monarchs, who were very interested in purity regulations and proper conduct that would please God and thereby bring order and prosperity to their kingdoms. Over the centuries, monasteries became places where important Latin and Greek manuscripts were copied, and where oral traditions of the people could be preserved in writing. Without the writings of Christian monks, such pre-Christian classics as the poem *Beowulf* would not exist today.

When Augustine and his monks marched into Kent, they carried with them precious handwritten and painted manuscripts guaranteed to attract the king to the more advanced text-based Latin civilization. As sites of civilization and skills, monastic houses spread throughout Europe and provided the institutional structures that undergirded medieval Europe. In rural Scotland and Ireland people stored their wealth at monasteries for safe keeping. Monks introduced agricultural improvements, and in the Netherlands they even pioneered the system of dikes. As monks moved into the countryside individually or in teams, their reputation as wandering miracle-workers and holy men drew people into the church. The stability of their foundations during centuries of wars, plagues, and famines sustained the faithful. The combination of authoritative structures with the entrepreneurial flexibility of monks was one secret of evangelizing Europeans at all levels of society.

The tenacity of monks facilitated the conversion of Scandinavia. From the eighth to eleventh centuries, Vikings from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway swept down the coasts of Britain and Europe, looting monasteries and killing monks. Since in rural society the monastery was the major institution where wealth was concentrated, monasteries became the targets of regular raids. Severe disruption to the churches occurred, as generations of bishops and monks were killed and monasteries were forced to move inland. Over time Vikings began wintering over in the areas they attacked, and they assimilated to the Christian population. After conversion, Vikings became generous and pious patrons of the local churches, and soon moved into monastic and ecclesiastical positions themselves. When Iceland was settled by the Norsemen, both pagans and Christians went there, as some of the Vikings had already lived in Scotland and so took their faith with them to Iceland. The Viking settlement in Greenland became Christian sometime in the eleventh century, and in the twelfth century the doomed settlement in that frozen land got its own bishop – the first practice of Christianity in North America. Contrary to what is reported in US history books, the first baptized European child born in North America was not in Jamestown, Virginia. He was Snorri Thorfinnson, born in the twelfth century of Viking parents in Greenland.

### *Monarchs, male and female*

The role of monarchs in the expansion of European Christianity was important down to the modern period. In small-scale societies, people were expected to share the worldview of their rulers. The power of the ruler, in turn, was partly based on his ability to align his people with the divine will for their preservation and wealth. Thus in the tribal milieus of Europe and Africa, and later in the South Pacific, conversion of the people to Christianity took hold one tribe at a time, with ultimate success measured by the conversion of the leaders. Even in large multi-religious empires such as the Roman, Chinese, and Persian, the approval of the monarch was essential to the survival of a religion. In areas where the monarch was not a Christian, Christianity might exist, but it was unable to flourish because to neglect the official religion was seen as destructive to the nation as a whole. In some cases the churches never gained royal support: for example the Nestorians, who traveled from Persia to China along the Silk Road for hundreds of years beginning in the seventh century, were ultimately doomed to oblivion by the decision of the Chinese emperor to stamp out heterodoxy.<sup>8</sup> Part of the key to the success of Christianization in Europe, Armenia, Nubia, and other places, therefore, was the role of tribal chiefs and kings in approving and sponsoring Christianity.

After his baptism, King Ethelbert, like Constantine before him and Charlemagne and others after him, considered himself a protector of the church. The merging of monarchy with Christian leadership was justified on Old Testament grounds in which the kings of Israel clearly had a divine mandate to rule. Part of the idea behind the “divine right of kings,” as it developed in Europe, was that God spoke directly to rulers and granted them authority. In a sense, monarchs were the most powerful laymen, according to Old Testament models, even as bishops were the most powerful churchmen.<sup>9</sup> This desire to be seen as protector of the church was similar to how Byzantine emperors viewed their task in the same time period. In some eastern Christian countries, such as Armenia and Georgia, the royal family’s patronage of the church extended to providing its high priests from among its own ranks. Evangelization of their own territories was part of the responsibility of divinely ordained monarchs.

With the conversion of Europe from monarchs on down the social ladder, the strategic role of Christian women must also be considered as part of the

<sup>8</sup> On early Christianity in Asia, see Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> On the integrated medieval worldview, see Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992).

historical record. When Queen Bertha sought the conversion of her husband, she was following in the footsteps of her great-grandmother Clotilde (d. 545), who had converted her husband Clovis (d. 511), king of the Franks. When the Slavic people of Kiev became Christians around the year 1000, it was partly due to the influence of Olga, grandmother of King Vladimir (d. 1015). Leading clerics encouraged Christian wives to use their influence on their husbands, who would then presumably convert the nation. In polygamous households, the Christian wife and mother competed with non-Christian wives who might be promoting other religions and advancing their own children to positions of leadership. Among the nomadic Mongols who galloped across and devastated central Eurasia in the thirteenth century, for example, were several notable Nestorian wives. Genghis Khan (d. 1227) and at least two of his sons married Nestorian women. The powerful Nestorian princess Sorkaktani Beki (d. 1252), the wife of his youngest son, became mother of the Great Khan of the Mongols (Khubilai Khan, d. 1294), an emperor of China, and an emperor of Persia. Although the Mongols did not become Christians, their tendency toward religious toleration in the thirteenth century, prior to their wholesale conversion to Islam, was partly due to the influence of powerful Nestorian wives and mothers.

As Islam gained strength across Asia, the desire to reconquer former Christian lands and to consolidate Catholic Christendom grew powerfully among monarchs on the Iberian peninsula, who had been fighting against Muslim invaders from North Africa since the early eighth century. With the assistance of various Crusaders, the kingdom of Portugal expelled Muslims and Jews in the thirteenth century. The prince of Portugal, Henry the Navigator (d. 1460), had a vision of sending ships around the coast of Africa in an attempt to break the Muslim blockade that kept Europe from trading with the Far East, and to capitalize on trade with Africa. He also sought to ally himself with a mysterious legendary Christian prince known as “Prester John,” now believed to have been the king of Ethiopia. Portuguese sailing vessels crept down the coast of Africa, and eventually crossed the sea to India and the Spice Islands. In order to continue the struggle against the Muslims, as well as to evangelize newly discovered territories, fifteenth-century popes granted extensive control over church affairs to Portuguese rulers. The age of European exploration and conquest had begun.

Portuguese missionaries had surprising success in spreading Catholicism near some of their outposts, notably among the Kongo people of what is now Angola. Kongolese Catholicism played a historic role when, in 1521, the grandson of the first Kongo Catholic chief was consecrated as the first African bishop, Henrique. Over time, however, the Kongolese Church was dissipated through lack of support from Rome. There would not be another African

Catholic bishop until the twentieth century. Ultimately the Portuguese slave trade depopulated Angola and sent millions of Africans to Brazil as slaves.

After Isabella of Castile (d. 1504) married Ferdinand of Aragon (d. 1516), in 1492, their combined forces conquered Granada, the last Muslim outpost on the Iberian peninsula, and established the nation of Spain. As with Portugal, the spirit of *reconquista* accompanied overseas exploration. Even as Granada was falling, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (d. 1506) met with Queen Isabella to request support for his voyage of exploration across the Atlantic, in pursuit of a new path to the Indies and the lucrative spice trade.

Once Columbus “discovered” America in the name of Spain, the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs needed a way to adjudicate their claims to new territories. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI (d. 1503) issued the decrees *Inter caetera* and *Dudum siquidem*. The system of royal patronage, or *Patronatus Regalis* (*Padroado* in Portuguese and *Patronato* in Spanish), required the monarchs of each country to evangelize their conquered territories in exchange for title of ownership and the right to collect tithes and appoint church officials.<sup>10</sup> The Pope drew a line around the globe and allotted non-Christian lands from the Philippines to the Americas to Spain, and from Africa to Southeast Asia to Portugal. In line with the *Patronatus*, Christopher Columbus took priests with him on his second voyage to the Americas, as did the other major conquistadors of the sixteenth century. The conquest of Latin America was thus continuous with the well-established modus operandi of Christendom in the late Middle Ages – that of the church legitimizing evangelization in a context of military conquest.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were powerful patrons of the Roman Catholic Church, and the most visible proponents of Christendom. The centuries of struggle against the Muslims had united church and state, similar to the way in which Muslim caliphs evangelized territories through conquest. Ferdinand and Isabella assumed the task of evangelization as part of the extension of their empires. Isabella took particular interest in the conversion of the American Indians. She ratified the system of *encomienda*, whereby Spanish conquerors received land grants with the provision that they convert the local inhabitants to Christianity. Like the monks of old among European peasants, members of religious and monastic communities were supposed to undertake the preaching, baptizing, and religious instruction of the Indians. But *encomienda* functioned as a violent system of conquest and enslavement rather than a means of peaceful evangelization.

<sup>10</sup> See Luis N. Rivera Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

The greed of the Spanish and Portuguese settlers meant that the system of conversion exported to the New World was continuous with the crusading mentality that had characterized seven centuries of effort by the Spanish to free Spain from Muslim control. Just as being a Frank under Charlemagne meant being a Catholic, so did being a Spanish subject under Ferdinand and Isabella. The limitations of Christendom as a mission model became apparent when Christian rulers – often over the objections of individual monks and missionaries among the ordinary people – used conversion as an excuse for their wars of conquest and territorial aggression.

When Gregory the Great launched the first papal mission beyond the boundaries of the Roman empire in AD 596, he unwittingly built a bridge over which Latin culture and the Catholic faith could penetrate, shape, and unify tribal societies. In an age when material and spiritual realities were seen as tightly interwoven, the cooperation of bishops and popes, monks and monarchs was necessary for large-scale social transformation. Little did Gregory know that a thousand years after he had sent missionaries from the Mediterranean Christian world into the northern wilderness, the distant mission fields would become the heartland of an independent and ambitious Christendom. Connection with the church universal, its courts, structures, and the intellectual traditions that sustained it, laid the foundations for a common Europe.

The shaping of European Christendom occurred in the approximate millennium between the missionary actions of Pope Gregory the Great and Pope Alexander VI. In 1493, Roman Catholicism launched yet another phase of expansion when Pope Alexander VI validated the sending of priests to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Once again, the commitment to crossing cultural and geographic boundaries would have a profound impact on the identity of Christianity, and would change the societies to which it traveled.

## 2

# Vernaculars and Volunteers, 1450–

One of the most important features of Christendom was the creation of a common European framework for scholarship through the use of standardized Latin for communication across ethnic boundaries. In the ninth century, King Charlemagne set a pattern for European monarchs by sponsoring monastic centers of learning. A steady stream of ancient manuscripts wended their way from the Mediterranean to their northern sponsors. The busy pens of monks copied Latin translations of classic philosophical works by Aristotle and other ancients, and more recent philosophical and mathematical works were translated from Arabic.

In the universities that arose in medieval Europe, priest-scholars explored emerging frontiers of theology, philosophy, law, medicine, and mathematics. In turn, teachers opened schools, and urban literacy rates began to rise. The spread of literacy had by the fourteenth century also spurred vernacular writings, as literate men and women penned musings in their mother tongues. But a big barrier to wider knowledge was the lack of books. As long as books were hand-copied on sheepskin or Egyptian papyrus, or even hand-carved and block-printed, their high price and scarcity kept knowledge in the hands of the few.

Hounded by creditors and shrouded in secrecy, in the 1450s a printer in Mainz, Germany, perfected a system of moveable metal type whereby large numbers of high-quality pages could be printed in a short amount of time. To showcase his invention, Johannes Gutenberg (d. 1468) printed the most important book in Europe – a Latin Bible. This three-volume masterpiece boasted Gothic type, durable ink, and rag paper, and employed a technology that remained basically unchanged until the nineteenth century. Gutenberg's investors no doubt reasoned they would make a fortune by printing and selling books to churchmen and to the increasingly literate merchant classes.

What Gutenberg and his mercantile sponsors could not have predicted was the explosion of new ideas that followed the invention of the new communications technology. The printing press spurred a communications

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**Map 2** Christians by region in 1600

*Source:* Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

revolution that began to democratize knowledge. Although the first printed book was a Latin Bible, and widespread use of Latin made possible the spread of ideas from one side of Europe to another, it is one of the ironies of history that the printing press directly challenged the Latin-based knowledge elites of church and state by making it possible for anyone with a popular following to promote his or her point of view.

The rapid spread of literacy, and the printed books and pamphlets to resource it, were rightly seen by religious and secular authorities as a challenge to the medieval church's authority to enforce a common worldview under the control of monarchs and popes. Between 1460 and 1500, approximately 6 million books were printed, more than had been produced throughout the Middle Ages. According to historian Carter Lindberg, "By about 1500, the symbiosis of increasingly widespread literacy and printing along with Renaissance intellectual impulses stimulated an unprecedented development of individuality and the formation of individual consciousness."<sup>1</sup> It was this development of individual self-awareness through literacy – with the availability of printed Bibles in local languages – that initiated the next broad phase in the spread of Christianity.

## **Bible Translation and the Roots of Modern Missions**

No one knew better the power of the printed word than a German Augustinian monk named Martin Luther (d. 1546), who believed that the

<sup>1</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 39.

printing press was a gift from God for the spreading of biblical truth. Luther's questioning of papal authority in 1517 launched what scholars have called the Protestant Reformation. As professor of biblical studies at the new University of Wittenberg, he believed that the Bible rather than church authorities was the final arbiter of issues of faith and practice. Luther also raised questions about ecclesiastical corruption, including the system of fundraising based on the widespread sale of "indulgences," or special shortcuts to salvation that implied buying one's way into heaven. He argued for *Sola gratia* – that God granted salvation freely to believers through his grace alone, rather than because of their good works. Luther's ideas sent shock waves throughout Europe and sparked widespread revolt against church authorities and practices, especially in locations where strong regional rulers felt oppressed by a distant or corrupt church bureaucracy, or where locals resented the large amount of land and wealth controlled by the Catholic Church.

What distinguished Luther from earlier "proto Protestant" reformers like the Czech Jan Hus (d. 1415) and Englishman John Wycliffe (d. 1384) was his success: his local prince protected him from being executed for heresy, and printing presses throughout Europe spread his writings. Seven print shops in Wittenberg alone disseminated his works. By 1519, Luther's ideas had spread to France, and by 1520 to England, where they were outlawed in 1521. Spread by fellow Augustinians and other church teachers, and carried by merchants and booksellers, Luther's ideas jumped from university town to university town. The basis for Luther's ideas about salvation, the use of the law, charity to the poor, and the power of individual conscience was his reading of the Bible in its original languages. He saw the translation of the Bible into German, therefore, as the most important task of his scholarly life. This revolutionary act allowed ordinary people to read the Bible for themselves – and simultaneously created a written standard for the German language. By the time of Luther's death in 1546, nearly 4,000 editions of the Bible had appeared in different styles of German.

In England, a group of priest-scholars at Cambridge University sympathized with Luther's ideas. From there the principles of church reform spread to Oxford and to London. In 1522 William Tyndale (d. 1536) decided to translate the Bible into English. But fear of the church losing control over theology caused the bishop of London to oppose Tyndale with the words, "we must root out printing or printing will root out us."<sup>2</sup> As Tyndale put the words of Scripture into the everyday language of common people, he

<sup>2</sup> Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, quoted *ibid.*, 313–14.

also challenged the authority of the Catholic Church by choosing English words biased toward the church as a community rather than a hierarchy, and repentance as an act of personal decision rather than a sacrament performed by priests. English vernacular Bible translation sowed the seeds of a broad-based English culture of personal initiative, rather than control by a wealthy, Latinized elite. Tyndale fled to Germany, from where he sent his English translation of the New Testament back across the Channel in 1526. Before he could finish the Old Testament, he was captured and executed for heresy in 1536. Tyndale's printed Bible became the basis for later versions, including the King James Bible of 1611 – authorized for public use once England became officially Protestant.

Historian Adrian Hastings argues that Bible translation was the source of modern nationhood, defined as a distinct people sharing common languages, customs, laws, and habits, beginning with the experience of England and spreading as a model to other countries. The road to nationhood was built when the use of the spoken vernacular moved from the oral to the written stage, thereby producing a body of literature that cemented a people's sense of cultural unity.<sup>3</sup> For the English, the concept of "nation" itself was defined by the use of the word in the earliest Bible translations, employed in weekly worship from the mid sixteenth century on, and then appearing unchanged in English Bible translations into the 1960s. Says Hastings, "Texts can produce peoples."<sup>4</sup> Although the common use of literary Latin had allowed the spread of ideas across medieval Christendom, once literacy, vernacularization, and the technology of printing took hold, the creation of distinct national cultures and the development of national identities could take place. From 1570 to the publication of the King James Bible, on average more than two editions of the English Bible appeared each year, along with vernacular liturgies and catechisms. The English concept of nationalism spread to the Scots, to the American colonies with the earliest Puritan settlers, and through Europe beginning with seventeenth-century Holland and its struggle against Spanish domination.

The birth of the modern nation-state broke down the ecclesio-political structures of Catholic Christendom. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, civil wars occurred throughout Europe where significant groups of Protestants, armed with their newfound literacy and Bibles in their mother tongues, challenged foreign ecclesiastical and monarchical control. In England, a moderate Anglicanism with a national church under a constitutional

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

monarch ultimately defeated challenges both from upper-class, monarchist Catholics and extremist Protestants – known as Puritans – who stripped the churches of their ornamentation, enacted strict laws on personal conduct, and executed King Charles I.

French Protestants, or Huguenots, marched into battle against the Catholics singing the Psalms in French. Their suppression in 1685 depleted France's middle class of watchmakers, silversmiths, and winemakers, as hundreds of thousands of Protestant artisans fled to England, Germany, Switzerland, South Africa, and the American colonies. In some countries, like Spain and Italy, humanistic and Protestant tendencies were ruthlessly suppressed. The Thirty Years War (1618–48), that pitted Protestants against Catholics, killed roughly 20 percent of the German population and reverberated across Europe.

At first glance, the Protestant Reformation seems irrelevant to cross-cultural missions. Protestantism was most successful in societies geographically separated from non-Christians, while allegiance to the Pope and to the ideals of Catholic Christendom remained intact in countries nearest the Muslim world. Protestants challenged monarchical power, defied bishops, trashed monasteries from England to Germany, and repudiated the clerical celibacy that had produced missionaries since the time of Paul. In theological terms, “apostolicity,” the idea of being sent out for the sake of the Christian message, and “catholicity,” the universalizing claims of the church, were both seen as characteristics of Roman Catholicism rather than of more nationalistic Protestantism. Lutheran theologians even concluded that Jesus' final command to “go into all the world” had been fulfilled by the early church and was no longer binding on Christians. Catholic missions widely expanded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while Protestants struggled to survive and to build their own political and social institutions in Europe.

But in the course of history, it was the vernacularization process itself that laid the foundations for modern missions. The idea that each person should read the Bible in his or her own language, and that the Bible could be interpreted by its readers rather than by educated elites, was a Reformation-era version of the early church's emphasis on hearing the gospel in different languages at the time of Pentecost in Acts 2. The Protestant principle of literary vernacularization embodied what mission historians Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls call “translatability,” the idea that the translation process itself guarantees that each culture infuses its own meaning into the words of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Islam, in which Arabic is seen to be the very word of God

<sup>5</sup> Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” in Walls,

and the translation of the Koran is technically forbidden, Christianity delights in the translation of the Bible into languages that represent a multiplicity of cultural identities.

Protestants did not invent the idea of translatability. Rather, the Protestant Reformation recovered the practice of earlier centuries, when the translation of the Bible solidified the cultural identities of ethnic peoples. The nations of Ethiopia, Armenia, and Georgia retained their ethnic Christian identities through centuries of opposition because the Bible was put into their languages by the fourth and fifth centuries. In the late ninth century, the brothers Cyril (d. 869) and Methodius (d. 885) put the language of the Macedonian Slavs into written form, translated the Bible into the language known as Old Church Slavonic, and founded churches that used the language. Old Church Slavonic became the sacred language of Slavic Orthodoxy, and helped the Russians and other Slavic peoples to retain their identity despite the attacks of Tartars, Mongols, and others who sought to destroy them.

The rise of vernacularization in the sixteenth century was thus significant not so much because it was new, but because it combined a theological rationale for Bible translation with the technology of printing and the rise of literacy. These things enabled the emergence of national identities and the individualism of modernity that lay just around the corner. Although cross-cultural missions were not a big priority for Protestants in the sixteenth century, the focus on Bible translation and distribution was the breakthrough that would define the outward movement of Christianity in later centuries.

## **The Revitalization of Catholic Missions**

Most Roman Catholics rejected the doctrines of *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Gratia* as the keys to needed church reform in the late Middle Ages. Although a wide variety of humanist ideas circulated through European Catholicism and were widely debated among intellectuals, Catholic leaders in Spain, France, Italy and other parts of Europe opposed “Lutheran” ideas of independence from papal authority. In these areas, vernacular Scriptures were ruthlessly suppressed because of their potential for incubating new

*The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 26–42; William Allen Smalley, *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991).

theologies and for exciting opposition to church authorities. And yet, for many Renaissance humanists, the deepened sense of personal responsibility characteristic of church reform did not lead them to abandon Catholic identity. Rather, it led to more intense forms of personal piety within the existing ecclesiastical framework, and deeper devotion to church tradition. For ordinary Catholics, the rich beauty of churches, the ritual celebrations, the protection of favorite saints, and increasing options for individual devotions accompanied their deepening faith. In short, becoming a better, more committed Catholic was a valid personal response – and an alternative to social upheaval – for sixteenth-century Catholics who longed for church reform.

Since commitment to foreign missions embodied the “apostolic” and “universal” attributes of Roman Catholicism, it was logical that one outgrowth of the “Catholic Reformation” was a revitalized commitment to outreach. The emergence of Protestantism reawakened Catholic missions, as adherence to Roman Catholicism could no longer be taken for granted. Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians sailed with Spanish and Portuguese explorers and undertook the evangelization of the Americas, the coast of Congo, and the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> The reconversion of Protestant “heretics” engaged the attention of Catholic missionaries in Europe, who pioneered new forms of spirituality and wrote new catechisms to pry Protestants away from their congregational singing and printed vernacular Bibles. New missionary communities of celibate monks, priests, and sisters formed to engage in charitable work among the poor. Innovations in mission practice included the founding of the Propaganda Fide in 1622, a centralized office directed from Rome that provided missionary training and administration over the expanding foreign missions. Also in the seventeenth century, increasing numbers of French and Belgian priests bolstered the primarily Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian missionary forces. Overall, the majority of Catholic missions from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries coexisted with the colonial expansion of Catholic countries in the Americas and Southeast Asia.

A new form of missionary piety emerged with the founding of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. The Jesuits became the largest men’s mission organization in the world, with 15,000 members and 440 colleges by 1626. They also were the first to use the Latinized word “mission” to represent the deliberate sending of special agents of the church, “missionaries,” for the purpose of converting non-Catholics or of reviving lapsed ones.

<sup>6</sup> On religious support for human rights during the conquest of the Americas, see chapter 4.

The founder of the Jesuits was an upper-class Basque and former soldier, Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556). While a Masters' student at the University of Paris, he gathered a handful of men, similarly formed by Renaissance humanism and a desire to serve God and the true church. One of the most important leaders in the history of Christianity, Loyola developed a series of meditations called the Spiritual Exercises, which proved a powerful tool of missionary spirituality that enabled individual practitioners to maintain self-discipline and focus, even if deprived of a supportive community and familiar surroundings. The spiritual and intellectual preparation of the Jesuits made them ready to travel across cultures, and capable of working alone even in hostile circumstances.

Loyola passionately wished to become a missionary to Muslims in the Holy Land. In this goal he was following an earlier founder of another great missionary community, St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), who in 1219 had visited the sultan of Egypt for theological disputation. Although Loyola's desire was thwarted, the small band of friends vowed to fulfill their missionary callings by going in absolute obedience wherever the Pope commanded them – a way of being in mission that challenged the stranglehold exercised by Portuguese and Spanish monarchs over missions in their colonies, and that often set the Jesuits at odds with Spanish and Portuguese colonialists. In 1540, the Society of Jesus was established. Even before official papal approval, one of the founding group, Francis Xavier, had sailed eastward as a missionary to Goa, India. Remembered today as one of the greatest missionaries in Christian history, Xavier reached out to the Paravas, fisherfolk in India, and taught them prayers and doctrine, as well as music. By 1549 Xavier was in Japan, the homeland of some of his first converts to Christianity. He died in 1552, waiting and hoping to enter China.

The significance of the Jesuits as missionaries, besides their ability to stay on course despite isolation and hardships, was their mission practice of “inculturation” – adapting themselves to the cultures they went to serve. Catholic inculturation and Protestant vernacularization were parallel approaches insofar as they required deliberate engagement with aspects of the indigenous cultures, and an attempt to transmit the gospel in cultural forms familiar to ordinary people. Ignatius of Loyola early on required that Jesuits learn the local language, and he decided against wearing distinctive western religious clothing. Jesuits thus immersed themselves in surrounding cultures. In 1542, when the Pope sent two Jesuits to Ireland, Ignatius ordered them to adapt to Irish customs. When, in 1573, Alessandro Valignano (d. 1606) became head of Jesuit missions in China and Japan, he followed the early lead of Loyola by studying and obeying the etiquette of

his hosts. The full entrance of Jesuits into China was finally permitted by Chinese authorities because of their willingness to adapt to Chinese cultural forms.<sup>7</sup>

Several generations of Jesuit missionaries deepened the practices of inculturation. The famous missionary Matteo Ricci (d. 1610) settled in China in 1583, lived as a Confucian scholar, translated Chinese classics, and wrote important philosophical works that bridged Christianity and Confucianism. Later Jesuits were even put in charge of the official calendar of the Chinese empire. Roberto de Nobili (d. 1656), who went to India in 1605, lived, dressed, ate, and studied as a Brahmin holy man. De Nobili wrote works in Tamil, Sanskrit, and Telegu. Other examples of profoundly adaptive Jesuits included Jean de Brebeuf, who went to Canada in 1625 and lived among the Huron Indians, learned their language, and made many converts before being tortured to death by the Iroquois in 1649. In 1624, Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes (d. 1660) entered Vietnam, devised the alphabet and wrote the first books in Vietnamese, founded Vietnamese Catholicism, and pushed for the ordination of Vietnamese priests.

Jesuit methods were controversial in the Catholic Church. Just at the moment in history when Catholicism was tightening its grip on doctrine, reaffirming the Latin language, and increasing regulation of myriad practices in response to the Protestant threat in Europe, Jesuit missionaries were adapting the faith to nonwestern cultures through the use of vernacular languages, study of non-Christian holy books, and cultural immersion. Jesuits wrote and printed vernacular catechisms for the instruction of converts, but their support of vernacularization was limited by Catholic regulations upholding the Latin Mass and Latin Bible. In China and Japan, Jesuits went so far as to argue that veneration of Confucius and the ancestors was not idolatrous worship, but merely an expression of civic duty and respect for parents. When news of these liberal practices hit Europe, the “Rites Controversies” broke out, and ended with a papal ruling against the Jesuit position in 1704.

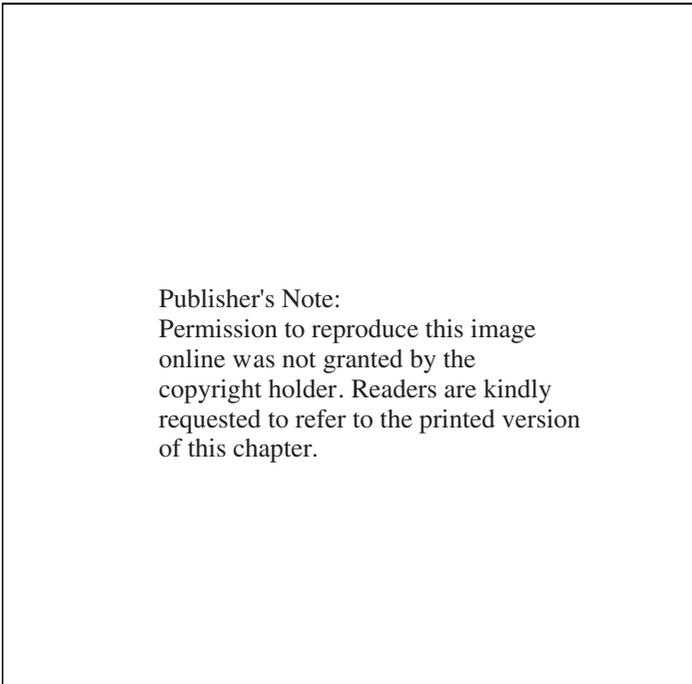
Jesuit independence threatened Portuguese and Spanish colonial interests, since they generally refused to operate under the control of colonial structures. Jesuit Manoel da Nobrega (d. 1570) went to Brazil in 1549 and gathered the

<sup>7</sup> On Jesuit mission theory and practice in East Asia, see Josef Franz Schütte, ed., *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, 2 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980); Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994); Peter Phan, *Culture and Catechesis: Alexandre De Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

Indians into villages to prevent their enslavement by Portuguese settlers. In Spanish America, Jesuit missionaries led the Guarani Indians beyond the reach of exploitative settlers and helped them defend themselves. In their fortified villages, the Indians lived a highly regulated life, raised crops for sale, and developed elaborate native Christian art, architecture, and music. Having made powerful enemies in Europe, in 1759 the Jesuits were expelled from Brazil. The loss of 500 missionaries and teachers devastated the Brazilian Church. In 1766, 2,200 Jesuits were ejected from Spanish territories in Latin America, and Catholic missions collapsed. The suppression of the Jesuit Order in 1773 marked the tragic end of a highly innovative period of Catholic mission history.<sup>8</sup>

Successful mission required a high degree of collaboration with indigenous leaders. In China, the Jesuits made friends with upper-class Confucian intellectuals and government officials. They founded confraternities that met for prayer and service to the poor. The aristocratic Xu family, following the lead of Ricci's friend, the agricultural scientist Xu Guangqi (d. 1633), continued to sponsor Catholicism in China for centuries, including the charitable work of Christian women. The Chinese emperors officially approved of mission in the way it was carried out by Matteo Ricci, and so the papal decision against the Jesuit practice of allowing Confucian rituals resulted in the suppression of Christianity in China. In Japan, the place of the greatest numerical success of the Jesuit mission before its destruction by Japanese shoguns in the mid seventeenth century, the Jesuits partnered with many kinds of people, including a blind storytelling evangelist named Lourenço, and with powerful feudal lords (*daimyo*). They also encouraged the ordination of Japanese priests. In Vietnam, de Rhodes made extensive use of Vietnamese catechists to spread the faith. Lady Catarina, the sister of Lord Trinh Tráng, ruler of the northern Vietnamese kingdom, was a chief sponsor of the mission that entered in 1627. She wrote its history in Chinese, and she converted seventeen members of her household. Even after persecution broke out in the northern kingdom in 1633, she refused to renounce her faith. And in North America, the Jesuit-inspired Catholics of Huronia converted the Iroquois to Christianity, despite having been conquered and dispersed by them. Huron Catholic women became famous for their rigorous asceticism and spirituality. Over time, the Jesuit method of inculturation resulted in bodies of Christians throughout the world who maintained their Catholic faith over centuries of persecution.

<sup>8</sup> The Pope restored the Jesuits as a community in 1814.



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**Figure 2.1** Matteo Ricci and leading Chinese Christian Xu Guangqi  
*Private collection/Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Art Library*

## **The Beginnings of Protestant Missions**

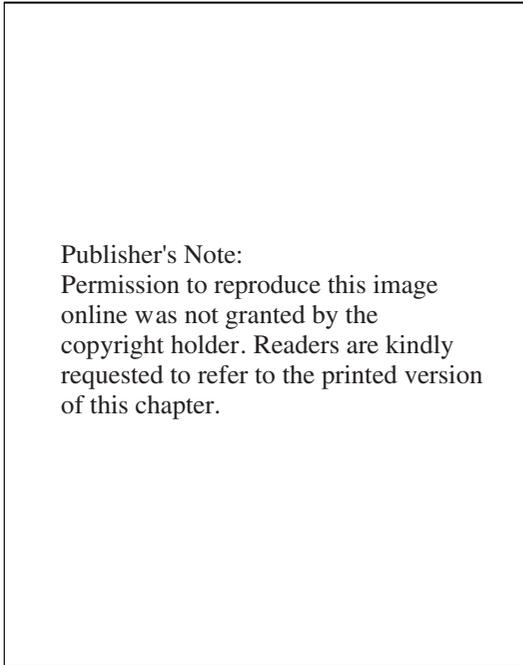
In the early seventeenth century, newly Protestant nations looked beyond Europe to establish trade relations and to plant colonies. Given that the Catholic popes had validated Portuguese and Spanish claims to control the non-European world, when England and Holland became Protestant it freed them from papal control and allowed them to enter the race for overseas colonies. The first Protestant ministers to go abroad were chaplains attached to the various trading companies and military outposts, similar to the way that Catholic priests had accompanied Spanish conquistadors to the Americas. Early Dutch, English, and German chaplains focused largely on the needs of European soldiers and tradesmen, but a few began relating to the indigenous populations in their overseas postings. These earliest

Protestant missionaries, like Luther in Germany, saw their primary task to be the translation of the Bible into common spoken languages. In North America, the Reverend John Eliot (d. 1690), a Congregationalist pastor in Massachusetts, received a mission subsidy from the Puritan-dominated British Parliament. In 1646 he began preaching to the Indians. His greatest accomplishment was to translate the Bible into an indigenous language and then publish it as the first Bible printed in North America – the Algonquin New Testament in 1661, and the Old Testament in 1663. In 1688, Dutch chaplains in Indonesia translated the New Testament into Malay, the first Southeast Asian language to have its own Bible.

A historic breakthrough for mission history occurred in 1706 when the Lutheran King Frederick IV (d. 1730) of Denmark sent missionaries to his small colony at Tranquebar, on coastal India. Unable to find any Danes willing to undertake a risky foreign mission, he heard of some German Lutheran students at the University of Halle who had embraced Pietism, a spiritual movement whereby small groups banded together for Bible reading, prayer, mutual support, and charitable outreach. In a sense, the Pietists completed the Reformation begun by Martin Luther because they embodied, on a grassroots and personal level, the cultural shift toward literacy and spiritual self-direction that marked the founding of Protestantism.

In 1706, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (d. 1719) and Heinrich Plütschau (d. 1747) arrived in Tranquebar, India. The Halle students faced opposition and persecution from Danish soldiers who opposed their outreach, but they learned Tamil and Portuguese and ministered to Hindus and the mixed-race offspring of Europeans in South India. Imbued with a Lutheran understanding of the importance of vernacular biblical literacy for both Christianization and nation-building, they proceeded to translate the Bible, the Lutheran catechism, prayers, and hymns into Tamil. They founded a college and churches, as well as orphanages and other institutions for social outreach. The two Pietists studied Tamil culture and religions, and sent the first reports about Indian culture back to Europe. In 1711, a Tamil convert went to the University of Halle and began the first teaching of an Indian language in Germany. Ziegenbalg then produced a Tamil grammar for the aid of German students. As someone who learned Tamil, read Tamil literature, and lived among the people, Ziegenbalg spread positive ideas about Indian cultures among Germans. He considered his greatest gift to the people to be his Tamil New Testament, which appeared in 1714.

The Danish–Halle mission exported the Reformation ideals of vernacularization to a nonwestern culture, and thereby set the pattern followed by successive Protestant missionaries. Protestant missionaries believed in the power of the gospel in people’s own language to save them for heaven, and



**Figure 2.2** Tamil Bible translated by Ziegenbalg

to improve life on earth. Following in the footsteps of Cyril and Methodius, Luther and Tyndale, this meant that the fundamental priority for missionaries was to produce a Bible in common languages so that people could understand it for themselves. The vernacularization process required an insider's knowledge of the local language and customs of the people. If necessary, it required putting the language into written form and creating a grammar. Ultimately it required starting schools to teach ordinary people to read, and using a printing press to spread the message.

Vernacularization – and its close cousin inculturation – were two-way processes, for understanding another culture required learning as much about it as possible. Eighteenth-century missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, became emissaries of nonwestern cultures back in Europe. Some of them even became the means of cultural renaissance within the indigenous language. Although most Tamil speakers did not become Christians after the arrival of missionaries, the missionary impact on Tamil culture was profound. In 1968, the regional government erected bronze statues in

Madras, India, commemorating eight heroes of Tamil culture. Three of them are European missionaries who edited Tamil classics, founded literary Tamil prose, wrote Tamil poetry, and taught the Tamil language in Europe. Even if the vernacularization and inculturation processes did not usually result in people becoming Christians, they played a central role in the formation of ethnic identities and nation-building.

## **Voluntarism and Mission**

By the late eighteenth century Dutch and English colonies stretched from India, to South Africa, to Indonesia, and across North America. A slave-based plantation economy that produced tea, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other products supported the rise of European urban factory centers from which cloth and other manufactured goods could be shipped around the world. Whether escaping from wars or seeking better opportunities, excess population poured from Europe into the Americas. The European and Arab slave trades created a parallel diaspora of millions of enslaved Africans who did the hard labor on plantations. Triangular trading patterns resulted, such as the one whereby slaves from West Africa produced the sugar in the Caribbean that was made into rum in New England that was traded for more slaves in West Africa.

In the wake of a transatlantic revival movement, and of Lockean philosophies of human reason and the social contract, humanitarian ideals about human equality began to grow. Theologies of human choice and cooperation with God began displacing older fatalistic notions characteristic of more static societies. By the late eighteenth century, Protestant believers were increasingly rejecting the assumption that they must follow the religion of their rulers. Popular “evangelical” movements – like the Baptists and Methodists – emphasized personal decision as the beginning point of religious faith, and self-improvement as the fruit of a disciplined lifestyle. These new forms of Protestantism attracted both lower-class whites and enslaved blacks.

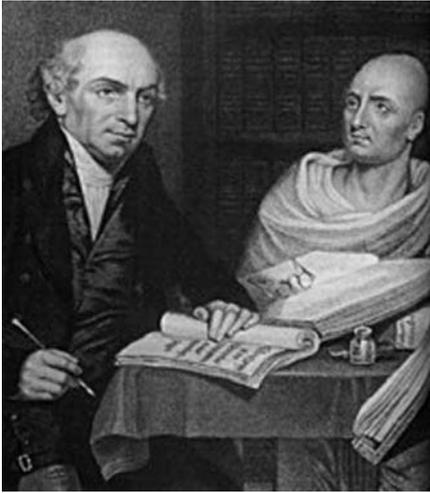
Eighteenth-century Protestant missions grew from the spread of ideas about individual freedom to choose one’s own faith, combined with the migration of Europeans and Africans back and forth across the Atlantic, and growing opposition to the slave trade. Pioneers in this regard were the Moravian Brethren, Bohemian Pietists who had faced persecution for their beliefs after the Thirty Years War. They decided to send missionaries to the Caribbean after their leader, Count Zinzendorf (d. 1760), met a former African slave in Denmark named Anthony Ulrich. Ulrich asked Zinzendorf to send messengers of the gospel to his relatives still in slavery. Moravians

moved in small groups to live in places where oppressed, non-Christian peoples needed their support – to black slaves in the Caribbean, American Indians in North America, and the Khoisan in South Africa. Despite their persecution by slave owners, the Moravian evangelization of West Indian slaves showed the slaves' humanity and potential for peace and reconciliation in a post-slavery society. British abolitionists thus used the Moravian work as proof that slavery could be abolished without bloodshed.

After British abolitionists founded Sierra Leone as a colony for the return of rescued slaves to Africa, African American Baptist preacher David George (d. 1810) led a group of hymn-singing former slaves ashore to colonize it in 1792. Groups of former slaves flowed into Sierra Leone, many of whom were convinced that their liberation from slavery was a divine calling for the evangelization of Africa. Through evangelical religion, modern agriculture, trade, and literacy, Sierra Leone Christians hoped to undercut the slave trade at its source, and to spread Christianity throughout West Africa.

For missions to thrive without the sponsorship of popes, monarchs, governments, or landed elites, new models had to emerge in which support came from the grassroots – from ordinary people. The pieces all fell into place in the late eighteenth century with the rise of the “voluntary society,” the idea that ordinary church members would donate money on a regular basis to send people like themselves to distant parts of the world, with the purpose of translating the Bible, founding churches and schools, improving people's lives through western medicine and agriculture, and convincing them that their eternal salvation would be secured by following Jesus. The voluntary society was, in a sense, the Protestant parallel to the Catholic religious community.

In the 1780s and 1790s, churchmen of several different denominations wrote tracts arguing for the establishment of voluntary missions. The most famous of these was the “Enquiry” by English Baptist shoemaker William Carey (d. 1834), who in 1792 argued that Jesus' command to “go into all the world,” baptizing, teaching, and preaching, still applied to modern-day Christians. Using the capitalist model of the trading company, Carey in effect suggested that ordinary Christians pool their resources to buy shares in a “missionary,” send him on a merchant ship to a British colony, and support him financially while he attempted to spread the Christian message among non-Christians, so that they, too, could choose eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. The return on the outlay would not be financial, but the spiritual reward of following Jesus' final command and helping people at the same time. The Baptists of England responded to Carey's “Enquiry” by founding the Baptist Missionary Society and sending the Carey family to India as their first missionaries.



**Figure 2.3** William Carey and Mrityunjaya, his Indian assistant

Several components were key to the concept of voluntarism. First was the basic philosophical/cultural shift of the Enlightenment toward the idea of free choice – that ordinary people had both the rational capacity and political right to choose their beliefs. Religion should be a matter of personal commitment, rather than a product of one’s inherited tradition, or the order of the king. Baptists like Carey believed that the church itself was a community that banded together by virtue of adult decision, not an inherited community marked by infant baptism or clerical hierarchy. Similarly, ordinary church people had the right

to organize groups of like-minded persons who shared a common mission. In theological terms, the idea of choice meant that salvation required individuals to cooperate with God, rather than be passive recipients of divine fiat or inherited custom. The strivings of Christian in John Bunyan’s spiritual classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), captured the essence of Protestantism’s individualistic spiritual struggle. It was translated by missionaries into multiple languages during the nineteenth century, and continued to inspire converts to Protestantism well into the twentieth century. The first ordained African minister in South Africa, the Reverend Tiyo Soga (d. 1871), translated *Pilgrim’s Progress* into Xhosa, its first African language.

A second assumption of voluntarism was the context of emerging worldwide mercantile capitalism, in which trade goods and raw materials were being moved around the world on ships. The adventures of explorers, such as cartographer Captain James Cook (d. 1779), introduced exotic cultures to western readers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. If merchants could go into the world to make money, Carey argued, shouldn’t Christians sacrifice themselves for the higher motive of saving people from eternal damnation? The rise of mercantile capitalism was creating middle-class people with the ability to make money and use it for their own personal economic advancement – or for the benefit of others.

A third assumption embedded in the idea of voluntarism was the family as the new missionary. The traditional missionary for over a millennium had been

the celibate Catholic male. But the Moravians showed that women and children could survive in a mission context as well. William Carey insisted on taking his wife and family with him to India. Although the presence of women and children in the mission field remained controversial at least until the 1830s, the nuclear family emerged as a major Protestant contribution to mission method. Family life sustained the missionary male and kept him focused, provided a model of Christian culture for the surrounding society, created a safe space for the evangelization of women and children, and gave women the opportunity to become missionaries to other women. If they had been denied the possibility of having families, the number of Protestant men interested in becoming missionaries would have remained small.

The sending of missionary families into emerging western colonies blurred the distinction between voluntaristic mission and European migration. Often the children of nineteenth-century missionaries chose to settle permanently in the places to which their parents went. Hawaii, South Africa, and North America are prominent examples where the families of missionaries became integrated into colonial societies over the generations. While many missionary progeny served in the ministry for multiple generations, others used their biculturality and linguistic skills to move into business or diplomatic work as part of a privileged white colonial class.

In the early nineteenth century, Protestants founded voluntary missionary societies in the UK, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and other countries, usually along denominational or territorial lines. The “home base” raised money for the missionaries, printed information about them, and supplied them with necessities. Missionaries booked passage on merchant ships, hired wagons and carriers, and walked to isolated places where they intended to work until they died – as many did from their hardships – or else returned home in broken health.

Catholic laypeople were also inspired by the spirit of voluntarism to become involved in mission. As Protestant women were doing in the United States and the United Kingdom, a French Catholic laywoman named Pauline-Marie Jaricot (d. 1862) began collecting money for missions and organizing prayer groups for their support. Her efforts culminated in the 1822 founding of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which was recognized by the Pope as one of the major avenues whereby Catholic laypeople could support missions, even if they could not yet be appointed as official missionaries.

By the early nineteenth century missionaries of different nationalities and ecclesiastical loyalties had developed interests in particular locations: Norwegian Lutherans went to Greenland because of their ancient Viking history; British Congregationalists were drawn to the South Pacific because

of reports by explorer Captain Cook; American Baptists sailed to Burma because when the British refused to let them work in India, they managed to gain passage there; Anglicans went to West Africa to oppose the slave trade at its source; Wesleyan Methodists traveled to Ghana in response to appeals from an indigenous prayer group requesting religious instruction; Russian Orthodox monks evangelized the Aleutian Islands because Russian traders were operating there.

European colonialism provided both opportunities and limitations for the expansion of nineteenth-century missions. Traders often opposed missionaries because they interfered with their exploitation of local peoples. When, at the urging of abolitionists and missionaries, the British Parliament forced the British East India Company to permit missionaries in 1813, India became one of the largest mission fields. China's unreached millions attracted major mission interest, and by the mid nineteenth century a series of "unequal treaties" opened certain port cities to foreign residents, including missionaries. The "scramble for Africa" was unleashed by the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, in which European countries carved up the continent into their own spheres of influence. Colonialism in Africa typically resulted in missionaries being welcomed in colonies under their own nation's control, and being restricted from entering those under the control of other European nations.

## **Protestant Missionary Activities in the Nineteenth Century**

By the end of the nineteenth century Protestant mission societies were working in the coastal regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and had started to move inland. In line with the "Protestant principle" of making the Bible available in vernacular languages, the first task of pioneer missionaries was to get to know the people, study their culture, and translate the Bible into the local languages. William Carey, working with teams of indigenous helpers, translated parts of the Bible into forty-four languages, including setting the basis for Bengali prose. The first American Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson (d. 1850), had translated the Bible into Burmese by 1834, and his wife Ann (d. 1826) made the first Thai translations in 1819. Pioneer Anglican chaplain Henry Martyn (d. 1812) had by 1810 produced translations into Persian and Arabic, and his Persian New Testament was later presented to the Shah. In 1814, English Congregationalist Robert Morrison (d. 1834) published a translation of the New Testament in Chinese, even though it was illegal for foreigners to learn Chinese or to live in China. Former slave Samuel

Ajayi Crowther (d. 1891), the first black Anglican bishop, made critical contributions to Bible translation that became the basis for Yoruba literature. Bible societies acted as auxiliaries to the missions by printing and distributing the Scriptures around the world, even in places where it was exceedingly difficult for Protestants to go, such as Catholic Latin America. By the late twentieth century, teams of missionaries, indigenous workers, and linguistic consultants had translated the Bible into over 2,000 languages.

Along with translations, printing, and the promotion of literacy, nineteenth-century missionaries preached, gathered converts, and founded churches. Missionaries rarely founded churches in a vacuum, or in “pure” native cultures untouched by the rest of the world. As with Bible translation, the missionary could not found churches without the cooperation of indigenous partners. It might take a pioneer European missionary twenty years to make one convert, but one native Christian could influence dozens of family members and neighbors. Indigenous Christians working as evangelists, catechists, and “Bible women” typically outnumbered the foreign missionaries, and were essential to the spread of the Christian message. In the South Pacific, for example, between 1819, when Tahitian King Pomare became a Christian, and 1834, Tahitian Christians traveling in boats visited every island within 2,000 miles of Tahiti. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they read about in the book of Acts, native evangelists were dropped off, unarmed, on islands two by two. South Pacific missionaries spread the good news of Christianity as a religion of peace. Many were clubbed to death and eaten by cannibals, but eventually Oceania became statistically the most Christianized part of the world.

In general, the Christian mission was unsuccessful where other world religions such as Islam were strong. Indigenous modernizers may have welcomed the western education and medicine brought by missionaries, but they usually rejected the religious message of Christianity. In places with anti-colonial or anti-foreign movements, such as Indonesia and China, Christianity was seen as a foreign religion brought by invaders, even if Christians had already been present for hundreds of years.

The fascinating issue raised by mission history is not why the Christian message was rejected by persons of diverse cultures and religions, but why it was so widely accepted. Christian belief, as a holistic way of addressing both questions of ultimate meaning and the need for material well-being, appealed the most in small-scale societies that were confronted with larger political forces they could not control. Missionaries and leading converts acted as buffers between local cultures, and as bridge figures to the outside world of trade, foreign militaries, and colonial administration. Intellectuals adopted Christianity as a strategic response to modernization, a way of

gaining the knowledge needed to negotiate the larger forces of political decay, or to resist colonialism. In some places, such as northeast India and Hawaii, entire ethnic groups of people joined churches and saw Christianization as a way of gaining dignity or of making progress as a group. In Japan in the late nineteenth century, internally displaced *samurai* (warriors) made up the core of new Christian believers, as becoming Christian gave them a new identity in a modern context. In many places, women converted to Christianity as a way to assert their dignity in the face of demeaning customs such as forced marriage, domestic slavery, and humiliating widowhood rituals. The spiritual aspects of Christianity, especially the promised reconciliation with God through the work of Jesus Christ, also attracted many.

One of the main activities of nineteenth-century missions was the founding of schools with the initial purpose of teaching people to read the Bible, and training leaders for the church. As people came to appreciate the advantages of gaining western knowledge, missions pushed their schools to higher and higher levels. The first modern colleges and universities founded in India, China, Japan, Korea, the Middle East, and Africa were the products of nineteenth-century educational missions. In many countries, missionaries were the first to insist on the education of girls, despite public opposition. By 1909, for example, American missionary women were operating 3,263 schools, ranging from primary level to colleges. By 1935, missions were operating 57,000 schools and over 100 colleges worldwide. Mission schools taught subjects such as science and geography, western and vernacular literacy, and ideas about democracy and individual rights. Mission education provided the foundational knowledge in which nationalist movements would eventually take root. Mission societies also sponsored the first international students to gain a higher education in Europe and the United States. The education of girls is one of the most widely acknowledged results of western mission work. The acceptance or rejection of Christianity was often in direct proportion to its perceived usefulness to local elites involved in nationalist struggles for self-determination.

Other major venues for mission involvement in the nineteenth century were those of healing and agriculture. Because Jesus was a healer, and people were eager for medical help even when they opposed Christianity, medical missions became a major aspect of nineteenth-century cross-cultural mission. The founding of clinics, hospitals, and medical schools was one of the most expensive, yet necessary, parts of the missionary infrastructure, both in meeting the needs of missionaries themselves and in terms of outreach. By 1938, Protestant mission institutions were employing 1,350 medical doctors and 13,000 missionary nurses in over 1,000 mission hospitals. In addition

to specialized work in tuberculosis and leprosy, and among the disabled, social reform movements grew from western medical practice. Missionary doctors led movements against child marriage in India, foot-binding in China, female genital mutilation in Africa, and other unhealthy practices.

Along with health care, gardening and agriculture were ongoing aspects of mission work. Missionary families and converts needed to eat. Farming was a fundamental concern in all subsistence societies. Missionaries like William Carey in India and Robert Moffatt (d. 1883) in South Africa introduced fruits and vegetables and irrigation schemes to increase local food production. Missionaries and migrants took their favorite trees and plants to their new homes. Early missionaries also catalogued the flora and fauna they found. By the early twentieth century, missionary conservationists were preserving indigenous plants and animals and addressing environmental problems by introducing conservation ridges and other measures to conserve soil and water.

Unlike the short-term mission trippers of the twenty-first century, the missionary volunteers of a century ago expected to learn the vernacular languages of their chosen people. Before governments had foreign aid budgets and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) numbered in the thousands, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Christian missionaries were the only westerners routinely involved in cross-cultural humanitarian outreach. In the centuries before air travel and email made cross-cultural connections a casual occurrence, missionaries went to their mission fields for life.

\*

From the late fifteenth century to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Europeans expanded their reach around the world through exploration, trade, and military force. The spread of Christianity to Africa, Asia, and the Americas occurred within the colonial framework in which European peoples poured into other parts of the world. By 1915, at the end of the “long” nineteenth century and the height of European imperialism, 351 Protestant mission societies were supporting approximately 24,000 “foreign missionaries.” These missionaries worked alongside 109,000 “native” staff members. Their mission schools enrolled roughly 2 million pupils. Protestants sponsored over 1,200 dispensaries, 700 mission hospitals, 245 orphanages, and 39 leper homes that cared for millions of needy and poor people. At the same time, Roman Catholics were sending approximately 19,600 priests, lay brothers, and sisters as foreign missionaries to Asia and Africa. Many thousands more worked in Latin America, where the distinction between foreign

and indigenous workers was unclear. At least 400 Russian Orthodox missionaries and 700 mission schools were in operation across Asia by 1908.

Analogous to the transmission of ideas across the Roman empire, Christianity moved outward by taking advantage of the connectivities provided by the structures of European empires. Yet, unlike traders and colonial administrators, missionaries were driven by religious motivations that included ideas of human equality under God. Thus what they offered – literacy, education, medical care, social services, support for individualism, and the gospel message – were tools that ultimately equipped indigenous peoples to challenge European empires on their own terms.

## Global Networking for the Nations, 1910–

In June 1910, 1,200 representatives of 160 Protestant mission societies from around the world arrived in Edinburgh. Over a thousand homes were thrown open to house the delegates, many of whom had traveled for weeks on trains and steamships to attend the historic event. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches were not represented, but never before had so many branches of Protestantism put aside their differences and embraced a common cause. For ten days, the leaders of the world Protestant movement – Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and others – gathered in the Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland. The conference delegates were flanked by four galleries that seated hand-picked observers, missionaries, and missionaries’ wives, who listened intently while leading activists discussed the key issues facing world missions in the twentieth century. For two years prior to the event, conference organizers had corresponded with missionaries and informants around the world to produce eight commission reports. The reports reflected such urgent topics as education in relation to the Christianization of national life, the missionary message in relation to non-Christian religions, the preparation of missionaries, the relation of missions to governments, and cooperation and the promotion of unity. The importance of the World Missionary Conference, or “Edinburgh 1910” as it came to be called, was such that the archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England, judged it to be without parallel in the history of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Edinburgh 1910 has been remembered for many reasons. It was the high point of western missionary optimism about the conversion of the world to

<sup>1</sup> Charles Clayton Morrison, “The World Missionary Conference, 1910,” *The Christian Century* (July 7, 1910); repr. online at <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1408>>. See also *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, vols. 1–9 (Edinburgh, London, and New York: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier./F. H. Revell, 1910).

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**Map 3** Christians by region in 2010

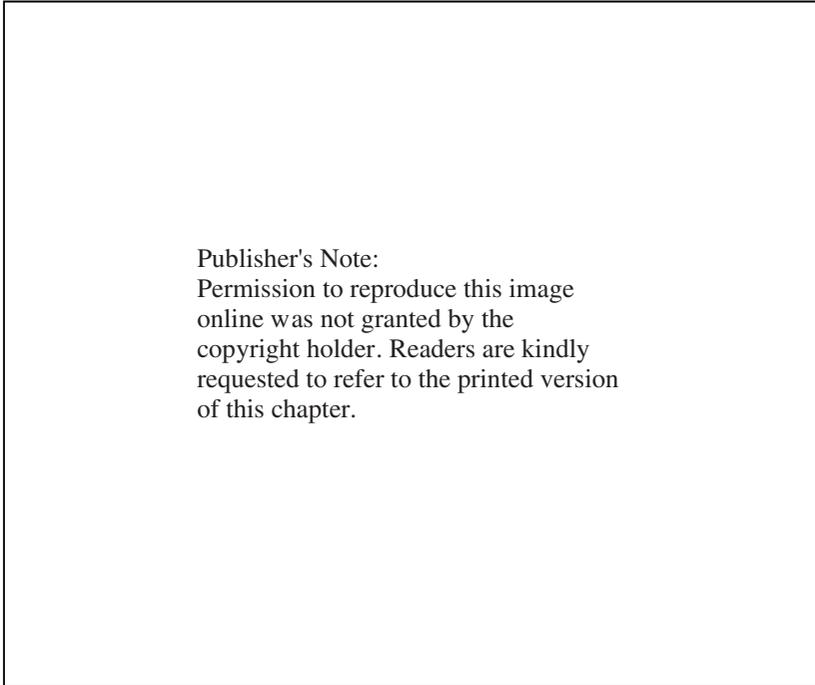
*Source:* Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Christianity. As the most inclusive meeting of Protestants in modern history to date, it launched the “ecumenical movement” for Christian unity that ultimately led to the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. It gathered under one roof powerful politicians and apologists for western Protestant Christendom, along with critics of westernization. Its organizational accomplishments were legendary: through its study commissions, for the first time in history a world overview of emerging Christian movements became available. A comprehensive atlas illustrated the geographic expansion of missions.

Edinburgh 1910 also signaled a new era: a small but strategic group of nonwestern Christian leaders met as equals with their western counterparts. Although only seventeen nonwestern Christians attended the conference as delegates, they delivered six of the forty-seven major conference addresses. Their presence confirmed the conviction of conference chairman John R. Mott (d. 1955) that “The evangelisation of the world ... is not chiefly a European and American enterprise, but an Asiatic and African enterprise.”<sup>2</sup>

A speech by V. S. Azariah (d. 1945) made a profound impression on the delegates. Azariah was a second-generation Indian Christian, YMCA leader, founder in 1905 of the groundbreaking Indian Missionary Society, and a future Anglican bishop. While expressing thankfulness for the sacrifices of the missionaries who brought the gospel to India, he criticized the paternalism and colonialist attitude of superiority that characterized even the best

<sup>2</sup> John R. Mott, quoted in *World Missionary Conference*, vol. 1: *Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World*, 404.



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**Figure 3.1** World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910  
*World Council of Churches photo archive*

missionary work. Azariah asked for true equality and partnership between missionaries and indigenous Christians:

Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labors of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS.<sup>3</sup>

Azariah's plaintive cry for friendship captured the spirit of the conference, as delegates determined to move beyond racial stereotypes to promote full equality between western missionaries and eastern converts, and between older and younger churches. Although the typical missionary in 1910 was a European, what thrilled the delegates at Edinburgh 1910 was the prophetic vision they glimpsed of worldwide Christian unity marked by human equality, justice, and a shared passion to spread the name of Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> V. S. Azariah, *World Missionary Conference*, vol. 9: *To Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World*, 315.



**Figure 3.2** V. S. Azariah, first Anglican bishop from India

From the perspective of mission history, the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, stands as an apt symbol for the dawning of a new era – that of Christian mission as a multi-cultural, multi-directional network. Ultimately world wars, economic collapses, and ethnic hatred dashed the hopes of optimists who expected the dawn of the Kingdom of God in the twentieth century. But the deeper significance of Edinburgh 1910 was not that of European ambitions or disappointments. It was rather that it foresaw, however dimly and tenta-

tively, the future of Christianity as a worldwide rather than a European religion.

## The Growth of Global Networks

Pioneer missionary William Carey had dreamed of holding a worldwide gathering of Protestant missionaries in 1810, but it took another century for all the pieces to fall into place that made Edinburgh 1910 possible. First there needed to be a critical mass of missionaries around the world, connected by an infrastructure that allowed conversations about issues of mutual concern. There needed to be a shared sense of unity that would encourage interaction across denominational and national boundaries. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the isolation of missionaries made the idea of an international gathering just a pipe dream. For example, it took two years for early nineteenth-century missionaries in Oregon to get mail from Boston, because it had to sail on trading ships around South America and across the Pacific to Hawaii before it turned toward the west coast of North America. Because missionaries felt called by God to witness to Jesus Christ, in hopes of saving people from eternal damnation, they moved by oxcart or donkey or canoe into isolated locations regardless of poor transportation or communication with the rest of the world.

But the growth of European colonialism changed all that. By the late nineteenth century, Great Britain had developed the largest trade network in the world. Railroads carried people and goods to ships that steamed ever

more rapidly abroad, secured by the Royal Navy. By the end of the century, in Britain 18,680 miles of track carried 1,100 million passengers plus freight each year. British colonies enjoyed a similar development of transportation and communication infrastructures: India's railroad tracks increased from 5,000 miles in 1869 to 25,000 miles in 1900. The importance of the transportation and communication revolution of the late nineteenth century – including the telegraph and the beginnings of electricity and the telephone – was extended by the twentieth-century development of wireless communication (the radio), the automobile and highways, the airplane, and finally computers and the internet. The technical breakthroughs that created linked infrastructures in the late nineteenth century marked the beginning of globalization.

As the main group of westerners who lived in isolated locations, missionaries early grasped the potential of new technological developments for moving people and ideas into the hinterlands. Early Protestant missionaries to Lesotho rode on the same ship to Cape Town that carried the rails for the southern approach for “Cape to Cairo.” Railroads connected isolated mission stations and made possible interdenominational field conferences, in which missionaries in particular regions could meet with each other to discuss matters of policy and practice. The missionaries of the early nineteenth century sailed to their destinations and expected to remain there for life. But, by the end of the century, ever faster steamships meant it became easier for them to return home on furlough – or for supporters to travel round a circuit of scattered mission stations.

In addition to increased communication among missionaries, during the 1880s and 1890s synergy between youthful energy and missionary vitality created rapidly expanding international Christian networks. Just as printing had facilitated the spread of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, so the technological advances of the late nineteenth century made possible the globalization of student Christian fellowships. To take one organization as an example, Christian Endeavor began in 1881 in the Williston Congregational Church in Portland, Maine. Faced with a lack of youth involvement in their church, Francis and Harriet Clark strove to convert teenagers through a program of mixed-gender weekly prayer meetings and socials. Upon reading Reverend Clark's account of their successful youth program in a magazine, the minister at North Congregational Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts, formed a second Christian Endeavor society. By 1886, the fifth annual convention of Christian Endeavor was held in Saratoga Springs, New York, and the president announced the existence of 850 societies in thirty-five states, territories, and provinces and seven in foreign countries. In 1891, a mere ten years after its founding, Christian Endeavor registered 11,000 societies with 600,000 members in over a dozen countries. In 1895, the Christian Endeavor conference of

the United Kingdom drew 6,000 young people to Birmingham, and a record number of 56,425 attended the convention in Boston. To the leaders of Christian Endeavor, the transformation of one congregation's youth prayer meeting into a global movement seemed nothing short of miraculous. Founder Francis Clark observed in 1906 of the sudden global reach of Christian fellowship:

It can hardly be realized by my younger readers how comparatively new is the development of this idea in its world-wide aspect. Now the Christian traveler cannot go to any considerable section of this world except Tibet without finding that Christian brethren have been there before him, and without receiving the right hand of Christian fellowship. Fifty years ago this could not possibly have been said. Twenty-five years ago it was less true than now. Even thirteen years since ... it could not be said with the emphasis with which it can now be asserted.<sup>4</sup>

The most important example of the fusion of Christian youth culture with foreign missions was the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM), which enlisted 800 US and 300 British college graduates as missionaries in its first eight years. The SVM grew out of a summer Bible conference held for YMCA student leaders in Northfield, Massachusetts, in 1886. The YMCA was the first widespread ministry to college students, and it stressed a balanced program of spiritual and physical discipline. To the gathered students, modern technology and trade networks, the seeking of knowledge and modernization by countries opened to western influence, and a new openness to missions within the British empire all demanded a new mobilization of missionaries. The sons of missionaries, as well as a Lakota Indian and a Thai student from Williams College, testified to the need for missionaries to reach their parts of the world. By the end of the summer conference, exactly 100 of the collegiate YMCA leaders had declared their intention to become foreign missionaries. Over the next academic year, over 2,000 students at 162 colleges across North America signed pledge cards promising to become foreign missionaries.

The SVM gave young people a central role in what appeared, in their youthful optimism, to be God's plan for the twentieth century. Sherwood Eddy (d. 1963), an SVM-er from Yale University, later recalled how the student missionary movement addressed the needs of his generation through the universal relevance of Jesus Christ:

<sup>4</sup> Francis Clark, *Christian Endeavor in All Lands: A Record of Twenty-Five Years of Progress* (Philadelphia: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1906), 492–3.

The audacity and presumption of the movement was embodied in its watchword: “The evangelization of the world in this generation.” Here was a whole stubborn world to be won, but nothing then seemed impossible to us students. The flush of youth and the adventure of a crusade energized the undertaking ... We felt we were following in the footsteps of Carey in India, of Livingstone in Africa, of Robert Morrison and Hudson Taylor in inland China ... This missionary crusade made an immediate challenge to our generation for the sacrificial and heroic.<sup>5</sup>

After serving a year recruiting other volunteers, in 1896 Eddy steamed to India as YMCA organizer for Madras. He worked closely with Indian student leaders, including his best friend V. S. Azariah. Eddy wrote in his book *The Students of Asia* that his goals in India were “to build up a strong national student movement, to train the leadership of a growing Christian community, to create a social consciousness for the social regeneration of India, and to establish Christianity as the universal religion in the greatest religious arena in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

The Student Volunteer Missionary Union of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in 1892. Like its American counterpart, its leaders decided to host an international conference to recruit European university students as missionaries. They called the conference “Make Jesus King,” after an inspirational three-word telegram sent by Japanese Christian students to American students in 1889. Despite its experimental nature as the first student conference of its kind in England, the Liverpool conference of 1896 drew 927 people from twenty nationalities to meetings at the Liverpool YMCA. Forty-four mission societies sent representatives to recruit students for various mission fields. When European delegates returned home from Liverpool, they spread the student missionary organization to Scandinavia, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland. Response to a prayerful collection for conference expenses was so great that students collected an extra £200 and sent it to John R. Mott, then on an organizing tour in Asia, with instructions to expand the student movement to Australia and New Zealand. Just as the Roman roads and galleys carried Paul and his helpers across the Roman empire, the colonial rails and steamers carried a cadre of youthful mission enthusiasts around the world. The vision that fueled this process was that of students mobilized to become missionaries for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *A Pilgrimage of Ideas; or, the Re-education of Sherwood Eddy* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *The Students of Asia* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1915), 127.

In August 1895 the global student network reached a new phase of organization with the founding of the World's Student Christian Federation (WSCF) at Vadstena Castle in Sweden. Missionary colleges from China to Syria to Egypt to Hawaii were producing followers of Jesus Christ. These student movements joined the WSCF on an equal basis, thus producing the first truly international, interracial fellowship of Protestant Christians in history. Nonwestern Christian leaders shared the excitement that they were central to God's plan for the twentieth century. In 1907, the decade-old WSCF held its first meeting in Asia. One of the speakers at the Tokyo conference was V. S. Azariah, who prophetically proclaimed:

No country can be fully evangelized except by its own sons ... The nineteenth century can well be called the missionary century of the Occident. Fellow-students of Asia, shall we make the twentieth century the missionary century of the Orient? ... let us go forth to make Jesus King of Asia."<sup>7</sup>

By 1910, what had begun as student movements twenty-five years earlier had become the skeleton of a global Protestant network. Those who were young missionary volunteers in the 1880s and 1890s were by 1910 the experienced leaders of a worldwide missions movement. Thus it was natural for SVM leader, YMCA organizer, and founder of the WSCF John Mott to preside over the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. Following the conference, from 1912 to 1913 Mott toured Asia to organize regional Christian councils in India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaya (Malaysia), Burma (Myanmar), China, Japan, and Korea. These councils – each with a mixture of native and foreign Christian leaders – reflected a new and permanent stage of regional cooperation among churches. The “Continuation Committee” that grew from the World Missionary Conference addressed political issues of global justice, such as securing freedom for Korean Christians arrested on trumped-up sedition charges by Japanese colonial officials. In 1921, mission leaders founded the International Missionary Council (IMC) as a permanent clearinghouse for worldwide mission issues. The IMC convened international conferences of mission leaders roughly once a decade, as well as lobbied governments on religious freedom issues.

## International Awakenings

While the World Missionary Conference of 1910 represented a vibrant, colonial-era missionary network, it was also the fruit of dynamic spiritual

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 43.

awakenings felt around the world. Late nineteenth-century Protestants prayed for and expected revivals. Reports of the conversion of African chiefs, Tongan kings, and Japanese samurai received immediate publication in widely distributed missionary magazines, such as the *Missionary Review of the World*. The testimonies of famous athletes who converted to Christ, such as England's best cricketer C. T. Studd (d. 1931), inspired students to devote their lives to foreign missions. Spiritual "higher life" conferences, revivalistic camp meetings, and conferences on Bible prophecies all heightened expectations that the twentieth century would usher in a new era of the Holy Spirit, in which "your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17).

By the 1880s, many devout Christians hoped that a widespread outpouring of the Holy Spirit around the year 1900 would lead to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, to bring about the "last days" foretold in biblical prophecies. But first the world needed to be evangelized so that as many souls could be saved as possible before Jesus' return. Not interested, or else ill qualified to work as teachers or doctors in increasingly sophisticated older mission institutions, numerous freelance missionaries bought themselves one-way tickets to China, India, Latin America, or Africa. These "faith missionaries" prayed to God for their support rather than relying on a salary from a denominational mission society. In order to reach people untouched by the Christian message, they moved beyond the established mission stations and into the remote sections of non-Christian parts of the world.

The prototype of the successful faith missionary was the English Methodist J. Hudson Taylor (d. 1905). Taylor yearned to evangelize the millions of Chinese where no missionaries had gone, and in 1865 he founded the China Inland Mission (CIM). Missionaries with the CIM traveled by twos into the countryside, dressed as Chinese, and took no guaranteed salary. By 1905, 825 missionaries were working under the CIM in all the provinces in China. Other faith missions followed Taylor's model, and their names reflected their destinations. For example the Sudan Interior Mission and the Africa Inland Mission sent evangelists into the vast area of northern Africa below the Sahara desert; the Oriental Missionary Society sent evangelists into Korea and Japan; and the Regions Beyond Missionary Union moved into poor and marginal areas beyond the British empire. The faith missions movement was interdenominational and international, and involved Germans, Scandinavians, South Africans, Japanese, Australians, Canadians, Irish, and others. It also allowed women to be evangelists, and so typically had more women than men as missionaries.

News reports from around the world seemed to confirm the need for Jesus' supernatural intervention in human affairs: the twentieth century opened

with wars over the competing claims of imperialism and nationalism – the Anglo-Boer struggle in South Africa, the anti-western Boxer movement in China, the massacre of Christian minorities in the Ottoman empire, the imperial arms race between England and Germany, and the Russo-Japanese conflict in 1905 – the first modern war in which an “Asian” power defeated a “European” one. In the midst of these international crises, news of spiritual awakenings also seemed to pour from every corner of the globe during the first decade of the twentieth century: from Wales in 1904; Los Angeles in 1906; Kedgaon, India, in 1906; Pyongyang, Korea, in 1907; Valparaiso, Chile, in 1909, and rolling revivals in different parts of western Africa throughout the decade. Each major revival renewed missionary vision and inspired a crop of indigenous evangelists who founded churches and mission movements of their own.

The first decade of the new century saw a host of apparently unrelated movements that, taken together, illustrate the building momentum of Christianity’s multi-cultural appeal. In 1906, an African American holiness preacher named William Seymour (d. 1922) launched a multi-ethnic pentecostal revival in Los Angeles. Over the two-year Azusa Street revival, people prophesied, spoke in tongues, and went out as missionaries in faith that they had received supernatural linguistic gifts for the spread of Christianity. In the next year, 1907, a revival broke out in Korea, a small country being colonized by Japan. Korean missionaries went from the revival to found churches in distant locales. In Africa, most of which had been recently occupied by European powers, the work of African teachers and evangelists was indispensable for founding churches. By the start of the twentieth century, virtually all the major missions in southern or central Africa relied upon pioneer African evangelists who accompanied foreign missionaries. The momentum for African-style Christianity grew steadily, despite colonial opposition and missionary paternalism.

Independent churches began breaking off from missions in South Africa in the 1880s over issues of racism, such as the suppression of African leadership and dismissal of African cultural norms. Just as western missionaries validated their call to worldwide evangelism by appealing to the Bible, so did emerging nonwestern mission movements. Africans who rejected missionaries and founded their own churches, for example, pointed to Psalm 68:31, “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” In 1910, the largest African-led revival movement to date broke out in several West African countries under the leadership of prophet William Wadé Harris (d. 1929). God called Harris in a vision. In robes of white and carrying a Bible, he set out with a band of singers to preach repentance from sins, to baptize, and to order people to burn their fetishes. Moral reform ensued, and an inter-tribal, inter-national

revival movement that saw tens of thousands of conversions was gathered into various denominations with western missionary assistance.

Harris was one of a handful of powerful early twentieth-century African Christian prophets who, called by supernatural visions and dreams, defied the colonial authorities and crossed national and ethnic barriers to proclaim Jesus Christ in African terms. The gospel vision of racial equality could spark revolution, as in 1915 when Baptist minister John Chilembwe (d. 1915) launched a failed rebellion against colonialism in Malawi. In 1921 Congolese Simon Kimbangu (d. 1951) began what eventually became the largest indigenous church in Africa – even though the Belgians imprisoned him until his death and dispersed his followers because they feared revolution. Also in 1921, Ugandan Anglican Apolo Kivebulaya (d. 1933) sought to evangelize pygmies in the Congo forest. In 1930, Joseph Babalola (d. 1959) began preaching a revival that resulted in the “Aladura” or “prayer” movement in West Africa. Former Methodist catechist and Shona prophet Johane Maranke (d. 1963) set out in 1932 on missionary tours through six nations. He founded what became the largest indigenous church in Zimbabwe, the Apostles. The rise of ecclesiastical independence movements in colonized contexts foreshadowed the political independence movements of the mid twentieth century.

By the 1920s, the first generation of independent Chinese church founders and revivalists were beginning their ministries. The progression from dependence on missionaries to rejection of their tutelage typically occurred among second- or third-generation native Christians. Having grown up familiar with the church, for second-generation Christians to reject missionary control was a sign of the self-confident indigenization of the gospel message. Watchman Nee (d. 1972), Witness Lee (d. 1997), Wang Mingdao (d. 1991), and John Sung (d. 1944) were born into pioneer Christian families, with parents closely associated with missionaries. Each man underwent a dramatic personal conversion experience that gave him the confidence to move beyond his parents’ generation and to begin an independent ministry. Sung was one of the greatest revivalists of the early twentieth century and is believed to have converted over 100,000 Chinese to Christianity, most of whom who lived in Southeast Asia (i.e. were overseas Chinese). Both Nee and Wang spent decades in prison under the communists because of their refusal to cooperate with government control over churches. Lee remained free and took Nee’s theology to Taiwan, from where it spread with Chinese migration around the world.

One of the most significant reasons for the spread of Christianity into Asia and Africa in the first half of the twentieth century was the renewal of Roman Catholic missions. In the nineteenth century the Catholic hierarchy

had wasted a lot of energy defending a failed idea of territorial Christendom in both Europe and Latin America, and opposing “modernist” ideas of tolerance and individualism. But in the twentieth century the leaders of the world’s largest church recovered the missionary vigor that had characterized it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beginning with Pius XI (d. 1939), elected in 1922, twentieth-century popes emphasized the importance of founding missions and developing national churches. In an important encyclical (letter to the faithful), Pius XI urged the founding of new mission societies in tune with local conditions, and the ordination of native clergy. Missionary communities, both male and female, opened new evangelistic and educational centers in China, India, Congo, Peru, and other locations around the world. In 1926 he consecrated six Chinese bishops, and soon afterward the first Japanese and Vietnamese bishops – the first non-western bishops consecrated since the eighteenth century. He set up 200 new episcopal sees, and sent apostolic delegations as his personal representatives to mission countries.

By the mid 1920s, the seeds had been planted for what would ultimately result in both Catholic and Protestant theologies of “inculturation.” Pius XI, in fact, rehabilitated the mission theory of the Jesuits and suggested that missionaries follow the ways of Matteo Ricci: vigorous national churches under indigenous leadership would go a long way toward fulfilling the “catholic” and “apostolic” aspects of what Catholics believed was the “one true church.” Among Protestants, mission colleges had produced a generation of educated nonwestern church leaders and Christian scholars in Asia. Innovative field missionaries such as American Methodist E. Stanley Jones (d. 1973) in India, Norwegian Lutheran Karl Ludwig Reichelt (d. 1952) in China, German Lutheran Christian Keysser (d. 1961) in Papua New Guinea, and English Methodist Edwin Smith (d. 1957) in Zambia built Christian theologies upon the religious and cultural structures of indigenous worldviews. Jones and Reichelt were especially famous for founding Christian prayer centers based respectively on Hindu and Buddhist models. The intentional movement toward inculturation in the 1920s was a piece of the puzzle necessary for the next phase of Christian growth.

## **Awakening Internationalism**

Europe disintegrated during World War I. The “war to end war” killed 10 million soldiers and injured 20 million more. Despite the orgy of destruction and hatred among so-called Christian nations, the vision of global unity glimpsed at Edinburgh 1910 inspired the worldwide missionary community

to maintain relationships across national lines for as long as possible. In the mission fields under occupation, missionaries tried to keep the work going by substituting for interned missionaries of enemy nationalities. After the Armistice, the International Missionary Council negotiated with the victorious governments to prevent the Treaty of Versailles (1919) from allowing the confiscation of German church property around the world. After the war, church leaders from Germany and England resumed contact and planned a regular series of international mission conferences.

The wartime slaughter of ethnic and religious minorities in the lands under Ottoman Turkish control fueled a movement to support human rights. The first massive American foreign aid project approved by Congress, Near East Relief, from 1915 to 1930 collected money and sent it through missionaries in Ottoman lands, who fed refugees, founded orphanages, and assisted persecuted minorities to emigrate to western countries. As the defeat of the Turks allowed ancient Orthodox churches to emerge from under Muslim control, they joined the call for the founding of a League of Nations that would replace war with arbitration and the peaceful settlement of national grievances. Missionaries overwhelmingly supported the idea of the “self-determination” of peoples, as one of President Woodrow Wilson’s famous “Fourteen Points,” proclaimed in his speech of January 1918.

While revivalistic Christians eagerly awaited word of new spiritual awakenings, post-war college students embraced “internationalism” – the dream that a global community of nations, defined either as political entities or ethnic groupings, would cooperate to live in peace. The British Student Christian Movement (SCM) issued a “Call to Battle” for international unity among students as “the only sure hope of peace and of the true development of nations.”<sup>8</sup> Mission clubs on college campuses transformed themselves into “world friendship” groups that aimed to sustain cross-cultural and interracial relationships and service. At mission conferences in the 1920s and 1930s, new missionary candidates were more interested in helping or befriending others than in converting them to Christianity. The shift toward friendship and social service forms of mission meant that education and medicine remained the largest areas of financial investment for established church mission agencies.

A “who’s who” of leaders in social Christianity around the world in the early twentieth century reveals close connections between missionary

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Dana L. Robert, “The First Globalization: the Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement Between the World Wars,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26/2 (2002), 51.

activism and work toward a new economic and political world order, as well as the nurturance of nationalism in India, China, Japan, and Korea. YMCA leader in China, James Yen (d. 1990), pioneered a mass literacy campaign strategy in the 1920s that taught Chinese peasants to read. In India, K. T. Paul (d. 1931) started innovative programs in rural development and in 1916 became the first indigenous National General Secretary of the Indian YMCA. In China, Korea, and Japan, women trained in mission schools pioneered women's higher education. Nonwestern leaders of mission-founded institutions, including colleges and universities, were typically modernizers who strengthened their countries' ability to function as equals among other nations through encouraging literacy and western education.

In a vivid demonstration of internationalism as a form of "reverse mission" to the west, mission boards sponsored speaking tours of leading nonwestern Christians. During the 1920s and 1930s, ambassadors of internationalism, such as the YMCA's Sherwood Eddy and John Mott, Japanese social worker Toyohiko Kagawa (d. 1960), Chinese YMCA leader T. Z. Koo (d. 1971), and South African teacher Mina T. Soga (d. circa 1981) proclaimed a universal, trans-national, multi-racial vision of the kingdom of God as the guiding norm for global Christianity – even in the face of persistent racism, and growing fascism and communism.

The 1938 meeting of the IMC in Madras, India, focused its attention on the building up of "younger churches." 471 delegates from sixty-nine different countries, including sixty women delegates, made the meeting the most ethnically and gender-diverse international Christian gathering held to date. China, the biggest mission field of the era, sent forty-nine official delegates led by a woman, the first Chinese president of Ginling College, Wu Yi-fang (d. 1985). African delegates traveled together by ship and developed a common consciousness of their own strength and unity. Those who attended came away with a concrete hope that the age of World Christianity was finally arriving. A few years later, at his installation as archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple (d. 1944) famously referred to the growing "world fellowship" of Christians as "the great new fact of our era."<sup>9</sup>

In the 1940s, President Henry P. Van Dusen of Union Theological Seminary in New York City became one of the first North American theologians to explicitly identify "World Christianity" as a present reality. During World War II, the encounters of American soldiers with Asian Christians, who fed them and hid them from the Japanese, revealed that, despite the withdrawal of missionaries, Christianity in South Asia and the Pacific exuded its own

<sup>9</sup> William Temple, *The Church Looks Forward* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 2–4.

vitality and authenticity. To Van Dusen, the cumulative force of wartime stories of Christian witness across ethnic and national divisions showed that “only a world Church is effective amidst planetary war ... To an age destined to survive, or to expire, as ‘one *world*,’ we bring a *world Church*. We have seen that in the past century Christianity has become, for the first time, a *world* reality.”<sup>10</sup>

A crucial idea behind Christianity as a world religion was the expectation that it be expressed in nonwestern cultural terms. In 1945, Francis Cho-Min Wei (d. 1976), a leading Chinese intellectual and university president, became the first Henry W. Luce Visiting Professor of World Christianity at Union Seminary. In a lecture series, Wei argued that Christianity must find “its new interpretation in terms of the Asiatic cultures.”<sup>11</sup> The mutual enrichment of both Christianity and China would occur as they related to each other. The fullness of World Christianity itself depended on each culture making its unique contribution to the totality. Despite their different nationalities and the crises of world war, Wei and Van Dusen, along with others who participated in the multi-cultural ecumenical movement, shared a common internationalist vision that the day of global Christian fellowship had finally dawned.

## Postcolonial Rejection of Christian Mission

The destruction of Europe during World War II (1939–45) halted four centuries of European expansion into other continents. Successful nationalist movements resulted in the independence of countries formerly under European rule: India in 1947, Burma in 1948, and Ghana in 1957 were the beginnings of an inevitable process of decolonization. By 1970, dozens of new nations stood where European empire had held sway only twenty-five years before. The 450-year-old flood of European emigration reversed itself as citizens of former colonies – Algerians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Indonesians, Lebanese, Colombians, Nigerians, and others – began emigrating to the homelands of

<sup>10</sup> Henry P. Van Dusen, *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1947), 248–51.

<sup>11</sup> Francis C. M. Wei, *The Spirit of Chinese Culture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 28. See also Peter Tze Ming Ng, “Christian Higher Education in China: A Globalization View,” in P. Y. S. Leung and P. T. M. Ng, eds., *Christian Responses to Asian Challenges: A Globalization View on Christian Higher Education in East Asia* (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, 2007), 66–9. Henry W. Luce was a Presbyterian missionary in China. His son founded *Time* and *Forbes* magazines and endowed professorships in honor of his father's mission work.

their former colonizers. In the 1960s, as the tide of western colonization receded, the reverse surge of global migration was just beginning.

With the end of colonialism came a radical critique of the concept of European Christendom, including the rejection of missions as western impositions on other cultures and religions. New political regimes confiscated mission institutions, including schools and hospitals. Western missionaries were denied visas in India, Indonesia, and other predominantly Islamic and Hindu countries. What seemed so full of promise from the 1920s through the 1940s – the liberal ideals of Christian internationalism – seemed unpatriotic and weak in the era of the Cold War. The secular ideology of Marxist communism opposed Christianity as a competitor to be destroyed – the “opiate of the people.” By the 1950s communist leader Josef Stalin (d. 1953) had purged hundreds of thousands of Russian Orthodox nuns and priests, as well as millions of ordinary citizens, in an attempt to destroy religious belief and to break ethnic solidarities in the Soviet Union and its satellite states in eastern Europe. In China, communist victory in 1948 meant the expulsion of missionaries and the accusation that even mission hospitals and Christian schools had been tools of capitalist imperialism. Leading Chinese Christian intellectuals and ecumenists were categorized as “rightists” and treated as traitors to the people. The 1959 victory of Fidel Castro in Cuba resulted in the ousting of missions and churches. By the 1960s it appeared to worried observers that Christianity around the world was collapsing rather than growing. Would the end of colonialism, and the success of communism and nationalism, mean the end of Christianity in Asia and Africa?

During the 1960s, the voices of young nationalists grew louder in regional and international church councils, and they accused missionaries of paternalism and failing to turn over church leadership structures to national control quickly enough. In the early 1970s, leaders of Christian Councils in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa called for a “moratorium” on the sending of foreign missionaries so that they could break long-term patterns of dependency that had been established during the colonial era. The paradox of the anti-missionary sentiment of the mid twentieth century was that mission education had created the opportunities and climate for indigenous leadership, and a disproportionate number of leaders of newly independent nations had attended mission schools or been sponsored for western education by mission scholarship funds.

In the secular west, scholarly critique against missionaries as “cultural imperialists” meant that in academic circles the missionary became a whipping boy for failed colonial policies. European mission agencies shifted their primary focus toward development aid, which they poured into the “Third

World” as a form of reparation for the legacy of colonialism. In liberal theological circles, growing religious pluralism and secularism assumed that conversion to Christianity was an assault on indigenous cultures. By the late 1960s, amidst a climate of self-doubt and re-evaluation, the numbers of professional western missionaries from older western “mainline” denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, began to plummet.

By the 1970s the optimistic projections from the 1940s about the emergence of a genuine World Christianity were forgotten or else rejected as the remnant of obsolete colonial fantasies. Sociologists of religion predicted not the continuing spread of Christianity, but the decline of religion. As scientific and technological advances spread around the world, scholars argued that secularization would inevitably follow. The wholesale collapse of Christian practice in Europe by the 1970s was seen as proof of the victory of secularization over unscientific beliefs, and that modernity had no need of God.

## **Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans in Mission**

And yet, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the retreat of Christianity under the forces of secularism and anti-colonialism was not the end of World Christianity, but the death rattle of European Christendom. Radical changes were painful, particularly to career missionaries who were either ousted by the national churches or withdrawn by their home supporters. While old structures sagged from the top down, new growth was occurring from the bottom up. Freed from its unhealthy dependence on the West, Christianity was liberated to grow into new cultural forms. In the history of Christian mission, the most important story in the mid twentieth century was neither secularization nor the challenges of postcolonialism, but the growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Although the participants at Edinburgh 1910 met in a Eurocentric context, it was their glimpse of the possibilities for a worldwide, multi-cultural Christianity that remains their enduring legacy.

For those able to see beneath theological controversies, and to ignore the media frenzy over the idea that secularism had killed God – a question asked on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1966 – evidence of the shifting demography of World Christianity was beginning to appear by the early 1960s. Anglican statistician David Barrett, then located at a mission college in Kenya, began quantifying the phenomenal growth of Christianity taking place at the grassroots, especially in Africa. In his groundbreaking book of 1968, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, he counted over 6,000 new Christian movements in

Africa alone. These “independent churches” typically originated when an African prophet broke from a western mission, but they quickly grew on their own and were not confined by western structures. Barrett predicted that nonwestern Christians would attain a numerical majority of members by the year 2000. In 1977, Catholic scholar Walbert Bühlmann predicted “the coming of the third church” with a growing percentage of future Roman Catholics coming from the Third World. Then, in 1979, the Chinese government allowed public worship for the first time since 1966. Far from having been killed off during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Christianity had increased by millions of members. While critics flagellated missionaries for their supposed links with colonialism, a groundswell of new Christian movements was emerging under local leadership – and therefore below the radar of western critics.

Although population statistics are not perfect, the best scholarly estimates of the number of Christians in Africa illustrate that remarkable growth occurred in the mid to late twentieth century. In 1900, the continent of Africa was largely a mission field. Its estimated 8,756,000 Christians were located primarily in Ethiopia and South Africa. But as a percentage of the total of Christians in the world, Africans constituted only 1.5 percent, compared to 66 percent in Europe. In 1970, the 116,538,000 Christians in Africa had grown to equal 9 percent of the world’s total Christians, compared to 38 percent in Europe. By the year 2000, of the world’s roughly 2 billion Christians, 350,091,000 (17 percent) were in Africa, compared to 550,729,000 or (27 percent) in Europe.<sup>12</sup> If these trends continue, by 2025, Africa will have 23.5 percent of the world’s Christians, Latin America 23.7 percent, and Europe 20 percent. It can be argued, therefore, that the late twentieth century was the greatest period of cross-cultural expansion in the history of Christianity. It seems that, in the twenty-first century, no one culture will be the dominant force.

Reasons for the huge changes taking place in the profile of World Christianity are too diverse and complicated for a short book to discuss in detail. Factors external to Christianity itself, such as decolonization, population explosion, urbanization, migration, globalization, and improved transportation and communication networks all played a role in the changes in Christian population. In addition to global trends, to get a full picture of the growth or decline of Christianity requires analysis of social, cultural, and political factors in every country and region of the world. But in terms

<sup>12</sup> These figures are extrapolated from David Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, “Status of Global Mission, Presence, and Activities, AD 1800–2025,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32/1 (2008), 30.

of the relationship between Christian mission and internal church affairs, major trends that began in the 1960s need to be identified as having facilitated the shifting demographic within Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, and evangelicalism.

Approximately half of the world's Christians are Roman Catholic. Throughout the twentieth century Catholicism remained the largest branch of Christianity in the world. Thus a central factor in the vibrancy of late twentieth-century Christian mission was the changes endorsed by the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), which in a sense fulfilled the missionary vision of Pope Pius XI in the 1920s. A decisive turning point in Catholic commitment toward a multi-cultural church occurred when Pope John XXIII (d. 1963) called a three-year meeting of all the bishops of the Catholic Church, to update its theology and vision. Vatican II shifted the emphasis away from the centralized hierarchy. Mass in local languages replaced a uniform Latin liturgy. Indigenization of mission theology and structures, as well as a new openness to local cultures, carried the Roman Catholic Church to a new period of growth at the grassroots. As vernacular Bible reading spread into Catholicism, Catholics began serving on committees for Bible translation projects around the world. Many nuns left their convents, stopped wearing special religious garb, and moved into communities to help the poor. Also, for the first time in centuries, Catholic laity were invited to participate as cross-cultural missionaries. In the decades following Vatican II, Catholics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America asserted regional solidarity as they put into practice the spiritual reforms of the Council, and increasing numbers of nonwestern bishops were consecrated.

Among mainline Protestants, self-criticism of paternalistic mission practices led to new mission theories of “partnership” from the 1960s onward. Despite the calls to limit the number of western missionaries, in a spirit of partnership western churches continued to provide substantial financial support for major projects, such as developing theological education in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The idea of partnership led denominations to strengthen global networking among churches of shared ecclesial tradition, so that, in place of a one-way missionary movement from the west, emphasis was now placed on cooperation among member churches within the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, or the Baptist World Alliance. These postcolonial, global denominational federations were sometimes able to exert pressure for social justice, such as in 1982 when the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid a heresy and ejected the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. In places where Christians remained a minority, such as the Middle East, India, and Southeast

Asia, regional or national ecumenical councils of churches played a vital role as a voice for united Christian concerns and human rights.

With the adoption of the motto “mission in six continents,” the World Council of Churches in 1963 endorsed the idea of multi-directional missions. Missionaries should be appointed to go from anywhere to anywhere, according to need. The idea of partnership in mission developed multiple meanings over the succeeding decades. The United Methodist Church, for example, worked through Cuban missionaries in Angola, Korean missionaries in Russia, Congolese missionaries in Senegal, African American missionaries in Ghana, and so on. The Episcopal Church, USA, developed a “companion diocese” program of twinning American and nonwestern dioceses for exchange of personnel and mutual support. For Presbyterians and Lutherans, the idea of “mission partners” could mean doing mission work through international agencies or overseas counterparts in the same family of churches.

Not all westerners rejected traditional missions during the late 1960s. As older denominations debated whether conversion or social justice was the goal of missions, “evangelical” Christians organized themselves into an independent network to evangelize the “unreached peoples,” the millions of non-Christians who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ. This mission movement of conservative Christians rejected the idea that the end of western colonialism required the end of cross-cultural missions. A new global mission network started in 1974 when, under the leadership of famous evangelist Billy Graham, evangelical mission leaders met in Lausanne, Switzerland, to craft the Lausanne Covenant, a statement that became the common faith basis for church-planting and conversion-oriented missions.

The Lausanne Movement grew increasingly multi-cultural in the 1980s. In 1989, the Movement met in Manila, Philippines, and embraced pentecostalism as the chief form being taken by nonwestern evangelicalism. With Latin American Luis Bush as chairman, it coordinated a push by evangelical agencies around the world to plant churches among every “nation” (defined as ethnic group) by the year 2000. While that goal was not attained, the effort to reach it energized global mission conferences that attracted tens of thousands of young people, the creation of databases of “unreached peoples,” and the founding of hundreds of nonwestern mission agencies and missionary training centers. In the long run, the significance of the Lausanne Movement – and affiliated organizations such as the World Evangelical Alliance and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students – was not just that it re-engaged North American evangelicals in cross-cultural missions, but that it gave momentum to the proliferation of nonwestern missionary movements in the 1980s and 1990s.

In contrast to missions in the era of European colonialism, the twenty-first-century mission model of networking lacked connections with the state. In the age of globalization, multi-directional migration and cross-cultural networking replaced the unidirectional form of early capitalist voluntarism that had defined Protestant missions since the days of European expansion. Advances in communication technologies and air travel also made it possible for ordinary Christians to undertake frequent short-term trips rather than go as missionaries for life. In 2005, an estimated 1.5 million North Americans participated in short-term “mission trips” of two weeks or less. Being a missionary moved beyond the geographical and professional model of a western church raising money to send a western person for life to a non-Christian part of the world. While the professional, language-fluent, bicultural, long-term missionary remained the backbone of cross-cultural mission, especially in dangerous places where deep knowledge of the culture was essential, globalization created a vast network of mission amateurs. The danger of the new popularity of short-term missions was demonstrated in July 2007, when a group of twenty-three short-term Korean Presbyterian missionaries was kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Two were executed and the rest returned home in September after the Korean government paid \$4 million in ransom.

Another feature of mission networking in the context of globalization was the proliferation of NGOs in the late twentieth century. Tens of thousands of modern NGOs performed many of the functions pioneered by missions in earlier centuries, such as providing health care, working for child welfare, supporting income-generating projects, and refugee relief. As mission work became more specialized, large Christian NGOs such as Church World Service, EZE, Christian Aid, World Vision, and Caritas Internationalis undertook major relief and development projects. While conversion was not the goal of Christian NGOs, they provided a friendly context of care for others in line with the best practices of Christian values. Many Christians preferred to work for NGOs rather than for church-based mission agencies because they were more interested in service than in evangelism.

By the end of the twentieth century, the most significant development in the structure of missions was not the end of the missionary movement but its transformation into a multi-cultural, multi-faceted network. Those who had predicted the end of missions after the end of colonialism were wrong. Europeans, in fact, still sent by far the largest number of missionaries of any continent, with Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain each sending tens of thousands abroad. But even with Europe outstripping other regions in the number of missionaries sent, the “typical” Christian in the year 2025 is statistically likely to be an African or Latin

American woman. And the “shift southward” in Christian population is causing the rise of mission movements in what fifty years ago were considered mission fields.

### *African missions*

Sub-Saharan Africa has registered the most dramatic growth in the number of Christians of any region since the mid twentieth century. By 1984, Africans not only controlled most church structures originally founded by foreign missionaries in Africa, but they had founded 7,000 indigenous denominations in forty-three African countries. In Anglicanism, the majority of members by the century’s end were African, and they contested global church policy on such issues as the ordination of women and homosexuals. In Catholicism, the growing number of African cardinals means that a non-western Pope could become a strong possibility in the twenty-first century.

African churches practiced a powerful evangelistic ethic and attracted multitudes into the churches through their emphasis on personal healing and communal support in a changing world. Revivals and regular pilgrimages by thousands to the graves of martyrs and African saints underscored the African cultural roots of Christianity. Women’s organizations in many denominations provided a platform for women to preach and heal other women, and to support the poor. Social crises – including dysfunctional governments, corruption, the challenges of HIV-AIDS, and numerous military conflicts – strengthened the reputations of churches as sustainers of the poor. However, the ethical failures of African Christianity also emerged as a public issue when the genocide of 800,000 Tutsi by the largely Christian Hutu occurred in Rwanda in 1994, or when self-proclaimed Christian movements such as the Lord’s Resistance Army abducted and enslaved child soldiers in an attempt to overthrow the Ugandan government.

One of the most startling developments in African mission since the 1980s has been the outpouring of African missionaries into Europe and the United States as part of the new African diaspora – the migration of Africans to the west. Many Africans went to Europe to study, and remained. In both England and Ukraine in the year 2000 the pastors of the largest churches were African, and a pan-African diaspora church network was founded in northern Europe in the 1990s. In 2003, Methodist Sam Kobia of Kenya became General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, thereby putting African leadership at the head of the old-line mission-founded ecumenical movement of Protestants and Orthodox. In November 2005, a Ugandan exile, John Sentamu, was inaugurated as archbishop of York, second in importance only to the archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England.

Already president of Youth for Christ and the YMCA, Sentamu embodied the missionary commitment of African Christianity.

In 1965, the reform of immigration laws in the United States allowed the immigration of new ethnic groups. With the influx of Nigerians, Koreans, Indians, and others, ethnic and denominational diversity increased dramatically among American Christians. Nigerian denominations, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God and the Benin-founded Celestial Church of Christ, opened healing centers and built church headquarters in the United States. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, in the year 2000, bought the first of 800 acres of land outside Dallas on which to build a massive headquarters from which to evangelize the United States, in a strategy similar to the way in which, a century earlier, mission stations were founded in Africa by Europeans. As had European sisters in the nineteenth century, African Catholic sisters crossed the Atlantic to work as missionaries among disadvantaged children. The Reverend Oscar Muriu, pastor of Nairobi Chapel, a mission-minded congregation that planted twenty-five churches in the Kenyan capital, aptly described the reality for African missions:

Crossing borders is difficult ... One answer is the refugee highway. We don't cheer displaced people movements, but if you look at the gospel over the centuries, refugees – persecuted, migrant people – have been some of the greatest vehicles for the spread of the gospel. Jesus himself was a refugee, fleeing to Egypt and later coming back.<sup>13</sup>

African missionaries placed great stress on the Bible, including the Great Commission that had energized St. Patrick, William Carey, and others down through the centuries. Jesus' final command to "go into all the world" had special resonance for people on the move. For African migrant-missionaries, the Great Commission was a biblical charter that validated a special place in God's plan for Nigerians, Ghanaians, Kenyans, and other African Christians. The universal vision of a transcendent gospel was held in tension with the particularity of divine blessing for the faithful.

### *Latin American missions*

In Latin America, the largest Catholic continent, the increase in Christian population resulted in 477 million Christians by the year 2000. Spanish – not English – was the majority language for Christianity in the early twenty-first

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Andy Crouch, interview with Oscar Muriu, "The African Planter," <[http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/05/the\\_african\\_planter.html](http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/05/the_african_planter.html)>, accessed June 22, 2007.

century. The two most important late twentieth-century Latin American developments for mission history were the emergence of liberation theology and the growth of popular Protestantism at the expense of historic Catholicism.

In a series of regional meetings during the 1960s and 1970s, many Latin American Catholic bishops supported a new mission theology of “liberation” that stressed the end of dependence on rich global elites and capitalist market forces. Liberation theology signaled the development of an active missionary theology by Latin American priests, who stressed the mobilization of lay Catholics through meeting in small groups (Base Christian Communities), Bible reading, and reflecting on injustices in Latin American society. In effect, the small-group methodology of liberation theology encouraged the deeper conversion of nominal Catholics throughout Latin America. The development of liberation theology forced western theologians to recognize that all theologies were to some degree products of their local contexts.

Latin American liberation theology emerged as a mission theology that deepened the solidarity of missionary priests and nuns with the poor by encouraging them to walk alongside, or “accompany” the poor, in their struggles for faith and justice. By the early 1970s, Catholic missionaries were moving out of their traditional convents and parochial schools and into poor urban communities, where they helped to “conscientize” the poor, to use the words of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (d. 1997). In the face of social injustice under military dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of priests, nuns, and catechists were martyred in Central and South America as they attempted to defend the rights of the poor. In 1980 in El Salvador, for example, Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated for speaking up for the poor victims of right-wing death squads. Also, four North American missionary women – three sisters and one lay worker – were raped and murdered for helping to document those who disappeared in the civil war.

The work of liberationist missionaries in teaching peasants to read and helping them to network for human rights created a hunger for a deeper Christian life. While a renewal of popular Catholic spirituality occurred in some places, in other places the increasing spiritual vitality fed into more flexible types of Protestantism. By the 1980s, the growth of pentecostalism had become a big worry for Catholic authorities in Latin America. Scholars predicted that Brazil, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Guatemala might have pentecostal Protestant majorities by the twenty-first century. In a similar way to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rapid growth of pentecostalism occurred as people began reading

the Bible for themselves, and organizing themselves under locally trained pastoral leadership. Although Catholicism was the largest branch of Christianity in the world, the shortage of Catholic priests throughout the continent provided opportunities for Protestant growth, especially in forms that focused on the cultivation of spiritual gifts, healing of physical and emotional illnesses, disciplined lifestyles such as abstinence from alcohol or extra-marital sex, and the pursuit of material prosperity. Scholarly studies showed that women experienced healing in Latin American churches and often recruited their husbands to join them.

In 1987, a huge mission conference in Brazil, COMIBAM, sparked the missionary enthusiasm of Latin American *evangelicos*, and created a network to move the continent from being a “mission field” to a “mission force.” Latin American missions took multiple forms, including that of pastors migrating to the United States or Europe with their congregations as a base for further outreach. Some indigenous Latin American denominations with millions of members, such as Brazilian Edir Macedo’s Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (founded in 1977), recruited members through evangelistic demon-fighting campaigns.

From the 1980s, increasing numbers of Latin Americans crossed cultures to witness to the gospel. Some pentecostals in Brazil, for example, went to live among Muslims, where their appearance and traditions allowed them to be accepted better than North Americans. By 2007 approximately 44,000 Ibero-Americans were serving as foreign missionaries, with Brazil and Mexico as two of the largest mission-sending countries.

### *Asian missions*

In Asia, Christianity in the late twentieth century remained a minority religion in most countries, with the exception of the Philippines and the South Pacific. Nevertheless, rapid growth rates in South Korea, among tribal peoples in India, and in China, pushed the Asian Christian population over 292 million, with 21 million in Oceania, by the year 2000. With their minority status, Christians in Asia typically faced more persecution for their beliefs than Christians in other continents in the twenty-first century. Christianity was often the religion of ethnic minorities in countries dominated by other faiths, such as the Karen in Burma, the Dani in Indonesia, or the Chinese in Malaysia.

The perennial challenge for Asian Christianities was the attempt to be both culturally Asian and Christian at the same time, in a context where Christianity was historically viewed as a western, colonial religion. Another major issue for Asian missions was the reality of multiple religious belonging: in India and China, for example, people traditionally practiced more

than one religion at a time. The question of whether Christianity should replace, add to, or build upon Asian religions was an ongoing theological problem. The issue of ancestral veneration remained a live issue for Christians in Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and China. In countries where filial piety provided the traditional base for ethical systems, the claims of Christianity to be an exclusive monotheistic religion were often difficult to reconcile with communal cultural practices.

In the early twenty-first century, most missionary energy among Asian Christians was used regionally, such as the estimated 40,000 to 80,000 Indians working to spread the gospel to other ethnic groups within India itself. Indian Protestants founded an estimated 250 mission organizations. South Korea sent roughly 15,000 foreign missionaries, many of them to other Asian countries such as Thailand and Cambodia. Global labor migration forced Asian Christians into challenging mission contexts: hundreds of thousands of Christian Filipinas worked as domestic servants in Muslim countries where it was illegal to hold Christian services.

As home to one-quarter of the world's population, China fascinated nineteenth-century Christians and became the largest western "mission field" in the early twentieth century. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, marauding gangs of Red Guards destroyed cultural artifacts and attacked the elderly, the traditional, and the religious under the aegis of Mao Zedong's idea of "continual revolution." Public Christian worship disappeared and went underground. When China repudiated the Red Guards and reopened itself to outside influence, it became clear that, instead of disappearing, Christianity had grown. The first public worship service in China after the Cultural Revolution took place in 1979. The government permitted the renewal of theological education for Christian leaders, and allowed the printing of Bibles and hymnals in Chinese.

In 1989, the government massacred pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. The Tiananmen Square demonstrations marked the first time that students had processed in public with the cross since the Cultural Revolution, and the head of the China Christian Council supported their right to demonstrate their faith publicly. The massacres caused widespread disillusionment with materialist explanations of reality among the youth. Many Chinese intellectuals began turning to Christianity as the philosophical underpinning of democracy and human rights: the failure of doctrinaire communism opened a space for belief in God. In the meantime, networks of Chinese house churches multiplied, with emphasis on healings, prayer, singing, and Bible study. The growth of Chinese Christianity was so rapid that by the early twenty-first century it was believed to be the fastest-growing church in the world. Some Chinese house church leaders dreamed of spreading

Christianity across Asia, back along the Silk Road until it reached the Middle East, the place of its origin.

In the twenty-first century, the parts of Asia in which Christianity faced its most difficult challenges were its original heartland – the land of Jesus’ birth, Lebanon, Turkey, and Syria, where the earliest non-Jewish followers of Jesus lived and where they were first called “Christians,” and the lands of the ancient Persian empire, including Iraq. In each of these places, Muslim majorities were in conflict with western powers, and ancient Christian churches became scapegoats for the failed foreign policies of the West. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 set up social resentments and religious conflict that almost obliterated the ancient community of Christians. On February 29, 2008, gunmen seized the leader of Iraqi Christians, the Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, as he left church after leading afternoon prayers. His body was found two weeks later. The continued destruction of Christianity in Muslim countries showed that Christian history was not a story of progressive advancement, but of expansion and contraction, according to local conditions and forces often beyond the control of Christians themselves.

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By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Christianity existed in every country in the world that allowed a modicum of religious freedom. Nearly one in three persons was a Christian. Christianity was more culturally diverse than at any time in its history. Its wide geographic scope and roots in multiple local cultures meant that Christian mission in the twenty-first century proceeded from multiple origins to multiple locations. A century after Edinburgh 1910, Christianity had become a world religion.

## Part II

# Themes in Mission History

# The Politics of Missions: Empire, Human Rights, and Land

In 1855, the Scottish missionary David Livingstone went to investigate the *Mosi oa Tunya*, “the smoke that sounds.” His partners in exploration, the Kololo, told him about a place where they could see columns of vapor accompanied by sounds like thunder. Did he have such a thing in his home country? Traveling by canoe, Livingstone and a few Kololo landed on an island in the Zambezi river. From there he saw the entire river, 5,500 feet across, spill over precipices into a massive gorge twice as deep and wide as the Niagara Falls. The explorer was awed by their magnificence, and their geographical significance in connecting what were thought to be two different rivers. In a letter back home in 1856, he called them the Victoria Falls – the only African site to which he affixed a European name during his years of travels.

Livingstone’s interest in exploration was a result of his obsession with ending the Portuguese and Arab slave trade – a cause he declared was the divine purpose of his life. Working as ambassador under the authority of Chief Sekeletu, who provided the supplies and men for his journey, Livingstone explored the uncharted regions of Central Africa in hopes of finding a navigable waterway down which the Kololo could send their crops and ivory in exchange for the European manufactured goods they desired. As an anti-slavery evangelical, he envisioned free, prosperous, and Christian African communities in control of their own economic destinies as equal trading partners with Europe – if only adequate transportation routes could be mapped. To that end he spent thirty years in Africa, most of them walking across the southern third of the continent and charting its geography.

Livingstone’s intellect was molded by the empirical research methods of the Scottish Enlightenment. A trained medical doctor, his naturalistic observations were unparalleled. He learned African languages, and recorded minute observations of geography, human customs, flora, and fauna. For these feats, he received a medal from the Royal Geographical Society in England.

At great cost to his health and safety, Livingstone chose a nomadic life. He sacrificed his family by leaving his children in Scotland under the care of others. He lived among African people in whom he saw similarities with the oral, story-telling culture of his Scottish Highlander grandparents. Livingstone opposed the white South African colonists' ill treatment of the Xhosa in the 1840s. One reason he moved northward into Central Africa was to avoid the areas dominated by European settlers, who burned down his mission station and library because they opposed British missionary efforts to assist the Africans. In 1871 he witnessed a massacre of over 400 people by Muslim slavers from Zanzibar. His vivid report of the massacre awakened British sentiment against the East African slave trade.

Dr. Livingstone survived recurrent malaria by taking primitive quinine pills he made for himself. But he suffered constant anal bleeding, dysentery and gastrointestinal problems, an arm broken by a lion, loss of teeth and hearing, maggots under his skin, and ulcerated feet. When he died in 1873 at age 60, his African helpers cut him open, and according to his wishes buried his heart and entrails in what is now the country of Zambia. They mummified his remains in the sun, and carried the corpse on a risky march 1,500 miles to Zanzibar, where it was put on a mail ship. When his body arrived in the United Kingdom, it lay in state before he received a hero's burial in Westminster Abbey. A proud Scot, Livingstone cherished his anti-English Highlander heritage, and in religious terms was a "Nonconformist" rather than a member of the established church. Nevertheless, his final resting place confirmed his popularity as a British imperial hero.

The famous Victorian missionary and explorer was a unique bridge figure between Africa and the United Kingdom, whose life's work shaped the history of both. His book *Missionary Researches and Travels in South Africa* (1857) sold 70,000 copies, an unprecedented run for a mission book. Through his publications and speeches, Livingstone appealed for more missionaries. His explorations gathered geographic information that identified areas suitable for European colonization. During his lifetime, Livingstone was accused of being too political, and of not being a "real" missionary attached to a settled mission station. In his heart, however, Livingstone was always working for God. His central interest was the well-being of Africans. He wrote, "God had an only Son, and He was a missionary and a physician. A poor, poor imitation of Him I am, or wish to be ... In this service I hope to live; in it I wish to die."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are many biographies of David Livingstone. The one on which I have relied for this treatment of Livingstone is Andrew Ross, *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire* (London: Hambledon & London, 2002).

David Livingstone insisted throughout his life that his chief goal was to stop the Portuguese and Arab slave trades. As an evangelical Christian, he believed that values of individual human self-worth under God, combined with “legitimate” commerce, would undercut the slave economies. Time sorely tested these ideals. Slave raiders and Portuguese officials used the information from his explorations to expand the swath of territory they controlled, and massacred inhabitants in the process. The emerging free markets in which he and other abolitionists put their faith were vulnerable to manipulation by powerful businessmen, imperial powers, and large landowners.

Although he generally opposed white settlement in Africa, in later years Livingstone preferred British control to that of the Portuguese. The British had outlawed slavery in 1833, but the Portuguese kept expanding their slave economy farther into Central Africa from their base in Mozambique. It can be argued that Livingstone’s explorations in the service of human rights provided the opening for men like imperialist Cecil Rhodes, who grew rich from exploiting Africa’s mineral wealth. In 1889, much of the area Livingstone had explored came under British control, when a group of adventurers led by Rhodes marched up from South Africa and conquered a swath of land north of the Limpopo river. Attracted by farmland and mineral rights, by the turn of the century, a European settler population was busy colonizing “Rhodesia.” The Africans for whose freedom Livingstone had given his life were displaced by his fellow countrymen.

In 1934, H. U. Moffat, ex-premier of Southern Rhodesia (and the descendant of missionaries himself), unveiled a giant bronze statue of David Livingstone to coincide with the first overseas radio broadcast from the country. The statue depicted a vigorous figure in a tropical hat, with hand on his left hip. The right foot stepped in stride with a walking cane. This imperial vision of Livingstone was sculpted by Sir William Reid Dick, who also sculpted King George V and other leading British figures. As the symbol of a European settler community in Africa, the Livingstone statue celebrated the far-reaching might of British colonialism. In the mid 1950s, the statue was placed at the entrance of the park that bordered the waterfalls, on the southern side of the Zambezi river. Coupled with a railroad from the Cape to the elegant hotels of “Vic Falls,” and a picturesque bridge across the Zambezi that attracted bungee jumpers, the Scottish explorer had become a colonial tourist icon. The base of the statue read “Missionary. Explorer. Liberator.”

After fifteen years of civil war, in 1980 the independent nation of Zimbabwe emerged from the former British colony of Rhodesia. Black majority rule, a high literacy rate, and a vigorous commercial farming sector marked Zimbabwe as a prosperous country, the “jewel of Africa.” Through



**Figure 4.1** David Livingstone memorial statue, Victoria Falls

the war and in the decades after Zimbabwean independence, the statue of Livingstone remained as part of a lucrative tourist industry, with its game viewing, hunting, fishing on Lake Kariba, and of course Vic Falls.

But by the twenty-first century the euphoria of liberation had given way to cronyism and corruption under the increasingly dictatorial ruler Robert Mugabe. To bolster his victory margin in rigged elections, Mugabe exploited the memory of British imperialism. In December 2001, at a congress of the ruling party, a hundred veterans of the Zimbabwe liberation war began stoning the Livingstone statue. Terrified tourists ran for cover, as the veterans smashed the historic markers describing Livingstone's "discovery." Riot police were forced to guard the statue for the remainder of the party congress, even as the war veterans demanded that it be destroyed and replaced with statues of black liberation war heroes.

In contrast to Zimbabwe, affection for Livingstone's memory remained strong on the northern side of the Zambezi river, where the colony of Northern Rhodesia became the independent nation of Zambia in 1964. Forty years later, Zambia prepared to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Livingstone's "discovery" of the Falls. The director of the Zambian National Heritage Conservation Commission, Donald Chikunbi, formally requested that the government of Zimbabwe relinquish the statue so that it could be placed on the Zambian side of the Falls – from where Livingstone had first viewed them. Livingstone had appealed for Christian missionaries in his fight against the slave trade that decimated Zambian territory. Throughout the nation, whose constitution states that Zambia is a Christian country, he officially remained a national hero. Old-timers claim that the Livingstone statue was first placed on the Zambian side of the Falls.

Ironically, despite the Zimbabwean war veterans' attacks on Livingstone as a symbol of British colonialism, Zimbabwe refused to give up the statue. Remarkd Chief Siloka Mukuni of the Leya people, who live in Zambia near the Falls: "The Zambians have a great deal of affection for Livingstone's memory, unlike the Zimbabweans ... We have changed a great many of our colonial place names since independence, but we have kept the name of Livingstone out of a deep respect. For Zimbabwe the statue merely represents tourism and money."<sup>2</sup>

One of the highlights of the 150th anniversary celebrations was the presence of the elderly Dr. David Livingstone Wilson, great-grandson of David Livingstone, and himself a former medical missionary in Zambia. Wilson recalled how a decade before, he had retraced his great-grandfather's steps over 300 miles through Zambia, Tanzania, and Burundi: "I received a positive reaction from people on the route who would tell me 'this is a Christian country thanks to David Livingstone.'"<sup>3</sup> Wilson insisted that his great-grandfather was a missionary who "sowed the seeds" for Christianity, but had not anticipated the British takeover of the area. Despite his honor in Zambia, Wilson reflected, his great-grandfather had been forgotten in Scotland. Both the missionary and the colonial past were ignored in the land of his birth.

## Critiques of Missions

Was David Livingstone a missionary hero, a proto-African nationalist, a crusader for human rights, or a British imperialist? Does his significance lie in his being a religious or a political figure? Should he be held responsible for how subsequent generations of Europeans invoked his example as a rationale for colonial expansion? The dispute over Livingstone's legacy – both during and long after his life – exemplifies the tortuous relationship of Christian missionaries with political and economic power. The fact that missionary work occurred within the broader context of European and capitalist expansion from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries – and now within a framework of globalization – has been used to paint missionaries with the brush of cultural and political imperialism. Unlike the self-professed neutrality of other cross-cultural change agents such as tourists, businessmen, and academics, missionaries explicitly engage people's religions and

<sup>2</sup> Jane Flanagan, "Dr. Livingstone's Statue Is Ours, We Presume, Zambia Informs," *The Telegraph* (filed Jan. 8, 2004), <[http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/aug2\\_2004.html#link3](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/aug2_2004.html#link3)>.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Revis, "Livingstone's Great Grandson Bound for Victoria Falls," *Ecumenical News International*, Nov. 10, 2005, <<http://www.eni.ch/articles/display.shtml?05-0863>>.

worldviews – a trait that opens them to accusations of religious dogmatism and cultural chauvinism.

The problem of missions' cultural and political implications has found full expression in the popular imagination, including films and literature. Books such as Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) made the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965) was still in print twenty-five years after its publication. The films *The Mission* (1986) and *Chariots of Fire* (1981) won academy awards for their sensitive portrayals of missionaries. Even popular computer games capitalize on the ambiguity of the missionary legacy. In the game *Age of Empires*, for example, missionary monks are a key strategic element in the building and consolidation of power. Wielding their staffs and copies of holy writings, and chanting, the monks "convert" the enemy troops so that they switch allegiance to the empire supported by the monks. And yet the missionary monk is also the healer, who carries faith that slowly increases and can restore the health of the injured. Although the monks in *Age of Empires* are depicted as devoid of values and beliefs, they are essential for the overall health and prosperity of their societies. Their dual role echoes the sentiments of prominent Japanese mission theologian Kosuke Koyama, when he characterized the modernization of Asia as symbolized by western "guns," whose wounds required treatment by Christian missionary "ointment."<sup>4</sup>

The relationships between western power and missions – between "guns" and "ointment," have drawn multiple critiques. Missions are condemned for introducing social or cultural changes, or for being connected to outside global forces such as imperialism, colonialism, westernity, or modernity. Opponents of missions sometimes dislike the missionary's country of origin, are hostile to Christian conversion in particular or to religious belief in general, or a combination of the above. From within nonwestern churches themselves, critics of missions have focused largely on missionary paternalism. Another arena of controversy comes from local situations, in which Christianity appears to strengthen one side of a local dispute, or challenges local power arrangements, or empowers ethnic minorities.

Since the days of Paul in the New Testament, Christians who brought the message of Jesus Christ have been charged with interfering with the established social order (Acts 17:6). In the seventeenth century Protestant scholastic theologians argued that, if God wanted all people to be Christians, he would have made them so without human assistance. Early Protestant missionaries went abroad despite loud complaints that they were throwing

<sup>4</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977).

their lives away, and that attempting to share the gospel with non-Europeans was a futile endeavor.

The fatalistic attitude that people were born into the religion they deserved received fresh impetus when “scientific racism” emerged in the 1850s with the publication of Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau’s four-volume *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*. Gobineau argued that the highest civilizations were those of “Aryans,” or white people, who remained unmixed with yellow and black people. The American translator of Gobineau, physician Josiah Clark Nott, believed that all efforts to bring Asians and Africans into Christian religion and culture were doomed to failure because of their racial inferiority. Once Darwin’s idea of “survival of the fittest” was popularized and applied to human groups, opposition to missions could be phrased in terms of “scientific” racial determinism. Popular speakers against Asian immigration in the late nineteenth century stoked fears of the “yellow peril” and racial mixing, and opposed the well-known missionary tendency to “elevate” the “lower” races by mixing them with white people. On a practical level, racist ideas encouraged the brutalization of native populations by colonial invaders, who considered them to be savages and sub-humans destined to give way to the “superior” white races.

Both critics and defenders of missions in the nineteenth century assumed that missions tried to convert people and change cultures. But mission supporters struck back against racial determinism by insisting that all people were created in God’s image, were capable of understanding the gospel, and had the rational power to choose to follow God. Many missionaries argued that they brought “civilization” and social improvements through modern schools, hospitals, the elevation of women, and ideas of democratic governance. The concept of missions as social improvement agencies was especially appealing in the era of high imperialism, from the 1880s until World War I. This was also the era of the “social gospel,” a movement that sought to improve the lives of workers by promoting workers’ rights, and founding social settlements that introduced kindergartens, skills training, medical care, and other services for the poor. In retrospect, even many of the best missionary efforts of the era were tainted by paternalism and assumptions about the superiority of western culture. But compared to the overt racism of ordinary westerners at that time, missionaries come across as surprisingly enlightened.

In the 1890s mission apologist James Dennis wrote three volumes entitled *Christian Missions and Social Progress*, a pioneer work of sociology and encyclopedic summary (with pictures) of schools, hospitals, and community service centers founded by missionaries around the world. In 1912, Congregationalist mission leader James Barton wrote *Human Progress*

*through Missions*, a powerful defense of how people's lives around the world were being improved through missionary efforts, including the introduction of vernacular literacy, schools, hospitals, modern agricultural methods, work to enhance the lives of women, suppression of the opium and drug trade, and the missionary study of nonwestern religions and literature.

But the violence and brutality of World War I (1914–18) discredited the notion that western culture was intrinsically Christian and therefore ethically superior to that of other religions. The idea of missions as the vanguard of western-style social progress seemed a shaky proposition given the racism and violence of western culture. Many leading missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s therefore argued that the purpose of missions was not to change people's culture, but simply to introduce them to Jesus Christ. Culture change would occur as a result of encounter with the gospel, but in ways that grew naturally from within the indigenous worldview rather than forced from the outside. Missionary E. Stanley Jones, billed by *Time* magazine in 1938 as "the world's greatest missionary," wrote in his powerful book *The Christ of the Indian Road* that the message of Jesus in India was that of a simple holy man, moving among the people, caring for them and sharing with them the idea that God is love. It comes as no surprise that E. Stanley Jones was a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi, who was profoundly moved by the ethics of Jesus and befriended missionaries, but who rejected the notion of Christian conversion.

By the 1920s, with anti-colonial and anti-European reactions breaking out around the world, it was clear that western colonialism had become a burden for Christian missions because nonwestern peoples saw missions as yet another aspect of western oppression. When the United States passed legislation restricting the immigration of Asians, even though missionaries protested that such hypocritical racism would hurt Christian missions, the Japanese and Chinese response to the anti-Asian Exclusion Acts was to turn against the west, including Christian institutions. Mission schools and hospitals were nationalized and put under Chinese leadership by 1929. As nationalism and anti-colonialism grew in India, China, Japan, Indonesia, and other countries under European control, Christian churches and schools found themselves on the defensive and subject to increasingly strict regulations, harassment, and legal limitations. Within the United States, a fact-finding study of missions by William Hocking issued in 1932, called *Re-thinking Missions*, fueled a firestorm of controversy by questioning the academic level of smaller mission schools and arguing that missionaries should not try to convert people, but be "co-workers" with the forces of righteousness in every religion.

World War II further weakened the power of the west and finally broke the back of European imperialism. During the 1950s and early 1960s, one country after another gained freedom from European control – India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Egypt, and other (usually British) colonies became independent fairly quickly. Other colonies, such as Vietnam, Algeria, and Congo, disintegrated into anti-colonial or civil wars. The rejection of colonialism often entailed the rejection of Christianity as a foreign religion. For example the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s specifically targeted and killed thousands of Christians, who were forced to participate in anti-Christian rituals. Jomo Kenyatta, political leader and eventually the first president of Kenya, famously quipped that missionaries had brought the Bible to the land of Africa, but that when Africans opened their eyes after praying, they had the Bible and the missionaries had the land.

In China, the object of major missionary commitments, civil war resulted in the founding of a People's Republic in 1949. Mao Zedong held the Marxist-Leninist philosophy that religion was the “opiate of the people” and should be eliminated through internal struggle. The Chinese Communist Party immediately restricted mission institutions and forcibly organized Chinese Christians into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Protestant leaders under the pro-communist and American-educated theologian Y. T. Wu published the Christian Manifesto. By 1952, at least 400,000 Chinese Christians had signed this manifesto, which stated that Christianity was connected with western imperialism and called for Chinese Christians to become immediately self-reliant and separate from all western institutions.

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 increased anti-American sentiment, and China accused the United States of using Christianity to support reactionary political forces. Missionaries saw that their presence was threatening the security of Chinese Christians, and they began to leave. The communists arrested missionaries and accused them of being spies, and they tortured and imprisoned untold numbers of Chinese Christians. Because the Pope opposed communism, Chinese Catholics were special targets of harassment, as were leaders of indigenous Chinese churches who refused to sign the Christian Manifesto. Two American Catholic missionary bishops were arrested. Bishop Francis X. Ford died in custody in 1952. Bishop James E. Walsh was the last missionary prisoner in China, released from prison and deported in 1970. The missionary movement to China was completely destroyed, and all mission property was seized.

During the era of the Cold War from the 1950s through the 1970s, the United States sent large quantities of military aid to Latin America in an effort to counter the spread of communism radiating from Cuba. In the early 1960s, along with initiating the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII

called for an outpouring of missionaries to Latin America because of the drastic shortage of priests in an overwhelmingly Catholic continent. Idealistic Catholics, both lay and clergy, male and female, responded to the Pope by moving to Latin America in a “papal peace corps.” Many took their initial cross-cultural training in Cuernavaca, Mexico, from Father Ivan Illich, who in 1964 founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation. In 1967 Illich published an article titled “The Seamy Side of Charity,” in which he accused the North American mission volunteers of indoctrinating the poor into capitalism, of propping up decaying church structures, and of creating dependency by replacing potential local lay leadership with foreign personnel. The North American missionary was a “colonial latchkey chaplain” just as guilty of American imperialism as the military advisors being sent under the United States’ Alliance for Progress.

Illich’s critiques found a voice in the emerging liberation theologies that attacked “dependency” as a key reason why Latin America remained poor while North America grew rich during the twentieth century. Although many Roman Catholic missionaries left Latin America disillusioned by the taint of collusion with US hegemony in the region, others stayed and shifted their focus from institutional ministries to grassroots organizing among the poor, whom they considered “the people of God” in line with the theological emphases of the Second Vatican Council.

During the 1960s and 1970s, “Missionary, Go Home!” became a popular rallying cry around the world. Nonwestern churches amid nationalist struggles condemned missionary racism, paternalism, and colonialism. By the early 1970s, Councils of Churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America were calling for a “moratorium” on the sending of western missionaries and money, so that young churches could develop their own ways of doing things without western control. The result of these internal criticisms of missions was serious soul-searching on the part of mainline western denominations, and a decline in the sending of western missionaries from the affected denominations.

As harsh as were the condemnations of missionary Christianity, they were a necessary phase in the emergence of a truly global Christian community. The long-term impact of the tumultuous 1960s was to decrease the number of missionaries from western mainline Catholic and Protestant churches. Older denominational structures and mission institutions such as schools, hospitals, and printing presses were turned over to indigenous church control. Postcolonial theologies of mission partnership emerged in older western churches. Even as they withdrew their missionaries, the mission wings of state churches in Europe began funneling large amounts of money into development projects in the Third World. By the 1960s, the sun was setting

on the large European denominational mission station, but the era of the non-governmental organization was just beginning.

### *Scholarly criticisms of Christian missions*

How do twenty-first-century people judge the actions of the cross-cultural pioneers of earlier generations, especially when missionaries and first-generation converts held strong beliefs in the worthiness of their own cause? Many westerners in the twenty-first century, especially highly educated secular elites, assume that missionaries, by virtue of their religious convictions, were hegemonic fanatics. Even the acts of teaching people to read, building schools, or installing clean water and irrigation systems – not to mention preaching or translating the Bible – can be interpreted as an assault on indigenous cultures by those critical of the belief system of missionaries.

Western academics provided powerful critiques of missions from the 1960s onward, especially as secularism, Marxism, and disillusionment with American foreign policy became widespread among intellectuals. Scholarly critiques of the political dimensions of missions focused on missionary paternalism and collusion with European imperialism and colonialism, rather than on the spiritual motivations or humanitarian accomplishments of the missionaries. In the widely accepted secularization thesis of the 1960s–1990s, many western scholars argued that religion would ultimately dissolve into a new modernity. Thus missionaries appeared as the meddling throwbacks to an earlier period of history when westerners still believed that religious faith should play a public role, rather than being confined to issues of private values and personal lifestyle choices.

Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued in 1974 that the chief evil of missions was what he called “cultural imperialism.” Although missionaries seldom wielded guns or overt power, they had the backing of western economics and politics to pressure people to change their cultures. Intellectual historian William Hutchison studied mission rhetoric produced for the western audience, and concluded that the late nineteenth-century language of conversion and conquest had provided a “moral equivalent” for imperialism. In 1991 a powerful critique of the cultural power of missionaries was published by South African scholars Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*. Using anthropological and historical analysis of the early missionaries among the Tswana in Botswana, the Comaroffs claimed they engineered a “colonization of consciousness” that led inexorably to the apartheid system in South Africa a century later. According to the Comaroffs, missionaries introduced irrigation, capitalism, a new belief system, and changes in the “quotidian” aspects of daily life that ultimately

stripped the Tswana of their self-determination. The “cultural imperialism” of the missionary was therefore more insidious than the overt political agendas of government officials or European colonists.

By the mid twentieth century, some of the most vigorous accusations against missionaries had come from secular anthropologists like the Comaroffs. Fascinating studies of the relationship between anthropologists and missionaries have demonstrated that many field anthropologists were in fact dependent on the missionaries for access to local cultures, and thus saw them as competitors. The myth of the neutrality of the anthropologist, versus the bias of the missionary, was exploded in the late twentieth century by the recognition that, by definition, the presence of an outsider creates cultural changes, whether that outsider recognizes it or not.

Probably the most famous accusation of anthropologists against missionaries has been the invention of the term “missionary position,” to denote the idea that missionaries have imposed strict sexual mores on previously care-free cultures, such as that sexual intercourse must always occur with the man on top. A study in 2001 by anthropologist Robert Priest, himself the son of missionaries, revealed that the anthropologist who coined the term “missionary position” was so biased against missionaries that he misread another anthropologist’s field notes. In other words, the people observed in the field notes were complaining not of missionary restrictions on sexual activity, but that missionaries had introduced western-style liberal attitudes toward sexual partnership, such as allowing men and women to hold hands in public, and approving of romantic love on equal terms between a male and a female. The false accusation about the “missionary position” was repeated for decades without being substantiated in fieldwork. The bias of the anthropological establishment was so egregious that the journal *Current Anthropology* printed Priest’s article with fourteen apologetic responses from famous anthropologists.

A strange omission from western scholarly critiques of mission history has been the role of indigenous initiative in mission, and the failure to recognize the crucial role played by early converts to Christianity as mediators between traditional ways and Christianity. Missionaries were powerless without indigenous partners who could express the gospel in their own cultural framework. The Comaroffs, for example, scarcely mentioned indigenous Christians or early converts as active participants in their own destinies: there is no explanation for why the Tswana would have voluntarily chosen to become Christians and have remained Christians to the present day. The earliest “converts,” as significant cultural bridge figures, are either missing from many studies or else become the “running dogs” of western imperialists, infected with a “false consciousness.”

And yet, as the history of the spread of Christianity shows, the bridging work of early indigenous Christians was even more crucial to the cross-cultural transmission of Christianity than the work of the foreigner. For every Livingstone, there was a Chief Sechele who for reasons of his own decided to adopt Christianity against the wishes of his own people. For the western Jesuits in sixteenth-century China, there were Chinese converts who adopted, sponsored, and defended Christianity at risk to themselves. In the early twentieth century, evangelists like Indian Sundar Singh preached more widely than did most western missionaries; in Southeast Asia and China, Chinese revivalist John Sung influenced thousands. Although academic critiques have typically focused on the “foreign” agency of Christianity, the work and motivations of indigenous converts provide an important counterpoint to interpretations of mission history solely as western imposition. Early converts became Christian for many reasons of their own, including interest in the ethics of Jesus, access to knowledge for modernization, improvements in the role of women, protection for indigenous cultures from hostile oppressors, and attraction to the Christian message.

By the 1970s, the passing of the era of European colonialism created the intellectual context for a scholarly movement known as “postcolonialism.” While the Marxist and poststructuralist intellectual frameworks of postcolonialism are too complicated to summarize in this brief overview, it is important to note that postcolonial discourse created a new level of analysis of Christian missions by shifting scholarly attention to the multiple ways in which western hegemony has been achieved and maintained through defining and essentializing the nonwestern “Other.” By assuming the universal rationality of western thought forms, westerners used their language, politics, and culture to stereotype the non-west and thereby dominate it.

The most important postcolonial discourse has been generated by non-western scholars located in the western academy. In 1978, the Palestinian American and professor at Columbia University Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, turned what had been a positive term referring to the earliest western translators of nonwestern literature into a negative term referring to any western attempt – including that of the media, linguists, and historians – to understand and describe the non-west. To Said, Orientalism involved pretending to represent the “Other” as an act of control over it.<sup>5</sup> In 1985, Indian literary critic and Columbia professor Gayatri Spivak asked western

<sup>5</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 76–7.

academics whether the “subaltern” could ever really “speak.” In other words, is the attempt of scholars to represent the perspectives of the powerless and voiceless people of history – women, the lower classes, and subjugated nonwesterners – ever possible, or is the voice of the western academic the one that is really heard?

With the exception of nonwestern theologians writing for western audiences, missions and missionaries are not the central concern of most postcolonial theorists in the academy. But because of their social location within the western colonial framework, western missionaries over the past few hundred years are fit subjects for postcolonial rereadings of history and literature. As translators of Asian texts, describers of nonwestern religions and cultural practices, and mediators between western nations and nonwestern communities, western missionaries would at first glance seem to fit the negative Orientalist stereotype. And yet the repeated attempts by missionaries to defend human rights and to provide education and medical care to people around the world belie easy assumptions about their acquiescence in the colonial project. Edward Said, for example, was from a Protestant family with close associations to American missionaries, and thus belonged to a missionary-supported tradition of Arab Christian nationalism rather than to pan-Islamicism.

Overall, postcolonial discourse provided a new and exciting theoretical space in which to re-evaluate the western missionary contribution to history because it moved beyond analyzing missionaries simply as representatives of colonialism. Postcolonial discourse reconsidered both missionaries and their converts as “postcolonial subjects.” That is to say, their relationship with each other and with their contexts promoted “hybridity,” a selective mixing of meanings and identities through which people adapted to new socio-political situations, and resisted colonial imposition. Both missionaries and their early Christian converts were chief agents of the transfer of knowledge and technologies from one culture to another. As such, they participated in both the globalization of knowledge and the re-creation of local identities that emerged from interaction with global modernity. In postcolonialist discourse, therefore, the long-term effects of missions and missionaries undercut a simplistic equation with cultural imperialism.

### *Anti-Christian rhetoric*

Probably the most critical accusations against missionaries emerged among Arab and Indian scholars who felt victimized by western imperialism and colonialism, and who opposed Christianity as a religion. In the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire, Muslim scholars wrote books in reaction to the

presence of Christian missionaries who were capturing the interest of young people with their schools. Some even founded a Muslim missionary society to compete with the Christian missionaries around Baghdad.

Sometimes competition and dialogue between religions sparked by the presence of missionary intellectuals led to the creative interaction of religious traditions, as well as the invention of “comparative religion” as a subject for scholarship. In India, missionary critiques of Hinduism resulted in Brahmin reforms of their own traditions: the nineteenth-century “Bengal Renaissance” strengthened monotheistic tendencies in Hinduism, and criticized social customs that devalued women and outcastes. Missionaries, in their turn, were influenced by their study of ancient Hindu and Muslim texts.

In 1953, Mustafa Khalidi and ‘Umar Farrukh published a highly influential book in Arabic arguing that missionaries were not primarily religious, but were rather the cutting edge of western imperialism and materialism.<sup>6</sup> Khalidi was a former professor at the missionary-founded American University of Beirut. Their arguments were translated into many languages and increasingly repeated by other Arabic-language authors in the 1980s and 1990s. As tension between the west and the Islamic world grew in the late twentieth century, missionaries were increasingly portrayed as Crusaders, as blasphemers of Mohammed the Prophet, and as invaders whose schools, hospitals, and views on women’s equality served to insult and humiliate Islam. By the end of the twentieth century, heated anti-missionary rhetoric had morphed into anti-Christian rhetoric, with even the descendants of the earliest Christians in the Middle and Near East accused of being traitors.

In India by the 1980s, militants connected with the Hindu Nationalist Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP) had begun to promote *Hindutva*, or “Hindu-ness” as a necessary component of being an Indian. Thus Muslims and Christians, both of whom belonged to religions that converted Hindus, should be severely restricted. Hindu extremists opposed missionaries and especially the conversion of outcastes, who were traditionally treated as sub-humans in the Hindu caste system. Under the influence of radical Hindu nationalism, numerous Christian churches were destroyed in India in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Christian women, including Catholic nuns, were assaulted. One of the most notorious cases of anti-missionary violence occurred in 1999 in the Indian state of Orissa, when a mob burned to death Australian missionary Graham Staines and his

<sup>6</sup> See Heather J. Sharkey, “Arabic Antimissionary Treatises: Muslim Responses to Christian Evangelism in the Modern Middle East,” in Jon Bonk, ed., *Islam and Christianity: Contemporary Mission Insights* (New Haven: Overseas Ministries Study Center, 2004), 9–14.

7- and 9-year-old sons. Staines had founded a home for lepers among tribal peoples – already outside the Hindu caste system – in the early 1980s. After the murder of Reverend Staines and his sons, his widow Gladys and their daughter forgave the killers and continued to work in the leper home until 2004, when they returned to Australia.

The irony of much anti-Christian rhetoric of the late twentieth century was that it increased during an era in which the western missionary presence in Muslim and Hindu areas was small, had no support from western governments, and focused primarily on humanitarian assistance. The continuous recycling of old anti-missionary rhetoric, therefore, revealed more about fears of social change and western neocolonialism, and prejudice against local Christians, than it did about actual western missionaries. In the eyes of Muslim and Hindu militants, even non-religious NGOs were seen as “missionaries” attempting to destroy nonwestern cultures.

## **Missionaries and Human Rights**

All anti-missionary arguments have in common their opposition to religious and cultural change. Yet in terms of cross-cultural activism, the missionary was earlier generations’ equivalent of the peace corps or NGO worker, and is still the conduit through which humanitarian aid flows in the most dangerous and remote situations. Should even missionary humanitarianism be rejected as a form of misguided cultural interference because of its previous context within European expansionism? Does the belief system of the missionary mean that outreach by Christians is automatically a slide down the slippery slope of “cultural imperialism”?

From the late fifteenth to the mid nineteenth century, the expansion of Europe went hand in hand with much missionary activity. Given that both western and nonwestern missionaries over the past 400 years operated in a larger context of western colonialism, it is inevitable that they participated in the system. At times missions clearly benefited from state support, such as the granting of land on which to build mission stations in Africa, or treaty protections for foreigners and converts in nineteenth-century China, or disciplinary power granted to priests by government authorities in colonial Latin America, or monetary payments to educate First Nations children in twentieth-century Canada. Yet analysis of mission involvement in “politics” must be considered in context. Not all colonial policy benefited missions. For example, the British tendency toward “indirect rule” worked to the advantage of Muslim elites at the expense of Christians and other minorities in Egypt and Sudan, while the vast colonial domain that became India was

made possible by standardized British structures, administered largely by educated Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims.

Because missionaries did not function in a vacuum devoid of western influence, or outside of collaboration with indigenous peoples, the ambiguity of the historical record remains. The missionary was rarely the only foreigner amidst a world of expansive empires, global trade, and extensive migration of peoples. Some of the most interesting features of that ambiguity, and areas that are seldom discussed in popular anti-missionary rhetoric, are those of mission involvement in human rights, and in struggles over land. Missionaries like Livingstone were trapped in the economic and political systems of their day. Yet the emergence of what today are called “human rights” is directly related to the often ineffective attempts of missionaries to act as a buffer between governments or abusive social systems, and the people among whom they lived. At their most authentic, missionaries came to identify themselves with the indigenous people. They learned their languages and literatures, and studied their customs. Unlike traders, colonists, soldiers, and other western adventurers, a major priority of missionaries was the spiritual and physical welfare of indigenous peoples. Sometimes this required launching human rights campaigns, reporting on atrocities to the western media, and opposing laws and government policies that hurt the people. Without the work of such missionary ethnographers as Bernardino de Sahagun among the Aztec, Maurice Leenhardt in Melanesia, Eugene Casalis among the Sotho, and many others, knowledge of pre-contact, oral indigenous cultures would be lost today.

### *Catholic missionary resistance to colonialism in Latin America*

During the early centuries of European expansion, the missionary labored under a harsh version of medieval Christendom, void of the checks and balances taken for granted by later generations. When Portugal and Spain began exploring and colonizing the world in the late fifteenth century, missionaries went along to baptize the colonial presence. Papal decrees gave total control over indigenous populations to the monarchs of Spain and Portugal, who then treated missions as a relatively cheap method of pacifying and controlling the indigenous populations. Monarchs and European colonists blocked papal efforts to found normal dioceses.

Christopher Columbus took priests with him on his second voyage to the Caribbean, as ambitious young Spaniards began their rapacious exploitation of Carib Indians by forcing them to dig for silver and gold. When Hernan Cortes conquered Mexico in 1519, he took along priests to explain Christian doctrine to the people and to baptize willing leaders. Upon destroying

the Aztec capital Cortes deceptively declared, “My principal motive in undertaking this war and any other one I should undertake, is to bring the natives to the knowledge of our Holy Catholic faith.”<sup>7</sup> Francisco Pizarro’s party of conquistadors that looted the Inca capital in Peru included six Dominican friars. The *Patronatus Regalis*, the 1493 agreement by which Spain and Portugal divided the non-Christian world between themselves, created government agents out of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and other members of religious orders who sailed with the conquistadors. According to Luis N. Rivera Pagán, Spain’s responsibility for the evangelization of the Americas became “the juridical-theological foundation for the donation, in perpetuity, of political authority.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the resulting genocide of the native population, the rhetoric of evangelization by their colonial conquerors was a farce. The hypocrisy of enslavement and murder awakened the consciences of early missionaries. Like the missionary theologian Alcuin, who in the 790s objected to the deadly means by which Charlemagne subdued and Christianized the Saxons, during the first half-century of oppression a cadre of brave men raised their voices against the powerful colonists who enslaved the Indians. The Dominicans in the Caribbean were soon outraged by the injustices, and they chose Father Antonio de Montecinos to represent them. In 1511 he preached a sermon series in which he accused the colonists on the island Hispaniola of “living in mortal sin.” He defended the idea that Indians had immortal souls. He later threatened to withhold the sacrament of communion from slaveholders.

The most famous opponent of the enslavement of Native Americans was Bartolomé de las Casas, who arrived in 1514 to manage family land on Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic). What he saw sickened him. He documented and protested the treatment of Indians, who were forced to work in mines without food and who died in droves. Getting no justice, Las Casas embarked on a strategy by which generations of missionaries have defended human rights: he appealed to powerful leaders in Europe, and sought to sway popular opinion by publicizing the abuses back home. He returned to Spain and presented his documentation before government officials and a future Pope. Over his lifetime, Las Casas made several trips to Europe to build a legal and theological case against the enslavement of Indians. Each time he returned to Latin America with greater authority from Pope and king, including an appointment as bishop in 1543. But he was

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Luis N. Rivera Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1992), 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

continually thwarted by settlers, who forced him to live among the Indians for his own survival. His greatest accomplishment was when the New Laws of 1542–3 were passed to begin freeing the Indians from the system of forced labor (*encomienda*).

Other reformers after Las Casas included Antonio de Valdivieso, bishop of Nicaragua, and Juan del Valle, bishop of Popayan. Despite heroic efforts, neither man was successful in turning colonists against oppression of the Indians, and both paid with their lives. By the 1540s it had become clear that removing Indians from colonial control might be the only way to save the remaining population. Colonists had already killed most Native Americans in the Caribbean and replaced them with slaves captured from Africa. In Mexico, the indigenous population dropped from 17 million to 1 million persons within seventy-five years of conquest. Jesuit missionaries managed to protect many Guarani Indians in South America by gathering them into self-sufficient fortified towns, called *reductions*. In an area that included modern-day Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and sections of Bolivia and Brazil, the Jesuits founded forty-eight towns that domiciled 200,000 Guarani over a period of 200 years. Not only Spanish, but Flemish, German, Creole, and other nationalities were represented in the mission force, that numbered over 2,200 at the time the Jesuit Order was banned from Spanish territory in 1767. Although missionary paternalism was central to the operation of *reductions*, its existence forestalled the destruction of the Guarani.

In addition to the enslavement and extermination of American Indians by colonists, the massive African slave trade that saw 10 million people shipped to the Americas from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries provided the major context for the emerging missionary human rights movement. Some missionaries, notably the Jesuit saints Alonso de Sandoval and Peter Claver, devoted themselves to serving the slaves even though they did not condemn slavery itself. Stationed at a Colombian slave port in the early seventeenth century, Claver and interpreters boarded slave ships to feed and care for the newly arrived victims. In 1685 the Capuchin Order formally asked the Pope to limit the slave trade. A leading black Catholic, Afro-Brazilian Lourenço da Silva, went to Rome and described the brutality of slavery. Although the Vatican condemned the slave trade in response to these petitions, and sent resolutions to bishops around the world, the economic and social system of slavery was too entrenched to be defeated by church leaders.

### *Protestant missions and slavery*

Protestant missionary witness against slavery began in the eighteenth century. The Moravian Brethren were part of the pietist movement that

emphasized the importance of Bible study, lay spirituality, and personal experience of the “new birth.” Persecuted for their pacifism, they began emigrating in small groups to live as missionaries among the most needy. In 1732 Moravians commissioned Leonard Dober and Tobias Leopold as missionaries for St. Thomas in the West Indies. They faced illness, and imprisonment by white planters because they treated slaves as equals by preaching to them and teaching them the Bible. Despite large numbers of missionary deaths and steady persecution, Moravians persisted in their outreach. During the 1730s the Moravians sent missionaries to slaves in Surinam, to Creek Indians in Georgia, and to the Khoikhoi, who were being absorbed as a slave class by white colonists in South Africa.

One of the most famous Moravian missionaries to the persecuted in North America was David Zeisberger, who spent sixty-two years among the Indians. Fluent in three Indian languages, and translator of the Bible and liturgy into Delaware, Zeisberger led the Moravian Delawares from place to place to keep them from being killed or enslaved by either European settlers or non-Christian Indians. Finally in 1798 the Moravian Delawares secured land grants and founded the village of Goshen, Ohio, where they planted orchards and farms, and maintained a rich worship life as well as their pacifist faith.

Moravian success among African slaves and American Indians was foundational for the anti-slavery movement. When in the 1780s the British evangelical William Wilberforce founded an anti-slavery society and launched a fight in Parliament to abolish the slave trade, he pointed to Moravian missions as proof that slavery could be abolished peacefully in the West Indies, without a bloodbath: in times of uprising, Moravian converts refused to engage in violence. For Wilberforce and other Anglicans of the anti-slavery Clapham Sect, missions were a means of attacking the slave trade. If Africans could be converted to Christianity, it would prove to European racists that they were human beings who should not be enslaved. Because of their anti-slavery convictions and requests from Christianized former slaves, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), founded by evangelical Anglicans in 1799, sent its first missionaries to West Africa, as did British and American Methodists. The 1792 landing of Baptist David George and his group of anti-slavery black colonists in Sierra Leone was heralded by Wilberforce as “a Christian experiment.” As a network of evangelical West Africans spread from Sierra Leone during the early nineteenth century, they worked collaboratively with missionaries to spread the gospel throughout the region. Free blacks, such as Quaker ship captain Paul Cuffee, provided crucial support for the African American evangelicals who colonized Sierra Leone and Liberia in efforts to stop the slave trade at its source.

The Moravian example also inspired John Wesley, founder of Methodism, the largest working-class religious movement of English-speaking people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wesleyan preachers worked among slave populations in the West Indies. Their simple message of God's grace and love regardless of one's position in life had a great appeal to African Americans. With the rise of experiential and Bible-centered revivalism – so different from the upper-class Anglicanism of the plantation owners – slaves began converting to Christianity. By the early nineteenth century, one-third of North American Methodists were African Americans. Literacy, self-uplift, and communal support were aspects of the evangelical gospel that appealed to both white and black working classes. For example, Methodism entered Cape Coast, the future Ghana, when in 1834 a small group of Africans were reading the Bible and wrote to England requesting they be sent Wesleyan missionaries.

One of the important functions of missionaries in West Africa was to send eyewitness reports to anti-slavery activists about the brutality of the slave trade. In 1839 Thomas Fowell Buxton, the successor to Wilberforce in the parliamentary struggle to abolish slavery, wrote *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*. His influential exposé of the capture and transmission of African slaves relied on missionary informants. As president of the Aborigines Protection Society, Buxton pushed Parliament to stem unjust colonial land seizures. In this task he also relied on the parliamentary testimonies of Anglican, Methodist, and Congregationalist mission leaders. The abolition of slavery in the British empire succeeded in 1833 thanks to his and other evangelicals' efforts.

It was not just parliamentary elites who turned against slavery in early nineteenth-century Britain, but a groundswell of popular opinion. Sociologist Robert Woodberry has argued that it was the presence of voluntaristic missionaries, independent of the state, who convinced ordinary Christians that slavery was wrong.<sup>9</sup> As Protestants in Great Britain supported missionaries, their relationship with the missionaries caused them to see slavery through missionary eyes and to turn against it. Volunteer activism and the persuasive techniques of revivalism energized British Protestants to take a stand against slavery despite its profitability. The bridge of empathy between slaves and supporters of abolitionism was the missionary and the mission society: using sociological analysis, abolitionist sentiment could be predicted by membership in a missionary society. When plantation owners in the West Indies tortured Christian slaves and destroyed their chapels out of fear that spiritual

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Woodberry, "Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Nonwestern Societies," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 4/1 (2006), 3–12.

independence would lead to rebellion, these human rights abuses were publicized by British missionaries, and scandalized the British public.

In addition to Anglicans and Methodists, a Protestant mission society that contributed to human rights was the London Missionary Society (LMS), the group that initially supported Livingstone's mission work. The LMS sent its first missionary to South Africa in 1799. Johannes van der Kemp was concerned with the oppression of the Khoikhoi people by the Dutch colonists. He gathered them into a mission station "Bethelsdorp" where they could be trained and educated. Hated by the white colonists for assisting the Khoikhoi, he attacked their enslavement and supported their right to vote. In 1800 van der Kemp was joined by LMS missionary James Read, who helped the "Cape Coloured," a mixed race group of Khoikhoi, Malays, and whites, bring charges of ill treatment against their masters. Both he and van der Kemp scandalized the colonists by marrying native women, a witness to equality under Christ that was also being made by CMS missionaries in West Africa.

In 1819 the LMS sent John Philip to South Africa as mission supervisor. By 1828 he had begun a campaign to gain civil rights for the Cape Coloured. Philip lobbied the British on human rights issues, and encouraged other missions to enter South Africa, much to the opposition of the white colonists. His campaign to change the nature of British rule resulted in his book *Researches in South Africa*, which exposed the ill treatment of Africans by the Cape government and colonists. Philip gained the support of Buxton, who in 1828 successfully brought before the House of Commons Ordinance 50. This Ordinance granted the Khoikhoi freedom over their own labor and thus liberated them from indentured servitude. As Philip fought the backlash from the whites in South Africa, he was instrumental in defeating vagrancy legislation aimed at the Khoikhoi, and he supported the Xhosa against the Cape colonists during the war of 1835–6. He believed that Christianity could succeed among Africans only if they were not harassed and crowded out by hordes of white colonists.

During the 1840s new racial theories spread throughout western Europe which argued that "science" demonstrated the inferiority of darker-skinned persons and civilizations. Philip opposed these theories, which encouraged the emigration of the British poor into colonies where they would displace darker races, allegedly in the name of scientific "progress." Although Philip died a discouraged man, in 1853 the constitution of Cape Colony showed his influence by providing for a non-racial franchise.

According to historian Andrew Ross, John Philip's true successor was David Livingstone, also a radical egalitarian evangelical, an LMS missionary, a Scot, an opponent of slavery, and one who shared Philip's defense of

the Xhosa and mixed-race peoples of the Cape. Based on his view of united humanity created by God, Livingstone shared Philip's rejection of the growing white racist ideologies that privileged white people at the expense of the "darker races."

### *Missionary defense of human rights*

What can be learned from the missionary defense of human rights during the 500 years of European expansion, from Bartolomé de las Casas in Latin America to David Livingstone in Africa, and beyond? Although missionaries have generally tried to avoid politics and have followed the human tendency to obey authority within the reigning political system, they ameliorated the brutal aspects of colonialism to the extent that they identified themselves with the needs of indigenous or exploited peoples rather than with colonial settler communities. Down through the ages, a vocal minority has pushed beyond "doing good" into challenging oppression. Identification with indigenous peoples was supported by the belief that all persons were created by God – as symbolized by descent from the same primordial parents, Adam and Eve, as written in the book of Genesis. While the idea of common human equality is widely shared today, such has not been the case throughout much of human history. Class systems, ethnic rivalries, and racial and gender hierarchies have dominated human social arrangements. But missionaries have often drawn upon the biblical vision of human unity and equality as a spiritual and theological grounding for opposing even their own governments in matters of justice. The ambiguity remains, however, for, notwithstanding their ideals, missionaries are unavoidably creatures of their own times and cultures.

In the past 150 years, the missionary witness to injustice was a central factor in the development of western human rights discourse. Countless missionaries, whose contributions are forgotten today, influenced public opinion to change the treatment of peoples victimized by powerful forces. Among the many noteworthy examples was Katharine Bushnell, an American missionary doctor who specialized in work against the sex trafficking of women and children. In the 1880s she infiltrated Wisconsin lumber camps where abducted women were kept as sex slaves. Her testimony resulted in the criminalization of forced prostitution by the Wisconsin legislature. Then in the 1890s she infiltrated ten British military stations in India and documented illegal brothels sponsored by the British military that included prostitutes as young as 11. Her report and testimony before the British government caused a huge outcry against the exploitation of women and girls. Her cause is continued in the twenty-first century by missionaries who

work among women prostitutes in the sex tourism centers of Thailand and Moldova. In 1909, African American missionary William Sheppard and his white partner William Morrison were tried for libel after they exposed the torture of rubber gatherers in the Congo. Troops and company officials were cutting off the hands and feet of Congolese, including those of children. After the acquittal of the missionaries in court, public pressure ultimately caused the removal of the Congo from King Leopold of Belgium's personal control.

The massacre of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during World War I was witnessed to the world by numerous missionaries, who protected refugees, provided shelter for orphans, and distributed aid. As a boy, Vartan Hartunian recalled watching 2,000 fellow Armenians being burned alive in a church. His family's lives were saved when missionaries waving white flags prevented their own church from being burned down by Turkish soldiers. He and his mother were hidden for months in an American missionary hospital. Along with thousands of others, the Hartunians escaped to the United States with help from missionaries and YMCA workers.<sup>10</sup> Missionary accounts of the Armenian genocide undergirded President Wilson's pronouncement of the "Fourteen Points" in 1918. This presidential speech made the protection of territorial sovereignty and the rights of ethnic minorities a centerpiece of American foreign policy.

Throughout the history of western expansionism, the justice-seeking stance of some missionaries helped to validate Christian ethical ideals of universal human community in the eyes of indigenous peoples. In 1937–8, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Nanking, China, where they murdered roughly 200,000 Chinese and raped at least 20,000 women. Fifteen American missionaries refused to be evacuated, and created a safety zone to protect Chinese civilians during the "Rape of Nanking." They not only saved thousands of lives, but stood as witnesses to the atrocities. During Latin American and Filipino military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, church-based documentation centers recorded the ranks of the "disappeared" and pressured governments over human rights issues. Hundreds of missionaries were imprisoned or lost their lives in the process. When Pol Pot launched his genocide in Cambodia in 1975, it was a Catholic missionary, Fr. François Ponchaud, who first alerted the world to the atrocities.

During the decades of apartheid from 1948 to 1994, mission and international church organizations supported South African leaders in exile,

<sup>10</sup> Tom Long, "Vartan Hartunian: From Childhood of Horrors, He Forged Hope," *Boston Globe*, Apr. 3, 2003, C13.

encouraged sanctions against South Africa, sent money from abroad to anti-apartheid organizations such as the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute, and provided education and medicine in segregated minority communities. Because of missionary solidarity with the freedom struggle over many decades, in 1998 when President Nelson Mandela of South Africa addressed the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches, he thanked missionaries for their work in helping to overthrow the apartheid system.

## **Missionaries and the Land**

Besides human rights, one of the most interesting dimensions of missionaries' interaction with colonial economies was their relationship with the land. David Livingstone was not the first missionary to be recognized for his prowess as explorer, map-maker and/or geographic observer. Medieval Saxon missionary Boniface, bishop for the Germanic frontier, traveled throughout Europe from England to Italy through France and Germany to the Low Countries. His monks built some of the earliest dikes to reclaim land from the North Sea. Eastern Orthodox monasteries have for centuries pioneered the preservation of animal and plant diversity. The Jesuit *reductions* in Paraguay were famous for the cereal crops raised by the Guarani Indians. From William Carey's botanical gardens in southern India to the introduction of irrigation schemes, fruit trees, and contour ridges by missionaries in Africa, missionaries have had a large impact on the land.

Theological reasons for this missionary interest in nature have ranged from a sense of awe and gratitude at God's creation to competition with the priests and diviners of traditional nature religions. The overriding pragmatic concern affecting land was the need to grow food for themselves and their converts. Successful food production and the provision of water resources were not only necessary for survival, but were in the minds of both missionaries and converts a visible symbol of the superiority of the missionary's message over traditional ways of life. After all, one of the most basic functions of religion through the ages has been to preserve the lives of peoples by pacifying gods and ancestors to ensure plentiful rainfall, successful hunts, and good crops.

The topic of missionaries and land use intersects with the issues of human rights in colonial contexts, for, in traditional societies, people's survival depends on access to land. Historically, the same ambiguous relationship with European expansion accompanied the land use of missionaries. In the first phase of conquest during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Spain and Portugal

exported feudal patterns of land use whereby European colonists or church leaders became the lords over indigenous “peasants.” In the Philippines, entrenched religious orders gained control over most of the land and restricted indigenous access to fishing and farming, thus provoking regular – and unsuccessful – uprisings against church rule. Thus when the United States conquered the Philippines, taking it from Spain in 1898, one of its first acts was to buy land from the Roman Catholic Church for more than \$7 million, and redistribute it to Filipinos. From Mexico to California, Franciscan friars such as Fr. Junipero Serra founded large “missions,” such as San Diego in 1769, and administered control over Native Americans who worked on church plantations. The produce from the missions fed the community and was also sold for cash. Although the administration of these missions was strict and even brutal, with Indians seen as children under the control of priest patriarchs, the missions in California temporarily preserved the land for Indian use in the face of unrelenting pressure from colonists to gain control over it all. In the Americas, the land-based mission, despite its considerable defects, proved to be the last line of defense between the Indians and rapacious white colonists.

The relationship between missionaries and land rights became more complex once the idea of communal tenure under manorial control gave way to patterns of individual ownership in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Protestant Reformation and then the American and French revolutions were accompanied by seizure of church-controlled lands. In England alone, as individual property rights increased, 6 million acres of land were enclosed by fences between 1700 and 1845. Protestant missionaries going out in the nineteenth century typically came from areas characterized by enclosed private farms, or recently industrialized areas. The artisan and agrarian roots of many nineteenth-century European missionaries meant that they carried to the mission field the goal of creating an independent yeoman farmer class as the backbone of a democratic society. Agricultural and “industrial” training therefore accompanied the spiritual and educational instruction they provided. Not only were many missionaries raised on farms, but larger missionary “colonies” typically included experts in farming and animal husbandry.

The acquisition of mission stations under European colonialism in Africa often required complex negotiations among missionaries, chiefs or local rulers, and the colonial powers. Since missionaries brought with them western education and medical care, and acted as mediators with the colonial officials, local leaders competed with each other to have their own resident missionary. Thus land was often allocated for missionary use by the decision of the local ruler within a larger context of growing European power. In 1833, a Sotho leader named Moshoeshoe invited two missionaries from

the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society to become his counselors and to move his people toward Christianity and western education. With the assistance of the missionaries, Moshoeshe was able to consolidate the boundaries of what became Lesotho and prevent its takeover by white colonists. Similar missionary assistance prevented Botswana from being incorporated into white-dominated South Africa. In other cases, colonial powers seized the land and allocated some of it to different denominations – usually those found in their own country – in the expectation that they would send missionaries to “civilize” the “natives.”

The ambiguity of missionary land use under colonialism can be illustrated by the history of the Dutch Reformed mission in Rhodesia. When the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa sent the Reverend A. A. Louw to central Rhodesia in 1891, a Shona chief allocated land to the mission. During the early twentieth century, the Morgenster Mission opened eleven mission stations in Masvingo Province, each negotiated with the permission of local chiefs. On these stations the mission sponsored 670 schools, hospitals and medical clinics, a printing press, agricultural extension activities, and the first schools for the deaf and blind in the country. Rising literacy rates, longer life expectancies, and the discouragement of clan warfare accompanied the growing prestige of Morgenster. As population pressures increased within the local communities, and as colonial laws granted more control to white settlers, during the 1940s and 1950s the chiefs negotiated the return of Dutch Reformed mission farms to African control. By the mid twentieth century, mission stations originally acquired under the pressure of an expanding European presence had become the core settlements of vibrant African communities, with embedded church-run services such as schools and medical clinics.

Despite the generally negative view of mission stations taken by historians, over time they often came to represent the core of indigenous power, western education, and resistance to colonialism. In his autobiography *Let My People Go*, South African Albert Luthuli wrote of life on the Congregationalist mission station Groutville, where he was both chief and elder of the church. Luthuli received an education at Congregationalist Adams College, the predecessor school to the mission-sponsored University of Fort Hare, and then taught there. In 1952 Luthuli became president of the African National Congress and led the Defiance Campaign against the apartheid government. In 1962 the Nobel Peace Prize winner was banished to Groutville. The ambiguity of colonial mission stations like Groutville, Bethelsdorp, Morgenster, Blantyre, Valdezia, and others was that, despite their origins in a colonial context, over time they functioned as a secure land base – and sometimes as a gilded cage – for indigenous Christian communities.

As with the fight for human rights, direct missionary efforts to secure land rights for indigenous peoples involved years of struggle, broken lives and dreams, and few victories. Nowhere was European colonialism as thorough as in North America. During the Indian uprising in 1675 New England, white colonists brutalized the converts of Puritan missionary John Eliot and took their land, and nearly lynched the elderly missionary for trying to help them. The Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Seminoles, and Chicasaw Indians inhabited the southeastern part of what is now the United States. Many tried to protect their land by becoming Christians, learning to read, and farming, but they faced relentless pressure from European immigrants. Congregationalist mission leader Jeremiah Evarts died from the stress of lobbying against Jacksonian policies that sought to take all Indian land east of the Mississippi river. The leader of the missionaries living in Cherokee territory, Samuel Worcester, founded the first Indian-language newspaper and translated parts of the Bible into Cherokee. When the missionaries defied an 1830 residency law passed to prevent whites from opposing the federal Indian Removal Act, Worcester and others were imprisoned with the approval of President Andrew Jackson. In 1838 Cherokee Indians were forced from their land at gunpoint and walked along the deadly “trail of tears” to barren reservations in Oklahoma. Worcester accompanied the surviving Cherokee and cared for them until his death in 1859. Evarts and Worcester in North America, Shirley Baker in Tonga, August Elger and Michael Scott among the Herero of Namibia – these are but a few of the names of missionaries who spent their lives resisting the takeover of indigenous land by white settlers.

### *Missions and ecology*

Because missionaries relied on nature to meet their needs and those of their converts, attention to flora and fauna, geography, and conservation has constituted a major but relatively unstudied aspect of mission work throughout history. Livingstone’s correspondence with the Royal Geographical Society was not unusual for missionaries of his era. For example, John Croumbie Brown, LMS missionary in South Africa, maintained a network of missionary informants throughout Southern Africa who sent him plant samples. In 1862 he became the official botanist of Cape Colony and produced numerous pioneer studies on the relationship between desertification and land and water use. In Syria, missionary surgeon George E. Post collected the plants of the region and in 1896 published the classic *Flora of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai* in both English and Arabic.

A perusal of nineteenth-century missionary correspondence and journals often reveals references to excitement at finding new plants and observing indigenous customs in relation to nature. For example, Cinie Louw's pioneer grammar and lexicon of Karanga, a dialect of the Shona people in Rhodesia, ends with a page listing the indigenous trees and their native names. Records of twentieth-century mission schools often featured "arbor days" devoted to tree-planting and conservation activities, alongside the regular farming required to sustain the student population.

The age of globalization engendered another set of missionary engagements with the land. World population increased from 3 billion in 1960 to 6.1 billion in the year 2000. Pressure on the land and the earth's resources has become immense. In their identification with indigenous peoples, especially small tribal societies caught in the path of government or corporate modernization campaigns, late twentieth-century missionaries turned their traditional concern for agriculture into movements for land restoration, and for battles to secure land rights for tribal societies.

In notable cases, the children of missionaries who grew up steeped in indigenous cultures became conservationists when their childhood lands were threatened with destruction. For example, in Ecuador, "missionary kid" Randy Borman began in 1977 to organize seven Cofán communities to protect their rainforests from exploitation by oil companies, cattle ranchers, and plantation owners. By resurrecting native crafts and traditional forest lore, the Cofán launched the world's first "community-based ecotourism project" to help them sustain their traditional habitat. In Zimbabwe in 1988 another son of missionaries, Inus Daneel, worked with traditional chiefs to launch a grassroots reforestation movement that focused on planting indigenous trees in communal lands. By modifying both traditional and Christian rituals into grassroots tree-planting ceremonies, rural villagers planted hundreds of thousands of trees a year for nearly fifteen years, worked on gully reclamation and water conservation, and started conservation clubs in local schools. Borman and Daneel are examples of how missionary identification with indigenous peoples built bridges with modernity for the preservation of indigenous lifeways. Borman is considered a chief by the Cofán, and Daneel is a bishop in an African indigenous church.

Catholic sisters have also started missionary movements for ecological justice. With the recognition that resource degradation most dramatically affects the subsistence-level poor, sisters run income-generating projects and environmental training in poor communities in the Philippines, Bangladesh, Panama, and other locations. For example, Maryknoll sisters from the Philippines, Latin America, and the United States together run a model farm

and forest that helps Afro-Panamanian families cultivate native medicinal plants in a push for ecological sustainability. The vulnerability of God's creation, combined with the vulnerability of the world's poorest people, together create a strong motive for cross-cultural mission in the twenty-first century.

As with human rights advocacy, missionary support for ecological sustainability can be dangerous. On February 12, 2005, two hit men hired by cattle ranchers shot Sister Dorothy Stang point blank as she stood in the rain, reading Bible verses to them about God's justice for the poor. She was on her way to meet with a group of peasants whose homes had been torched by loggers and ranchers who were illegally seizing their land. A sister of Notre Dame de Namur, Stang had moved to Brazil from Ohio in the 1960s and began assisting landless peasants seek better lives for themselves in the Amazon through ecologically sustainable practices. Stang helped the people of Pará develop ecologically sound businesses, founded schools that taught them to read and write, lobbied the Brazilian government on behalf of the landless, and gave religious instruction. But corruption kept pushing the people deeper into the forest, as agribusiness and corporate interests made big money through deforesting the Amazon by over 9,100 square acres a year. Despite repeated threats on her life, Stang stated, "I don't want to flee, nor do I want to abandon the battle of these farmers who live without any protection in the forest. They have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a better life on land where they can live and work with dignity while respecting the environment."<sup>11</sup>

Dorothy Stang was a defenseless missionary nun, without personal possessions except for her clothing and a Bible, living in solidarity with poor people who were being pushed around by the rich and powerful. Although she was born in the most powerful country in the world, because of her identification with the poor she became a Brazilian citizen. She was as vulnerable as they were: in the thirty-year period before 2005, over 1,200 people were killed defending the land rights of the poor in the Amazon.

Like other missionaries whose interpretation of the gospel changed society, her legacy will matter more in her adopted country of Brazil than in the country of her birth. After thousands attended her funeral, the president of Brazil declared that 22,000 acres of land would be preserved for her landless people. Her killers were imprisoned and convicted of murder – an exception in an extended conflict where money often trumps the rule of law.

The story of the gospel as it moves across cultures is that of reaching new groups of people on the margins of society. But the judgment of history will

<sup>11</sup> "Dorothy's Life," <<http://www.sndohio.org/dotstang.htm>>.

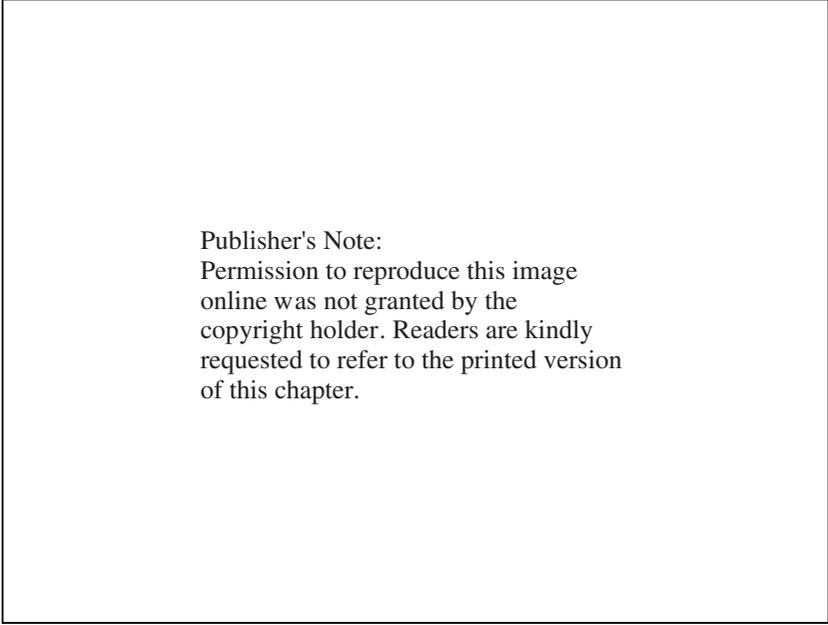
vary depending on the contexts of its students. Will future generations judge Sister Dorothy primarily as a crusader for indigenous land rights and ecological sustainability? A cross-cultural missionary saint who lived out the gospel she preached? An indigenizer who stood with her people? Or as a foreign busybody who blocked progress, interfered in regional affairs, and tried to change the culture? Like David Livingstone, she will no doubt be remembered as all of these.

## Women in World Mission: Purity, Motherhood, and Women’s Well-Being

In January 1969, a 24-year-old lawyer and devout Roman Catholic named Annalena Tonelli left Italy to teach in a high school in northeastern Kenya. It was the era of African nationalism and a time of new beginnings. After difficult transitions from colonialism – some more peaceful than others – new nations took down the flags of their former conquerors and raised their own. A combination of hopeful idealism and residual colonial guilt attracted European volunteers eager to assist in tasks of nation-building.

The 1960s were also a heady time for young lay Catholics like Tonelli. The Second Vatican Council, a ground-breaking meeting of the churches’ bishops from 1962 to 1965, had updated the theology of the church for the first time in 400 years. As part of Catholicism’s forward momentum, Vatican II reaffirmed the “apostolic” or missional identity of the church as the “people of God.” This meant eliminating the Latin Mass and adopting ordinary spoken languages for worship. For the first time in centuries, laypeople were encouraged to live out active missionary vocations. Dialogue with other religions and respect for Protestants replaced the old anathemas. A positive attitude toward making Christianity at home in all cultures followed Vatican II. Catholic missionaries around the world deepened their engagement with the ordinary people among whom they worked.

Annalena’s faith had been formed in her local parish in Forlì, and honed in Catholic Action and the Catholic student movement. University students of her generation in the 1950s were inspired by the example of French “worker priests” who dressed and lived as industrial workers to bring them the gospel. Catholic Action was a spiritual movement that encouraged Catholics to get involved in solving social problems through the “see, judge, act” method: first observe the situation, judge it according to the norms of the church, and then act to improve it. Catholic Action prefigured the working method of liberation theology, which was emerging in Latin America at the time Annalena went to Africa. As a teenager in 1963, she founded a



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**Figure 5.1** Annalena Tonelli in Somalia

Committee Against World Hunger in her hometown. In the spirit of the age, Annalena Tonelli was a young woman eager to make the world a better place.

After arriving in Kenya, Tonelli was drawn to work with Somalian Muslim refugees, who were trying to survive in the desert. Since Somalia had been an Italian colony, perhaps she felt a special connection or burden of guilt in relation to needy Somalis. When Tonelli realized that tuberculosis was widespread among her students and their families, she returned to Europe to study tropical medicine and leprosy treatment. Then she settled down in Africa for what turned out to be the rest of her life.

Although not a medical doctor, Annalena Tonelli spent thirty-three years working among nomadic Somalis suffering from tuberculosis. In 1984 she was arrested by a military tribunal in Kenya, and expelled from the country for criticizing persecution against a group of desert nomads. She told the authorities that she had defended the people for the sake of Jesus Christ. Moving to Somalia, she owned nothing and ate and dressed and lived as a Somali. Over the years, she survived attempted ambushes, assaults, a car-jacking, and kidnapping. People came to admire her “Somaliness” – her calm temperament even in times of crisis.

In 1996 Tonelli raised money from her friends to open a 200-bed tuberculosis hospital in Borama, a town in the northwest corner of Somaliland, a remote region in Somalia. The hospital was so successful that the World Health Organization named it a “TB center of excellence,” and Tonelli was able to attract support from UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and from Caritas, the international Catholic charitable organization. Traveling out from the hospital into surrounding villages, she founded out-patient clinics that treated people for tuberculosis and other diseases. Twice a year Tonelli sponsored visits by eye doctors from Germany, who restored sight to 4,000 people. She opened a school for the deaf, handicapped, and orphaned. Somalis with HIV-AIDS also started traveling to Borama hospital for care.

Annalena Tonelli chose to live as a celibate Christian woman amidst polygamous Muslim Africans to whom an unmarried woman was a contradiction in terms. Her life resembled that of Charles de Foucauld, an early twentieth-century Catholic mystic who had lived alone and unprotected in the North African desert as friend of the nomadic Tuaregs before World War I. Foucauld lived out a mission of “Christian presence” by serving the Tuaregs as a model of Christ’s love for the poor. As a Frenchman, his life was a counter-witness to the violence of French colonialism in North Africa. He lived in harmony with local Muslim religious leaders. Although he died without making a single convert, his ideals were rediscovered after World War II among Catholic missionaries trying to reach the working classes, and among university students disillusioned with colonialism.

Annalena Tonelli followed Foucauld’s ideals of humility and service, later flavored by liberation theology’s understanding of God’s “option” or preference for the poor. She spoke of the motivations behind her years of mission service in 2003, when against her wishes to remain humble and unnoticed she was awarded the prestigious Nansen Refugee Award by the UNHCR:

I wanted to follow Jesus and opted to be for the poor. For Him, I chose radical poverty, although I cannot ever become poor in the way that poor people are poor.

I live out my service without a name, without the security of a religious order, without belonging to an organization, without a salary, without paying social security for my old age. But I have friends who help me and my people, especially those on the “Committee Against World Hunger” in Forli.

I left Italy determined to “proclaim the Gospel with my life” in the footsteps of Charles de Foucauld. Thirty-three years on, I proclaim the Gospel with my life alone, and I burn with the desire to go on doing this until the very end.

This is what motivates me deep down, along with an invincible passion for the suffering and downtrodden, over and above questions of race, culture or creed.<sup>1</sup>

Annalena Tonelli followed her spiritual guide Charles de Foucauld in life, and also in death. In 1916 he was shot in the head by militants or bandits taking advantage of the turmoil in North Africa caused by World War I. On October 5, 2003, at 8.30 p.m., a man jumped from behind bushes and shot Annalena twice point blank in the head as she walked through the hospital checking her patients. At the time she died, 377 patients were being tended at her hospital.

Borama poured out its grief. Five thousand people gathered to protest the murder. On Friday the week of the assassination, imams at thirty mosques in Borama condemned the murder in their prayer services, and praised her work. Women in a remote village she had visited declared a one-day fast. Her memorial service in Somaliland's capital was attended by the vice-president, the head of the traditional Elders' Council, and UN officials. Calling her the "Mother Teresa of Somalia," the people of Borama renamed her hospital the Annalena Hospital, the school for the deaf the Annalena School, and erected a statue in her honor. The deeper lesson of Annalena Tonelli's death was that her personal relationship with the Somali people she loved, forged over a lifetime of service, was ultimately stronger than the historic tension between Muslims and Christians, or Africans and Europeans.

In Italy, it was speculated that she was killed for bringing HIV-positive persons to her hospital from other districts, or perhaps for opposing the universal practice of female genital mutilation in which traditional Somali "circumcisers" cut away girls' genitalia. Perhaps she had been killed for being a Christian among Muslims in a time of heightened Muslim-Christian enmity in the world. In fact, arrest of the gunman Mustafa Mohamed Yusuf revealed that he had been harassing her to give him a job driving a new hospital vehicle.

When Annalena Tonelli was killed, newspapers in the United States noted only the death of a "humanitarian aid worker." Typical of the secular bias of major American media, newspapers like the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* made no reference to her Christianity or to her self-understanding as a witness for Christ – though the *London Times* called her a "Roman Catholic missionary." Yet the ancient meaning of the word "martyr" is

<sup>1</sup> "The Only Thing That Counts," *World Mission Magazine*, 15/11 (Dec. 2003), <<http://www.worldmission.ph/December03/Annalena%20Tonelli.htm>>.

“witness.” Tonelli’s solidarity with the poor, and belief that her life itself was her testimony, was a form of mission as old as Christianity itself. St. Francis of Assisi allegedly told his followers to “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.” Tonelli’s humble service followed the path of many who witnessed to Muslims over the centuries, with few expectations that they would convert to Christianity. Her solidarity with the identity of the Somali people was her way of being in mission:

Only those people who know me well maintain that I am Somali like them, and that I am the real mother of all those I have saved. “*Ut unum sint*” (that they may be one) has been, and remains, the deepest yearning of my soul ... Each day at the TB Centre we work for peace, for reciprocal understanding, to learn together how to forgive. Oh, forgiveness, how hard it is to forgive. My Muslims have great difficulty appreciating it, wanting it for their lives ... And yet life only has meaning if you love. Everything is meaningless without love.<sup>2</sup>

## Women as Missionaries

Annalena Tonelli’s life clarifies the meaning of mission as service, and the self-understanding of missionaries as those who serve in the name of Jesus. It also opens a window into the rich history of Christian women, who despite huge obstacles have crossed geographic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries to witness to their faith. Since the day when women at his tomb were the first to announce that Jesus had risen from the dead, women have participated in the spread of Christianity within and across cultures.

Around the globe, more women than men are practicing Christians. Measured by regular church attendance, pilgrimages, prayers at home, fundraising, and teaching children about the faith, Christianity is a women’s religion. The ratio of female to male Christians is approximately two to one. Within Catholicism, sisters outnumber brothers and priests by more than 50 percent. Yet because the priests, preachers, theologians, public leaders, and famous missionary entrepreneurs are typically male, the crucial roles of women in mission remain buried in the unwritten stories of human relationships. In the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, in both Catholicism and Protestantism, the majority of missionaries were women. However, until recently overview histories of mission have scarcely analyzed women’s roles or acknowledged that women typically make up the majority of active believers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

What is distinctive about the role of women in the history of mission? Annalena Tonelli was obviously courageous and dedicated. But was she unique in what she did as a missionary woman? How would she have done her work differently had she been a man? Even as Annalena Tonelli expressed her theology of mission in the tradition of Catholic monks like Charles de Foucauld and liberation theology's "option for the poor," her life of service to the marginalized, devotion to healing, and special concern for women and children placed her within the mainstream of women's missionary history.

As the unpaid wives of official male missionaries, as unmarried women responding to God's call, and as ordinary migrants or people on the move, women have deliberately crossed cultures to witness to their faith. Denied the opportunity to be priests, preachers, and ordained clerics throughout most of the history of Christianity, women missionaries have concentrated largely on lifestyles of service and personal relationships as the way to spread the gospel. Although men and women work in partnership, often men have been in charge of building up the institution of the church while women take care of people's day-to-day needs. That mission work often takes place on the margins, beyond the centers of ecclesiastical power, has sometimes allowed women to assume leadership roles unavailable to them in their home countries. Thus the way in which Annalena lived out her witness provides valuable insight into the meaning of mission as an activity by and for women, who constitute the majority of believers, and the backbone of Christian practice around the world today.

## **Purity and Gender Neutrality**

At a conference held at the Vatican in 2001, Annalena spoke of her decision to remain celibate: "I'm not married because that's the way I chose in joy when I was young. I wanted to be all for God. It was a necessity of being, that of not having a family of my own. And so it has been by grace of God."<sup>3</sup> In her decision not to marry for the sake of her mission, Tonelli drew upon one of the oldest traditions of women in mission. In cultures from biblical times to the present, the refusal of women to marry and bear children has been a counter-cultural witness. A woman's childbearing potential traditionally measured her worth in patriarchal societies. A barren woman was considered cursed, and in many cultures was discarded or abused. For a woman to refuse to engage in sexual relations has thus carried profound social and economic consequences. And yet, throughout history, thousands

<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.marbriella.it/annalena/inglese/copertina2.html>>.

of Christian women have sacrificed sexual relations, marriage, and bearing children in order to serve God rather than their own families. This sacrifice was necessary in societies that required full-time commitments from married women for child care, elder care, agricultural work, food provision, and extensive preparation for communal feasts and rituals. Paradoxically, the choice of celibacy bestowed upon women a gender neutrality that allowed them to overcome the normal expectations of and limitations on women's roles in traditional societies.

The early church attracted an unusually large number of women compared to the number of women in Roman society, many of them poor widows. Some historians believe there was an order of widows recognized by the church who banded together to serve the poor. The book of Acts tells how Jesus' head disciple Peter traveled to Joppa and raised the leader of widows from the dead (Acts 9:36–42). As the only person Peter raised from the dead, and as the only woman designated "disciple" in the New Testament, Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) provided for the poor widows and children of the church by sewing and by organizing income-generating projects. As widowed women joined the early Christian movement, they found a level of support and respect not granted them in the larger society. Wealthier Christian widows often defied the norms of Roman society by refusing to remarry and pass down their wealth to other men. Instead, they used their wealth to serve the poor and to nurse the sick, and in so doing attracted others into the church.

In Syriac-speaking churches, the role of the widow grew into that of the "deaconess." According to the early church manual, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, written in Syria at the beginning of the third century, the deaconess "is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness."<sup>4</sup> The female deacon was on the cutting edge of an expanding, missionary church. By going into non-Christian homes to nurse the sick, widows and deaconesses set an example of Christian charity that attracted non-Christians. In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark attributes the meteoric expansion of membership in the early church in part to the fact that Christians nursed the sick during the frequent epidemics of the day while most others fled in fear and left the ill to die. Not only did more Christians than pagans recover from sickness, but the pagans who did recover were welcomed into a very visible Christian fellowship.

<sup>4</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, trans. G. Homer (1929), ch. 16, <<http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/didasc.asp#instruct>>.

By the mid fourth century, groups of celibate virgins had become an accepted part of the church. To government authorities, the refusal of women to accede to male social control was a deeply subversive act that marked Christianity as a dangerous cult. Early church historian Eusebius recorded that many women who had taken vows of virginity were tortured and martyred in the persecutions of the emperors Diocletian and Decius. In the persecutions in Ancyra, 2,000 virgins were martyred. Virginity as a form of martyrdom, and martyrdom for the sake of one's virginity, witnessed to the power of Christ, for they demonstrated a woman's commitment to serving God rather than buckling under to the normal gender roles demanded of her.

As Christianity developed in Europe, a pattern emerged of women's self-empowerment for mission, and then eventual suppression by male church leaders. Groups of celibate women gathered for the sake of outreach to the poor and needy, but their mission work was repeatedly shut down by restrictive medieval church rules. In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII ordered that all religious women who had taken solemn vows must live full-time within an enclosure, supposedly because men were unable to resist raping women and women were unable to keep from tempting men. His ruling destroyed the ability of western Christian women to work in organized outreach ministries for several hundred years.

In 1535 Angela Merici founded the Ursulines to work among the poor and to educate girls. Although, predictably, the Council of Trent (1545–63) forced them into the convent, the Ursulines maintained a missionary imagination that was stimulated by the work of Jesuit priests among the Huron Indians in North America. In the 1630s, a French Ursuline Marie Guyart Martin, known as Marie de l'Incarnation, had visions that she was called to go to a big, cold, forested country as a missionary. In her mystical devotion to Jesus, who became her "Spouse" when she took vows of celibacy, she felt that she was taking on Christ's goals – namely, that of drawing souls to him for their eternal salvation. Loving Christ, Marie de l'Incarnation had to love what he loved, the salvation of souls:

My body was in our monastery but my spirit, united to that of Jesus, could not remain shut up there. This apostolic spirit carried me in thought to the Indies, to Japan, to America, to the East and to the West, to parts of Canada, to the country of the Hurons – in short, to every part of the inhabited world where there were human souls who belonged by right to Jesus Christ. With inner certainty I saw the demons gaining victory over these poor souls, whom they snatched from the domain of Jesus Christ, our divine Master and Sovereign Lord, who had redeemed them by his Precious Blood ... In spirit I roamed through the vast stretches of the Indies, of Japan and China, and kept company with those laboring to spread the Gospel there. I felt closely united to

these workers because I felt that I was one with them in spirit. While it is true that in body I was bound by my rule of enclosure, nevertheless, my spirit did not cease its travels, nor did my heart cease its loving solicitations to the Eternal Father for the salvation of the many millions of souls whom I constantly offered him ... I am wise enough to teach all nations about him. Give me a voice strong enough to be heard to the ends of the earth to proclaim that my divine Spouse is worthy to reign and to be loved by all hearts.<sup>5</sup>

Sure that God was calling her to Canada, Marie endured ridicule and humiliation by priests who did not support her. But when the Canadian Jesuits decided they needed someone to teach Indian girls, Marie volunteered, and with two other Ursulines traveled to the New World in 1639 as the first Catholic cross-cultural women missionaries in the modern period. Marie's spirituality did not stop with being the "bride of Christ." Rather, her union with God meant that she worked for the conversion of the Indians. Within a week of arriving in Quebec, the nuns' cloister was completed and they moved in. Marie spent the rest of her life, over thirty years, behind convent walls running a school for girls and keeping the rules of enclosure until her death.

The handicaps that restricted Marie de l'Incarnation, the first missionary woman in North America, gradually lifted in the nineteenth century. Against huge odds, the heroic age of Catholic missionary women began. After the French Revolution, newly formed congregations of sisters traveled from Europe and opened girls' schools across North America, founded hospitals and nursed the sick, and supported desperate immigrants. In 1807, Anne-Marie Javouhey founded the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny to educate the young, and she sent sisters as missionaries to the French West Indies and French Guiana. Mother Javouhey educated the first Africans ordained as priests in West Africa. In 1883, German American Marianne Cope led six Franciscan sisters from New York to Hawaii, where they cared for lepers alongside the famous Father Damien. The Sisters nursed Damien himself, who died of leprosy caught from his patients. In 1921, the first six American Maryknoll sisters went to China, the first overseas destination of the first US-based women's missionary congregation. In China the Maryknoll sisters cared for orphans, started schools, and in some parts of China traveled two by two in evangelistic tours through villages.

Although celibacy was seen as a kind of daily martyrdom to the desires of the self, its deeper meaning for women throughout the history of Christianity

<sup>5</sup> *Marie of the Incarnation, Selected Writings*, ed. Irene Mahoney (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 113–14.

was that it symbolized their control over their own destinies and bodies, and the decision to serve God rather than men. Families often opposed Christian women's assertion of celibacy because it represented a loss of income or prestige by parents who expected to get paid for the sexual activity or marriage of their daughters. In traditional societies where male relatives owned women's reproductive functions, self-assertion of women's right to sexual purity was a site of struggle for Christian witness, and a cause of literal martyrdom. When Catholicism spread in Japan in the early seventeenth century, one of the reasons the shogun began persecuting Christians was because Christian women refused to serve as concubines – an unprecedented defiance of male prerogatives in patriarchal Japanese culture. Similarly, in Hawaii in the early nineteenth century, Christian female chiefs hid women in caves rather than let them submit to the casual sexual liaisons with visiting European sailors expected of them by native custom and demanded of them by foreign men.

In traditional African practice, women's reproductive capacity was purchased by the husband through payment of the bride price to the wife's parents. Yet in Africa, Asia, and America, as in Europe, a significant number of Christian women insisted on remaining celibate so they could serve God. In South Africa, Anglican pilgrims annually visit the grave of "virgin martyr" Manche Masemola. She became a Christian against the opposition of her parents, who opposed the spread of Christianity and the loss of "bride price" should their daughter resist traditional marriage arrangements. In 1928 Manche's parents beat her to death. Her remembered celibacy affirms the spiritual power of Christianity and encourages people in their faith. In North America, the first Native American woman on her way to official sainthood is the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, born of a captured Algonquin Christian woman and a Mohawk chief. Her decision to become a Catholic accompanied a choice for celibacy, and she was persecuted and forced her to flee her Mohawk village. Her subsequent ascetical life of prayer and charity toward others caused many Native Americans to become Christians. The virgin "Lily of the Mohawks" died in 1680 at age 24.

By the 1970s, vowed religious life declined among western women as celibacy began losing its social value. Lifestyle options opened up to western Catholic women other than the traditional choice between marriage or religious vocation. But celibacy grew steadily among women in traditional cultures, where the church was experiencing rapid numerical growth. Within long-established Catholic women's mission congregations, the number of young nonwestern sisters mushroomed even as the median age of western sisters increased. For example, one of the largest Catholic women's missionary institutes, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM), was begun by a

noble Frenchwoman, Mother Mary of the Passion, in 1877. Like the Jesuits, sisters of the FMM vowed to cross all cultural and geographic boundaries for the sake of the gospel; much of their work was concentrated in India. By the late twentieth century, Asian and African sisters from the traditional mission fields were typically younger than those from Europe and North America and thus represented the wave of the future. By 2004, of the 7,400 Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, 3,100 were Asian and only 2,100 were European.

The strength of Catholicism in nonwestern countries can be gauged by the determination with which women have insisted on remaining unmarried for the sake of the gospel. During the Cold War, anti-religious and anti-imperial movements pressured Chinese Catholic sisters to break contact with western branches of their communities. Participants in the violent Cultural Revolution forced Chinese nuns to marry. Some pretended to marry priests, or else returned to their families in the early nineteenth-century Chinese Catholic tradition of “virgins,” who lived with their parents and kept the church alive in the absence of missionaries. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, Chinese religious women re-emerged with their celibacy intact to instruct children and to train new generations of young women.

In the late twentieth century the largest increases in the number of female religious took place in Africa, where Christianity was growing the fastest. Despite initial local hostility toward African sisters as unnatural to African culture, celibate Catholic women gradually became a valued part of church life in the Congo, Nigeria, Kenya, and other parts of Africa. By the early twenty-first century more and more African Catholic sisters were choosing to become cross-cultural missionaries. Like the Catholic sisters of earlier centuries, who taught the poor children of European immigrants and provided social services to fellow migrants, African sisters moved into new areas as missionaries among African migrant populations. As did Annalena Tonelli, women around the world still decide to remain unmarried so that they may freely cross boundaries and serve others as teachers, healers, and witnesses to the Christian faith.

## **The Mission of Motherhood**

A year after the murder of Annalena Tonelli, the people of Borama gathered to remember her. Said Sheik Saweer, “Annalena was a good person who helped our sick and the poor. Her killing was an aggression that was contrary to the teachings of Islam. Our prophet said that anyone who killed a person, a non-Muslim as such, who was under his protection will never

smell the scent of paradise.”<sup>6</sup> Chanting her name, Muslim leaders, hospital patients, government officials, students, and communal elders carried placards declaring that “Annalena Tonelli was a mother, a sister and a friend.” Stated Sahra Abdillahi Faja, who continued Tonelli’s work against female genital mutilation, “We feel pain deep inside whenever we remember the killing of Annalena. I don’t think we will ever get a person like Mother Annalena. We have been orphaned by her death.”<sup>7</sup> Like many missionary women who identified closely with the people they went to serve, despite her lack of biological children Annalena Tonelli had become “mother” to the people of Borama. Tonelli was one of many missionary women over the past two centuries who earned the right to be acknowledged as a mother of the community. Missionary “mothers” often thrived in cultures with strong extended family ties. Like the celibate widows and virgins, the “mother” image originated in the early centuries of Christianity, in identification with Mary as the mother who bore Jesus and thereby gave birth to the church.

One of the most important and distinctive aspects of Protestant missions after the eighteenth century was the development of the family as the chief model for missionary outreach. When the Moravians sailed to the Americas as pioneer Protestants in mission, they took their families with them. Being able to read, Moravian women instructed Native American and African American women. Because Protestant ministers were encouraged to marry, Protestant missionary wives took biological motherhood into cross-cultural contexts when they finally became missionaries in significant numbers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In 1810 Congregational ministers in New England founded the first major American foreign mission agency, the American Board, to send theology students to India. At the insistence of the young ministers, who refused to go without partners, the American Board decided to allow its missionaries to marry. Of the five men sent as the first foreign missionaries from the US, three quickly found wives before they sailed in 1812. The parents of the other two men’s prospective fiancées refused to let their daughters marry the missionaries because they feared they would die a lonely death in a dangerous “heathen” land. The first missionary wives were well educated for their time, and had a strong sense of their own responsibility to serve God by rescuing women and children from eternal damnation. Marriage to a missionary provided a way in which they could live out callings to ministry that

<sup>6</sup> Bashir and Hashim Goth, “Annalena Tonelli Found her Bliss by Becoming One with the Poorest,” Oct. 8, 2004, Adwalnews Network, <<http://www.awdalnews.com/wmview.php?ArtID=3854>>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

otherwise would have been denied them because of their gender. Resistance to the idea of missionary wives nevertheless remained until at least the 1830s, because of the perceived dangers involved in taking women and children into parts of the world that lacked a western presence.

As “assistant missionaries” to their husbands, the chief role of the first three American missionary wives was to make a home for their husbands so that they could accomplish the core male tasks of translating the Bible, preaching, and founding churches. As pastors’ wives, they took on the job of ministering to women and children, including seeking to improve women’s status in society by educating them. 19-year-old Harriet Newell died from the effects of childbirth less than a year after sailing from Massachusetts in 1812, thereby becoming the United States’ first “missionary martyr.” After two years in India, Roxanna Nott returned to Connecticut with her husband when his health collapsed.

But the ingenuity of the third missionary wife, Ann Judson, confirmed the value of sending women as “helpmeets” for their husbands, and a new model of male–female partnership in mission was born. Ann became a household name and American heroine when she and her husband were rebaptized in India, and the Baptists in America organized a new mission board to support them. As a missionary wife in Burma, she adopted orphans, taught girls, translated Bible portions, and wrote the first history of an American mission. Ann fed prisoners and negotiated for the release of her husband and other Europeans imprisoned by the Burmese in their rebellion against British imperialism. She used the proceeds from the sale of her history of the mission to free young Burmese girls from slavery. She died at age 38 from her hardships, but her memory continued to inspire women to missionary service in the twentieth century. Demonstrating her deep commitment to the people, her dying words were in Burmese.<sup>8</sup> Even today, Burmese Baptist women trace the organization of their women’s groups back to “Mother” Ann Judson.

Whether they were biological mothers or unmarried workers sent by women’s missionary societies, nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary “mothers” often opened their homes to abandoned children. Care for children was a distinctive gender-based contribution of missionary women. The famous Scottish Presbyterian Mary Slessor became mother to hundreds of outcast women and twins thrown out to die in eastern Nigeria. Independent missionary Gladys Aylward moved alone to China in 1930 and became a

<sup>8</sup> Dana L. Robert, “Protestant Women Missionaries: Foreign and Home,” in Rosemary S. Keller and Rosemary R. Ruether, eds., *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 834–43.

citizen. In 1940, she gathered a large number of children and walked them for days over the mountains to escape from a dangerous war zone. After the war, she opened the Gladys Aylward Children's Home in Taiwan. An African American woman from Maine, Elizabeth Hall, became known as "Mama Hall" for spending thirteen years working with children in the Congo in the late nineteenth century. Mama Hall then moved to Jamaica and ran a children's home for many years. Eliza Agnew, the first unmarried female missionary in Sri Lanka, was called the "Mother of a Thousand Daughters" because she educated 1,300 girls over a forty-year period in the mid nineteenth century, and followed up by visiting them in their homes. Pandita Ramabai, a high-caste convert from Hinduism, founded a shelter and educational center for abandoned Hindu child widows, and then an orphanage for girls in the early twentieth century.

The missionary woman as "mother" to orphans was only one aspect of the mission of motherhood within Protestant missions. By the 1850s, British women in India realized that unless they could visit upper-class Muslim and Hindu women in their women's quarters, these women would never be exposed to the Christian message because it was not culturally appropriate for them to mingle with men outside their immediate families. Sir Monier Monier-Williams of Oxford University was widely cited when he opined that Christian mission would make little headway until British women could reach the Indian home – "until a way is opened for the free intercourse of the educated mothers and women of Europe ... with the mothers and women of India in their own homes."<sup>9</sup> Only the stabilizing force of a Christian family, with a Christian wife and mother at its heart, could sustain male converts in their faith. Therefore it was important for missionary women to visit secluded women in their harems and zenanas, and bring them to the Christian faith.

Missionary women in the mid nineteenth century developed their own mission philosophy called "woman's work for woman," in which western women supported female missionaries whose main priority was to work with nonwestern women and children. The philosophy of "woman's work for woman" assumed that women of the world were sisters, and that those with the privileges of western civilization needed to uplift their "heathen" sisters in Asia and Africa. While such ideas helped to mobilize western women for missionary work, they were also chauvinistic and laid the women's missionary movement open to charges of cultural imperialism. Although

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Rosemary Seton, "'Open Doors for Female Labourers': Women Candidates of the London Missionary Society, 1875–1914," in Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton, eds., *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 51.

women missionaries typically did not exercise political or military power, efforts to shape women's lives in accordance with western gender norms occurred in the ambiguous context of western colonial expansion.

The discovery of "unreached" Asian women and children in women's quarters stimulated the founding of dozens of women's missionary societies in the late nineteenth century. Supporters of women missionaries believed that if homes became Christianized, then entire societies would be transformed by Christianity. This logic unfolded by the late nineteenth century into an argument that the conversion of the mother was key to the success of the entire mission. Women's missionary societies systematically collected small amounts of money from church women in the west, and used it to send female missionaries to Asia and Africa. By the early twentieth century, in the United States alone there were over forty women's missionary societies with 3 million dues-paying members, thus making the "woman's missionary movement" the largest grassroots movement of women in the United States. Women missionaries from the United States, both married and single, came to outnumber male missionaries roughly two to one at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

The ideal of the Christian home as promoted by western missionary women reflected a combination of the historical Christian focus on monogamy in marriage with modern western ideals of partnership between husbands and wives. Missionary leaders like American Baptist Helen Barrett Montgomery, first woman president of a major denomination in 1920, argued that Christianity was the only religion to assume the basic equality of men and women, while Islam, Hinduism, and other religions assumed the inferiority of women and allowed men to marry multiple wives. In contrast, Christian marriage was seen as a partnership in which wives were respected, with a single standard of sexual ethics for both men and women. Christian families ate together, worshiped together, and promoted the education, cleanliness, and well-being of children. By the early twentieth century, missionary women were introducing the latest methods of home economics, hygiene, and child nurture – such as the founding of kindergartens, and clinics for mothers and babies – into the mission fields.

In 1938, at the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Madras, India, seventy Protestant women from around the world sponsored

<sup>10</sup> On the history of American women in mission, see Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), and "The 'Christian Home' as a Cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practice," in Dana L. Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

a major discussion of the meaning of “Christian home making.” Their report noted that the Christian home was a democracy in which men and women were partners, and a witness to the power of Christ for the improved well-being of women and children. They gave examples of home-based Christian rituals emerging in non-Christian cultures, such as home dedication ceremonies in Africa, new rice festivals in Thailand, wedding ceremonies in Japan, and mixed-caste Sunday schools in India. Home-based religion was a chief way in which women could build upon ancient cultural traditions to develop a holistic Christian faith.

During the twentieth century, the power of missionary motherhood resonated across all branches of Christianity. Among Catholics, for example, Joan Burke has written of late twentieth-century Congolese sisters, who, though they initially were derided as “sterile cows” because they bore no children, earned the right to be called “Mamas” of their people, nurturing them into Christian life and practices.<sup>11</sup> Among the Orthodox in 1920s Paris, Maria Skobtskaya felt God calling her to be the “mother of all” to destitute Russian refugees. “Mother Maria” opened a shelter and soup kitchen. From her work came the idea of “Orthodox Action,” a mission of hospitality to care for the displaced needy. The Nazis ultimately arrested Mother Maria for rescuing Jewish children being rounded up for imprisonment. She died in Ravensbrück concentration camp on Good Friday 1945, when she traded places with a Jewish prisoner about to be executed. By the 1980s, Skobtskaya’s example was feeding into a wider awakening of missionary interest among Orthodox Christians in North America. Although Mother Maria had been a nun, the Orthodox tradition of minister’s wife (Presbytera) as “mother” of the community evolved into a strong missionary role for priests’ wives when married Orthodox priests and their families undertook mission work in Africa and to former communist areas of eastern Europe after the Iron Curtain fell in 1989.

As Christianity spread into nonwestern cultures, family life acted as a shared priority and contact point between missionary and indigenous women. Although women’s roles differed across cultures in many respects, the idea that Christianity should improve family life was a key both to the conversion of women and for the founding of women’s organizations in different denominations. In 1930 the National Christian Council of China held a conference of ninety delegates (one-third of whom were men) on “Christianizing the home.” Under the guidance of Miss Ch’i Yu-chen, the Christian Council established a department for home Christianization. After

<sup>11</sup> Joan Burke, *These Catholic Sisters are All Mamas! Towards the Inculturation of the Sisterhood in Africa: An Ethnographic Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

World War II the International Missionary Council and regional church councils sponsored similar “Christian home life” conferences and projects in Africa, Southeast Asia, and other locations.

By the 1970s popular Protestantism – especially in a pentecostal form – was growing so rapidly in Latin America that substantial Protestant minorities emerged among such traditionally Catholic populations as those of Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, and Brazil. The wide spread of evangelicalism in late twentieth-century Latin America was closely connected to the family stability provided by Protestant models of home life, amidst larger disruptive social patterns of urbanization and migration. As families moved from farming villages to the cities, women became more dependent on the earned wages of men. Yet men were faced with new pressures and temptations to act “macho” by drinking, fighting, and visiting prostitutes. Major studies of the growth of evangelical churches showed that female converts outnumbered men two to one, and that women typically brought men into the church rather than the reverse. If women could convert their husbands to evangelical Christianity, the family prospered because the husband’s wages would no longer be squandered on male entertainments. In the words of anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco, as a “strategic women’s movement,” evangelical Christianity in Latin America had the chief effect of centering men’s priorities on the home. Instead of drinking, gambling, and taking mistresses, newly converted evangelical men began sharing decision-making with their wives and making support of their children a high priority.<sup>12</sup>

In the massive conversion of Africans to Christianity in the twentieth century, from 8 million Christians in the year 1900 to over 325 million in the year 2000, the role of women’s church groups was crucial for attracting women into the churches, and keeping them there once they joined. Known in different traditions as Mothers’ Unions, women’s prayer unions, or, in South Africa, *manyanos*, denominational women’s organizations were introduced by missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century. They quickly became the backbone of African churches, especially in light of male migration to the cities for wage labor. In Methodist *manyanos* women prayed together, sewed or raised money, and taught children Christian behavior. The Anglican Mothers’ Union, with its motto “Christian Care for Families Worldwide,” had 3.6 million members by 2005. In South Africa it ran day care centers, soup kitchens, orphan programs, literacy training, pre-marital counseling, and health management for those with HIV-AIDS.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

Women's groups promoted female solidarity by wearing distinctive church uniforms, and holding regional prayer and preaching conferences for women and girls. Women helped each other in times of illness or financial need, but also in giving advice and support for the task of raising children. One important function of the women's prayer union was to agitate for male monogamy. Since usually women could join only if they had Christian weddings, church organizations gave women an incentive to lead their husbands to the altar and thereby stabilize family life. The importance of mothers' prayer groups for African Christianity cannot be overestimated as a force for the spread of Christianity, and for its naturalization in diverse African contexts.

Since reproduction and motherhood are common gender-based realities for women of all cultures, the missionary as mother, and the mother as missionary, have both played central roles in the cross-cultural spread of Christianity. The ideal of Christian motherhood has been used to empower women, and to underscore female domesticity – paradoxically, sometimes both at the same time.

## Women's Well-Being and Social Change

In January 2004 an excited crowd of Muslim women, covered from head to toe, packed the large hall of a school in Berbera, Somalia. According to reporter Maggie Black, posters on the wall read: "The time has come to disarm! Lay down your weapons!"<sup>13</sup> Prominent speakers included the mayor, leading sheikhs, medical doctors, and midwives. The disarmament they urged was not to relinquish weapons of war, but to give up the razor blades, scissors, and knives that characterized the trade of the "female circumciser." In Somalia, 95 percent of young girls undergo female genital mutilation (FGM). This ancient practice to remove their external genitalia and sew up their vaginas, leaving only a small opening, is a leading cause of stillbirths, maternal death, and unbearably painful intercourse. The ostensible purpose of the practice is to obey the Quran and to maintain the purity and femininity of Somali women. But the custom pre-dates Islam and is not found in the Muslim Scriptures. After the speakers proclaimed the practices as contrary to Islam, and described the health problems and pain suffered by mutilated women, the high point of the rally occurred: six female circumcisers laid down their tools. Singing and dancing followed.

<sup>13</sup> Maggie Black, "The time has come to disarm! Lay down your weapons!", *Guardian*, Jan. 26, 2004, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jan/26/gender.uk>>.

The hand behind the anti-circumcision rally was the recently murdered Annalena Tonelli. In Borama, she had joined forces with a midwife and a local sheikh to found three anti-circumcision teams. The first anti-circumcision rally had resulted in twenty-four circumcisers laying down their tools. To solve the problem of the loss of the women's livelihood, money was collected for them to open small businesses, and Tonelli paid their children's school fees. Even though Tonelli stayed in the background, opposition to the movement was strong among traditionalists, leading to speculation that this was the real cause of her murder. Stated Sheikh Mohammad Sayeed, whose wife had suffered six stillbirths because of FGM, "We talk about mutilation openly. We persuade people that the innocent girl is their responsibility – we ask them why they are harming her. The whole world, not only us, is against this practice ... Annalena is now a Boraman. We call her *deeqa* – gift. She has done so much: her TB centre, deaf school, a blind school soon to be opened. Allah loves if someone helps others. Although Annalena is a Christian, Allah loves her and her work."<sup>14</sup>

### *Medical work and women's rights*

The connections made by Annalena Tonelli among women's rights, medical care, and social change embodied one of the strongest core values in the history of missionary women – that of improving women's well-being. Since 1869, when American Methodist women sent the first female medical missionary, Clara Swain, to India, a central priority of women's missionary activity was to improve women's lives by providing medical care and challenging customs injurious to women's health. The commitment to medical care was so strong that, by 1909, one in ten American women missionaries supported by Protestant women's mission societies were doctors or nurses, and American Protestant women were supporting eighty hospitals and eighty-two dispensaries around the world.

The beginning of medical training for western women coincided with the emergence of Protestant women's missionary societies in the mid nineteenth century. The confluence of these two movements was no coincidence, for a major platform in the philosophy of "woman's work for woman" was that the gospel message required improving women's physical well-being. Not only would attention to women's health lead to greater respect both for women and for Christianity, but medical work followed the example of Jesus, who healed many women and girls in his ministry.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The fact of gender-separate societies in Asia made urgent the need for women doctors; only women medical doctors could treat women patients. In addition, non-Christian societies expressed openness to women healers, when they opposed other forms of Christian activism. Clara Swain, for example, treated fourteen patients the day she arrived in January 1870. She immediately began teaching medicine to Indian women. She founded the first women's hospital in Asia. She made it known that her Christian principles opposed the seclusion of high-caste women who were not allowed to be educated, and she opposed female infanticide. In 1885 the Rajah of Khetri asked her to become a physician in his domain, thereby forging an important personal relationship between a prominent Hindu leader and a Christian woman, and also allowing a Christian presence in a Hindu kingdom. In 1873 Methodist missionary Lucinda Coombs arrived as the first female physician in China. Within two years, despite China being hostile to foreigners and missionaries, Coombs was allowed to open the first women's hospital. In the early 1890s the first Chinese women became medical doctors – after a woman missionary tutored them in science and English from childhood and then sent them through the University of Michigan medical school.

The connection between medical missions and women's health issues of necessity involved social change. Sometimes the changes were gradual, as were, for example, the growing acceptance of women as professionals and of western science. Medical missionaries hoped that attention to women's physical needs would increase respect for women by curing conditions that traditionally caused them to be rejected by their husbands and families. Early female medical doctors often collected evidence used to oppose traditional social customs. For example, around 1890, Dr. Nancy Mansell was so outraged by the mortality rate of child brides caused by intercourse with adult men that she led a successful petition drive to get the Indian parliament to raise the minimum age of marriage to 12. Female missionary doctors and teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries opposed foot-binding in China, female genital mutilation in Africa, child marriage, and social customs involving rape and other forms of abuse. Although they often faced opposition from the status quo both in the mission societies and in the mission fields, their successes were eventually achieved because they worked in partnership with progressive leaders in their host cultures.

Missionary concerns about the damaging effects of premature sexual relations and childbirth have been ongoing from the late nineteenth century to the present. For example, in 2005 vesicovaginal fistula was a condition that was found to be emerging in at least 100,000 women a year, who bore children too young without medical care, and thereby tore a hole between the

vagina and bladder. Such women became incontinent and barren, stank, and were rejected by their families. Only 85 to 90 percent of fistulas could be fixed, and incontinence remained a problem. A handful of missionary physicians in North Africa or on mission ships nearby specialized in repairing fistula for poor women, caring for them in special villages, providing them job training, and helping them begin new lives. While such care led to greater self-respect for the damaged women, it also challenged traditional social practices.

The tradition of fighting for women's rights remains a legacy of the women's missionary movement, and an important component of Christian witness in non-Christian countries. For example, after Japan's invasion of Manchuria, in 1932 Japanese Christian women bravely called for Japan to repent of its aggression, even though Christians were only a tiny percentage of the Japanese population. In the 1970s a Japanese Christian woman journalist named Yayori Matsui led a public demonstration against the habit of Japanese men taking Asian "sex tours." Having learned as a child from her Christian parents about the abuse of Chinese by Japanese, in the 1980s Matsui exposed the issue of "comfort women" to the world. An estimated 200,000 Korean and non-Japanese women were used as sex slaves by the Japanese military during the war. In the year 2000, Matsui's group held a Women's International War Crimes Tribunal with female judges and victims of eight countries, that found the Japanese emperor and military guilty of sexual slavery. While her feminist views were central to Matsui's stance against sex slavery, her Christian identity in a non-Christian country empowered her to stand against traditional Japanese decorum that silenced women.

Support for women's health and human rights remains a controversial and even dangerous area of mission activity because it challenges patriarchal customs that are often sanctioned by religion. Partnership between missionary and indigenous leaders has always been necessary for social change to effectively take place on behalf of women. Indeed, without such partnership, missionary women can be accused of being insensitive western "cultural imperialists." As with the work of missionary men, the work of missionary women for the past few hundred years has taken place against the backdrop of western colonialism. Missionary women's attempts to change gender roles often assumed that western practices were better for women than their own traditional cultures. Thus to avoid being culturally insensitive or imperialistic, when Annalena Tonelli opposed female genital mutilation she remained in the background and worked in partnership with Muslim leaders and midwives. Sheikh Mohammed Sayeed used Friday prayer services to preach that FGM was not supported by the Quran; and that, like the human

mouth, the vagina was not created by God to be mutilated and sewn shut. Despite Sayeed's support, Tonelli's involvement in women's health concerns put her life at risk.

Tonelli was not the only missionary woman to be murdered amid the increasing tension between the Islamic and western worlds in the early twenty-first century and the perception that missionaries embodied western colonialism. Because of the documented large gap between typical western and typical Islamic views of the roles of women, medical missionaries working in solidarity with Muslim women remained potential casualties of "culture clashes" beyond their control – even as local women appreciated their presence. On December 30, 2002, a gunman assassinated 57-year-old gynecologist Martha Myers in the Baptist hospital in Yemen where she had worked for twenty-four years, delivering babies and attending to poor women's health needs. Earlier that year, Swiss nurse and midwife Verena Kerrer was shot in Somalia while working in her hospital and school. As with Tonelli's murder, thousands of ordinary Muslims demonstrated against the murders and grieved openly for their Christian "mothers." Despite the fact that Christian medical women typically saw their work as a witness to Christ's concern for human needs rather than as an attempt to convert people, by the late twentieth century radical Muslim fundamentalist rhetoric was accusing Christian humanitarian workers of being evangelists in disguise.

### *Education*

Thunderous applause greeted Ambassador Gertrude Ibengwe Mongella in November 2004 when she rose to address Boston University faculty on the subject of the African Union Parliament and democratization in Africa. Mrs. Mongella had recently been elected the founding president of the Pan African Parliament of the African Union, thus making her the woman who held the highest political office on the continent of Africa. Among her many distinguished positions, Mongella had served in her native Tanzania as Minister of State for Women's Affairs; Minister of Lands, Natural Resources and Tourism; Head of the Social Services Department of the ruling party; and High Commissioner to India. From 1993 to 1995 she was Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, and more recently a goodwill ambassador of the World Health Organization. A teacher, wife, mother of four children, and feminist, she demonstrated her commitment to the well-being of women around the world when in 1995 she acted as Secretary General of the United Nations International Conference on Women held in Beijing.

Mrs. Mongella began her speech by thanking her hosts. Then she paused and said, "I must thank the American missionaries who came and started the girls' school in which I was educated. Without the work of the Maryknoll Sisters, young African girls like me would have had no opportunities to get an education, to become a teacher, or to attend a university." "But why are Americans not focusing on founding schools and hospitals like they used to?" she asked. "Where are the missionaries of today?"

According to United Nations statistics on the well-being of women, the greatest improvement in women's status during the twentieth century was due to the improved education of women. Studies have shown that better-educated women led to greater wealth for societies, and to smaller family size. The longest-lasting contribution in the history of women's mission activity was the introduction of women's education around the world. By the early twentieth century, the majority of girls' schools in Japan, Korea, China, and other locations, had been founded by missionaries despite social prejudice against women's education.

As Ambassador Mongella's words suggest, the majority of female missionaries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered themselves teachers, and saw the founding and staffing of educational institutions to be their central mission. Because women were usually restricted by church regulations from preaching and ritual activity, teaching was the female equivalent. Unable to "preach" because of church rules, missionary women argued that the Bible allowed them to "teach." The first Protestant missionary teachers were the wives of British missionaries in India. When American Protestant missionary wives went to Asia, they followed the example of the British wives and started their own schools. In 1822 the first unmarried American woman became an overseas missionary: African American former slave Betsey Stockton accompanied a missionary family to Hawaii and opened a school for children. After returning to the United States, Stockton taught First Nations children in Canada before becoming principal of a school for black children. In the 1830s, British mission supporters founded the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East to send unmarried women teachers as missionaries. Londoner Mary Ann Aldersey began the first school for girls in China in 1843, when the end of the first "opium war" opened select treaty ports to foreigners. However, the acceptance of unmarried women teachers was not widespread until late in the nineteenth century, once numerous denominational women's missionary societies had been organized to send them.

As with Annalena Tonelli's opening of schools for the deaf and blind, women's educational and medical work went hand in hand. Along with the first female doctor Clara Swain, American Methodist women in 1869 sent

Isabella Thoburn to India, where she founded the first women's college in Asia. What began in the early nineteenth century with the adoption of orphans, or home-based instruction, gradually grew into boarding schools and day schools, and then in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into colleges and universities. Within the confines of an educational institution, missionary women could instruct girls on academic, practical, and religious subjects. As higher education for women became more acceptable in the west, in the early twentieth century women's higher education burst forth in full bloom across all the older "mission fields." By 1909, American women's missionary societies were supporting over 3,200 schools, including eleven women's colleges in Japan, China, Korea, and India.

Women's education carried with it the potential not only for Christianizing the family and providing wives for local pastors, but for building strong women's leadership as part of the modernization process embraced by social progressives in the early twentieth century. Thus female literacy, higher education, and cross-cultural solidarity were embraced by pioneer generations of educated, nonwestern women. The first generation of these women earned degrees in the west and returned home as educational "missionaries" to their own people. For example, Helen Kim was the first Korean woman to earn a PhD in 1931. Under her leadership, Ewha Women's University – originally a Methodist girls' mission school – became the largest women's university in the world. Bryn Mawr graduate Michi Kawai, head of the Japanese YWCA and a principal of an important girls' school, was a leading internationalist and ecumenical movement leader during the 1930s. From South Africa, the Presbyterian teacher, social worker, and founder of the National Council of African Women, Mina Tembika Soga traveled to the International Missionary Conference meeting in 1938, the first African woman to attend an international conference. Afterward, Soga acted as a "reverse missionary" by touring the United States and speaking against apartheid in South Africa, and questioning racial segregation in the United States.

By the 1960s the western missionary teacher had become less important as a factor in mission because the idea of educating women and girls had gained wider acceptance throughout the world, and national governments took on the role of educating their female citizens. With the opening of multiple professions to women as they moved into the workforce in the 1960s, and the reduction of mission commitments on the part of western mainline churches, fewer women chose lifetime missionary teaching careers. By 1968 the number of western Catholic nuns had begun to decline. Those who remained often moved from teaching careers in large middle-class parochial schools into informal settings within poor communities, where they could

work on issues of human rights and social justice among the poor. While basic literacy training, Bible study, and skills training for abused women remained an important priority for many cross-cultural female workers, the heyday of educational institutions in missions staffed long-term by unmarried female missionaries – so nostalgically remembered by Ambassador Mongella – had passed.

### *Hospitality and evangelism*

Although early missionary women were interested in preaching and spreading the gospel across cultures, social customs and church regulations usually prevented them from becoming evangelistic missionaries. Preaching and the founding of churches were typically considered “male” tasks. For women, hospitality in one’s own home, and visiting non-Christian women in their homes, remained the chief means by which missionary women could find opportunities for verbal witness to the Christian message.

The roots of a mission of hospitality lie in the New Testament, where Jesus urges his followers to welcome strangers. Throughout the history of Christianity, hospitality was an especially important context for evangelism by women in situations where public proclamation of the gospel was difficult, if not impossible, because of cultural rules against women leading public meetings. Hospitality often involved opening a liminal space, a transitional place between the fully public and the strictly private, into which people could be invited and cared for. Between the world wars, workers with the international Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) set up drop-in coffeehouses (the *foyer* movement) for the hundreds of thousands of displaced European students who had nowhere to go and no money. In a quintessential statement of the female mission method, one woman worker noted, “One must never underestimate the importance of a cup of tea in the evangelization of the world.”

Hospitality to the needy stranger was a mission of inclusion practiced by Annalena Tonelli as she cared for social outcasts. While on the surface hospitality as a women’s form of mission seemed a fairly routine form of female activity consistent with women’s role in most cultures as nurturers and providers of food, it could actually involve a dangerous challenge to prevailing cultural norms. Welcoming the stranger entailed taking risks, as when Tonelli welcomed into her hospital an HIV-positive mother and child from another district – and received death threats for doing so.

When women founded their own missionary societies in the late nineteenth century, their sponsorship of unmarried missionaries made the idea of women evangelists more acceptable. In mid-century Victorian England,

a network of “female charitable visitors” went into the slums of London to visit and to assist the poor. In Germany, England, and the United States, Protestant deaconesses lived together in community and visited the urban poor, nursed the sick, and shared the gospel. The rise of the Salvation Army in 1878, as an evangelistic and service movement among the urban poor, relied heavily on female workers popularly known as “hallelujah lassies” who sang and preached in public. Street gangs and rowdy crowds attacked the Salvationist women with bricks and rotten vegetables, but the women were unusually effective in converting drunkards. The Salvation Army provided converts with work, food, and shelter.

In China, Korea, and other countries in Asia and Africa, women’s missionary societies hired mature indigenous women, called “Bible women,” to travel through villages, visiting women in their homes and introducing Bible study, singing, and prayers. Often a western missionary woman partnered a Bible woman. The appearance of the white woman drew a crowd, the Bible woman spoke in familiar dialect, and then together they taught the gathered women. At other times, Bible women carried the Scriptures into places where western women were unable or unavailable to go. While home visitation and traveling between villages remained a key priority for western women who had the necessary language skills, Bible women could be hired more cheaply and given Bible and literacy training in groups. The role of Bible woman was the first independent ministry role available to Christian women in Asia and Africa.

Although most Bible women worked among their own ethnic groups, some became “foreign missionaries” in their own right. For example, Chinese Bible woman and medical doctor Dora Yu became a pioneer cross-cultural missionary in Korea. Yu graduated from the first women’s medical school in China, run by Methodist women, in 1896. In 1897 Yu and her American missionary colleague Josephine Campbell opened the first women’s mission of their denomination in Korea. For six years, Yu worked as physician, teacher, translator, preacher, and house visitor there. In 1903 she visited 2,540 women in her role as Bible woman. After returning to China in 1904, Yu founded her own independent mission and became a prominent revivalist in the southern provinces of China. During the 1920s, she ran a Bible school, held Bible conferences on prophecy, and preached at famous revivals from which the founding generation of independent Chinese male pastors emerged. Dora Yu’s life exemplifies the linkages among the mission philosophy “woman’s work for woman,” revivalism, and the beginnings of indigenous Chinese Christianity.

In Africa, the woman evangelist faced opposition both from hostile male pastors and from non-Christian populations. Though rare, successful female

evangelists did exist, however, such as the Lutheran Paulina Dlamini, the “Apostle to the Zulus,” who was sponsored to preach by a pious white South African farmer in the 1890s. Another remarkably successful missionary evangelist was Amanda Berry Smith, a former African American slave who started her ministry by singing and preaching in American camp meetings, then went to India as a missionary in the 1880s, and then to Liberia. Smith combined evangelism with running orphanages for needy African and African American children. Wesleyan Methodist women’s missionary auxiliaries from the 1920s to the 1990s sponsored South African Bible women to visit women, talk about Jesus, and teach girls in Swaziland and the Transvaal. These women walked for miles carrying their meager possessions, and visited rural women in their kraals (homesteads) to discuss spiritual matters. The South African Bible woman was thus an important link between white colonial missionary organizations and the full-blown emergence of indigenous African Christianity.

By the late twentieth century, the rapid growth of grassroots Christianity in Africa had created new opportunities for evangelism by and to women. With the wide spread of women’s literacy, and a positive view of the work of the Holy Spirit in empowering ordinary believers, the work of women in healing and prayer movements became central to the founding of new churches around the world. In Ghanaian and Nigerian pentecostalism, prominent husband–wife revivalist and church leadership teams emerged that often specialized in “deliverance ministries,” in which people were exorcised of evil spirits and demons.

Although it was extremely difficult for a woman to found a church alone, women healers were sometimes able to attract marginal populations into new churches. For example, as reported by researcher Isabel Phiri, several Malawian women became major church founders in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Mayi Chipondeni was a deaconess in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, when she experienced illness and miraculous healing through faith. Ejected from her denomination, Chipondeni began the Namatapa Healing Church in 1992. The church specialized in cleansing rituals in which she prophesied over each person, and people repented of sins and vomited out evil spirits. After being purified, the people ate porridge to regain their strength. By 1999, Chipondeni had founded seventy-five gatherings in Malawi and Mozambique. She saw her healing movement as a form of evangelism, for the purpose of convincing people to follow Jesus Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Isabel Phiri, “African Women in Mission: Two Case Studies from Malawi,” in M. L. Daneel, ed., *African Christian Outreach*, vol. 1: *The African Initiated Churches* (Menlo Park, SA: Southern African Missiological Society, 2001), 267–93.

Bishop Mercy Yami was another Malawian evangelist who founded Zodabwitsa “Miracles” ministry in 1994. By 1999 Yami had five churches. She evangelized among poor rural women who lacked financial support, the blind, and drug addicts. Yami felt called to welcome with a ministry of compassion those marginal persons most neglected by mainstream churches. Thus she worked on providing clean water to the blind, and distributing food and clothing. Her primary calling as evangelist was expressed in her role as preacher during revival meetings and outdoor worship services.

The stories of Bishop Yami and Mayi Chipondenji illustrate the importance of indigenous women as boundary-crossing evangelists and church founders who undertake unique ministries that combine hospitality and evangelism. As Christianity spreads in Africa, much of the work of evangelism that was done even forty or fifty years ago by western missionary women, who walked long distances with their Bibles to visit women in their huts, is now being done by African women themselves.

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The history of Christian mission must focus on women, for the majority of Christians in the world are women. If judged by numbers of members, Christianity is predominantly a woman’s movement. Missionary women have typically placed the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel within a framework of service, healing, teaching, and hospitality. Whether as celibate sisters, mothers, teachers, social workers, evangelists, or medical doctors, the witness of women builds relationships. Even when conversion is not possible, as in the sacrificial life of Annalena Tonelli among Muslim Somalis, women’s webs of human relationships have been a chief means by which Christian ideas and values cross cultural boundaries.

# 6

## Conversion and Christian Community: The Missionary from St. Patrick to Bernard Mizeki

On March 17 each year, people of Irish descent celebrate St. Patrick's Day as a marker of Irish identity. Hundreds of thousands stream into Dublin to enjoy the fireworks, concerts, parades, and street theater. St. Patrick's Day parades began in 1762, when Irish soldiers serving in the colonial British army marched through the streets of New York City accompanied by Irish music. Today politicians lead annual St. Patrick's Day parades through the streets of large American cities in public celebrations of when grassroots organizing finally unseated the Yankee Protestant monopoly of city governments a century ago.

The paradox of St. Patrick's Day is that, in celebrating Irish identity, it also commemorates a fifth-century Catholic saint whose ministry incorporated a particular people into a multi-cultural vision of universal Christian community. The importance of St. Patrick was well expressed in 1921 by Seumas MacManus, author of the sentimental favorite *Story of the Irish Race*: "What Confucius was to the Oriental, Moses to the Israelite, Mohammed to the Arab, Patrick was to the Gaelic race. And the name and power of those other great ones will not outlive the name and the power of our Apostle."<sup>1</sup>

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Every year on June 18, thousands of pilgrims gather in Marondera, Zimbabwe, to remember the martyrdom of Bernard Mizeki, a Mozambican Anglican catechist. Bishops, priests, and members of indigenous religious communities, Mothers' Unions, laymen from Bernard Mizeki Guilds, and ordinary Christians travel annually from Zambia, Mozambique, South

<sup>1</sup> Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race*, rev. edn. (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1921), 124–5.

Africa, and Botswana, and other parts of Zimbabwe, and there are also occasional delegations from as far away as the United States. In 1996 an estimated 20,000 people came for the hundredth anniversary of Mizeki's murder. During the course of the twentieth century, Mizeki's reputation grew from his humble origins as "native house boy," to that of "native teacher," then important "missionary martyr," and finally as Anglican "Apostle of the Shona." At the centennial celebration the archbishop of Canterbury himself laid a wreath at Mizeki's shrine.

The celebration of Bernard Mizeki as a "saint" whose feast-day is marked on the Anglican calendar stands as a symbol of the growing self-confidence and communal identity of African Christianity in South and Central Africa during the twentieth century. Billed as the largest gathering of Anglicans on the continent, the annual Mizeki pilgrimage is also the only regular meeting of the entire Central Africa Province of the Anglican Church. Along with other popular pilgrimages across the continent, it shows that Christianity is fully at home as an African religion.

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Although divided by race, continent, denomination, and approximately fourteen hundred years of history, St. Patrick of the Irish and Bernard Mizeki of the Shona shared an identity as foreign missionaries. They both took the Christian message across cultural boundaries for the sake of converting people to Christianity. Not only were Irish and Shona cultures changed by contact with the gospel, but their Christianization reshaped the faith itself. Irish monks founded monasteries that kept alive the scholarship of the Mediterranean during the "Dark Ages" and traversed Europe as missionaries. Irish Catholics dominated the structures of the American Catholic Church by the mid nineteenth century. While the story of Southern African Christianity is still unfolding, the cultural unity among Shona people in twentieth-century Zimbabwe owed much to the missionaries who brought a common written language and educational system to scattered clans formerly enslaved by the Matabele and then colonized by the British.

Exploring the stories of St. Patrick and Bernard Mizeki shows how the relationship of the missionary to the receptive community is key to understanding the missionary's role in the ongoing historical process of forming communal Christian identities. As mission theologian Hendrik Kraemer noted in the 1930s, the missionary himself was the "point of contact" between people's traditional lifeways and the cluster of beliefs and practices called "Christianity." And as anthropologists have increasingly observed, "translocal and putatively foreign agents" are themselves important in the

production of locality.<sup>2</sup> The legacies of St. Patrick and Bernard Mizeki do not explain how Christianity has moved from one culture to another at all times and in all places, but they do provide insight into both the self-understanding and the significance of the missionary as an agent of religious and cultural change.

## Who Was St. Patrick?

Many Irish people would be surprised to learn that their patron saint was “British.” He was born in the northernmost Roman colony of Britannia into a Christian family. Although the Britons and the Irish shared linguistic and cultural roots, the Britons practiced mixed farming while the Irish were pastoralists. After they conquered the Gauls who lived in continental Europe, the Roman legions crossed the English Channel in AD 43 and conquered the Britons. But they never conquered the less centralized and less settled Irish. Even though the Britons and the Irish shared a “Celtic” cultural heritage, they were historical enemies who raided each other’s territories and enslaved the vanquished. Young Patrick was such a slave. He escaped from his Irish master after six years of servitude. Later in life, as a Christian priest, he felt called by God to return to Ireland to share his faith.

Why did a “Brit” risk his life and freedom to teach his Irish captors what he believed about God? How did a former slave become the beloved St. Patrick, the “Apostle of Ireland”? The life of the saint is shrouded in tradition and myth, as is appropriate to a heroic figure in Irish epic poetry, whose stories were passed down through the generations. According to legend, St. Patrick was a miracle-worker and healer. He drove the snakes from Ireland. He explained the threefold nature of the Christian God by pointing to the three leaves of a shamrock – divided and yet united into one. Patrick is also credited with ordering the written preservation of ancient oral Irish lore. Besides the myths and legends, direct historical evidence about Patrick is slim.

What is certain is that a Christian priest named Patrick left two documents written in the clumsy Latin of someone for whom it was a foreign language. Despite the difficulties in deciphering Patrick’s Latin, these were the first known documents written in Ireland, and are the only known “contemporary narrative of the conversion of Ireland to Christianity.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Orta, *Catechizing Culture: Culture: Missionaries, Aymara, and the “New Evangelization”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Tomas Ó Fiaich, “The Beginnings of Christianity,” in T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, eds., *The Course of Irish History*, rev. edn. (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 61.

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They also bear consideration as the first surviving substantial Latin texts from beyond the boundaries of Roman civilization. The words of Patrick, taken in historical context, tell us about his own identity and priorities, sense of calling from God, and mission work among the Irish that led to their conversion.

According to Patrick's *Confession*, he was born into a prosperous Romanized British Christian family. His grandfather was a Catholic priest, and so Patrick was at least a third-generation Christian.<sup>4</sup> His father Calpornius served as deacon in the church and as decurion, a government official in the Roman administration similar to a city councilor.

Decurions had heavy responsibilities

as local leaders who were expected to uphold the imperial Roman system at their own expense. Like other wealthy Britons, Patrick's family owned a villa with its attendant lands. Born a Roman citizen during the fourth century, he was part of a British elite that was proud of its participation in a larger Latin culture that stretched across the Continent and down to the Mediterranean. People outside the sphere of Roman control – such as the Irish – saw the Romans and their British supporters as sources of wealth and rare goods either through trade or plunder. At its peak, Roman Britain may have contained 2 million people, many of whom lived in towns.

During the fourth century Roman Britain enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity, with Christianity as a legal and favored religion. But British security was short-lived. As various Germanic tribes attacked the Roman frontiers on the Continent, and long-term enmity with Persia caused raids and warfare in the east, Roman garrisons were withdrawn from Britain and consolidated elsewhere. The British cities were left to their own defenses against the increasingly aggressive seaborne Picts and Irish. The effective end of Roman Britain occurred in 410 when Emperor Honorius withdrew the last Roman troops in what was probably supposed to be a temporary

<sup>4</sup> Celibacy was not enforced for Catholic priests until 1139.

measure. Soon the political and military structures of the western Roman empire lay in ruins. The shrinking and decaying western cities and Roman colonial settlements were left to protect themselves against the pillaging hordes of barbarians, or “outsiders.”

Along with many others, 16-year-old Patrick was seized from his father’s land by Irish invaders and taken by boat across to Ireland, where he was forced to work as a shepherd. To be captured as a slave was a common fate during the centuries when warring tribes dominated the Eurasian continent, for slavery was the major economic engine of the day. Slaves represented human capital for Romans, for Persians, and for the tribes of Europe who preyed upon both empires. The relatively prosperous and unprotected former Roman territories, especially in towns where people lived in larger numbers, were like ripe fruit waiting to be plucked.

### *The making of a missionary*

Patrick’s time of exile laid the foundation for his missionary calling. During the six years in which he was enslaved, his Christian faith grew stronger. Slavery involved nakedness, hunger and deprivation, and living among the animals. Although he had paid little attention to things of religion before he was captured, he began praying many times a day. “And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountains; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me – as I now see, because the spirit within me was then fervent.”<sup>5</sup>

One night in a dream he heard a voice telling him that he would soon return to his home. The voice told him of a ship ready to take him across the sea to Britain. Even though Patrick was 200 miles from the coast, he fled from his master. “And I went in the strength of God who directed my way to my good, and I feared nothing.”<sup>6</sup> Arriving at the shore, he indeed found a ship ready to sail, and he requested passage. The captain refused, and Patrick retreated to a hut to pray. While he was praying, one of the sailors summoned him to join them, and he embarked for the three-day journey away from Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> *The Confession of St. Patrick*, trans. from Latin by Ludwig Bieler, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <[www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/confession.html](http://www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/confession.html)>, 3. All references to Patrick’s *Confession* are from this translation.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

In Patrick's *Confession*, he recalls that in dealing with the "pagan" sailors he "refused to suck their breasts for fear of God, but rather hoped they would come to the faith of Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup> The Irish practiced a traditional Celtic nature religion. Druid priests memorized extensive amounts of oral lore and performed rituals to maintain the proper spiritual balance in nature. Refusing to be a "suck up" by betraying his faith, Patrick tried to witness to his beliefs even though he was in a vulnerable position as a run-away slave. For two weeks after landing, the group was desperate because they had not found any food. Patrick remained faithful to God during that time by refusing to offer sacrifices or participate in druidic rituals to the various nature spirits, gods, and goddesses of the sailors. No doubt he discussed his refusal to offer sacrifices by sharing his belief that there was one God, who was greater than all the smaller deities being invoked by the sailors. Finally the captain said, "Tell me, Christian: you say that your God is great and all-powerful; why, then, do you not pray for us? As you can see, we are suffering from hunger."<sup>8</sup>

Patrick responded to the captain's request with confidence, "Be truly converted with all your heart to the Lord my God, because nothing is impossible for Him, that this day He may send you food on your way until you be satisfied; for He has abundance everywhere."<sup>9</sup> Soon a herd of pigs appeared on the road, the group killed them, and stopped for two days to eat and to recover from their starved condition. They also found honey, which they sacrificed to their deities, but Patrick ate none of it. For the rest of their trip, the group found food, fire for heat and cooking, and had good weather. The day they finally ran out of food, they met other people. They had stumbled their way out of the desolate area, but it was a few more years before Patrick arrived home.

Although the story of Patrick's escape from slavery was not the beginning of his self-conscious identity as a missionary, it shows how his faith was sharpened and strengthened in encounter and dialogue with persons of beliefs different from his own. As a Christian, Patrick believed in the truth of one God, who was powerful over all things. When he prayed to God for food, and the herd of pigs appeared, it appeared to all that Patrick's God was the source of well-being and prosperity. The miraculous presence of the boat, the willingness of the sailors to take him, and the appearance of the pigs were all concrete signs of divine guidance and favor that would have been recognized as such by Celts, whether Irish or British.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

*The missionary calling*

One theme that appears throughout the *Confession* is the importance of dreams and visions to Patrick's confidence as a Christian, and to his calling as a missionary. A dream freed him from the fear that bound him to his enslaved condition, and ultimately a vision called him back to Ireland. Many years later, after Patrick had become a priest, he dreamed of a man bringing him letters from Ireland, one of which began, "The voice of the Irish." Patrick seemed to hear voices crying, "We ask thee, boy, come and walk among us once more."<sup>10</sup> Following his vision of Irish voices, Patrick had another experience of mystical union with God, in which he felt God praying within his body, and also beside and above him. At the end of the prayer, the mysterious force revealed itself as the Holy Spirit, and Patrick awakened. Through such mystical experiences, dreams, and visions, Patrick knew that God was calling him to return to Ireland as his "ambassador."<sup>11</sup>

For Patrick to meet God through dreams and visions would not have seemed unusual to the Celtic British or Irish, for in primal religions, from Africa to North Asia to the South Pacific and around the world, people have believed that deities and spirits communicate through dreams. Dreams or protracted periods of mysterious illness were frequently experienced as a call to serve particular ancestors or deities. In the Bible, the great missionary Paul was guided in his ministry and travels by visions of Jesus and dreams from God. Patrick's recitation of a dream as proof of his being called by the Holy Spirit would have made sense to ordinary people, and would have given him legitimacy on the popular level as a religious leader. What made Patrick's calling unique was not that he was called by God through dreams, but that he was called to cross cultures so as to communicate knowledge of the Christian God.

Patrick found deeper meaning in his faith when he became an enslaved exile. The idea of one God with dominion over all spirits and all peoples must have been deeply meaningful to someone torn from his homeland, who was surrounded by the spirits or demons of a foreign oppressor. Patrick's self-understanding as a wanderer under God's protection, and as someone who operated on the margins of society, was essential to his calling as a missionary. He stated repeatedly in his *Confession* that he was "rustic, exiled, unlearned," and "the outcast of this world."<sup>12</sup> He was a "stranger

<sup>10</sup> *Confession*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

and sojourner,”<sup>13</sup> “a stranger and exile for the love of God.”<sup>14</sup> Not only were Christians followers of one who had a wandering ministry on earth and “nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:10), but God’s spiritual kingdom was universal and not confined to a particular location on earth. Followers of Christ were “in the world but not of it” because their community transcended time and space, and crossed all human boundaries.

St. Patrick’s calling from God, and his missionary identity as a “stranger and sojourner” combined with his beliefs about the universal nature of the Christian message to entice him back across the dangerous sea to the land of the Irish. Although Patrick’s religious commitment began with mystical experiences that had their roots in Celtic cultures, he later interpreted his life experiences through the words of Christian Scripture, and the creeds of the church. Early in the *Confession*, he recited a creed that laid out his belief in God as “Lord of the universe,” and in his son Jesus Christ who was with the Father from the beginning of the world. Jesus became human, defeated death, and then was “received into heaven.” Jesus Christ had power “over all names in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess to Him that Jesus Christ is Lord and God.” The Holy Spirit was given to people to make them “sons of God and joint heirs with Christ” in eternal life. Patrick believed with other Catholic Christians that this “Trinity” – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – were together the one true God.<sup>15</sup>

Patrick’s calling was strongly motivated by his belief in the nearness of a day of judgment. As have many missionaries down through history, he believed he was chosen by God to be his “ambassador” not because he was educated or sophisticated, but because Jesus had prophesied that the gospel would be preached throughout the world before it ended. Patrick could testify that it had indeed been preached beyond the boundaries of civilization – in the wilds of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> Citing passages from the Isaiah that refer to what will happen in the end times, Patrick noted that “To Thee [God] the gentiles shall come from the ends of the earth”; and “I have set Thee as a light among the gentiles, that Thou mayest be for salvation unto the utmost part of the earth.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>14</sup> St. Patrick’s *Letter to Coroticus*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, New Haven: Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, <<http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1166.htm>>, 1. All citations are from this translation.

<sup>15</sup> *Confession*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 6.

The theology of mission that Patrick cited as a rationale for his own calling is known today as the “Great Commission.” Jesus’ final words to his disciples after his resurrection have been one of the major scriptural justifications for cross-cultural mission since the times of Patrick. According to historian Richard Fletcher, Patrick “was the first person in Christian history to take the scriptural injunctions literally; to grasp that teaching all nations meant teaching even barbarians who lived beyond the frontiers of the Roman empire.”<sup>18</sup> Patrick sought “to baptize and exhort a people in need and want” in obedience to Jesus’ command,

Going therefore now, teach ye all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world. And again He says: go ye therefore into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned. And again: This Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony to all nations, and then shall come the end.<sup>19</sup>

As the world of Roman Britain crumbled around him, Patrick felt himself burdened with Jesus’ final command to go into “all the world,” in anticipation of the end of time as he knew it. To Patrick, Ireland represented the “ends of the earth” beyond the boundaries of his known Christian world.

Another way in which Patrick liked to frame his missionary identity was by talking about Jesus’ prophecy to his disciples that they would be “fishers of men.” Jesus turned ordinary fishermen into witnesses who went into the world, teaching and baptizing people in response to Jesus’ message. Patrick himself was an ordinary person who was empowered by God to be a “fisher of men.” He wrote, “Behold, I send many fishers and hunters, saith God, and so on. Hence it was most necessary to spread our nets so that a great multitude and throng might be caught for God.”<sup>20</sup> Patrick’s use of the phrase “fishers and hunters” was an interesting word choice. Although the New Testament talks about fishermen, it never mentions hunters. Patrick’s use of the word “hunter” on more than one occasion gives a tantalizing hint of the way he must have adapted the biblical stories to the circumstances of the Celtic warrior/hunter cultures in which he lived.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: H. Holt, 1998), 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Confession*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

As the historical archetype of the cross-cultural missionary, Patrick was a man who believed himself chosen by God for the purpose of spreading the knowledge of God to a group of people beyond the frontiers of his own civilization. Patrick was not supported or funded by an imperial power. Not only had Roman troops withdrawn from Britain, but the western empire itself was collapsing. Patrick was vulnerable, and his life repeatedly endangered. He was an exile, a stranger, and a sojourner who lived on the margins of both Irish and British societies. Having suffered formerly as a slave, he had grown capable of the physical, psychological, and emotional hardships required to leave the people of his youth, cross political and cultural boundaries, and return voluntarily to the land of his captivity with no guarantee that he would survive to tell about it.

### *The Christianization of the Irish*

Archeological evidence shows that Christianity expanded rapidly throughout Ireland during Patrick's lifetime and in the century after his death, and that it readily coexisted with traditional Irish cultural and social institutions. Similar to the steady growth of Christianity in Oceania during the nineteenth century, the expansion of Christianity in Ireland took place on multiple levels, led by indigenous leaders who baptized thousands, built churches and monasteries, developed a system of education for the training of ministers, and acted as catalysts to the formation of Christian worldviews. Irish monasteries became centers of Latin learning and stimulated the "golden age" of Irish art. Irish missionaries took the Christian faith into Scotland and then throughout the world. Ireland's psychological debt to St. Patrick was expressed in the romantic statement of Seumas MacManus, that after his ministry the Irish "left the conquering sword to be eaten by rust, while they went far and wide again over sea and land, bearing now to the nations – both neighbouring and far off – the healing balm of Christ's gentle words."<sup>21</sup>

Why would the Irish – or any other group of people, for that matter – accept a foreigner in their midst and then accept enough of what he had to say so that an entire society gradually transformed its identity? Obviously Patrick did not convert the Irish by himself. Over the course of many centuries, Irish paganism and Irish Christianity coexisted. Ultimately, however, Ireland itself was reshaped by the beliefs and practices of Christianity. By adopting Christianity, and more specifically Catholicism, the Irish both maintained key aspects of their cultural uniqueness and entered into a

<sup>21</sup> MacManus, *Story of the Irish Race*, 126.

common discourse with other ethnic groups. Although Ireland's story is uniquely its own, the conversion of the Irish to Christianity was a process that linked them with other groups undergoing similar transformations, so that by the twelfth century there existed a shared cultural and religious heritage across most of Europe.

Anthropologists have noted the tendency of local religions to merge themselves into world religions as previously isolated peoples come into contact with other cultures – a process of moving from a microcosmic to a macrocosmic system of explanation for reality. In the process, some aspects of local culture are jettisoned, others are kept but channeled into new directions, and new elements from outside the culture invigorate the mix. Conversion involves a “process of identity development” in which individuals or groups take on a new “reference group” by which they evaluate “people, situations, and life projects.”<sup>22</sup> This conversion process takes place for many reasons that vary for each social context, and for the individuals involved. As the example of St. Patrick shows, the impact of the cross-cultural encounter is never limited only to “spiritual” or individual matters. Because missionaries are unavoidably part of larger social forces, their personal intentions are often different from the actual results of their presence. The missionary is seldom the only outsider involved in complex processes of social change. Patrick was part of a larger pattern of British and Irish interaction that involved trade, warfare and slave-raiding, and numerous cultural borrowings.

When Patrick began his mission work, there were already a few Christians in Ireland, though virtually nothing is known about them. Undoubtedly there were other Christian slaves. Irish traders with Britain had possibly learned something of Christianity, and some Irish mercenaries had served in the British army. Stones with Irish writing give evidence that some Irish people settled among Welsh Christians in southern Wales, and no doubt communicated with their families back in Ireland. In 431, Pope Celestine sent a bishop named Palladius to attend to the theological and spiritual state of the Irish Christians. Unfortunately nothing is known of Palladius' work. Could it be that Patrick's vision of the “voice of the Irish” summoning him for help was the voice of Irish Christians – even fellow slaves – whom Patrick knew to be without leadership or support in an overwhelmingly pagan land? Perhaps the emotional power of Patrick's sense of calling was based on his own memories of believers he had known. At any rate, he was certainly neither the first Briton nor the first Christian in Ireland.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Hefner, “The Rationality of Conversion,” in id., ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 25.

Patrick's writings are the only written documents that reveal something about the early mission processes among the Irish. Patrick returned to Ireland determined that "I must spread everywhere the name of God."<sup>23</sup> He sought to "faithfully serve the people to whom the love of Christ conveyed and gave me for the duration of my life."<sup>24</sup> To serve the Irish in the name of God meant laboring "for the salvation of others,"<sup>25</sup> and teaching the Irish the knowledge of God so that they would turn from worshipping idols and "things impure."<sup>26</sup> According to Patrick, many Irish were "reborn in God through me and afterwards confirmed ... clerics were ordained for them everywhere, for a people just coming to the faith" in fulfillment of biblical prophecies that Gentiles would turn to God in the last days.<sup>27</sup>

Patrick's chief goal in Ireland, then, was to bring people to faith in God, and to establish churches for them. This laborious process included administering baptism, the ritual cleansing in water of those who wished to live a Christian life in connection with the church. After baptism, the new Christians put on white robes and were sealed with scented oil to indicate their purity. From the beginning of Christianity, baptism was the visible sign of one's incorporation into the Christian community.

Baptism in fifth-century Europe always involved the defeat of demons. Because Celtic traditional religion was so concerned with satisfying nature spirits and plural gods, becoming a Christian entailed a difficult process of renouncing the spirits as "demons" and being cleansed of their power. Patrick's legendary reputation as a man of great spiritual power was undoubtedly related to his ability to fight demons in the name of the one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The defeat of demons through the "rebirth" of baptism was the beginning of a Christian life that renounced idolatry and numerous forms of impurity.

One remarkable feature of the thousands baptized by Patrick was that many were the offspring of clan leaders. With their extended clan structure, the Irish had a hierarchical system of organization led by many chiefs, or "kings." Patrick made a practice of traveling throughout Ireland accompanied by the converted sons of kings. Perhaps he used them as emissaries and guarantors of his own safety as he traveled from one place to another. Even so, he and his companions were taken prisoner and threatened with death many times.

<sup>23</sup> *Confession*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Because of lack of historical documentation, it is unclear why the Irish responded so readily to Patrick's message, and acceded to the rituals of baptism and then confirmation. Was it because of his lack of fear in the face of danger, and the tangible power he possessed over spirits, lower gods, and forces of evil? Was Patrick's message of one God a vehicle of inter-Irish unity and a way to overcome clan enmities, as opposed to the divisive nature of many different local gods and spirits? Did the ethic of peace implicit in Christianity create a way to resolve inter-clan rivalries? Were young chiefs drawn to the church because he could teach them valuable new kinds of knowledge, such as how to read and to write? Did the fact that Patrick was British mean that his perceived Roman cultural or political connections appealed to young Irish leaders as weapons in their own attempts to find new avenues to power or prestige, even though Ireland itself was never conquered by the Romans? Had a desire for change gradually permeated Irish society already, and Patrick's public ministry served to articulate change as commitment to the church? All of these explanations of why Patrick's message was so readily received are plausible; and all of them have been advanced to explain the appeal of Christianity at one time or another in similar tribal or clan-based societies. Although the documentation is lacking as to why it happened, the century following Patrick's death saw the great expansion of Irish Christianity. During the sixth century, churches appeared throughout the country, notably in the areas where he had traveled.

### *Missionary identification and Christian ethics*

Patrick's own writings give hints as to why his message appealed to the Irish. The first was the deep level of identification he felt with them. As do all good missionaries, he spent years among the Irish learning about their culture: he interpreted his enslavement as part of God's larger plan for his life task. He understood the Irish and knew their language. He spoke in idioms they understood, as is shown by the reference to his role as "hunter." He translated the deeper meanings of Christianity into Irish modes, helped no doubt by the Celtic roots he shared with them.

While most scholars have concentrated on Patrick's *Confession* as a defining document for mission history, his earlier *Letter to Coroticus* showed his profound loyalty to the Irish and helps to explain why they honored him. Patrick cared about the physical well-being and what are now called the "human rights" of the new Irish Christians. He began the letter declaring that he was the bishop of the Irish, who lived among them as "stranger and exile," and had sacrificed his "country and parents and my life to the point

of death.”<sup>28</sup> It seems that a British chieftain named Coroticus had attacked new Irish Christians, fresh from their baptisms by Patrick. Many were slain in their baptismal robes, and others captured as slaves.

In Celtic fury, Patrick cursed Coroticus and his men, calling them not Britons, but wicked “fellow citizens of the demons.” With all the power of his office, Patrick rendered divine judgment on Christians who murdered the innocent and enslaved their brothers and sisters in Christ: “Let every God-fearing man know that they are enemies of me and of Christ my God, for whom I am an ambassador.”<sup>29</sup> To be a Christian meant following the laws of Christ, including giving up the violence of murder and of enslaving one’s brothers and sisters in the Lord. Coroticus had even sold them as slaves to the non-Christian Scots and Picts. For these violations of Christian law, Coroticus would suffer the penalty according to the Scriptures: “The riches, it is written, which he has gathered unjustly, shall be vomited up from his belly; the angel of death drags him away, by the fury of dragons he shall be tormented, the viper’s tongue shall kill him, unquenchable fire devours him.”<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the actions of Coroticus, said Patrick, the Christians of Gaul sent men with money to ransom Christian slaves from the Franks and other heathen tribes. But Coroticus had taken new Christians, including women who had sworn vows of chastity, and betrayed “the members of Christ as it were into a brothel. What hope have you in God, or anyone who thinks as you do, or converses with you in words of flattery? God will judge ... Hence the church mourns and laments her sons and daughters ... who were removed and carried off to faraway lands, where sin abounds openly, grossly, impudently.”<sup>31</sup> Patrick cried out in “sadness and grief” for the killed and stolen Irish whom he considered members of the family of believers: “The wickedness of the wicked hath prevailed over us ... Perhaps they do not believe that we have received one and the same baptism, or have one and the same God as Father. For them it is a disgrace that we are Irish. Have ye not, as is written, one God?”<sup>32</sup> After predicting that the slain Christians would “reign with the apostles, and prophets, and martyrs” in the “kingdom of heaven,” Patrick concluded the letter by asking that it be read aloud “before all the people” and to Coroticus himself.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Letter to Coroticus*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

In this powerful letter, Patrick showed his identification with the Irish in his phrase “we are Irish.” He defended them with every ounce of his spiritual power and even defied a powerful military leader for their sake. To be a Christian meant to renounce murder, to not enslave Christians, and to live a pure life serving the one God. To be a Christian was to identify with a new “reference group” – the Christian family. Fellow baptized believers from whatever tribe or nation became one’s new family and should be treated as such. Racial and ethnic differences melted away in light of the larger common relationship in Christ.

The *Letter to Coroticus* shows that for Patrick the Christian ideals of brotherly love and identification in Christ overcame tribal divisions and ethnic hostilities. Patrick the missionary became Irish in solidarity with the suffering of the very people who had enslaved him as a youth. He denounced sin and injustice at grave risk to himself. In its ideal form, incorporation into the “body of Christ” meant choosing a way of peace and reconciliation that overcame ethnic boundaries, and renouncing the power structures of a warrior culture. Patrick’s solidarity with his converts shows why a Briton is remembered with reverence even today as the “Apostle to the Irish.”

The response of Coroticus and his men to Patrick’s letter was to laugh uproariously and to reject it out of hand, for in common understanding there could be no brotherhood or need to apply Christian values to those who stood outside one’s own ethnic group. Patrick was faced with the classic missionary dilemma: at some level, to the Irish he must have represented Romano-British imperial culture. After all, he was coming from the direction of the old empire, even if as an ascetic he had personally renounced the trappings of Romano-British power and prosperity. He brought a message that he claimed was universal, but may have seemed like an imperialist plot to his critics. Yet when he took a prophetic stand for justice on behalf of his converts he was accused of materially profiting from his mission work among the Irish. No doubt the more cautious British Christian leaders thought him a nonconformist troublemaker. This all too familiar scenario has frequently characterized the marginality of missionaries – caught between cultures, and subject to misunderstandings from both sides.

Yet Patrick’s *Letter to Coroticus* raises speculations that the inclusive social ethic of Christianity itself could have been a major reason for its spread among the Irish. Just as happened among the Tongans and Samoans and Fijians in the nineteenth century, the introduction of the gospel message among the Irish created a body of people who wished to transcend their warrior culture. Instead of wandering far and wide to kill and enslave people of other ethnicities, in the centuries after Patrick celibate Irish monks

wandered throughout Europe as missionaries – teaching and baptizing the Scots and other Celtic groups into the Christian family. The story of the conversion of the Irish is inseparable from the spread of Irish monasticism, and the launching of missionary journeys by the great Irish missionaries of the Middle Ages.

Another ethical issue that appears in Patrick’s writings and that could help explain the attraction of women to the Christian message was Patrick’s defense of the chastity and leadership of women, including his opposition to their enslavement. When Patrick mentioned the conversion of individuals in his writings, he specifically noted the conversion of a high-born Irish woman and her decision to become a “virgin of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Despite opposition from their fathers, who no doubt lost status and perhaps income from their refusal to wed, women converts were prominent in Patrick’s work. In both the *Confession* and the *Letter to Coroticus*, Patrick mentions the terrible situation facing women in slavery: “But greatest is the suffering of those women who live in slavery. All the time they have to endure terror and threats. But the Lord gave His grace to many of His maidens; for, though they are forbidden to do so, they follow Him bravely.”<sup>35</sup> His final appeal in the *Letter to Coroticus* was to ask that they “set free the baptized women whom they took captive, in order that they may deserve to live to God, and be made whole, here and in eternity!”<sup>36</sup> Not only had newly baptized women made the decision to remain virgins for Christ, but “pious women” provided financial support for Patrick’s mission.

Although little is known of women’s roles in Ireland before the coming of Christianity, its spread launched a new day for women’s rights once a Christian leader gained the public authority to limit warfare. In 697 the Abbott Adomnan (d. 704) issued the “Law of the Innocents” that gave the testimony of women legal force, and gave women limited property rights. Endorsed by ninety-one Irish kings and bishops, Adomnan’s law repudiated the previous situation of women as abused slaves and forced warriors. This attempt to legalize Christian standards toward women and children was unprecedented in Europe in that period. Christianity in medieval Ireland became known for the leadership of royal women as the heads of monasteries, and as political and spiritual advisors to men.

By the seventh century, monasteries stood throughout Ireland. Hundreds of monks lived within the largest of the earthen enclosures that marked their

<sup>34</sup> *Confession*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Letter to Coroticus*, 4.

perimeters. Christian monasteries composed the centers of settlement in a country that had no cities. The families of the founders of the monasteries provided them material support, and they stood on family land. Monks busied themselves with learning Latin, and copying Latin texts in beautiful Irish calligraphy. In contrast to the oral lore of the traditional druidic scholars, a striking feature of Christianity was that it facilitated the skills of reading and writing. Writing was itself seen as a form of magical spiritual power by the pagan Irish. According to an early life of Patrick, his “clergy advanced through a land without writing, holding open texts ‘like drawn white swords.’”<sup>37</sup> With literacy on their side, the monks of Christian Ireland provided a focal point for Christian laws and teachings that promoted and stabilized a pan-Irish unity. Christian monasticism stood as witness against inter-tribal militarism and the lawlessness of gang warfare.

What remains today of ancient Irish epic poetry and pre-Christian legends exists because Christian monks wrote them down in an effort to preserve their cultural heritage. Irish Christian scholarship became so important that the Irish monks cultivated the knowledge of ancient Greek, and so were able to mediate Aristotle and other ancient texts to Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance. Although Patrick himself was a humble man who repeatedly apologized because he struggled to express himself in broken Latin, a century later a fine Latin education was available in Ireland. The monks who followed Patrick in succeeding centuries became the repository of classical learning after the destruction of the western Roman empire.

And what of Patrick himself? As the centuries unfolded, the uneducated former slave, self-appointed ambassador, exile, and outcast who was mistreated by the authorities of his day, evolved into the patron saint of Ireland. His persistence and his spiritual power became the source of legends. Admiring biographers attributed to him miracles and power encounters against druid priests, as well as crediting him with the ultimate success of Christianity over paganism, as symbolized by the snakes he allegedly expelled from the Emerald Isle. Various representations of Patrick show him battling snakes, or holding a shamrock to symbolize his teachings about the Trinity, or reading and writing. According to a seventh-century life of Patrick, St. Patrick’s “breastplate,” a *lorica* or special words spoken for protection against evil forces, purportedly turned him into a deer to escape from a druid king. Later generations believed that reciting the prayer would protect them from evil for twenty-four hours.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 204.

In the early Middle Ages, “pilgrimage merged insensibly into mission.”<sup>38</sup> The Christianization process of the Irish not only involved religious specialists but ordinary people, who undertook pilgrimages to places overflowing with the spiritual power of Patrick himself. One ancient holy site that was transformed into a destination for Christian pilgrims was Croagh Patrick, a conical-shaped mountain near Westport, County Mayo. This holy mountain still sees 25,000 pilgrims visiting on “Reek” Sunday each July. According to tradition, Patrick undertook a forty-day Lenten fast there in 441. He prayed, saw visions, and was comforted by divine messengers who assured him Ireland would one day be Christian. Roman Catholic authority over Irish Christianity was also confirmed in popular consciousness by the tradition that Patrick had learned of the consecration of Pope Leo the Great while he was on the mountain. He immediately sent word of his obeisance to the Pope, and was rewarded by the gift of holy relics from Rome. After blessing the people, and ensuring that no snakes could remain in Ireland, Patrick descended the mountain and celebrated Easter with his followers.

The legends of Croagh Patrick are significant not because they contain historical facts but because they illustrate how Christianity transformed Irish worldviews in the name of Patrick. In stories from the lives of Patrick written several hundred years after his death, Patrick’s ministry converted the pagan holy mountain into a Christian holy site, drove away snakes – a symbol of pagan divinity – suffused the mountain with holy power and miracles, and also linked Irish Christianity to Roman Catholicism. The ongoing presence of European pilgrims at Croagh Patrick, as well as at other sites associated with Patrick, affirmed both Irish Christian identity and unity with the rest of Catholic Europe.

Patrick’s stature grew in tandem with the shaping of Irish national identity. Patrick the man left two poorly written but passionate documents. Patrick the saint left a unified Irish people who paradoxically – and perhaps unreflectively – took their place as part of a multi-cultural and global religious family, which shared in theory, if not in practice, a universal ethic of love and justice under one God.

## **Bernard Mizeki, “Apostle to the Shona”**

What can be gained by comparing a fifth-century Briton among the Irish, with a nineteenth-century Mozambican among the Shona? The appropriation of Patrick by the Irish demonstrates how ancient history and myth can

<sup>38</sup> Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 94.

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illuminate the messy process of the spread of Christianity in southern Africa today. Conversely, controversies over the significance of Bernard Mizeki likewise reveal how the contemporary expansion of Christianity can enlarge interpretations of historical processes whose details are lost in the mists of time. In the cases of both St. Patrick and Bernard Mizeki, the significance of the missionary lies in how his growing “sainthood” was intertwined with the emerging Christian identity of the communities that evoke his memory.

Although Bernard Mizeki did not write famous missionary reflections as did St. Patrick, more facts are known about his life. He was born in 1861 and named Mamiyeri

**Figure 6.2** Icon of Bernard Mizeki  
By Robert Lentz, iconographer

Mizeka Gwambe. He was an ethnic Shangaan who grew up near the Bay of Inhambane in the Portuguese colony that became Mozambique. As a young teen curious about the world, he sailed to Cape Town, South Africa. The port was a bustling, multi-cultural hub for international trade, and Mizeki found a job in a butchery. Around age 20, with some fellow migrants, he began attending a night school run by a German missionary woman under the aegis of the Cowley Fathers, a high church Anglican monastic community that sent missionaries to the Cape Colony. Under the influence of deaconess Fräulein von Blomberg, Mizeki struggled with his reading and writing, but he was fascinated by instruction in Scripture and the rudiments of Christianity. Said his teacher, “in everything concerning religion he was always the first and best pupil.”<sup>39</sup> Taking the name Bernard, in 1886 he was in the first group of seven converts baptized by the Cowley Fathers in Cape Town. The next phase of Bernard’s life consisted of forsaking secular employment, moving into a church hostel, and becoming a mission worker with the Cowley Fathers.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Farrant, *Mashonaland Martyr: Bernard Mizeki and the Pioneer Church* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1966), 23.

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**Figure 6.3** Bernard Mizeki's baptismal portrait (second row, fourth from the right)  
*From Jean Farrant, Mashonaland Martyr*

Mizeki's baptism coincided with the period of the "scramble for Africa." After the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, European governments divided the continent into spheres of influence. In 1888 the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes obtained the mineral rights over the vast territory controlled by the Ndebele King Lobengula. Chartered as the British South Africa Company, a group of adventurers hired by Rhodes invaded and conquered the lands of the Ndebele and the Shona, thereby opening the territory of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to European conquest and settlement. At the same time, increased interest in world evangelization was drawing half a dozen Christian denominations to the unevangelized regions of South Central Africa. The struggle for influence among the Shona, and the church's uneasy relationship with the European adventurers and settlers who founded Rhodesia, was captured by the comment of missionary David Carnegie in 1889 to the London Missionary Society, "Gold and the gospel are fighting for the mastery, and I fear gold will win."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> David Carnegie, quoted in Constance E. Fripp and V. W. Hiller, eds., *Gold and the Gospel in Mashonaland 1888: Being the Journals of the Mashonaland Mission of Bishop Knight-Bruce, and the Concession Journey of Charles Dunell Rudd* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. v.

As part of the ecclesiastical race for Rhodesia, Bernard Mizeki was one of several “native catechists” who accompanied Anglican Bishop George Wyndham Hamilton Knight-Bruce on a boat from South Africa to Portuguese East Africa, and then inland to the newly established episcopal see of Mashonaland in 1891. Already in 1888, Knight-Bruce, then bishop of Bloemfontein in South Africa, had walked through Mashonaland and negotiated with the Ndebele king in hopes of someday being allowed to open missions among the Shona. An offshoot of the Zulu, the Ndebele had treated the Shona as a slave class since 1840, when Shaka Zulu’s lieutenant Mzilikazi had invaded their homeland and subjected them to a scorched earth policy. Knight-Bruce opposed the Rudd concession that granted Shona territory to Cecil Rhodes in exchange for weapons for the Ndebele king. Although Knight-Bruce eventually came to terms with the changing realities before he died from complications of malaria in 1896, he continued to lament the European colonization of Mashonaland. “I have said that for me the charm of the country vanished with the coming of the white man.”<sup>41</sup>

Knight-Bruce and his catechists overcame great obstacles to walk across the new 20,000 square mile diocese in 1891. The bishop negotiated with Shona chiefs to allow missions in their territories. Thus Bernard Mizeki, born in Mozambique, minimally educated in South Africa, and with little knowledge of either the Shona people or their language, was settled in the territory of Chief Mangwende. The only other African catechist who could stand the isolated life and remain faithful to the Anglican missionary vision, Frank Ziqubu, settled in the territory of Chief Makoni. Mizeki’s isolation was broken by visits of Fr. Douglas Pelly, a young white missionary who divided his time between the two mission outposts.

Bernard Mizeki’s ministry among the Shona lasted five years. In that time he proved himself to be the best linguist of the Anglicans in Rhodesia. He mastered the spoken dialect within a year. Ultimately he came to know eight African languages, as well as English, Dutch, Portuguese, and some French, Greek, and Latin. In his mission work he traveled among villagers, led the daily prayers and worship of the church, kept a successful garden that included vegetables and flowers, and taught children. One of his attractions for the people was his superior musical ability, and he gave singing lessons and taught hymns. Both white colonists and Mangwende’s people liked his charismatic personality. The senior wife of Chief Mangwende became his special patron, and many high-ranking women were attracted to the mission. In 1895, Mizeki’s status with Chief Mangwende was sealed when an itinerant

<sup>41</sup> G. W. H. Knight-Bruce, *Memories of Mashonaland* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895), 81.

Anglican priest married Bernard to the chief's adopted granddaughter, a Shona woman named Mutwa. In that year, Bernard worked in a translation team, putting prayers and Bible portions into Shona.

As Bernard grew more confident in his understanding of local customs, he challenged the work of *ngangas*, the traditional diviners and healers. In African primal religions, people believed that misfortune was caused by evil ancestors, spirits, or persons using witchcraft against others. The role of traditional diviners was to diagnose the source of evil, including identifying and punishing accused witches. Through prayer, Mizeki opposed the animal sacrifices of the *ngangas*. In many African cultures, twins were considered an evil omen and were destroyed. He rescued twins and opposed the punishment of witches.

In his contests with the powers of the traditional religion Bernard Mizeki's role paralleled that of St. Patrick, and even that of Jesus, who was famous during his lifetime for casting out evil spirits. To combat traditional explanations for illness, he participated in vaccination campaigns and supported western medicine. In religious instruction, he tried to teach the people that Mwari was a loving God who listened to people and met their personal needs.<sup>42</sup> As Mizeki gained influence with the local chief, around 1894 he received permission to found a settlement at a sacred grove on a stream-fed mountain. Bernard removed some of the sacred trees and planted a large garden and experimental wheat crop. He protected his garden from the movement of ancestral spirits across the land by carving crosses into trees around its perimeter. These spiritual and economic challenges to the traditional spirit mediums – opposing their healing practices, desecrating a sacred grove, using crosses to ward off territorial spirits, and drawing followers to the new ways of western literacy, medicine, and agriculture – proved to be fatal when in 1896 the Shona rebelled against the British.

With the founding of Rhodesia in 1893, it became apparent that British colonialism had come to stay in the lands of the Ndebele and the Shona. Although the Shona had been brutally subjugated by the Ndebele, they nevertheless saw the British defeat of King Lobengula as a deeper challenge to their way of life, especially when Rhodesia imposed such things as hut taxes, disease control regulations, and the branding of cattle. Incorporation into the colonial economy gave the advantage to modernizers like Mizeki, who had access to western commodities. Led by traditionalist spirit mediums and a series of directives from the traditional high god in the Matopo Hills, the Ndebele revolted against the British, and the Shona soon followed. As the

<sup>42</sup> Mwari is the name of the Shona high god, whose central oracle resides in the Matopo Hills.

uprising began, Mizeki was warned to leave his mission and take refuge in a safer location. But with a pregnant wife, and as benefactor of his small village, Mizeki wrote, “Mangwende’s people are suffering. The Bishop has put me here and told me to remain. Until the bishop returns, here I must stay. I cannot leave my people now in a time of such darkness.”<sup>43</sup>

After midnight on June 18, 1896, three of Chief Mangwende’s male relatives came to the mission, stabbed Bernard with a spear, and left him for dead. There are several possible reasons why Mizeki was attacked, ranging from his threatening role as a link to the colonial economy, to family jealousy at his influence with Mangwende and his head wife. The conversion of the chief and his first wife potentially disempowered the relatives of other wives because Chief Mangwende would have had to give up his multiple wives. Mizeki’s Christian worldview challenged the *ngangas* who were directing the revolt. Mizeki’s economic power to access trade goods, his perceived political power through friendship with white farmers, and his playing the role of interpreter between blacks and whites all made him a threat to traditional power structures in Mangwende’s community. As with other bridge figures living unprotected among local people, he became particularly vulnerable in a political situation that divided people along ethnic and cultural lines.

Mizeki managed to crawl to the nearby stream and wash his wounds. His wife Mutwa and another woman went to his hut to gather blankets and make him some gruel. As they later testified for the written record in 1909, when they walked back up the mountain, they saw a blinding white light and heard a noise like many birds’ wings where Bernard had lain. When they looked again, he had disappeared and his body was never found. As at the tomb of Jesus, women witnessed to the miraculous disappearance of his body. One month later, his closest student, John Kapuya, accepted baptism as the first Shona convert of the Anglican mission.

### *Evolving views of Mizeki*

Because Cecil Rhodes gave lands to the Anglican Church, Mangwende’s territory remained under Anglican control after the suppression of the rebellion. In 1899 a white Anglican priest returned to the site of Mizeki’s mission and built a small school for boys. Sometime in the early twentieth century, Father Ernest Simpson tentatively identified the site of the martyrdom, painted a cross there, and held an annual service on June 18. Then, in 1933, Father Edwin Crane found the floor of a hut underneath collapsed ruins

<sup>43</sup> Mizeki, quoted in Farrant, *Mashonaland Martyr*, 208–9.

that some elderly people identified as the location of Mizeki's hut. Over this place of martyrdom Crane built a circular shrine, with an altar, elevated above the original mud floor. On June 21, 1938, about a thousand Africans and a hundred Europeans celebrated a high mass at the dedication of the shrine. In 1946, 600 persons gathered for the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of Mizeki's martyrdom, including two bishops, many clergy, and a message read from the governor of Rhodesia. Two thousand communicants participated in a special communion service, including Mizeki's widow and daughter as guests of honor.

Africans outnumbered Europeans as participants, but the annual communion celebration marking the Mizeki anniversary remained under the control of white bishops and clergymen well into the mid twentieth century. The Cowley Fathers promoted his reputation wherever they did mission work. White prelates sang his praises as an exemplary convert, who in traveling the road from convert to martyr, remained faithful to his missionary calling. Although Mizeki's faithfulness to the Shona people was heralded as the reason why he was considered a martyr, his popularity among white Anglicans remained assured because he had also been faithful to them. He had maintained friendships with white colonists and priests, and he remained where the bishop had placed him. In the view of historians Terence Ranger and Janet Hodgson, white colonialists promoted the Mizeki site as part of an early twentieth-century pilgrimage strategy to create "a new mystical geography" that would cement African loyalty to Anglicanism. From a white Rhodesian perspective, the non-racial shrine "could be used to foster loyalty to cross and crown. Mizeki thus became the prototype Christian colonial citizen."<sup>44</sup>

The white archbishop of the new Province of Central Africa first visited the shrine in 1960 and acted as celebrant and preacher with the white bishop of Mashonaland. The diocese authorized an official biography of Mizeki, which was published in 1966 as *Mashonaland Martyr* by Jean Farrant. By the time of the book's publication, memorials to Mizeki in South Africa, Rhodesia, Botswana, and Swaziland included half a dozen stained-glass windows, two reliquaries, several murals and carvings, half a dozen churches and schools bearing his name, and the inclusion of his name on the Anglican provincial calendars of South and Central Africa.

The nationalist struggles of the 1950s and 1960s undercut the neatly defined colonial appropriation of Mizeki. African colonies began throwing

<sup>44</sup> Janet Hodgson citing Terence Ranger in "Ecclesial Communities of the Excluded," in Dana L. Robert, ed., *African Christian Outreach*, vol. 2: *The Mission Churches* (Menlo Park, SA: Southern African Missiological Society, 2003), 117–55: 134.

off European rule. Although Rhodesia's large number of white farmers resisted the black freedom struggle, a significant number of white church leaders had embraced African nationalism by the 1960s. In 1961 Rhodesian bishop Cecil Alderson reinterpreted Mizeki as a prophet, a "forerunner of the African nationalist intellectual."<sup>45</sup> In a concession to Shona theologies of ancestral intervention, Alderson by the mid 1960s was also arguing that African belief in the intervention of ancestors was consistent with Christian beliefs in the intervention of the saints on behalf of the living. Mizeki's path to symbolic sainthood during the 1960s was not simple, however. Once civil war broke out in Rhodesia in 1965, Mizeki could no longer serve as an effective symbol of non-racialism. To Shona priest Father Salathiel Madziyire, keeper of the shrine in the 1970s, the Mizeki shrine was primarily a symbol of cultural nationalism. But to many others who were fighting for freedom from the white regime Mizeki remained a colonial collaborator. As the bloody Rhodesian civil war continued through the 1970s, participation in the Mizeki pilgrimage shrank precipitously. During *chimurenga* (the liberation war), interpretations of Mizeki became as fractured as his followers.

### *Mizeki after colonialism*

By the 1960s, with decolonization in full swing throughout Africa, both churches and states lurched unevenly toward indigenous control. Anglicanism was beginning the post-war expansion that would roughly double its numbers from about 40 million in 1960 to about 80 million in the year 2000, largely through growth among Africans. The decolonialization of the Mizeki celebration occurred in tandem with the expansion and deepening of Christianity as an African religion.

Ironically, even when Mizeki was still considered a colonial collaborator by Shona revolutionaries in Rhodesia, his reputation as a symbol of African resistance was spreading more broadly. In the late 1960s black Anglican migrants working in South Africa felt excluded from ordinary churches and began attending Methodist, African indigenous, and parachurch gatherings that allowed them to express their cultures in prayer, song, and revivalistic worship styles. With the dedication of a largely migrant church in Paarl, South Africa, to Bernard Mizeki in 1973, the Bernard Mizeki Guild was established for Anglican laymen who sought a more intense, African-style worship life including all-night prayer vigils, healing, and sharing of dreams. Composed largely of Xhosa-speaking migrant workers, Bernard Mizeki

<sup>45</sup> Terence Ranger, "Taking Hold of the Land: Holy Places and Pilgrimages in Twentieth-Century Zimbabwe," *Past and Present* 117(1987), 158–94: 190.

Guilds spread across South Africa.<sup>46</sup> Laymen wore purple waistcoats, a special badge, and danced with staves – a traditional symbol of authority. Anglican migrant workers could identify with Bernard Mizeki as a fellow migrant who sacrificed himself for Christ. By linking lay piety to the name of Bernard Mizeki, Anglicanism was also able to slow defections to the Methodists and to the indigenous churches. Members of Bernard Mizeki Guilds aspired to make the annual pilgrimage to the Mizeki festival.

After the end of the civil war, and the establishment of Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia) under black majority rule in 1980, the Mizeki pilgrimage entered a period of rapid growth. The formal eucharistic celebration on Saturday morning of the annual pilgrimage transitioned from white to black episcopal leadership. But the deeper contextualization of the Mizeki pilgrimage occurred at the informal, lay level. In the growing popularity of Bernard Mizeki, his meaning became Africanized alongside a deepening of Anglican unity across multiple African cultures. The great popularity of the pilgrimage can be seen as continuous with Shona traditions of pilgrimages to the burial places of chiefs in the mountains. Since such gatherings also affirmed the ties of people with the land, the postcolonial “mystical geography” of the Mizeki pilgrimage celebrated black indigenous control of a liberated Zimbabwe. When the archbishop of Canterbury laid a wreath on his shrine at the centennial pilgrimage in 1996, it was not to honor a faithful colonial retainer but to honor as an Anglican martyr “a simple catechist in Mashonaland who died for his witness for justice.”<sup>47</sup>

Descriptions of pilgrimages from the late 1990s and early 2000s reveal multiple layers of African Anglican identity expressed in the celebration of Bernard Mizeki.<sup>48</sup> Laypeople arrived in the thousands on buses and trucks from South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Botswana, and of course Zimbabwe for the weekend nearest the martyrdom anniversary of June 18. Recalled Fr. Stephen Gendall, who led an annual delegation of thirty from his parish,

I can never forget the experience of coming around the final corner on the strip road and seeing our destination: the black hillside with the glow of scattered wood fires. As we drew closer we could make out people walking,

<sup>46</sup> Hodgson, “Ecclesial Communities,” 135.

<sup>47</sup> Archbishop Rowan Williams, sermon in Odibo, Namibia, Jan. 30, 2000: Anglican Communion News Service 2011, Feb. 7, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> I am indebted to interviews with the following persons for descriptions of the Mizeki pilgrimage: the Revd Gift Makwasha, the Revd John Kaoma, the Rt. Revd Godfrey Tawonezwi, and Lin and Liz Parsons.

dancing and singing, or huddled by their fires. Before we knew it we were in the midst of the thousands of pilgrims. The singing was loud and drums were beating; the mountainside was alive with worship to God.<sup>49</sup>

Pilgrims camped out from Thursday until Sunday of the Mizeki pilgrimage weekend. Mothers' Union members, in their distinctive blue and white uniforms, surrounded the shrine where they sang hymns and preached. Younger people, camping farther from the shrine, mingled with each other while singing praise choruses, dancing, and eating. People cooked their food on wood fires and huddled near them on the cold winter nights. In the spirit of an old-fashioned camp meeting or an all-night traditional gathering (called a *pungwe*), people sang, danced, prayed, and exhorted throughout the night. The bishops and high-ranking clergy were nowhere to be seen, as they were housed in hotels and cottages. On Friday the annual provincial meetings of religious communities were held, and on Friday evening there was a choir competition from various church choirs.

For the clergy and bishops, the central ritual of the Mizeki weekend was the two-hour-long Saturday morning communion service, with choral accompaniment. A giant procession, in full regalia, built up in rank beginning with members of religious communities, then diocesan deacons, priests, bishops, and finally the archbishop of Central Africa. The bishop from Mozambique, who had participated regularly since 1986, carried a large cross brought from there, as if to remind everyone that Mizeki was a Mozambican. Even though Mizeki himself was a lay catechist, laypeople were not part of the communion procession. With the archbishop as celebrant, and bishops as concelebrants, the liturgy was conducted in all the main languages of the Province. The multiplicity of languages underscored the broadening and unifying significance of Mizeki for the Province, for in earlier years the liturgy was conducted in English and Shona. After the priests distributed communion to the thousands in attendance, the key clerics processed out after the final benediction.

After the hierarchy had finished the official ritual communion, the people's celebration began. Popular leaders such as the Reverend Lazarus Muyambi, founder of the Zimbabwe Spiritual Healing and Manger Centre at St. Agnes Mission in Gokwe, Zimbabwe, and members of his religious community, began healing people. Because healing services were not typically held during Anglican services in the province, and because Fr. Muyambi performed exorcisms, his work and that of others like him remained

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Gendall, "A Bernard Mizeki Pilgrimage," *The Bridge* (June 2005), 8.

controversial among bishops and diocesan priests. But thousands of laypeople believed Mizeki was a healer full of spiritual power, and they went on the Mizeki pilgrimage to be healed. As Fr. Muyambi and leaders from Mothers' Unions conducted healings around the shrine, thousands walked up the holy mountain to the stream in which Mizeki had washed his wounds. A penitential climb made in prayerful silence was the heart of the pilgrimage for those who came for healing. They queued in long lines to dip containers into the stream to take home the holy water, believed to have healing powers.

Farther up the mountain is the rocky cave from which Mizeki allegedly disappeared. A tree split by lightning and grown back together helps mark the spot. People tore off bark from tender saplings, and then tied their bark string around the several larger trees at the sacred rock. They prayed, confessed their sins, and begged Bernard to intervene with God on their behalf. The pilgrims felt Bernard's mystical presence on the holy mountain. The mixture of traditional religious beliefs with Christianity was evident in the ascent of the mountain, which was a holy grove according to Shona traditional religion. Since chiefs were traditionally buried in high mountain caves, marked by holy groves, there was a deeper continuity with Shona tradition in the climb to the cave than in the communion service at the shrine itself. Many taboos originated in the spirit of traditional religion: pilgrims were not allowed to dip up water with a black pot, nor to bathe in the water. Reminiscent of Croagh Patrick in Ireland, people believed that no snakes could live on the mountain. In Shona traditional religion the snake was a sacred animal that could embody ancestors or spirits, or be a witch's familiar. The sacred grove itself was still respected by the people, as they brought in their own wood for cooking fires and did not fell the trees on the holy mountain. However, they did pocket leaves and soil to take home for medicine.

Reflecting the basis of popular religion in oral cultures, traditions continued to evolve during the pilgrimages in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One such tradition was that every year a lamb made its way from the mountain and passed through the gathered people. The word rippled through the crowd when the lamb had passed. Another tradition that emerged in the late 1990s was that every year someone would die at the pilgrimage and go straight to heaven. Since so many people went to be healed, it was natural that sickly and vulnerable people were at risk in the large crowds. It was believed that the spirit of Bernard took somebody to itself in revenge for his murder, and that person became a martyr of the church.

On Saturday afternoon, a dramatization of the life of Bernard Mizeki took place at the shrine. Performed by evangelical Anglicans who tended to oppose traditional religion, the play showed Mizeki's work as healer, catechist, and one who loved the Shona people by refusing to leave them.

It pitted Mizeki, a violator of traditional taboos, against traditional *ngangas* and the forces of evil ancestors. In the play Mizeki wore a clerical collar even though he was actually a layman. One of the killers was depicted as a *nganga* – another bit of theatrical license. In the play the ancestors decreed that Mizeki be destroyed in order to save their land. After the stabbing, Mizeki prophesied that one day Anglicans would fill the mountain. His disappearance in a flash of light, witnessed by the women, reminded worshippers of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or the disappearance of Elijah.

The dramatization of Mizeki's life became for the observers a ritualized way of reconciling the dissonance they may have felt between traditional religious practices and Christian beliefs. Although the play made *ngangas* and ancestors responsible for Bernard's death, the lesson in the end was that the religion of Jesus Christ overcame the traditional religion. Traditional religion had power, but Christianity was more powerful. Mizeki's prophecy of the growth of Anglicanism, enough to fill the mountain, was fulfilled in the presence of the people at the pilgrimage. The sacred grove remained on the holy mountain, but now under the ultimate power of the Christian God. Through the symbol of Bernard Mizeki, traditional religion was fulfilled rather than obliterated by Christianity.

On Saturday night, people remained awake. In the flickering light of hundreds of small fires, they sang, prayed, gave testimonies, and spoke in tongues. Then on Sunday morning of the Mizeki anniversary was the final Eucharist, served by local priests. In the afternoon, people got on their buses and trucks and went home. Pilgrims felt that their spiritual devotion had increased, their sense of unity as African Anglicans across ethnic and national boundaries had deepened, and they returned to their ordinary lives inspired and perhaps healed of the problems that made life miserable.

Today the transformation of missionary Bernard Mizeki into a multi-ethnic people's "saint," or an Anglican "ancestor" for the provinces of Central and South Africa, is neither complete nor uncontested. In addition to tensions between laity and clergy, and between groups of laypeople at the pilgrimage, clerics still fight among themselves for control of the Mizeki name. Although the Anglican African bishops promote the shrine as a symbol of unity for the Province of Central Africa, and gather there for the consecration of bishops and other provincial tasks, disputes among the Zimbabwean Anglican bishops spill over into attempts to dominate the shrine. Bishops' tussles over the control of Mizeki's shrine are reminiscent of the twelfth century, when the archbishops of Armagh claimed Patrick's chapel on Croagh Patrick because they succeeded him, but the archbishops of Tuam claimed it because it was located in their diocese. No doubt spiritual

power – and fees paid by pilgrims – are at stake for the hierarchs, despite their condescension toward the unregulated, popular aspects of the pilgrimage.

The most fascinating aspect of the changing meaning of Bernard Mizeki over the past century is how his commemoration undergirds the popular Africanization of Christianity, local ethnic identities, and the aspiring universality of a formal Anglican Christianity that spreads beyond tribe and nation. To Shona pilgrims, Mizeki is a Zimbabwean. He is the founder of their church, better known than his white sponsor Bishop Knight-Bruce. He married a Shona woman related to a chief, and he refused to leave his Shona people to save his life. He chose to become a Shona. To Mozambicans, Mizeki is a compatriot born and bred among them who deserves praise for his great deeds. South Africans take credit for having converted, trained, and sent him out, and for having organized the powerful Mizeki Guilds. These plural national claims on Mizeki compose the united identity of South and Central African Anglicanism, and point beyond it to the realities of Christianity as a global religion. African Christian unity has supplanted the symbolic role Mizeki played early in the twentieth century as a loyal catechist and reconciler between the black colonized and the white colonizers. In the same way that legends of St. Patrick signaled both Irish ethnicity and participation in the multi-ethnic Catholicism of the crumbling Roman empire, so the Mizeki celebration reinforces African ethnicities and the multi-ethnic Anglicanism of the former European colonies.

## **Missionaries and the Formation of Communal Christian Identities**

While self-sacrificing missionaries have been appreciated by those who knew them personally, most missionaries' lives are not celebrated with official saints' days, place names, communion services, pilgrimages and parades, and stained-glass windows. That being said, a surprising number of Christian communities around the world honor in some fashion the special missionaries who brought them the gospel: Baptists in Burma tend monuments to their missionary parents Adoniram and Ann Judson; Korean Christians visit the "foreigners' cemetery" in Seoul in which the pioneer Protestant missionaries are buried; Malawian Presbyterians decorate the grave of the South African evangelist William Koyi; Frieslanders in Holland support a park on the spot where their missionary pioneer St. Boniface was murdered. Missionaries like these are remembered because, in helping their followers to understand their relationship with God in a new way, they sparked

transformations in people's worldviews and their self-perceptions about their place in the world.

Patrick and Bernard Mizeki are remembered as saints because the messages of their lives continue to symbolize the aspirations and identities of their communities over time. The creation of communal Christian identities never took place in isolation, but in the context of a larger world that became accessible through the ministry of the missionary. Both St. Patrick and Bernard Mizeki operated on the edges of empires, though in Patrick's case the political empire was receding, and in Bernard's case it was growing. Both felt called by God as missionaries to another people with cultures similar to their own. Both identified themselves with the people they embraced – Patrick claimed the name “Irish” when his converts faced enslavement and persecution, and Bernard remained with his Shona converts at the price of his life. Both taught and healed people, and introduced new forms of knowledge that attracted women and men of all ranks. But most importantly, the collective memory of their myths and miracles represented the rapid spread of Christianity over a relatively brief period of time, among particular groups of people. As Christianity came to symbolize communal identities in the immediate centuries after their deaths, the “Apostle to the Irish” and the “Apostle to the Shona” were born.

What is the role of the missionary in the processes by which Christianity has become a world religion? As bearers of the gospel message across cultural boundaries, missionaries carry creative tension between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the local and the global, the traditional and the modern. This bridging function allows beliefs and practices to cross from one world to another. In the case of St. Patrick and Bernard Mizeki, their long-term impact is out of proportion to the brevity of their lives. By identifying with their chosen peoples, they became catalysts for important social and cultural processes far beyond their immediate control.

World Christianity today is a mosaic of the kind of cultural conversions represented by the lives of St. Patrick, Bernard Mizeki, and other missionaries like them over the centuries. Controversial in their own day, and often forgotten with the passage of time, they nevertheless embodied the spirit of peoples on the move, deepening both local identity and the self-awareness of humanity on a broader scale. Their stories help to explain the cultural diversity that makes Christianity a world religion.

## Postscript: Multicultural Missions in Global Context

In 2001 my husband and I stayed in a hotel near the Great Zimbabwe ruins, a granite fortress and temple complex that is the largest ancient structure in Africa south of the Egyptian pyramids. We struck up a conversation with one of the hotel guards. As the child of Dutch Reformed missionary parents, my husband spent his boyhood playing with Shona boys in the villages and then grew up to become an expert on Shona religions. I listened as the men chatted about the ancient clans who built the fourteenth-century ruins and the political situation in Zimbabwe today. The guard was a minor officeholder in the Zion Christian Church, one of the largest indigenous churches in Southern Africa. Founded by Bishop Samuel Mutendi in 1925, the Zimbabwean branch of Zionists are proud of their economic self-sufficiency, network of schools, and holy city named after Mount Zion in the Bible. By 2000, the ZCC numbered three-quarters of a million members in Zimbabwe, and four and a half million in South Africa. As one of the leading African-initiated churches, the ZCC was a church founded in Africa, by Africans, for Africans.

Our new friend was eager to discuss spiritual matters because he was seeking to climb the ladder of pastoral offices in the ZCC. He shared his enthusiasm for the book he was reading. But he was not reading a Zionist tract. Rather, it was a book in English of writings by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuo-sheng), one of the most famous Chinese church founders of the twentieth century. How did a Shona-speaking worker in rural Zimbabwe, I wondered, a member of an African-founded church, get a book by Watchman Nee?

Watchman Nee was a third-generation Christian, and the grandson of one of the first Protestant pastors ordained in China. After his conversion in a revival around 1920, Nee's spiritual hunger led him to Bible studies conducted by a freelance Anglican missionary named Margaret Barber. As their relationship progressed, Barber shared with Nee the spiritual writings of

popular mystics and Keswick “holiness” writers – an international network of evangelical Christians who believed in the “higher Christian life” of deepened personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Among the several writers who most influenced Nee’s own theology of the Holy Spirit was Andrew Murray, a South African minister, who wrote hundreds of publications on living a holy Christian life. Murray’s writings in English became popular in Great Britain and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nee studied them intensely, including Murray’s sermon notes, and hoped to translate Murray’s book *The Spirit of Christ* into Chinese. After sharpening his theology and developing a unique understanding of people’s spiritual nature, Nee penned his own works on the Christian spiritual life. He founded what he believed was true to the New Testament church, a Chinese movement independent of foreign missionaries, known as the Local Assemblies, or Little Flock.

By 1949, on the eve of communist victory, roughly 25 percent of Chinese Christians were members of independent movements founded by Chinese Christians rather than by missionaries. Nee’s Little Flock was one of the most vigorous of the indigenous Chinese-founded churches. Independent Chinese Christians read the Bible for themselves and rejected western denominations and missionary institutions. They also rejected “liberal” or “modernist” theology and government control over their activities. For his refusal to cooperate with the communist regime, Nee was arrested and imprisoned in 1952. He died in a work camp twenty years later, having never been allowed visits by anyone except his wife.

And yet, even before his imprisonment, Nee’s movement had spread to Chinese migrants in the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and other locations in Southeast Asia. During the mid twentieth century, Nee’s spiritual reflections were collected and transcribed by his followers, translated into different languages, and then published in numerous editions. The writings traveled from China to Taiwan, and from there to California, where a press collected and published Nee’s works in a sixty-two-volume set. In China today, Nee’s influence can still be felt in thousands of house churches that honor his memory.

A few weeks after our chance encounter, I discovered a possible answer to my question about how Watchman Nee’s writings got into the hands of a Shona indigenous church member in rural Zimbabwe. I attended an academic conference in Hammanskraal, South Africa. One of the conference speakers was a prominent Chinese American academic, who gave a paper on the late twentieth-century spread of Watchman Nee’s movement in China despite continued persecution by the communist government. The speaker brought with him another Chinese man, who had moved from California to

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**Figure 7.1** Apostolic evangelist preaching in Zimbabwe  
*Photo by M. L. Daneel*

South Africa in order to spread the ideas of Watchman Nee. This self-supporting Chinese missionary brought several members of the small fellowship group he had gathered in nearby Pretoria. They were white South Africans of Dutch descent, an ethnic group known as Afrikaners.

In the evening, sitting around the fire, I asked the white South Africans questions about their spiritual lives. They described how meaningful were the writings of Watchman Nee, introduced to them by their Chinese missionary friend. One Afrikaner mused on how he was doing his best to spread the testimonies of Watchman Nee around Southern Africa. The maid who

worked in his house was from Zimbabwe. They often discussed spiritual truths. In fact, when he knew she was visiting her family back in Zimbabwe, he gave her copies of writings by Watchman Nee to carry across the border. Like links in a chain, Watchman Nee's meditations had traveled with his followers from China to Taiwan, from Taiwan to California, were translated and published, and then taken by a Chinese missionary to South Africa and introduced to white South Africans, who sent them via Shona speakers to Zimbabwe. And a Shona-speaking man had discussed them with me and my husband, an American academic and a white Zimbabwean who had grown up of missionary parentage on a Dutch Reformed mission station.

I asked the Afrikaners whether they had ever heard of Andrew Murray. "Oh yes," one of them replied, "Reading Watchman Nee prepared me for Andrew Murray. I was introduced to Andrew Murray through Watchman Nee." He seemed unconscious of the irony that Murray's writings had inspired Watchman Nee's own formulations on the nature of the Holy Spirit. Andrew Murray was the foremost South African spiritual writer of the twentieth century. Like the latter-day converts to the spirituality of Watchman Nee, he was an Afrikaner through his mother, and he ministered to English and Dutch speakers alike. Many of Murray's descendants had become missionaries and ministers. My Zimbabwean husband, in fact, was a relative of Murray, and stood periodically with dozens of missionary kin and recited the family covenant, the promise to God that had drawn the Murray family as missionaries from Scotland to the Cape Colony in the early 1800s.

And so the circle was complete. Murray's spiritual writings in English contributed to major missionary revivals in England from the 1890s through the 1910s. From England, a pietistic missionary named Margaret Barber took them to China, where she introduced them to an intense young Chinese Christian named Watchman Nee. And now, in the twenty-first century, the works of Watchman Nee were awakening the spiritual lives of Murray's own ethnic group of white South Africans.

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This true story of overlapping human networks illustrates the meaning of mission in a global, postcolonial age. At its most simple, the spread of the message of Jesus Christ from one culture to another occurs because of intentional human relationships across cultural boundaries. In periods of history that encourage the movement of people and ideas, ordinary Christians who believe strongly in their faith feel responsible for sharing that faith with others.

To understand mission in the age of World Christianity requires uncovering not only the human connections in local situations, but a multi-cultural,

global matrix as well. Mission in the twenty-first century is not limited to the old model of crossing salt water for a lifetime in another culture. Rather, it is a network, an international web of human relationships in which the “missionaries” scamper back and forth like human spiders, weaving and expanding the web in all directions. It is important to study the spiders, but it is equally important to notice the web.

As this brief history has shown, the church has always lived in the world within a framework of evolving human cultures and shifting political realities. Christianity spread through families, and clans, neighborhoods, and castes. It rode on highways and ships and trains within empires, when relatively open borders allowed people to migrate from one place to another. Christianity has traveled with technologies, including the spread of printing and literacy, and the internet. When Christians have moved or communicated across cultures, they have taken their worldviews with them, and then adapted them to their new situations.

But something else besides human mobility has been required for the creation of World Christianity – namely, a system of meaning that allows for cultural adaptation and makes sense beyond one’s own narrow ethnic or national boundaries. The universal vision transforms the local, and the local brings personal meaning to the universal. Christianity has become a world religion not only because of movements of people, but because its meaning system compels people to look beyond their own natural boundaries and comfort zones, and to invite others to join them. Mission history is the story of those who spread the gospel message, and those who respond to it. The missionaries and the converts are like the two sides of a bridge, the anchors for the span across which the faith travels. And as the presence of Watchman Nee’s writings in southern Africa demonstrates, today’s convert might very well be tomorrow’s missionary.

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