

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***Protestant Missionaries and Cultural Change***

In 2001, Professor of History, Alvin J. Schmidt, published his important book, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*. Among other parts of his argument, Schmidt demonstrated how Christians manifested a care for and respect for the dignity and worth of human beings in the Greco-Roman world. Christians cared for “throw-away” babies, the sick, the poor and the elderly in the ancient world. He also demonstrated how Christianity affirmed the dignity, worth and freedom of women in the ancient and modern world. The record of Christianity in founding hospitals, health clinics and the general improvement of health care is nothing short of astonishing. Further, Christianity pioneered the founding and promotion of higher education all over the world, but especially in western civilization. In America, Harvard, Yale, Andover-Newton, William and Mary, etc. come to mind. Christians also were leaders in the founding of modern science, theory and research. For example, Galileo, Kepler and Newton all did their work from a decidedly Christian worldview. In addition, the Christian worldview energized the human rights and equality under law movements so central to the modern world. William Wilberforce in Great Britain and most of the leaders of the America abolitionist movement were all manifestly Christian, for biblical Christianity was the energizing dynamic for the abolition of slavery in England and in the United States. Finally, Christianity’s contribution to the arts, to music and to literature is well-established. A trip to any museum in America or Europe exposes the wealth of art created by Christians to the glory of God. Indeed, genuine, biblical Christianity has had a profound impact on civilization.

But what about the modern missionary movement that took the Gospel to Africa and Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Today, ugly terms such as “proselytizing” and “colonialist” are often associated with world missions in that century. Missionaries of that period are also frequently pictured as aiding the imperialistic ambitions of England and other European nations. Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” betrays an ugly side of missions. This is the primary line of argument for those who teach or write about worldwide missions. However, rather important research by sociologist Robert Woodberry is challenging that perception and that rather cynical outlook of 19<sup>th</sup> century missions. He began to explore the connection between Protestantism, missions and democracy in Africa especially. Andrea Palpant Dilley writes that Woodberry began “digging into one of the great enigmas of modern history: why some nations develop stable representative democracies—in which citizens enjoy the rights to vote, speak, and assemble freely—while neighboring countries suffer authoritarian rulers and internal conflict. Public health and economic growth can also differ dramatically from one country to another, even among countries that share smaller geography, cultural background and natural resources.”

What follows is a sampling of Woodberry’s findings:

- While in West Africa, Woodberry discovered that British missionaries in Ghana built an entire network of schools and printing presses. Hence, in that nation today there are bookstores with hundreds of printed books, including locally printed texts by local scholars from the University of Ghana. Next door in Togo, the French colonial office severely restricted missionaries and took an interest in educating only small elite. Today, education in Togo is limited; in Ghana it is flourishing.
- Woodberry charted mission stations all across the Congo in central Africa. Protestant missionaries were only permitted in the Belgian Congo. Anecdotally, this fact seemed significant, but did it make a difference? He already knew that missionaries had educated women and the poor, had promoted widespread printing, led nationalist movements that resulted in the empowerment of citizens and helped fuel other elements of burgeoning democracies. But Woodberry's research for his dissertation offered proof of a bold, audacious claim: "Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women) and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations."
- Woodberry correctly observes that "We don't have to deny that there were racist missionaries. We don't have to deny there were and are missionaries who do self-centered things. But if that were the average effect, we would expect the places where missionaries had influence to be worse than places where missionaries weren't allowed or were restricted. We find exactly the opposite on all kinds of outcomes. Even in places where few people converted, [missionaries] had a profound economic and political impact."
- The positive effect of missionaries on democracy applies only to "conversionary Protestants." Protestant clergy financed by the state, as well as Catholic missionaries prior to the 1960s, had no comparable effect in the areas where they worked.
- Dilley writes that "While missionaries came to colonial reform through the backdoor, mass literacy and mass education were more deliberate projects—the consequence of a Protestant vision that knocked down old hierarchies in the name of the priesthood of the believers. If all souls were equal before God, everyone would need to access the Bible in their own language. They would also need to know how to read." Woodberry observes that "although the Chinese invented printing 800 years before Europeans did, in China the technology was used mostly for elites. Then Protestant missionaries arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and began printing tens of thousands of religious texts, making those available to the masses, and teaching women and other marginalized groups how to read. Not until then did Asian authorities start printing widely." Pull out a map, Woodberry contends, point to any place where "conversionary Protestants" were active in the past, and you'll typically find more printed books and more schools per capita. You'll find that in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, most of the early nationalists who led their countries to independence graduated from Protestant mission schools.

Woodberry's research is exciting and pathbreaking. It confirms the much broader conclusions of historian Alvin Schmidt and it confirms what the New Testament had argued for 2,000 years:

The Gospel transforms people from the inside out, and then transforms interpersonal relationships of those believers, which in turn transforms culture. Missionaries wanted people to read and write, so that they could read the Bible and communicate biblical truth. That simple conviction changed culture and impacted vast parts of the world where the Gospel was planted. Woodberry's research is a bright light reminding us of the power of the Gospel.

See Dilley's article, "The Surprising Discovery about Those Colonialists, Proselytizing Missionaries," in [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (28 January 2014).