

Introduction

The focus of this work is primarily on the Protestant missionary enterprise and the expanding British incursion into China in the nineteenth century. It examines the precarious and ambivalent relationship between the missionaries and the British colonial government that controlled the territories in which they attempted to propagate the faith. Although the meaning of 'mission' has evolved over time, in this context, it refers to the sending of missionaries to a particular territory and the activities undertaken by them. It includes the propagation of faith, the conversion of non-believers, and the founding of new churches.

In the nineteenth century, it was almost totally commercial interests that led Britain to adopt an expansion policy towards China. Nonetheless, British colonisers thought that the adoption of Christianity might make the Chinese more receptive to Western goods and influence. Merchants and missionaries discovered that they had a common interest in the opening of China, although their means were different. The missionaries wanted 'to tell the Chinese about Jesus' which led Peter Conn to characterise the missionary enterprise as 'one of the strangest and most compelling episodes in the history of relations between China and the West'.¹ The truth is quite simply that Christian missions entered China on the tailcoats of military domination. Gunboats carried the Gospel.

In the early twentieth century, Westerners, including policy makers in Europe and the United States, tended to support Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Kuomintang government, because of his anti-communism and his embrace of Christianity. Furthermore, Western governments supported Chiang because he did not threaten the unequal status quo between them and China. Chiang was thus seen as an agent of the West.

1. Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2. Evers says, 'China is a test case for the Christian missions' because in this vast nation, we can find all the major themes of the encounter of Christianity with other cultures, religions and ideologies. George Evers, 'Christianity in China – a Case of Missed Opportunities?' in *China and Christianity: A New Phase of Encounter?* ed. Felix Wilfred, Edmond Tang, and Georg Evers (London: SCM Press, 2008), 24.

In the early years of Kuomintang rule, there were hostile sentiments towards Christianity within the government. In 1927, Tang Liangli, a member of the Kuomintang Party, wrote: 'There is no group of foreigners who have done more harm to China than the modern missionaries, either directly or indirectly. It is in connection with their subversive activities that China has lost the greater part of her dependencies. By their teachings they have denationalised hundreds of thousands of Chinese converts, and have thus been instrumental, to a great extent, in disintegrating not only the body but the spirit of the nation.'¹

However, many of the high officials of the Kuomintang Party were Christians. They exerted great influence on the nation, taking a leading role in rural reform and mass education. In other words, these Chinese Christians contributed greatly to national reconstruction in the years before the beginning of war in 1937.² Thus, many missionaries supported the Kuomintang government, which later led them into difficulties when the Communist government took over China. In fact, missionaries who supported Chiang Kai-shek were classified as 'cultural imperialists' under the People's Republic.³

Not surprisingly, Christian missionaries were expelled when the Communists took over China in 1949 because they were regarded as the 'running dogs of imperialism'. These charges came from some Chinese Christians as well. 'The Christian Manifesto' composed in Beijing by the leaders of the Three Self Movement in 1950 declared that 'Christian churches and organisations in China . . . recognise that in the past imperialism has made use of Christianity.'⁴

1. Quoted in Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 33-34.
2. R. Pierce Beaver, 'Nationalism and Missions', *Church History* 26, no. 1 (1957), 35. Much of Christianity's future at this time, 1926-1927, depended on what political elements were dominant: the 'left-wing' Communist elements or the 'right-wing' that supported Chiang Kai-shek. See Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, M.A.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 112, 125-128.
3. John King Fairbank, ed., *Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3. For missionary views of the Communists and the Kuomintang, see Paul A. Varg, 'The Missionary Response to the Nationalist Revolution', in Fairbank, ed., *Missionary Enterprise in China and America*, 317-326.
4. Quoted in Alan Craft Thomson, 'Christianity and imperialism: the Chinese example', *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 13, no. 1 (1971), 89. Anti-Christian tradition in China started during the early seventeenth century when Christian missionaries challenged the orthodoxy of Confucianism. It reached its height in the late nineteenth when a great number of missionaries entered into the interior of China and preached doctrines that undermined the social and cultural structures of traditional Chinese society. See Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism, 1860-1870* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3-60. See also Jessie G. Lutz, 'Chinese Nationalism and the Anti-Christian Campaigns of the 1920s', *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 3 (1976), 395-416.

This charge was elaborated in an article in the *Christian Journal*, *T'ien Feng* by Chiang Wen-han, 'On the Use of Christianity by Imperialism'. He wrote: 'In the modern history of China, Christianity has been used by the Imperialists as a tool of invasion. This is a hard fact, which cannot be denied. The Western nations' missionary enterprise in China can never be separated from their expansion of colonialism.'¹ Missionaries accompanied the imperialists as pioneers and accomplices in their scramble for colonies. In return, the missionaries obtained special privileges and access into China. This type of Christianity had aroused the indignation of the majority of Chinese citizens and created suspicion between Chinese Christians and the rest of the population.

Christian missions were destroyed by the Communist regime, but the faith survived, and was passed on to an indigenous church that now struggled to come to terms with its past. To get rid of the colonial stigma, Chinese Christians implemented the 'three-self principle', namely, self-government, self-support and self-propagation, to establish their own church. This principle reminded the church to sharpen its vigilance against imperialism.² Besides uniting all the Protestant denominations into one, the 'three-self principle' also enabled the church to become a truly Chinese Church stripped of Western trappings and a foreign image. The unity of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in the 1950s was mainly the political unity of 'anti-imperialist patriotism', and not the theological or ecumenical unity of Christian churches from different denominations.³

The Chinese were not necessarily against anything that was 'foreign'. In fact, they were fond of foreign cars, whiskey and clothes. But when it came to a 'foreign religion', which normally referred to Christianity, it reminded them of their humiliation during the nineteenth century under Western

1. Chiang Wen-Han, 'On the use of Christianity by imperialism', *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 12, no. [2] (1971), 29. Ch'en holds that the missionaries' handling of affairs with Chinese officials led to the exposure of corruption and incompetence of the Chinese civil service. This indirectly awakened in the people a desire for reform. The missionaries sympathised with the people's aspirations, but this sympathy was seldom understood because the missionaries were associated with the imperialist powers. There was also a lack of communication between the missionaries and the Chinese. Jerome Ch'en, *China and the West: Society and Culture 1815-1937* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1979), 138.
2. He Changping, 'Remolding Three-Self to Run the Church Well', *Chinese Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (1996), 1. See also 'Christian Manifesto' and Growth of the Three Self' in Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 160-166.
3. This helped to unite the liberal with the evangelical and fundamental wings of the Protestant churches, as they would not feel that their faith would be compromised through their participation in the Three-Self Movement. Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K.H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 118.

powers. It is interesting to note that Buddhism was never considered a foreign religion in China. In fact, most Chinese Buddhists would not think of their religion as originating in India. Unlike the aggressiveness of Western Christianity, Buddhism was seen as a peaceful religion capable of accommodating the local culture of China.

In judging whether missionaries were willing agents of imperialism, Jerome Ch'en makes a distinction between those who worked in China before 1914 and those who came to work there afterwards. Ch'en holds that the latter sought to dissociate themselves from imperialism and the privileges that went with it. They attempted to adapt themselves to the new situation in order to remain in China. This meant denouncing imperialism and treating China with respect and equality.¹

Going beyond generalisations, the issue the author wants to raise here is to what extent the missionaries had become servants of imperialism rather than the Gospel. In this work he proposes to study individual missionaries in order to examine their positions regarding Western military aggression, the opium trade and the unequal treaties. It is a critical review of Christian missions against the backdrop of the Opium War, the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), Gunboat Diplomacy, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). To prevent indulging in unjust judgment from present hindsight, we will attempt to understand the philosophical and theological presuppositions prevailing at that time.

Most of the missionaries who came to the East in the nineteenth century were sincere Christians who desired to share their faith with people in far-off lands. They truly believed that only Jesus Christ could save humankind from hell and damnation. Furthermore, some were willing to sacrifice themselves so that others might have abundant life, both here on earth and in heaven. Missionaries were concerned with the souls of the Chinese and in many cases grew to love them as people. But this very concern and love reinforced in them the determination to bring light and remove what they perceived as darkness or superstitions. This inevitably led them to adopt a critical and often intolerant attitude towards much of Chinese culture.²

Further studies also reveal that the motives behind mission were often ambivalent because of the imperial aim to transform natives into submissive subjects of the colonial government.³ There were many evangelists who harboured the ambition of transferring the missionaries' 'superior' culture to

1. Ch'en, *China and the West*, 141.

2. Cohen, *China and Christianity*, 265. George L. Davis wrote: 'The truth is that nothing will save China, but a radical change of heart . . . unless China is Christianised it will mean a new set of theories, instead of the experienced ones.' Quoted in Ch'en, *China and the West*, 138.

3. Ernest Alexander Payne, 'Constrained by Jesus' Love: An Inquiry into the Motives of the Missionary Awakening in Great Britain in the Period between 1698 and 1815', *International Review of Mission* 46, no. 181 (January 1957), 90.

the natives, while some just had the romantic idea of going to some exotic places at a time when travelling was forbidden to most people. There were some missionaries who were determined to plant their own confession or denomination in others' territories.¹ In other words, like most human undertakings, missionary motives were often mixed.

Up until the twentieth century, the colonial expansion of Protestant nations – for example, Britain and the United States – was purely for commercial reasons. Gradually the colonial expansion became bound up with missionary expansion when the authorities began to welcome missionaries into their territories. Why? The colonial administrators began to see the missionaries as allies who would enhance their mercantile interests. Since the missionaries lived with the local people and understood their customs and languages, they were the ones most qualified to persuade the obdurate natives into submitting to imperial power.

The colonial authorities woke up to the idea that they had a 'sacred duty' to uplift the natives and entrusted them to the missionaries who would build schools and hospitals, subsidised by the government, for the benefits of the local population. The colonists realised that the missionaries were the best agents to promote Western cultural, political and economic influence. In fact, they were very good educators and health officers during that time. Eventually missionaries were regarded as 'vanguard and rearguard' of Western imperialism. Consciously or unconsciously, the missionaries had become 'pioneers of Western imperialistic expansion'.² The colonisers began to realise that gun and gospel were both useful for the empire – imperialism and evangelism should go hand in hand.

It is understandable that imperialists, colonisers and politicians were quick to recognise the value of mission work to enhance their power and control, but it is more difficult to understand why missionaries were so willing to become tools of such political and cultural aggression. In actual fact, some missionaries requested their home governments to extend its territories so that they could work in peace in case other hostile powers took over. Thus missionaries became supporters of colonial government because they believed that their own country's rule was beneficial for them and the people they wished to evangelise.

In many ways, missions served the empire rather than *vice versa*. 'Direct guilt' existed because the missionaries were silent when the colonial authorities committed atrocities.³ In their attempt to be mediators between

1. See also Paul A. Varg, 'Motives in Protestant missions, 1890-1917', *Church History* 23, no. 1 (March 1954), 68-82.

2. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 304. 'Imperialism needed moral justification and the missionaries provided it. Imperialism also needed well-informed people who could help in wars of aggression and in the conduct of trade.' Ch'en, *China and the West*, 139.

3. *Ibid.*, 305.

the imperial power and the local people, the missionaries were actually serving the interests of the exploiters. They needed the protection of the colonial government in the places that they worked and thus few dared to challenge the authorities. But the whole picture is more complex and ambiguous. It was not purely the spiritual side of imperialism and not all missionaries were lackeys and stooges of the imperialist powers. Further, it is not fair to criticise at a distance with our present day standards of justice and truth. The fact is that there have always been some enlightened people who dared to challenge the status quo and withstand the might of Western imposition.¹ Those great missionaries were friends of the local people, visited them in their homes, and convinced them that God loved them by sending his son, Jesus Christ. Those missionaries were able to empower the people who had been oppressed and marginalised by an alien system. But only a few missionaries were convinced that mission was simply incompatible with colonialism.

It is also true that some Protestant missionaries did protest against the greed of the colonial powers. They had not remained completely silent in the face of atrocities perpetuated by the imperialists, but they never doubted the legitimacy of colonialism and in fact accepted it as 'an inexorable force'. The more the missionaries were accepted and respected by the establishment, the more they compromised their positions and in the end became 'bearers and advocates' of Western expansionist policy – 'hounds of imperialism', as it were.² In other words, the colonial government was assured of the missionaries' patriotic loyalty especially when protection was given to them in order to propagate the faith.

British evangelical missionaries strongly believed that Britain's imperial influence was part of God's providence and design to spread the Gospel to the heathens. Thus they rarely questioned or opposed British rule in the colonies, though they did question and challenge the authorities when the natives were badly treated or exploited. In other words, 'the missionary calling was to keep the flag in check, not to haul it down'.³

1. Missionaries like J. Th. van der Kemp (1747-1811), John Philip (1775-1851) and J.W. Colenso were shining examples. They intervened on behalf of the native people and infuriated a French governor of Madagascar who retorted: 'What we want is to prepare the indigenous people for manual labour; you turn them into *people*.' Quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 311. On the Catholic side, there was the great Dominican preacher and theologian, Bartolomé de las Casas, in Latin America, who fought against the Spanish conquistadors to the bitter end to champion the rights of the natives, asking: 'Tell me, by what right do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude?' Quoted in William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 20.
2. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 312.
3. Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 153. This understanding of divine providence, Stanley admits, was biblical in its substance but distorted by the

The outbreak of World War I marked the end of the 'Great Century' of Christian missionary expansion. The spirit of confidence in human capacities to do good was replaced by scepticism, cynicism and pessimism. Mission work was criticised as cultural and political imperialism by the secular press. There was concern about the annexation of the Philippines and the carnage of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. The prevailing theology of mission came under criticism that sprang from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. There was a change in missiological approach under the influence of liberal theology and the Social Gospel movement. Attitude towards non-Christian religions became more positive; they were looked upon as not entirely false but containing elements of truth. The emphasis was on the influence of Christianity rather than on the number of baptisms.¹

Nowadays, in missionary agendas, the most critical task deals with the Christian attitude toward religious pluralism and the approach to people of other faiths. The debate is whether non-Christian religions, though they may possess truth and goodness, are salvific or not. Some theologians believe that Christ is present in non-Christian religions and thus these religions may be considered ways of salvation. Traditionally, Christians believe that only Jesus Christ can save, but some theologians believe that Christ can save people by working through non-Christian religions. The Spirit blows as it wills and cannot be confined to Christianity, much less to particular Christian churches. This line of thinking is called inclusivism in the theology of religions. Exclusivism, on the other hand, holds that only Christianity can save us, while pluralism insists all genuine religions are valid paths to salvation with or without reference to others.

The Christian landscape has changed drastically in recent times and mission has taken on a new meaning. Due to secularism, the church in the West is facing a severe crisis. Church attendance is falling dramatically in Western Europe and the decline in religious and priestly vocations is alarming to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, vocations in the Third World are booming. It is not uncommon now to find Hispanic, African and Asian missionaries working in Europe, the United States and Australia. So the Empire preaches back, as it were, to the Centre. We need to rethink and to redefine the meaning of mission given the present situation of secularism, globalisation and the changing religious landscape. Some have even asked, 'Can the West be converted?'²

Enlightenment ideology. But it would not be fair for us to judge the weakness of this Victorian theology based on our present-day understanding. Ibid., 181.

1. Gerald H. Anderson, 'American Protestants in pursuit of mission: 1886-1986', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 3 (July 1988), 105.
2. See Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted?' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (January 1987), 2-7.

The two world wars have revealed that Christians are just as vicious as any other people, perhaps even more destructive, with their new technology. Christian mission can no longer ride on the wave of white superiority. Alan Booth says that Christianity 'must make its own way in the world and offer its own reputation, which is by no means the reputation for success which gave our fathers so great a missionary advantage. That can scarcely be expected of a faith whose founder was crucified.'¹

Outline and Sequence of the Work

Chapter 1 briefly discusses the Catholic missionary expeditions in the sixteenth century, followed by the British and American Protestant missions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Common to all missions, these expeditions were not purely motivated by the Gospel values, which they tried to preach to the so-called 'heathens'. There were commercial, political and humanitarian reasons behind Christian missions. Quite often, the preaching of the Gospel was tarnished by racism and a sense of cultural superiority among the evangelisers, some of whom were lackeys of the colonial powers that supported their work.

Chapter 2 explores the close ties between missionaries and traders, the British attempt to enter China, the role of the East India Company and the ensuing Opium War (1839-1842). The missionaries' attitude towards the opium trade and war was rather ambivalent, ranging from silent toleration to outright condemnation. Some missionaries were oblivious to the injustice done to the natives by imperialism. Most of them supported the unequal treaties imposed upon China by Western powers, which in the long run had a damaging effect on Christianity.

Chapter 3 examines the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising as outcomes of long pent-up anti-foreign and anti-Christian sentiments. Since missionaries came to China under the protection of Western powers, anti-Western sentiments were closely connected with anti-Christian feelings. Most Chinese did not distinguish Christianity and the foreign vehicle in which it came to them. For them, both represented evils that were detrimental to the traditional Chinese way of life.

Chapter 4 examines the life and work of the first Protestant missionary in China, Robert Morrison. He had a complicated relationship with the British colonial government because he held an official position in the East India Company as translator and negotiator, which compromised his mission as a preacher. This chapter evaluates to what extent Morrison was an unwitting tool of British imperialism that sought to humiliate the Chinese people to whom he had dedicated his life.

1. Alan R. Booth, 'Imperialism, economic development, and the Christian world mission', *The Ecumenical Review* 21, no. 3 (July 1969), 218.

Chapter 5 studies the colourful career of Charles Gutzlaff as a preacher as well as a spy for the British government. He was one of those missionaries who without a qualm handed Bibles from the deck of the boat to the Chinese while simultaneously negotiating deals with British opium traders. Credited for his attempt to establish an indigenous church with native preachers, Gutzlaff was also a gifted linguist who translated the Bible into Chinese. His legacy includes the development of house churches in China and inspiring one of the greatest missionaries in China, James Hudson Taylor.

Chapter 6 portrays Taylor as one of the missionaries who vehemently opposed opium trading in China and denounced the injustice that the British had committed. Taylor's China Inland Mission suffered a great loss of lives and property during the Boxer Uprising. China was forced by Western powers to pay compensations to the missions. But Taylor, a generous soul, refused to accept the indemnities and thus helped to dispel the idea that Christianity was an imperialistic and opportunistic religion.

Chapter 7 examines the life work of Timothy Richard, a contemporary of Taylor, who held very different views about mission policies and methods. He was an outstanding personality who had great esteem and affection for the Chinese people. He promoted ecumenism by his friendship with Roman Catholic missionaries and attempted to understand non-Christian religions as well. Besides giving witness to his Christian faith, Richard was deeply involved in educational, social, economic and political reforms in China.

Years of toil and sacrifices undertaken by missionaries had produced few Christian converts in China. One of those who questioned the relevance of Christian missions was Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of American Presbyterian missionaries in China. Chapter 8 explores the life and writings of Pearl S. Buck, who lived in China for forty years and understood the Chinese people intimately, as revealed by her classic novel *The Good Earth*. A Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1938, Buck was a controversial figure during her lifetime, but her humanistic approach to Christian missions won her many admirers as well as critics.

China is officially a Marxist state with an atheistic ideology and thoroughly secularised. This work concludes by examining the relationship between Marxism and Christianity, and considers the role of religion in a secular society like China, where, ironically, Christianity seems to have flourished in indigenous churches without missionaries. The author believes that it is critical for Chinese Christians to co-operate with the Communist government to promote the common good of the people and also to develop a Church with Chinese characteristics responsive to the crying out of the people.