

January 24, 2014

The following article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/world-missionaries-made.html>

*Christianity Today, January/February, 2014*

## COVER STORY

# The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries

They didn't set out to change history. But one modern scholar's research shows they did just that.

**Andrea Palpant Dilley** [ posted 1/08/2014 ]



For many of our contemporaries, no one sums up missionaries of an earlier era like Nathan Price. The patriarch in Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, Price tries to baptize new Congolese Christians in a river filled with crocodiles. He proclaims *Tata Jesus is bangala!*, thinking he is saying, "Jesus is beloved." In fact, the phrase means, "Jesus is poisonwood." Despite being corrected many times, Price repeats the phrase until his death—Kingsolver's none-too-subtle metaphor for the culturally insensitive folly of modern missions.

For some reason, no one has written a best-selling book about the real-life 19th-century missionary John Mackenzie. When white settlers in South Africa threatened to take over the natives' land, Mackenzie helped his friend and political ally Khama III travel to Britain. There, Mackenzie and his colleagues held petition drives, translated for Khama and two other chiefs at political rallies, and even arranged a meeting with Queen Victoria. Ultimately their efforts convinced Britain to enact a land protection agreement. Without it, the nation of Botswana would likely not exist today.

The annals of Western Protestant missions include Nathan Prices, of course. But thanks to a quiet, persistent sociologist named Robert Woodberry, we now know for certain that they include many more John Mackenzies. In fact, the work of missionaries like Mackenzie turns out to be the single largest factor in ensuring the health of nations.

## 'This Is Why God Made Me'

Fourteen years ago, Woodberry was a graduate student in sociology at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill (UNC). The son of J. Dudley Woodberry, a professor of Islamic studies and now a dean emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, started studying in UNC's respected PhD program with one of its most influential figures, Christian Smith (now at the University of Notre Dame). But as Woodberry cast about for a fruitful line of research of his own, he grew discontented.

"Most of the research I studied was about American religion," he says of early graduate school. "It wasn't [my] passion, and it didn't feel like a calling, something I could pour my life into."

One afternoon he attended a required lecture that brought his vocational drift to a sudden end. The lecture was by Kenneth A. Bollen, a UNC–Chapel Hill professor and one of the leading experts on measuring and tracking the spread of global democracy. Bollen remarked that he kept finding a significant statistical link between democracy and Protestantism. Someone needed to study the reason for the link, he said.

Woodberry sat forward in his seat and thought, *That's me. I'm the one.*

Soon he found himself descending into the UNC–Chapel Hill archives in search of old data on religion. "I found an atlas [from 1925] of every missionary station in the world, with tons of data," says Woodberry with glee. He found data on the "number of schools, teachers, printing presses, hospitals, and doctors, and it referred in turn to earlier atlases. I thought, *Wow, this is so huge. This is amazing. This is*

*why God made me."*

Woodberry set out to track down the evidence for Bollen's conjecture that Protestant religion and democracy were somehow related. He studied yellowed maps, spending months charting the longitude and latitude of former missionary stations. He traveled to Thailand and India to consult with local scholars, dug through archives in London, Edinburgh, and Serampore, India, and talked with church historians all over Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa.

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In essence, Woodberry was digging into one of the great enigmas of modern history: why some nations develop stable representative democracies—in which citizens enjoy the rights to vote, speak, and assemble freely—while neighboring countries suffer authoritarian rulers and internal conflict. Public health and economic growth can also differ dramatically from one country to another, even among countries that share similar geography, cultural background, and natural resources.

In search of answers, Woodberry traveled to West Africa in 2001. Setting out one morning on a dusty road in Lomé, the capital of Togo, Woodberry headed for the University of Togo's campus library. He found it sequestered in a 1960s-era building. The shelves held about half as many books as his personal collection. The most recent encyclopedia dated from 1977. Down the road, the campus bookstore sold primarily pens and paper, not books.

"Where do you buy your books?" Woodberry stopped to ask a student.

"Oh, we don't buy books," he replied. "The professors read the texts out loud to us, and we transcribe."

Across the border, at the University of Ghana's bookstore, Woodberry had seen floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with hundreds of books, including locally printed texts by local scholars. Why the stark contrast?

The reason was clear: During the colonial era, British missionaries in Ghana had established a whole system of schools and printing presses. But France, the colonial power in Togo, severely restricted missionaries. The French authorities took interest in educating only a small intellectual elite. More than 100 years later, education was still limited in Togo. In Ghana, it was flourishing.

## **Like an Atomic Bomb**

Those who know Woodberry can easily picture him there in West Africa—a tall, lanky man searching for answers with doggedness and precision. He might double as a film-noir private detective if you tossed a trench coat on his shoulders, turned up the collar, and sent him down a dark alleyway.

"It was fun to watch his discovery process," says Smith, who oversaw Woodberry's dissertation committee. "He collected really rare, scattered evidence and pulled it together into a coherent data set. In one sense it was way too big for a doctoral student, but he was stubborn, independent, and meticulous."

What began to emerge was a consistent and controversial pattern—one that might damage Woodberry's career, warned Smith. "I thought it was a great, daring project, but I advised [him] that lots of people wouldn't like it if the story panned out," Smith says. "For [him] to suggest that the missionary movement had this strong, positive influence on liberal democratization—you couldn't think of a more unbelievable and offensive story to tell a lot of secular academics."

But the evidence kept coming. While studying the Congo, Woodberry made one of his most dramatic early discoveries. Congo's colonial-era exploitation was well known: Colonists in both French and Belgian Congo had forced villagers to extract rubber from the jungle. As punishment for not complying, they burned down villages, castrated men, and cut off children's limbs. In French Congo, the atrocities passed without comment or protest, aside from one report in a Marxist newspaper in France. But in Belgian Congo, the abuses aroused the largest international protest movement since the abolition of slavery.

Why the difference? Working on a hunch, Woodberry charted mission stations all across the Congo. Protestant missionaries, it turned out, were allowed only in the Belgian Congo. Among those missionaries were two British Baptists named John and Alice Harris who took photographs of the atrocities—including a now-famous picture of a father gazing at his daughter's remains—and then smuggled the photographs out of the country. With evidence in hand, they traveled through the United States and Britain to stir up public pressure and,

along with other missionaries, helped raise an outcry against the abuses.

To convince skeptics, however, Woodberry needed more than case studies. Anyone could find the occasional John and Alice Harris or John Mackenzie, discard the Nathan Prices, and assemble a pleasing mosaic. But Woodberry was equipped to do something no one else had done: to look at the long-term effect of missionaries using the wide-angle lens of statistical analysis.

In his fifth year of graduate school, Woodberry created a statistical model that could test the connection between missionary work and the health of nations. He and a few research assistants spent two years coding data and refining their methods. They hoped to compute the lasting effect of missionaries, on average, worldwide. "I felt pretty nervous," he says. "I thought, *What if I run the analysis and find nothing? How will I salvage my dissertation?*"

One morning, in a windowless, dusty computer lab lit by florescent bulbs, Woodberry ran the first big test. After he finished prepping the statistical program on his computer, he clicked "Enter" and then leaned forward to read the results.

"I was shocked," says Woodberry. "It was like an atomic bomb. The impact of missions on global democracy was *huge*. I kept adding variables to the model—factors that people had been studying and writing about for the past 40 years—and they all got wiped out. It was amazing. I knew, then, I was on to something really important."

### Cause or Correlation?

Woodberry already had historical proof that missionaries had educated women and the poor, promoted widespread printing, led nationalist movements that empowered ordinary citizens, and fueled other key elements of democracy. Now the statistics were backing it up: Missionaries weren't just part of the picture. They were central to it.

"The results were so strong, they made me nervous," says Woodberry. "I expected an effect, but I had not expected it to be that large or powerful. I thought, *I better make sure this is real. I better be very careful.*"

Determined to be his own greatest skeptic, Woodberry started measuring alternative theories using a technique called two-stage least-squares instrumental variable analysis. With any statistical work, he knew, it was easy to mistake correlation for causation. There is a link, for example, between eating oatmeal and getting cancer. But that doesn't mean that if you eat too many Quaker Oats, you're doomed. It turns out that elderly people, who have a higher risk of cancer as such, happen to eat oatmeal for breakfast more often. In other words, oatmeal doesn't *cause* cancer.

In the case of missions history, Woodberry had to ask: What if missionaries moved to places already predisposed to democracy? Or what if the colonizing country—New Zealand or Australia or Britain—was the real catalyst?

Like a mechanic taking apart an engine only to rebuild it, he had to counter his own theory in order to strengthen it. That meant controlling for a host of factors: climate, health, location, accessibility, natural resources, colonial power, disease prevalence, and half a dozen others. "My research assistants were entering all these variables, and the missions variable was amazingly robust," says Woodberry. "[The theory] kept on holding up. It was actually quite fun."

Fun, but hard to believe. Woodberry's results essentially suggested that 50 years' worth of research on the rise of democracy had overlooked the most important factor.

"When I started to present on this, no one was interested," says Woodberry. "I'd get two people in the sessions at conferences. It was not on anyone's radar." When scholars did show up, Woodberry came to expect hostile questions and the occasional angry interruption.

But at a conference presentation in 2002, Woodberry got a break. In the room sat Charles Harper Jr., then a vice president at the John Templeton Foundation, which was actively funding research on religion and social change. (Its grant recipients have included Christianity Today.) Three years later, Woodberry received half a million dollars from the foundation's Spiritual Capital Project, hired almost 50 research assistants, and set up a huge database project at the University of Texas, where he had taken a position in the sociology

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department. The team spent years amassing more statistical data and doing more historical analyses, further confirming his theory. With these results and his dissertation research, Woodberry could now support a sweeping claim:

Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations.

In short: Want a blossoming democracy today? The solution is simple—if you have a time machine: Send a 19th-century missionary.

## Startling for Scholars

In spite of Smith's concerns, Woodberry's historical and statistical work has finally captured glowing attention. A summation of his 14 years of research—published in 2012 in the *American Political Science Review*, the discipline's top journal—has won four major awards, including the prestigious Luebbert Article Award for best article in comparative politics. Its startling title: "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy."

"[Woodberry] presents a grand and quite ambitious theory of how 'conversionary Protestants' contributed to building democratic societies," says Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of history at Baylor University. "Try as I might to pick holes in it, the theory holds up. [It has] major implications for the global study of Christianity."

"Why did some countries become democratic, while others went the route of theocracy or dictatorship?" asks Daniel Philpott, who teaches political science and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame. "For [Woodberry] to show through devastatingly thorough analysis that conversionary Protestants are crucial to what makes the country democratic today [is] remarkable in many ways. Not only is it another factor—it turns out to be the most important factor. It can't be anything but startling for scholars of democracy."

"I think it's the best work out there on religion and economic development," says Robin Grier, professor of economics and international and area studies at the University of Oklahoma. "It's incredibly sophisticated and well grounded. I haven't seen anything quite like it."

When Woodberry talks about his work, he sounds like a careful academic who doesn't want to overstate his case. But you also pick up on his passion for setting the record straight.

"We don't have to deny that there were and are racist missionaries," says Woodberry. "We don't have to deny there were and are missionaries who do self-centered things. But if that were the average effect, we would expect the places where missionaries had influence to be worse than places where missionaries weren't allowed or were restricted in action. We find exactly the opposite on all kinds of outcomes. Even in places where few people converted, [missionaries] had a profound economic and political impact."

## The Nations' Educators

There is one important nuance to all this: The positive effect of missionaries on democracy applies only to "conversionary Protestants." Protestant clergy financed by the state, as well as Catholic missionaries prior to the 1960s, had no comparable effect in the areas where they worked.

Independence from state control made a big difference. "One of the main stereotypes about missions is that they were closely connected to colonialism," says Woodberry. "But Protestant missionaries not funded by the state were regularly very critical of colonialism."

For example, Mackenzie's campaign for Khama III was part of his 30-year effort to protect African land from white settlers. Mackenzie was not atypical. In China, missionaries worked to end the opium trade; in India, they fought to curtail abuses by landlords; in the West Indies and other colonies, they played key roles in building the abolition movement. Back home, their allies passed legislation that returned land to the native Xhosa people of South Africa and also protected tribes in New Zealand and Australia from being wiped out by settlers.

"I feel confident saying none of those movements would have happened without nonstate missionaries mobilizing them," says Woodberry. "Missionaries had a power base among ordinary people. They [were] the ones that transformed these movements into mass movements."

He notes that most missionaries didn't set out to be political activists. Locals associated Christianity with their colonial abusers, so in order to be effective at evangelizing, missionaries distanced themselves from the colonists. They campaigned against abuses for personal, practical reasons as well as humanitarian ones.

"Few [missionaries] were in any systemic way social reformers," says Joel Carpenter, director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World

Christianity at Calvin College. "I think they were first and foremost people who loved other people. They [cared] about other people, saw that they'd been wronged, and [wanted] to make it right."

While missionaries came to colonial reform through the backdoor, mass literacy and mass education were more deliberate projects—the consequence of a Protestant vision that knocked down old hierarchies in the name of "the priesthood of all believers." If all souls were equal before God, everyone would need to access the Bible in their own language. They would also need to know how to read.

**'I never felt really comfortable with the idea of missions. Then I read Bob's work. I thought, Wow, that's amazing. They left a long legacy.'**

"They focused on teaching people to read," says Dana Robert, director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University. "That sounds really basic, but if you look worldwide at poverty, literacy is the main thing that helps you rise out of poverty. Unless you have broad-based literacy, you can't have democratic movements."

As Woodberry observes, although the Chinese invented printing 800 years before Europeans did, in China the technology was used mostly for elites. Then Protestant missionaries arrived in the 19th century and began printing tens of thousands of religious texts, making those available to the masses, and teaching women and other marginalized groups how to read. Not until then did Asian authorities start printing more widely.

Pull out a map, says Woodberry, point to any place where "conversionary Protestants" were active in the past, and you'll typically find more printed books and more schools per capita. You'll find, too, that in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, most of the early nationalists who led their countries to independence graduated from Protestant mission schools.

"I'm not religious," says Grier. "I never felt really comfortable with the idea of [mission work]; it seemed cringe-worthy. Then I read Bob's work. I thought, *Wow, that's amazing. They left a long legacy.* It changed my views and caused me to rethink."

## **Sign of Greater Purposes**

Skeptics remain, of course. In 2010, when Woodberry submitted his article to the *American Political Science Review*, the editors asked him to add case studies, run more regressions, and make all data and models public. For the article, he produced 192 pages of supporting material.

"It's a remarkable testament to his courage and endurance to get his work in a flagship journal," says Philpott. "In order to make this article fly, he had to leave no stone unturned and anticipate every hypothesis. It's an article whose thoroughness outpaces any I've seen."

But Bollen, whose talk prompted Woodberry's initial research (and who later cochaired his dissertation committee), offers a word of caution. "It's an excellent study. I don't see any particular flaw, but it's too bold to claim as an established fact. It's a single study. We have to see if other people can replicate it or come up with other explanations."

Yet so far, over a dozen studies have confirmed Woodberry's findings. The growing body of research is beginning to change the way scholars, aid workers, and economists think about democracy and development.

The church, too, has something to learn. For Western Christians, there's something exciting and even subversive about research that cuts against the common story and transforms an often ugly character—the missionary—into the whimsical, unwitting protagonist we all love to love.

Woodberry would temper our triumphalism, to be sure, reminding us that all these positive outcomes were somewhat unintended, a sign of God's greater purposes being worked out through the lives of devoted but imperfect people.

Still, a little affirmation seems appropriate. As Dana Robert notes, "Bob's research shows that the total is more than the sum of its parts. Christians collectively make a difference in society."

Looking back now, more than a century later, we see just how long that transformative difference can endure.

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## **What They Brought the World**

William Carey. David Livingstone. Hudson Taylor. These are the rock stars of the modern missionary movement. Here are eight other missionaries who were bellwethers for global democracy.

## **CONGO**

Alice Seeley Harris

A UK Baptist, Harris and her husband, John, were among the first people to use photography to promote human rights. In the early 1900s, colonialists used forced labor to extract rubber from the Congo's jungles—and villagers who resisted were castrated, burned, or had limbs cut off. The Harrises traveled throughout the United States and Britain disseminating photos and giving lectures detailing the abuses.

## **BOTSWANA**

John Mackenzie

The British missionary partnered with a chief named Khama III to protect his land from being occupied by white settlers in South Africa. Their efforts birthed a pivotal land protection agreement. If not for Protestant missionaries, Botswana would most likely not exist today.

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

Trevor Huddleston

The Anglican missionary to South Africa earned the nickname Makhalipile—"dauntless one"—in part for publishing *Naught for your Comfort*, a devastating critique of South African racial policies. His writings and later leadership with the Anti-Apartheid Movement helped turn British public opinion against apartheid.

## **INDIA**

Ida Sophia Scudder

She vowed to never become one. But then Ida Sophia Scudder watched three women die needlessly one night at her parents' missionary bungalow and knew God was calling her to the mission field. Scudder addressed the plight of Indian women and the fight against bubonic plague, cholera, and leprosy. In 1918, she started one of Asia's foremost teaching hospitals, the Christian Medical College & Hospital.

## **INDIA**

James Long

Sent to Calcutta at age 22, Long was an Irish Anglican priest who played a key role in the Indigo Revolt of 1859, when rural indigo farmers rebelled against British planters. Long translated and published *Nil Darpan*, a play written by Dinabandhu Mitra about the poor treatment of indigo farmers, for which he was fined and briefly jailed. He is remembered today as a key preserver of Bengali education, literature, and history.

## **JAPAN**

Guido Verbeck

Guido Verbeck was a Dutch political adviser, educator, and missionary hired by the Japanese government to establish a new English school system in Nagasaki. He went on to lead massive change in Japan's education system, set up an exchange program with the States, and began the first Bible study in modern Japan.

## **CHINA**

Timothy Richard

Amid China's famine of 1876–79, Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist, helped lead one of the first major humanitarian relief efforts in modern history. While in Shanghai, he helped produce almost 300 books, campaigned with the Anti-Footbinding Society, and consulted with the governor of Shanxi Province to found a university.

## **CHINA**

Eliza Bridgman

In 1864, 20 years after sailing to China, American missionary Eliza Bridgman opened a school for girls in Beijing who otherwise would have suffered prostitution, forced labor, or starvation. Bridgman's school was eventually folded into Yenching University, one of the first universities in China. Now Peking University, today it is China's most prestigious university.

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