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Four Axes of Mission: Conversion and the Purposes of Mission in Protestant History

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Abstract

This article offers a framework for historical analysis of the goals of Protestant missionary projects. ‘Conversion’ in Protestantism is not clearly defined, is liable to be falsified and may (in some missionary views) require preparatory work of various kinds before it can be attempted. For these reasons, Protestant missionaries have adopted a variety of intermediate and proxy goals for their work, goals which it is argued can be organised onto four axes: orthodoxy, zeal, civilisation and morality. Together these form a matrix which missionaries, their would-be converts and their sponsors have tried to negotiate. In different historical contexts, missionaries have chosen different combinations of priorities, and have adapted these in the face of experience. The article suggests how various historical missionary projects can be analysed using this matrix and concludes by suggesting some problems and issues in the history of Protestant missions which such analysis can illuminate.

Keywords: missions; Church history; imperial history; Protestantism

Protestant missionaries, almost by definition, set out to foster ‘conversion’ of some kind. This article sets out a scheme for analysing that aim historically, by attending to how missionaries have conceived it and measured their own success or failure. We do so against the background of a generation of scholarship on the problem of conversion which has enriched the field by directing our attention beyond the missionaries themselves. Since the groundbreaking work of Jean and John Comaroff in the 1990s, historians and other scholars of missions have come to appreciate that conversion is a game for multiple players, and one which necessarily includes political, cultural, economic and anthropological dimensions as well as (indeed, sometimes almost to the exclusion of) explicitly ‘religious’ ones. The Comaroffs’ foundational notion of conversion as ‘conversation’, a dialectic between missionaries and ‘indigenous’

people, now seems almost a truism, and some more recent scholars have argued that even their enhanced understanding gives insufficient weight to the ways in which indigenous people can participate in and, to some degree, control the nature of their own conversions. Christian missiologists long treated indigenous people as essentially passive or indeed resistant actors in the drama of conversion, but the work of the psychologist of religion Lewis Rambo, with his emphasis on conversion as ‘turning’ or movement, has unavoidably turned the focus onto the converts themselves. It is now possible, as David Kling has masterfully demonstrated, to write a comprehensive history of Christian conversion in which converts – not missionary agents – take centre stage.¹ Christian theological commentators on the globalisation of Christianity, such as Lamin Sanneh and Philip Jenkins, have come to emphasise Christianity’s protean nature, and to describe conversion as a process of ‘translation’ in which, in Jenkins’s terms, ‘foreign cultural trappings’ were ‘purge[d] away’ by indigenous converts. David Lindenfeld’s recent history of the globalisation of Christianity aims to tell that story primarily through the eyes of indigenous people, developing a complex taxonomy of how they were snared on Christianity’s manifold ‘cultural hooks’, with responses ranging from selective incorporation of Christian practices and ideas; through ‘dual religious participation’, in which distinct traditions are retained in separate cultural spaces; to various processes of ‘translation’ in which Christian practices and ideas are given new cultural expressions.² Some of these processes amount to ‘cultural imperialism’, but by no means all. Some historians of mission have even begun to talk of mutual conversion, in which missionaries and those who send them undergo transformations as profound as any they are trying to bring about in their flocks.³

Given this direction of scholarly travel, to turn our attention back to the missionaries and their intentions – as this article does – may seem perverse. Our suggestion, however, is that missions are indeed a game for multiple players; while our understanding of the parts played by indigenous peoples has been greatly enriched, the other side of the story has not quite kept up. In particular, since the conversionary encounter is typically initiated by missionary agents, this is a game in which missionaries have a first-mover

¹ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2 vols., 1, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 11, *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago, 1991, 1997); Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, 1993), esp. 3; David W. Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (Oxford, 2020).

² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 2009); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, 2002), esp. 43–50, at 45; David Lindenfeld, *World Christianity and Indigenous Experience: A Global History 1500–2000* (Cambridge, 2021), esp. 9–30.

³ For an example of the phenomenon of the ‘conversion’ of missionaries, eased in this case by Vatican II’s avowed openness to learning from ‘what is good and holy’ in non-Christian religions, see Laura Rademaker, ‘Going Native: Converting Narratives in Tiwi Histories of Twentieth-Century Missions’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 70 (2019), 98–118, esp. 113. This is distinct from the wider notion that missionary ventures could be transformative, even ‘conversionary’, for the societies which sent them: see David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton and Woodstock, Oxon., 2017).

advantage. If we are to understand how the game plays out, it is important not only to understand the motives and responses of indigenous peoples, but also to understand what missionaries have thought they were trying to achieve, and why they set about their work as they did.

If this question has been neglected, it is partly because the answer is too simple and obvious to be interesting. Missionaries were (and are) trying to convert peoples from different cultures to Christianity, in some of the many senses in which that is possible. They may use a wide range of means to pursue very varied kinds of conversion, and they may (of course) meet with little or no success. They will also have a variety of other motives, from personal ambition to patriotic support for imperial enterprises.⁴ But insofar as conversion in some sense is no longer their aim, then they are no longer really Christian missionaries. If a good deal of scholarly attention has focused on those ‘mixed’, secular motives,⁵ it is partly because the baseline of conversionary intent goes without saying.

Yet if conversion is a tangled, negotiated and contested problem, missionaries are necessarily drawn into those tangles, negotiations and contests. What counts – in missionaries’ eyes, or the eyes of those who send and support them – as a sufficient, authentic or valid conversion? This is a ‘persistent and controversial issue within the history of Christian conversion’.⁶ The problem is a particularly acute one for the Protestant missionaries who are the focus of this article. In the Catholic tradition, the fundamental purpose of mission is less the securing of individual conversions than the establishment of the Church in new lands.⁷ Moreover, when individuals do convert, the process is framed by reasonably clear-cut external and sacramental markers. For Catholics, unlike for most Protestants, baptism is understood to be an *ex opere operato* means of grace, which incorporates even an infant or uncomprehending candidate into the Church: such people’s conversion is hardly complete, but they can meaningfully be described as Catholic.

In Protestantism, the emphasis on the exclusive importance of faith and the move away from sacramental or ecclesiastical elements in salvation has made the problem of missionary goals a much more vexed one. With salvation understood as above all an inward event, individual conversion came to be enduringly important for many varieties of Protestants, with many traditions valuing conversion narratives or testimonies of faith as markers of full

⁴ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1, 7, 10–11; and see next note.

⁵ Norman Etherington, ‘Introduction’ to *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford, 2005), 2, 4, reviews literature depicting missionary motivations as tainted by commercial and imperial imperatives, which Etherington sees as of the past; but cf. John Barker, ‘Where the Missionary Frontier Ran ahead of Empire’, *ibid.*, 86–106, esp. the conclusion at p. 105; and Mark Thomas Edwards, *Faith and Foreign Affairs in the American Century* (Lanham and London, 2019), 19–23, 52–5. The tendency in the social sciences to see missionaries’ motivations predominantly in negative terms is effectively problematised by Robert J. Priest, ‘Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist’, *Current Anthropology*, 42 (2001), 29–68.

⁶ Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 662–3 and cf. 18–19, 261–2.

⁷ David Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Louisville, 1980; Eugene, 2006), 117–18.

membership.⁸ Even in more traditionally structured Protestant churches, it was axiomatic to missionary theorists, practitioners and promoters from the beginning that *conversio* had to precede *plantatio*. ‘Wee have not learnt as yet,’ wrote the publicists for one of the first Protestant missions in the 1640s, ‘the art of coyning Christians, or putting Christs name and Image upon copper mettle’: nor, indeed, did they have any wish to imitate such corrupt and superficial mass production, which they associated with Catholicism and with Spain. A church had to be built from individuals.⁹

But in the absence of unambiguous ritual or legal markers, what constitutes an authentic individual conversion? How can anyone be sure of the authenticity of someone else’s conversion, or indeed of their own? This is a recurrent problem of Protestant theology and pastoral practice in a great many contexts, including in evangelistic work in missionary homelands. However, it is perhaps at its most acute in the missionary encounter, where the lack of a shared set of cultural languages and practices makes it unusually difficult to ‘read’ other people with any confidence.

In this essay, we suggest a framework for analysing the different ways in which Protestant missionaries have tried to tackle this problem.

In the absence of windows into the soul, Protestant missionaries have from the earliest times felt obliged both to apply a series of presumptions about what conversion means, and to use various proxies to measure it, and its sufficiency or authenticity. This grew from the belief that certain individual and communal patterns of behaviour were outward manifestations of the inward, invisible transformation that was Protestant missionaries’ underlying aim. And so missionaries have adopted those patterns as proxies or surrogates for conversion. These proxies tended, by elision, to become the actual goals of the missionary enterprise. At the simplest level, certain types of behaviour were taken to be signifiers of inner change, so much so that the signifier became the signified.

Nor did proxies need to signify profound inner transformation to be significant. Missionary work is very often attended with meagre success.¹⁰ Under such circumstances, it is common for missionaries to modulate their goals, and to pursue patterns of communal behaviour which might not represent complete and ‘authentic’ conversion, but which might be steps towards it: the early nineteenth century British missionary John Philip referred to this

⁸ Cf. Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 663.

⁹ *The Day-Breaking, if not the sun-rising of the Gospell with the Indians in New-England* (Wing S3110. London, 1647), 15; Jan Jongeneel, ‘The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius’, *Calvin Theological Journal*, 26 (1991), 47–79, at 64–5.

¹⁰ For some compelling recent case studies that illustrate this truism, see Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Oxford, 2012); D. L. Noorlander, *Heaven’s Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, 2019); James Van Horn Melton, ‘Conversion and Its Discontents on the Southern Colonial Frontier: The Pietist Encounter with Non-Christians in Colonial Georgia’, in *Protestant Empires: Globalizing the Reformation*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge, 2020), 228–53. In the nineteenth century, famously, David Livingstone won only a single African convert.

as the “indirect” or “reflected influence” of the gospel’.¹¹ Soon enough, missionaries might see these patterns as legitimate proxies for, and thus metrics of, missional ‘success’, and even claim them as a mission’s purpose. Preparatory projects, such as teaching indigenous people to speak and read European languages, could blur into the conversionary task itself.¹² So could charitable or medical work by missionaries which did not have an explicitly conversionary aspect.

Going down such paths has been particularly tempting when conversion in the conventional sense has seemed out of reach: when it has appeared that inner change is not being effected, or not sufficiently so. Under those circumstances, there could be considerable pressure (whether internal, from the missionaries themselves, or external, from their sponsors or funders) to redefine success as something that was both achievable and measurable, such as attendance at schools, changes to patterns of communal behaviour, or even the construction of buildings. In this way, goals conceived of as proxies for conversion might come to substitute for it, as that unmeasurable and, apparently, barely attainable aim receded over the horizon.

What makes this process of historical interest is that it was rare for any one of these proxies to be seen as adequate on its own. Our argument, therefore, is that historic Protestant missions can be profitably analysed in terms of the range of proxies they used to measure and direct their activities, and in terms of how those proxies were understood to relate to each other in terms of sequencing, attainability, interdependence and importance. In what follows, we propose a simple matrix for analysing these proxies; offer some historical examples of how they have interacted in practice; and suggest ways that this matrix can be used to interrogate some of the persistent problems of the history of Protestant missions.

Four axes of conversion

We propose a conceptual matrix in which the proxy measures of conversion used and sought by Protestant missionaries may be plotted along four axes. The historical question then becomes which axes were prioritised over others, to what extent, why and with what consequences. The four axes are:

1. *Orthodoxy*. Does a convert openly profess doctrines which the missionary regards as correct, for example by affirming a confession of faith or other creedal statement, or by demonstrating a satisfactory understanding of key doctrinal issues?
2. *Zeal*. Is a convert earnest, persistent and committed in their practice of Christianity, rather than formal, intermittent and indifferent? How confident can the missionary be of their sincerity?

¹¹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, II, 77.

¹² See Clifford Putney, ‘Introduction’ to *The Role of the American Board in the World: Bicentennial Reflections on the Organization’s Missionary Work, 1810–1920*, ed. Clifford Putney and Paul T. Burlin (Eugene, 2012), xx.

3. *Civilisation*. Does a convert live in a mode which the missionary regards as civilised and fully human (typically including functional literacy), or in a mode perceived as primitive, wild or animalistic ('heathen')?
4. *Morality*. Does a convert live in accordance with the ethical priorities the missionary teaches (regardless of any formal religious basis for their ethics)?

These axes are here phrased in individual terms, but even the most individualistic of Protestant missionaries have always understood that conversions are made possible (or prevented) by a social context, and have social consequences.¹³ All four axes can be applied to societies as well as to individuals, albeit to different extents. The first two are more inherently individualistic in nature; the latter two more collective. This is one of the factors governing which axes are prioritised in particular circumstances.

None of the axes represent stark dichotomies, although they can be expressed as such. Each has its opposing poles (zeal vs apathy, morality vs depravity), but each axis represents a spectrum. They were potentially liable in missionary eyes not only to deficiency, but to excess or at least perversion: civilisation could become decadence, and zeal, enthusiasm or fanaticism – faults that many missionaries knew all too well from their home countries. Even orthodoxy and morality could be corrupted into dry book-learning and legalistic self-righteousness. Such flaws were usually the result of the four axes becoming unbalanced: enthusiasm, for example, was zeal without sufficient orthodoxy, and decadence, civilisation without morality.

It is rare to find this matrix being articulated in full in the sources, but some witnesses come close. In 1649, for example, England's governing Rump Parliament established the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, one of the first Protestant missionary corporations.¹⁴ The legislation celebrates the conversions that had been reported amongst Native Americans in Massachusetts, but immediately asks: how can anyone be sure these conversions are authentic? The answer is keyed to all four of our axes. They are 'not only of Barbarous become Civil' (*civility*); they have also proved the authenticity of their conversions by

their diligent attending of the Word so preached unto them [*orthodoxy*], with tears lamenting their mis-spent lives [*zeal*], teaching their Children what they are instructed in themselves, being careful to place their said Children in godly English Families, and to put them to English Schools [*orthodoxy* and *civility*], betaking themselves to one wife, putting away the rest [*morality*], and by their constant prayers to Almighty God morning

¹³ Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin (eds.), 'Introduction' to *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning* (Aldershot, 2014), 1; Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 661–2.

¹⁴ Not to be confused with the better-known Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), established in 1701.

and evening in their families, expressed (in all appearance) with much Devotion and Zeal of heart' [zeal] ...¹⁵

Even if such a comprehensive and explicit appeal to all four axes is unusual, all four are pervasively evident in Protestant missional thought and practice. While the pattern originates in the early modern period, it also persists, in somewhat changed form, to the post-imperial age. As the English legislators of 1649 suggest, most Protestant missionaries' *ideals* would include 'conversion' in all four senses – to bring people, ultimately, to the point of being orthodox, zealous, civilised and moral. Yet missionaries, as well as bringing their own distinctive preconceptions to the problem, have always had to recognise that the peoples they are attempting to reach begin from different points in the matrix. They therefore need to decide which measures they see as most ultimately important, which as the most immediately urgent, and which as practically attainable. They may believe, for example, that it is futile to teach doctrine before morals have been reformed – or the reverse. This decides what map through the matrix to the hoped-for destination they may attempt to chart. Missionaries might prioritise the teaching of doctrine, the fostering of personal commitment, the reformation of modes of living, or the inculcation of ethical norms – and in each case meaningfully regard themselves not only as pursuing conversion, but as doing so by the most urgent means in the particular circumstance they faced.

The matrix in practice

When the Protestant missionary endeavour was first taking shape, in the years around 1700, the conventional maps plotted through the matrix would have varied dramatically in different geographical and cultural settings of missionary activity. A typical Euro-American Protestant of that era might rank the native peoples of the Americas as having neither orthodoxy (if they had notions of deity, they were distant from Christian ones) nor civility. Yet the same peoples might be ranked highly for zeal, and perhaps for morals, with any perceived depravity often being blamed on the traders, soldiers and settlers who were corrupting them. However, the general consensus of the age was that civility was a prerequisite for true conversion. It was commonplace to argue that until Native Americans came to adopt settled agricultural lifestyles, any talk of Christianity was futile, and to blame missionary failure on their stubborn attachment to their traditional way of life. The early eighteenth-century Anglican catechist Elias Neau, justly renowned as a sympathetic missionary to enslaved Africans, took a much dimmer view of Native Americans: 'people, who have nothing but the Figure of Men'. After two decades' American experience, he wrote, 'I never see any of them that were true Converts ... but must needs say that if the Purity of manners be not joined with that of doctrine I have no good opinion of such Professors of Christianity'.

¹⁵ *An act for the promoting and propagating the Gospel of Jesus Christ in New England. Die Veneris, 27 Julii, 1649. Ordered by the Commons assembled in Parliament* (Wing E2505A. London, 1649), 407–8.

Barbarism was tied to immorality: Neau saw it as futile ‘to run in the woods after miserable Creatures who breath nothing but Blood and Slaughter’. And he was clear as to why superficial conversions were meaningless: although ‘it is good to propose the Truth to the Mind’, nevertheless ‘the most difficult part is not to instruct Mens minds but to carry the affections of the Heart to the Love and Obedience of the Supream Good’.¹⁶ Or, in our terms: until they had attained civilisation and morality, training in orthodoxy alone could not be crowned with the zeal which he saw as the final desideratum of his mission. As such, efforts to induce or even compel them to change that way of life, even though devoid of any apparently religious content, might be understood as missionary endeavours.¹⁷ Later in the eighteenth century, missionary opponents of the slave trade would advance a similar argument: until slaves were enabled by freedom to enter into some semblance of civilised life, rather than being brutalised by servitude, they would be unable to embrace Christianity.

The priority on civilisation was not universally shared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, with some Protestants even suggesting that European notions of civility in fact amounted to decadence and served to hinder rather than to further the propagation of the faith.¹⁸ Differing views on this meant that if Native Americans professed Christianity, a missionary might – or might not – prioritise zeal and ethical norms (such as marriage) over civilisational norms such as diet and dress. By contrast, the same missionary might rank the ‘carnal Protestant’ of England as civilised and orthodox, but as apathetic and formal in faith, and depraved in morals – even using the virtues of the pagans to reproach nominal Christians back home.¹⁹ The ‘wild Irish’, by contrast, our missionary would regard as partially orthodox – they were baptised and professing Christians even if they were papists – and as zealous, but as so lacking in either civility or morality, and indeed in knowledge of their supposed faith, that they might be counted as effectively pagan.²⁰

Our hypothetical Protestant missionary in 1700 would, however, have regarded many non-Christian peoples as civilised. The ‘Turks’ were also typically seen as zealous, with their piety and especially their iconophobia putting Christians’ lax orthodoxy to shame; their morals were a mixed picture, their charity being admired and their polygamy deplored. Protestant visitors to the Ottoman Empire often thought the Turks compared favourably to Orthodox Christians, who were seen as lamentably lacking in zeal, morality

¹⁶ Elias Neau to John Chamberlayne, 3 Oct. 1705, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, SPG Letterbooks A2/125 p. 3.

¹⁷ R.G., *Virginia’s cure, or, An advise narrative concerning Virginia discovering the true ground of that churches unhappiness, and the only true remedy* (Wing G1624. London, 1662); W. Stitt Robinson Jr, ‘Indian Education and Missions in Colonial Virginia’, *Journal of Southern History*, 18 (1952), 152–68, esp. 160.

¹⁸ Gerald J. Goodwin, ‘Christianity, Civilization and the Savage: The Anglican Mission to the American Indian’, *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 42 (1973), 93–110.

¹⁹ *The Day-Breaking, if not the sun-rising*, 5.

²⁰ Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans and the Construction of Difference* (Athens, GA, 2013), esp. 30.

and civilisation compared to their Turkish neighbours – deficits which were easy to blame on those Christians' doctrinal shortcomings.²¹ The Chinese, by contrast, were usually classed as pagans, and so sunk deeper in theological error than the monotheistic Turks, but to a Protestant admirer such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, China's civility matched or even exceeded Europe's: it was that very civility which offered him hope that China might be brought to embrace the one thing it lacked, namely Christianity.²²

Missiological solutions to these different challenges varied depending on the theological assumptions which were brought to the task. Lutheran Orthodoxy generally prioritised orthodoxy over zeal, to the extent that the seventeenth-century Lutheran establishment was hostile to any notion of cross-cultural mission.²³ Likewise, a Dutch Calvinist might place a premium on doctrinal education, to the extent that a minister in seventeenth-century Ceylon might measure his success by the fact that his converts 'could refute the Popish Errors concerning Purgatory, the Mass, Indulgences, Auricular Confession, &c.'. ²⁴ A Pietist might value zeal over civility, accepting, for example, the legitimacy of working in indigenous languages such as Sámi or Tamil.²⁵ Anglo-American Calvinists, and indeed Huguenots such as Elias Neau, might emphasise the need for civility. English Latitudinarians might prioritise morals.

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Protestant missionaries were populating the matrix differently, but the basic framework remains. While many missionaries of this later era plainly desired to effect deep spiritual transformations, their priorities frequently slipped from orthodoxy and zeal towards civilisation and morality, through an often unwitting elision of Christian beliefs with the cultural practices and technologies of western Christendom. Robert Moffat wrote about his mission to the Tswana in the 1830s that:

The same Gospel which had taught them that they were spiritually miserable, blind, and naked, discovered to them also that they needed reform externally, and thus prepared their minds to adopt those modes of comfort, cleanliness, and convenience which they had been accustomed to view only as the peculiarities of a strange people.²⁶

²¹ Cf. Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History*, The Modern Library edn (New York, 2002), xxxii–xxxiii, 25, [38]–39, 56–9.

²² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Writings on China*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr (Chicago, 1994), 45–7, 51.

²³ Dennis C. Landis, 'Lutherans Meet the Indians: A Seventeenth-Century Conversion Debate', in *The Spiritual Conversion of the Americas*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville, 2004), 99–117.

²⁴ Philip Baldaeus, 'A True and Exact Description of the Most Celebrated East-India Coasts of Malabar and Coromandel, as also of the Isle of Ceylon', in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4 vols. (ESTC T097848. London, 1704), iii, 802.

²⁵ Dikka Storm, 'The Church, the Pietist Mission and the Sámi: An Account of a Northern Norwegian Mission District in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Norwegian Journal of Missiology*, 3 (2017), 59–75; Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford, 2008), 147–67.

²⁶ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (1842), p. 505.

If success could reorientate missions in this direction, so could failure.²⁷ In the Islamic world, long experience told Christian missionaries that individual conversions were particularly difficult to obtain or even to pursue. Under such circumstances, social programmes could become a surrogate for conversion. Education and public health work were seen by many Christian missionaries as emulating Christ's ministry; even hostile regimes might permit missionaries to undertake such work, and it was usually possible to demonstrate some tangible success. Well before the end of the nineteenth century, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission's work in the Ottoman Empire had become so given up to schools and clinics, with success measured in numbers of graduates and patients, that explicit interest in individual conversion is hard to find.²⁸ Civilisation, to be achieved through the medium of Western-style education, had become the most important aim, with morality (since schools taught pupils ethical conduct) a distant second. Christian orthodoxy was at best implicit in this education, and zeal was quite out of reach. Missionaries settled for using the more societal axes as proxies for individual transformation.

One time-honoured way round the difficulties of Protestant mission in the Islamic world and elsewhere was to target indigenous Christian churches: Assyrians, Copts, Maronites, and the Mar Thoma Christians of India, among others. The question of whether such missionary efforts were legitimate became urgent in the late nineteenth century and after, with declining interdenominational conflict and incipient ecumenism: the Protestant establishment gathered at the World Missionary Conference in 1910, for example, took the view that South America was *not* a mission field, because Protestant mission to Catholics was unnecessary.²⁹ Whether this was accepted or rejected depended on the view taken of our matrix. For those who prioritised orthodoxy, the conversion of so-called Christians sunk in ancient error was essential; the urge to 'civilise' such Christians could be almost as powerful. The advocates of morality or zeal were more sympathetic to their separated brethren.³⁰

²⁷ Indeed, Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, II, 118, conclude that, due to the 'disappointingly low' number of converts, missionaries to the Tswana gradually but overwhelmingly came to prioritise 'the civilising mission' over 'salvation' – as if the two were alternatives.

²⁸ See e.g. Yvette Talhamy, 'American Protestant Missionary Activity among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the Nineteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 47 (2011), 215–36; I. Okkenhaug, 'Christian Missions in the Middle East and the Ottoman Balkans: Education, Reform, and Failed Conversions, 1819–1967', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 47 (2015), 593–604; J. H. Proctor, 'Scottish Medical Missionaries in South Arabia, 1886–1979', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (2006), 103–21; Dorothy Birge Keller and Robert S. Keller, 'American Board Schools in Turkey' and Virginia A. Metaxas, 'Dr. Ruth A. Parmelee and the Changing Role of Near East Missionaries in Early Twentieth-Century Turkey', in *The Role of the American Board*, ed. Putney and Burlin, chs. 4–5.

²⁹ See Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, 2009), 54–8, 64–6, 72, 297, 306.

³⁰ See Gareth Atkins, 'Missions on the Fringes of Europe: British Protestants and the Orthodox Churches, c. 1800–1850', in *British Protestant Missions and the Conversion of Europe, 1600–1900*, ed. Simone Maghenzani and Stefano Villani (New York, 2021), 215–34.

Similar issues confronted missionaries from the state and ‘mainline’ Protestant churches of Europe and North America as they decided how to relate to the Pentecostal and Holiness denominations and other minority or sectarian movements – movements that were undeniably Protestant, but of dubious orthodoxy; with a zeal that had become excessive or perverted; alarmingly uncivilised; and (it was often alleged) suspect in morals. Those new denominations, by contrast, viewed the old establishments as fatally lacking in zeal, lax in their morals, somewhat erroneous in their doctrines and hypocritically decadent in their priority on civilisation – so much so that, in some cases, they targeted missionary efforts not only at Catholics in Latin America (the World Missionary Conference notwithstanding) but also at mainline Protestants in Europe.³¹

If the ‘civilisation’ axis appears less dominant in the modern era than in earlier centuries, this is in part because it shifted its form. The medical and educational missions that spread across the world in the modern era may not have insisted on the adoption of European modes of living as peremptorily as their predecessors, but their conviction that it was in the best interests of indigenous people for them to embrace certain material and behavioural norms of Western civilisation (such as hygiene and sanitation) was no weaker. Yet this was never unchallenged. Among the evangelicals there was a suspicion that medical and educational missions were a manifestation of the ‘social gospel’ which they rejected in their home countries.³² By the 1930s, missionaries who established schools and taught modern agricultural methods might also be affirming indigenous patterns of dress and obstructing colonial authorities.³³ Even medical missionaries did not necessarily privilege civilisation over the other axes. One Swiss missionary nurse wrote in the early 1940s: ‘Human beings in the Belgian Congo, as in all other countries, are less in need of civilization and of schools than of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel which delivers from the old life and renews the heart, which preaches love of one’s neighbor.’³⁴ One missiological strand thus came to see civilisation, not merely as less important than morality or zeal, but as potentially *antithetical* to inward transformation.

³¹ See e.g. Philip Wingeier-Rayo, ‘The Impact of the World Missionary Conference on Mexico: The Cincinnati Plan’, in *The Reshaping of Mission in Latin America*, ed. Miguel Alvarez (Oxford, 2015), 36–46, 731–3, 736–7; Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 414–15, 420–2; Fernando Santos-Granero, *Slavery and Utopia: The Wars and Dreams of an Amazonian World Transformer* (Austin, 2018), 21–2, 139–64, 167–9, 173–7; Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church*, rev. edn (Nampa, ID, 1995), 276–8, 283–6; G. Alexander Kish, *The Origins of the Baptist Movement among the Hungarians* (Leiden, 2012); Peter Ackers, ‘West End Chapel, Back Street Bethel: Labour and Capital in the Wigan Churches of Christ c.1845–1945’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 (1996), 298–329; and, for more recent history, Hans Krabbendam, *Saving the Overlooked Continent: American Protestant Missions in Western Europe 1940–1975* (Leuven, 2020).

³² Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, II, 67.

³³ See e.g. Norma Youngberg, *Under Sealed Orders* (Mountain View, CA, 1970).

³⁴ Maria Haseneder, *A White Nurse in Africa* (Mountain View, CA, 1951), 120.

Another reason for a decreasing stress on the civilisation axis was the increasing emphasis from major missionary societies in Africa, China and elsewhere on using local converts in evangelisation. Protestants had recognised this principle since the seventeenth century, but now began to pursue it in earnest. Such people were often eloquent and capable missionaries, who thought they were ‘participating in a shared missionary endeavour that operated above racial and ethnic distinctions’ even while experiencing ‘the inequalities of power’, and who complicated notions of agency and exploitation.³⁵ These indigenous believers were, in the missionaries’ explicit categorisation, more ‘civilised’ than those around them, but generally not much more. Yet they were entrusted with missionising: partly because there were few Western missionary boots on the ground; partly because they had shown themselves to be zealous, sufficiently orthodox, and morally upright; and partly because their very ‘barbarism’ was recognised as an advantage, making them able to be heard by their own kin. Indeed, wildly inflated hopes were sometimes attached to such people, who were consequently liable to be blamed when they inevitably fell short.

Yet as the centrality of Western-style education and biomedicine in the modern missionary enterprise demonstrates, ‘civilisation’ has remained a decisively important marker of Christianisation. The agonised twentieth-century debates over the treatment of polygamy are a case in point: willingness to abandon existing polygamous norms was seen as a critical test both of civility and morality, even in the face of burgeoning arguments that a rigid line on this matter was both a stumbling block to conversion and potentially cruel to individuals.³⁶

The point of this *tour d’horizon* of changing Protestant attitudes to the missionary task is to indicate that, even as a wide range of Protestants pursued highly varied missionary projects with very diverse methods and presuppositions, our matrix of four cross-cutting axes – orthodoxy, zeal, civilisation and ethics – can be used to place, compare and interpret them. Our suggestion, therefore, is that this persistent underlying framework for analysing missionary intentionality can be a valuable tool for historical analysis of a wide variety of Protestant missionary enterprises. To understand the purpose, and thus the consequences (intended and unintended), of any mission, we need to understand what kinds of ‘conversion’ were being pursued, how, and in what order; that is, we need to understand which of these axes missionaries regarded as most urgent, how they proposed to move their people along them, and how they proposed to test whether they had done so.

³⁵ See Emma Wild-Wood, *Apolo Kivebulaya: Religious Change in the African Great Lakes c.1870–1935* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2020), quotation at p. 33; Peggy Brock, ‘New Christians as Evangelists’, in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Etherington, 132–52; Jehu Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial Context* (Westport, 2002); and, for early commitment to the same principle, Edward E. Andrews, *Native Apostles: Black and Indian Missionaries in the British Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

³⁶ Timothy Willem Jones, ‘The Missionaries’ Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888–1988’, *Journal of Religious History*, 35 (2011), 393–408.

Applying the model

Examining the history of Protestant missions with the aid of this model can help to bring certain issues more clearly into focus: some have received insufficient historical attention, others are the subject of historical controversy.

We have already noted how the matrix can be used to analyse decisions about which missionary projects were seen to deserve priority: decisions that mixed bluntly practical questions of accessibility and expected receptiveness with theological and apocalyptic views of who ought or ought not to be missionised, and when. Likewise, it can be worthwhile to examine the distinctive language and metaphors of missionary projects ('planting the church', 'bringing to Christ', 'taking the Gospel') through the lens of our matrix. It can help us to understand missions' distinctive time frames: missionary tasks measured in generations and centuries imply a civilisation- and morality-focused project based around education in which those who have already reached adulthood might be given up as unreachable.³⁷ Whereas, if there is a last desperate chance to save souls, it makes sense to proclaim orthodoxy and whip up zeal to snatch whoever can be saved from the impending fire.³⁸

What links each of these and other issues to the proxies for conversion which our four axes measure is the knotty question of authenticity. A Protestant 'conversion' is virtually impossible to evidence conclusively, even allowing for the wide range of definitions of what true 'conversion' might be. This problem has bedevilled Protestant missionary enterprises from the beginning – whether in the shape of straightforward dissimulation, perhaps in a ploy to secure material benefits from a colonial power (what was sometimes called 'rice-Christianity'³⁹); of calculated adjustment to official persecution (what in the sixteenth century was known as Nicodemism⁴⁰); or, more insidiously, of 'converts' who believed that they were truly Christian but

³⁷ This was typical of eighteenth-century projects in both the Dutch and British empires: see for example the Congregationalist missionary to the Native Americans, John Sergeant, who in 1743 concluded, after five years in the field, that there was no alternative but to 'take such a *Method* in the Education of our *Indian Children*, as shall in the most effectual Manner change their whole Habit of thinking and acting; and raise them, as far as possible, into the Condition of a civil industrious and polish'd People ... to root out their vicious Habits, and to change their whole Way of Living': most of the adults were beyond hope. Samuel Hopkins, *Historical memoirs, relating to the Housatunnuk Indians* (ESTC W14473. Boston, MA, 1753), 97–8. For a similar, more systematic approach in the Dutch empire, see Jurrien van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster: Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690–1795* (Groningen, 1978).

³⁸ This was typical of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelical Anglicans, and of the rather different evangelicals of twentieth-century North America: Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals* [2001] (Eugene, 2015), ch. 1; Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Oxford, 2010), 28–34, 51–7; Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of American Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 2–5, 326–31; Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 401–5.

³⁹ This term apparently originated in the early seventeenth-century Dutch East Indies: Johannes Keuning, 'Ambonese, Portuguese and Dutchmen: The History of Ambon to the End of the Seventeenth Century', in *Dutch Authors on Asian History*, ed. M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs, M. E. van Opstall and G. J. Schutte (Dordrecht, 1988), 362–97, at 383.

⁴⁰ Carlos M. N. Eire, 'Calvin and Nicodemism: A Reappraisal', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 10 (1979), 44–69; Andrew Pettegree, 'Nicodemism and the English Reformation', in his *Marian Protestantism: Six*

whose conversion might not measure up to the missionaries' exacting standards. The proxies we have described might have been the best solutions available to this problem, but they were very inadequate: for all of them are falsifiable, and the more priority is placed on any one of them, the more incentives are created to falsify it. Missionaries have consequently often lurched between excessive credulity and a systematic fear of hypocrisy which can almost amount to asserting the inevitability of their own failure.⁴¹ Protestantism's classic insistence on 'faith alone' and on conversion as an inward event made assessing the authenticity of conversions difficult enough in their 'home' cultural contexts – a difficulty which helped shape, for example, classical Puritan casuistry, the culture of revivalism, and Pentecostalism's tellingly named doctrine of 'initial evidence'. In alien cultural contexts, with all the accompanying incomprehension and suspicion, those looking to assess conversion were inevitably compelled to measure its outward manifestations, whether prescribed (conformity to doctrinal, civil or moral norms, or even to outward shows of zeal, which might be laid down as shibboleths in particular circumstances) or more spontaneous – for with painful irony, it was the *unexpected* manifestation of apparently spontaneous life-changes, which might be displayed on any of our axes, that missionaries most eagerly sought. Such spontaneous displays could even redraw the paths through our matrix that missionaries had plotted. A long-serving Canadian missionary in Korea in 1907 admitted that he had long assumed that 'the Korean would never have a religious experience such as the West has' – until, that is, the outpouring of what he was compelled to recognise as zeal in that year's revival changed his mind.⁴²

As this indicates, although our matrix is about missionaries and their intentions, it can also shed light on the dialectic between missionaries and the missionised which has informed so much recent scholarship. Missionaries' abstract intentions may have determined their entry-point into our matrix, but the path they actually took was determined by their interaction with indigenous peoples. For they themselves often traced their own paths through the matrix, reflecting their own convictions and priorities. Some converts might value clear-cut norms of ethics or orthodoxy – abstention from alcohol, monogamy, correct recitation of a confession of faith – as unambiguous markers of Christian legitimacy, as well as being of intrinsic value. Others might exploit missionaries' concern for civilisation and orthodoxy to secure benefits which they valued primarily for worldly reasons: the appeal of education, and literacy in particular, to enslaved people and many others dealing with conquest or occupation is a well-known lubricant of the missionary process.

Studies (Aldershot, 1996), 86–117; Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven, 2017), 382–5, 464–5.

⁴¹ As in, archetypally, the debacle of Karl Gützlaff's 'Chinese Union' and the resulting long hang-over of scepticism: Jessie G. Lutz and R. Ray Lutz, 'Karl Gützlaff's Approach to Indigenisation: The Chinese Union', in *Christianity in China from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford, 1996), 269–91.

⁴² Eunsik Cho, 'The Great Revival of 1907 in Korea: Its Cause and Effect', *Missiology*, 26 (1998), 289–300, at 296.

This could reach a point at which missionaries and missionised collaborated in maintaining a mutually agreeable fiction: missionary schoolmasters pretended to convert their students, and students pretended to be converted. Missionaries might hope that those who came seeking education with secular motives might be infused with the Gospel regardless. Or, wary of indigenous people attempting to exploit them, they might try to prevent civilisation from crowding out orthodoxy, and orthodoxy from crowding out zeal.

In other situations, indigenous people might prioritise inward, subjective definitions centred on zeal, whose subjectivity ensured that greater agency fell to the converts. Surprised or sceptical missionaries might not be able to gainsay the spiritual authority of displays of zeal, especially if such displays aligned to a missionary's own religious culture or to a distinctive doctrine in such a way as to sweep aside any nagging suspicions of hypocrisy. In the right context, the right practice could be self-authenticating. Tears of repentance had a particular weight. In an early encounter with Native Americans in New England, sceptical missionaries could not but be impressed that one of their hearers 'powred out many teares and shewed much affliction', especially because he did so 'without affectation of being seene, desiring rather to conceale his grieffe which (as was gathered from his carriage) the Lord forced from him': this fitted like a glove their preconceived understanding of how repentance was manifested.⁴³ Nearly two centuries later and half a world away, Moffat vividly described Tswana converts weeping for their sins: 'eyes now wept, which never before shed the tear of hallowed sorrow.' Moffat was sceptical enough of the motivations of some apparent converts that he 'found it necessary to exercise great caution in receiving members into the little church'. Yet the weeping converts fitted his conception of a true Protestant conversion experience so well that he could not but see this as a 'manifest outpouring of the Spirit from on high'.⁴⁴ Likewise, for Pentecostal missionaries of the following century, the gift of tongues put an end to doubts: where converts manifested it, the Holy Spirit had undeniably endorsed the reality of their conversion. Other denominations found different shibboleths centred on different axes. For Seventh-Day Adventists, observing the seventh-day Sabbath was so central, culturally as well as doctrinally, that it served synecdochically as a signifier of true conversion: both a desired public outcome in its own right and irrefutable proof of inward transformation. Almost as important for Adventists was renunciation of pork, tobacco and alcohol.⁴⁵ For the many other Protestant denominations that preached 'temperance', abstinence from spirits or from all alcohol could likewise serve as convincing moral evidence of 'genuine' conversion.⁴⁶

⁴³ *The Day-Breaking, if not the sun-rising*, 9; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 187–95.

⁴⁴ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, pp. 496, 508.

⁴⁵ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventists and the American Dream*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, 2006).

⁴⁶ David Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience* (1982), 46–51; Norman Etherington, 'Outward and Visible Signs of Conversion in Nineteenth-Century Kwazulu-Natal', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32 (2002), 432; Jennifer Fish Kashay, "'We will banish the polluted thing from our houses':

What makes this significant is that these criteria were never wholly under missionaries' control. Converts themselves could have a considerable degree of agency, in particular for balancing civilisation and morality – that is, for deciding what aspects of an indigenous culture were matters of indifference that were compatible with Christianity (or indeed supported it), and which were damaging or contrary to it. 'Conversion' changes some aspects of a convert's life and leaves others relatively unaltered: quite where the line should fall will always be a matter for negotiation.⁴⁷ Whatever course those iterative negotiations took, missionaries never exactly got the 'conversions' they sought. Nor, indeed, could they quite desire to do so. If they had – if converts had simply conformed, and shown no initiative of their own – that would in itself have demonstrated that their conversions were 'inauthentic'. Considering missionary communities through the four-axis perspective underscores a key point: some loss of control is a necessary condition for missionary 'success'. This was by no means always acknowledged by the communities that sent and sustained missionaries; many others that might accept it in theory balked at its implications. Yet even highly centralised denominations sought inward authenticity, and evidence for this had to be *both* conformist *and* individual.

One result of this is that missionaries as individuals, their institutions, and the churches and wider societies which sent them, were changed by the missionary process, both in the simple sense that their theoretical ideas about conversion were often revised following contact with the reality of a different culture, and in the more complex sense that a large part of a missionary's task is to learn from and about that culture. This was foregrounded in many missionaries' minds because the Christian tradition gives spiritual weight to concepts such as *pilgrimage* and *exile*, but in any case long-distance travel involved dislocation to a new, cross-cultural setting. It is no coincidence that the most translated Protestant missionary text aside from the Bible itself is that textbook of self-dislocating zeal, *Pilgrim's Progress*. In particular, this presses on the tension between individualism and community. The missionary is a dislocated individual or part of a small, tight-knit group: the same is often true of early converts. Yet the ultimate aim is not to detach converts from their families and social context (even though that is often in fact the outcome).⁴⁸ Instead, the ideal is ultimately to bring their whole communities with them – even if that sometimes means that Bunyan's brand of zeal must be downplayed in favour of the more communal axes.

Moreover, missionaries' paths through the matrix had to be negotiated not only between missionaries and their would-be converts, but also with the churches, agencies, donors and support networks who made missionary work possible. If Protestants never quite endured a catastrophe like the Catholic Church's Chinese Rites controversy, episodes like the Bishop Colenso

Missionaries, Drinking, and Temperance in the Sandwich Islands', in *The Role of the American Board*, ed. Putney and Burlin, 287–311.

⁴⁷ Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 13–14.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hebrews 11:13–15; Avihi Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge, 1992); Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1, 172–5

crisis in Natal show that similar tensions were at work.⁴⁹ The priorities or theories of theologians and armchair missionaries were distinctive and often unrealistic or impractical; donors had pet projects they insisted missionaries pursue; churches had rules they insisted be adhered to regardless of context; colonial governments had their own priorities which typically pushed missionaries towards agendas of civilisation and morality. All of these forces had to be managed. If missionaries attempted actively to oppose one of them, they usually required other groups of supporters. For example, in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, much of the planter and local church elite opposed attempts to Christianise enslaved people by teaching them to read. The missionaries of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) were divided on the subject, and some recommended working within this constraint; it was argued that appropriate zeal and morality could be nurtured without the need to pursue too much orthodoxy or civility.⁵⁰ Although the Society's London establishment generally supported literacy efforts, this clash between local and metropolitan forces left missionaries with limited room for manoeuvre.⁵¹ The promising missionary projects in Dutch Brazil in the 1640s were, their most recent historian has concluded, stymied by the determination of the church authorities in Amsterdam to micromanage a situation which they only dimly understood, by placing a near-absolute priority on a certain precise definition of orthodoxy.⁵² In the modern era, this tension has often been triggered by ecumenical projects; uniting bodies such as the Church of Christ in China or the Church of South India appeared self-evidently necessary to many missionaries on the ground, whereas denominational conservatives in the West regarded them as unacceptably compromising orthodoxy.

Historiographical implications

Our suggestion, then, is that our four-axis framework can provide a useful matrix, not merely for understanding missionary motivations themselves, but for thinking about the wider history of Protestant missions and their cultural, political, social and economic impacts around the world (both in 'sending' and 'receiving' societies). In what follows we offer some outline suggestions of the questions which our framework might be used to ask and to indicate ways in which it may be of value even to historians whose primary fields of interest do not include mission.

1. Colonisation and coercion

Most (but not all) historic Protestant mission has taken place within imperial contexts in which it was deeply implicated on multiple levels. However, it is

⁴⁹ D. E. Mungello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, Monumenta Serica 33 (Nettetal, 1994); Peter Hinchliff, 'Colenso, John William', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Oxford, Bodleian Library, USPG Papers 2: Committee Minutes, vii.134–7.

⁵¹ Glasson, *Mastering Christianity*.

⁵² Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath*, esp. 174–83.

increasingly recognised that the relationship between missionary and imperial projects was as awkward as it was intimate.⁵³ Historians' role is of course neither to defend nor to condemn missionary projects, but to disentangle how these relationships worked. A rigorous understanding of missionary intentions is a necessary part of this work. Imperial power structures were often either hostile to missionary projects, or 'cooperative' in ways that forced them, sometimes reluctantly, in specific directions. Like mating spiders, missionaries and empires needed, exploited and manipulated each other. Their purposes might sometimes be aligned but were rarely very similar. And some missionaries – for example, non-European missionaries working across the circles of empire, those from dissenting or marginalised denominations, or those from such European countries as Norway and Switzerland (or indeed the United States up to the 1890s) with little or no direct imperial presence – were largely excluded from and often at odds with imperial power structures, even if some of them could also exploit the cultural context of colonialism. The resulting differences can meaningfully be plotted and interpreted using our matrix, for imperial authorities had their own views on these proxies: often valuing civilisation, but not in cases where it might lead to colonised (or enslaved) peoples making unwelcome assertions of status; broadly favouring (Christian) morality insofar as it fostered industrious and loyal subjects, yet wary of it insofar as it might foster social conflict or undermine trade in alcohol or opium; often indifferent to orthodoxy as such, except insofar as it might encourage helpful or unhelpful political affiliations; frequently suspicious of zeal. In other cases, even the most nakedly coercive instruments of imperial power could actively understand themselves as having a missionary purpose, as in, for example, the British navy's nineteenth-century campaigns against the slave trade – purposes which would, inevitably, be shared far more by some individuals within those institutions than others. This naturally led to those institutions pursuing 'conversions' of the kind that they might be able to deliver, as hammers look for nails – targeting the enemies of civilisation and morality with their own particular brand of zeal. Whatever routes through the matrix secular rulers favoured, missionaries who chose to follow in their footsteps would find their paths made straight for them. Those with their own priorities would not.

2. *Missionary martyrdom and suffering*

Missionary work is often profoundly costly for the individuals involved, and sometimes extremely dangerous. This fact is so central to missionary hagiography that historians are justly uneasy about emphasising it. The analysis of missionary priorities and motivations provides a useful perspective on this. The active seeking of martyrdom is a 'problem' more often found in

⁵³ E.g. Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester, 1990); Brian Stanley (ed.), *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids, 2003); Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004); Etherington, *Missions and Empire*; Hilary M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801–1908* (Cambridge, 2011).

Catholic missions, but it has its Protestant equivalent in the tendency to validate mission work through suffering and labour, and to use suffering to build support networks. There have certainly been Protestant martyrs: David Livingstone's death was described in these terms; the deaths of John Williams in the New Hebrides (today's Vanuatu) in 1839 and John Patteson in the Solomon Islands in 1871 elevated each man's posthumous reputation even while helping to generate donations.⁵⁴ Even though martyrdom is on one level a mark of missionary failure, as a demonstrative act it was understood to model Christian orthodoxy and morals to indigenous people – even if that understanding in fact existed largely in the minds of martyrs' metropolitan supporters. It might also, especially when associated with a 'barbaric' practice such as cannibalism, shift missionary priorities in a particular situation towards civility. General Charles Gordon was a much more effective missionary to the Sudan as a 'martyr', his self-sacrifice repeatedly invoked by Protestant publicists to inspire emulation, than he had been in life.⁵⁵ And when all else was done, it was possible to use virtue ethics to turn an account of a martyrdom away from failure to a celebration of the missionary's duty and spiritual quest, however apparently fruitless. This may mean that martyrdom could become a receptacle for failure, in which self-endangerment and even seeking out violent confrontation become ways forward for thwarted missionaries, and in which martyrdom becomes a measure of success. In this sense, the pursuit of suffering can almost become a fifth axis, an exceptionally unsatisfactory proxy for real conversionary work, but also a passive-aggressive dynamic in which missionaries become accelerants of violence.

3. Language and translation

How missionaries have dealt with language barriers has been one of the most persistent and revealing problems of the Protestant missionary enterprise. Approaches which prioritise civilisation might prefer to educate indigenous people in a European language, believing that pagan tongues could not adequately convey Christian doctrine; those that favour zeal might prefer indigenous languages, while not prioritising translation of the entire Bible as aggressively as those who favour orthodoxy. Early Pentecostal missionaries attempted to use their commitment to zeal to bypass the question altogether, via the gift of tongues. Regardless of whether and how translation is prioritised, it is itself a fraught and dialectic process of 'conversion' through which Christianity is by necessity decanted into a pre-existing set of containers of meaning and association.⁵⁶ How missionaries tackle these dilemmas is largely a function of their preferred route through our matrix. Here we

⁵⁴ See e.g. Sujit Sivasundram, *Nature and the Godly Empire: Science and Evangelical Mission in the Pacific, 1795–1850* (New York, 2011), 127–31; Etherington, 'Introduction', 7.

⁵⁵ Cynthia F. Behrman, 'The After-Life of General Gordon', *Albion*, 3 (1971), 50–2, 55.

⁵⁶ Lindenfeld, *World Christianity and Indigenous Experience*, pp. 21–4. And see Andrew Walls, 'The Translation Principle in Christian History', in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY, 1996), 26–42.

might note in particular that the specifically Protestant ambition to translate and to distribute Bibles, biblical materials, and devotional material by Protestant authors, and the recurrent confidence that those materials will prove to have intrinsic power, unavoidably gives agency to ‘converts’ to form orthodoxies and moralities of their own, often with unexpected results which missionaries struggle to contain.⁵⁷

4. Medical and educational missions

Just as missionary organisations can lose control of the missionising process when they adapt to local languages, so schools, colleges, clinics and hospitals can take on a life of their own: healthcare and education have their own internal dynamics. We are accustomed to seeing such projects, which either do not focus on conversion at all or do so only indirectly, in a missionary context, but our matrix reminds us that they deserve closer analysis.⁵⁸ Are they intended as supporting the conversionary enterprise? If so in what sense – by laying the educational groundwork seen as necessary for embracing Christian orthodoxy (literacy, for example), by inculcating moral norms, by modelling the missionaries’ zealous personal commitment to serving the needy, by demonstrating the superiority of missionaries’ civilisation? Or are these projects seen as ends in themselves? (If so, in what sense? Is the claim to disinterested altruism in fact a conversionary attempt to demonstrate Christian morality?) How might these motives interact with the shifting ethical codes of medical or educational professionalism – an interaction happening both within institutions and within individuals?⁵⁹ How do the different missionary discourses interact? A school or clinic might be described as taking very different paths through, or around, the matrix by denominational fundraising reports, by professional bodies and by individual staff members’ correspondence. To say nothing of the views of their pupils and patients, whose demand for (or resistance to) such institutions was coloured by their own sense of missionary priorities as well as by more immediate and practical concerns. The responses of these ‘clients’, of course, also feed back into the paths chosen through the matrix. In particular, medical or educational missions often arose when more explicitly conversionary efforts had failed or been blocked, and another route had to be chosen: both because institutional pressures pushed missionaries towards paths on which measurable success was possible, and because the mission experience forced missionaries themselves to rethink their ways through the matrix.

⁵⁷ On perhaps the most spectacular and certainly the bloodiest example of this process of indigenisation, see Carl S. Kilcourse, ‘Instructing the Heavenly King: Joseph Edkins’s Mission to Correct the Theology of Hong Xiuquan’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 71 (2020), 116–34.

⁵⁸ For a pioneering overview of the terrain, see Andrew F. Walls, ‘The Domestic Importance of the Nineteenth-Century Medical Missionary’, in his *Missionary Movement*, 211–20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217–19; Hilary Ingram, ‘A Little Learning is a Dangerous Thing: British Overseas Medical Missions and the Politics of Professionalisation, c.1880–1910’, in *Complaints, Controversies and Grievances in Medicine: Historical and Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Jonathan Reinarz and Rebecca Wynter (New York, 2015), 75–90.

Conclusion

These are only a sample of the knot of questions raised by this perspective. A final recurrent theme is worth underlining, however: the importance of seeing missionary history through the lens of failure. Winning non-Christian converts to Protestantism has, in most historical contexts, been slow, difficult and sometimes impossible. It has almost always been harder than simplistic readings of the Acts of the Apostles and of stirring missionary narratives apparently implied, or than naive enthusiasm for the intrinsic power of Scripture or of the preached Word assumed. The history of Protestant missions is therefore largely a history of how missions and missionaries (and convert minorities) have responded to difficulty, danger and disappointment. There is a recurrent cycle of responses, in which initial intentions are frustrated, leading to reflection, reassessment and (sometimes) renewed or redirected efforts. Sometimes failure is denied; sometimes it becomes so dominant that even successes are not recognised. This cycle of frustration can be gradual, or can be punctuated by periodic lurches: in particular, war or other moments of political crisis can be decisive in moving the cycle onwards.

It is largely because of this cycle that the matrix of approaches to conversion we are suggesting is not static but dynamic. It is driven by unexpected failure – and, more rarely, by unexpected success. The first English settlers in North America were genuinely surprised that Native Americans appeared uninterested in their religion, and concluded that civility had to be prioritised; a century of disappointment later, missionaries of David Brainerd's generation rejected that in favour of a priority on orthodoxy and morality. American missionaries in late nineteenth-century Korea became suspicious of the conversions produced by their emphasis on orthodoxy and morality; they began instead to long for zeal, and were eventually rewarded with the revivals of 1907.

Which is to say: a primary lesson of our focus on missionary intentions is that missionary history is largely a story of unintended consequences. If missions' longed-for results rarely materialised, their consequences were nevertheless often profound, on many levels – including the 'feedback' consequences on metropolitan churches sparked by their involvement with missionary enterprises. And unintended consequences are still consequences; the intention remains essential if we are to understand them. This requires a means of analysing what the missionaries were attempting, and why; and of probing deeper into their own understanding of what they were attempting. We offer this model as an aid in that task.

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