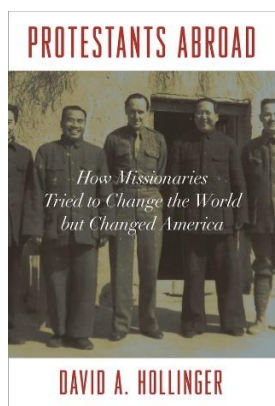


BOOK REVIEW

Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America

By David A. Hollinger

Reviewed by Daniel Miller



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From James Michener's *Hawaii* to Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, we have become accustomed to images of foreign missionaries as cultural imperialists. David Hollinger offers a very different portrait, in part because he focuses on the impact of missionaries from mainline Protestant denominations rather than those from more conservative evangelical or fundamentalist churches. What he finds is that these missionaries and their children and the mission agencies that supported them became more respectful of non-Western and non-Christian people and cultures as a result of their experiences in the Global South and less tied to denominational distinctives or even Christian orthodoxy. Having begun with the aim of proselytizing, most of these missionaries shifted their efforts to promoting economic development and providing social services such as health care and education. And instead of touting the superiority of Protestant Christianity and Western culture, they ended up challenging their sending churches to abandon denominational provincialism and encouraging all Americans to show greater respect for non-Western people.

Using a wealth of biographical detail, Hollinger follows the careers of scores of missionaries and missions-influenced Protestants to show how widespread their influence was. Because many were well versed in foreign languages and cultures, they were sought after as O.S.S. officers, State Department diplomats, and university professors. Several acted as interrogators of Japanese prisoners during World War II where they urged humane treatment and effectively used non-coercive techniques to obtain valuable intelligence. A number of prestigious Asian studies departments were established with staff consisting mostly of former missionaries and their children. As official and unofficial advisors to the U.S. government, many showed remarkable prescience in warning against looming problems such as the antagonism of Palestinian Arabs to Jewish immigration in the 1920s. And it was a missionary organization—the International Voluntary Services—that provided the model for President Kennedy's Peace Corps. Unfortunately, their eagerness to provide services to the U.S. government sometimes got them into trouble. Some of the "China Hands" who warned of corruption in Chiang Kai Shek's government (the author uses the older spellings of Chinese leaders) were branded as communist sympathizers during the Red Scare of the 1950s. And a number of IVS workers in Vietnam were killed by the Viet Cong. But mostly they were just ignored by administrations that mouthed moral pieties while engaging in realpolitik.

Hollinger also highlights the contributions of women to the story. Pearl Buck not only encouraged public support for China during the Japanese invasion, she advocated for numerous progressive causes such as reproductive rights for women, civil rights for African Americans, and mixed-race adoptions. Perhaps because of the obstacles they themselves had overcome to be heard, missions-associated women and organizations played key roles in the black civil rights movement, including the writing of the landmark Truman era white paper "To Secure These Rights."

At the heart of Hollinger's narrative is "contact theory," the idea that exposure to previously unfamiliar

people and cultures encourages empathy toward them. It was close contact with non-Western individuals that gave these “missionary cosmopolitans” their deep convictions that Americans should be more respectful of foreigners and more critical of their own nation and religion. Unfortunately, they found it difficult to transfer their new-found convictions to those who had not shared their experiences. Their push for ecumenism was rejected by most American churchgoers who clung to their familiar denominational patterns. Their promotion of progressive causes led conservative believers to abandon mainline denominations for evangelical mega churches. The missionaries themselves and their children often followed their new perspectives to their logical ends: religious universalism or progressive secularism. For anyone who believes Christian faith can and should be wedded to progressive causes, Hollinger’s account is sobering.

While Hollinger covers an immense terrain with admirable detail, he does leave important topics unexplored. He focuses on American missions that were supported by mainline denominations. He deliberately ignores the role and impact of evangelical and fundamentalist missions and passes over African American missionaries as well. In fact, nearly all his subjects were associated with the Far East, with lesser attention given to India and the Middle East, and virtually none to African or Latin American missions. On a minor note, the author omits some important names from the index such as Chiang Kai Shek and Mao Zedong. Caveats aside, this is an essential book for anyone interested in the paradoxical role Christian missions have had on America.

References

Kingsolver, Barbara M. 1998. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperCollins.

Michener, James A. 1959. *Hawaii : A Novel*. New York: Random House.

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