

Unwitting Patriots: The Cultural Influences Affecting America's First Missionaries

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As a member of the first American foreign missionary cohort and the longest-tenured of the group, Adoniram Judson became the model for all missionaries sent from the United States. After nearly forty years in Burma (present-day Myanmar), Judson had translated the Bible into the Burmese language, started a relatively large local church, and become an American celebrity. However, not all missionaries of the nineteenth century were seen as celebrities; popular writers of the period as well as later historians heavily criticized the movement. By engaging with a wide range of primary texts and secondary works by both historians and literary scholars, this study investigates the underlying causes of the discrepancy between religious people's enthusiasm for missions and the secular world's condemnation of them. It concludes by linking the issues of the later missionary movement to what some might call a relatively minor and understandable flaw in Judson's character: cultural pride.

The supposedly apolitical missionary's support of the 1824 British invasion of Burma as "the best, if not the only means of eventually introducing the humanizing influences of the Christian religion" creates a striking conflict with his deeply held New England theology of the gospel's sufficiency to save anyone regardless of cultural position (qtd. in Trager, ix). As one of the first scholars to critique the Burmese Christian mission, Helen G. Trager claims that Judson's negative view of the Burmese was a result of reading British missionary reports on Burma. According to the British, Burma was heathen, corrupt, and essentially unsavable. By reading their writings, Judson developed a preformed conviction that the Burmese were more depraved than his fellow Americans, and as historian Jon Butler often notes in *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, this spiritual and cultural pride came easily to American Christians because of the widespread belief in American morality and goodness.

Just as Judson studied the British reports, so did the next wave of American missionaries study and follow Judson's writings. His writings unintentionally insinuated the superiority of American culture and implicitly gave license to Judson's followers to project American values onto other societies. This attitude of superiority quickly spiraled into missionaries seeming more like self-appointed American ambassadors than the divinely called messengers they claimed to be, a fact that became widely known only after the nation's literary authorities (such as Herman Melville and Sinclair Lewis) heavily criticized foreign missions.

Christian missionary enterprises will always be a contentious topic: Those holding the required theological beliefs praise such efforts as not only acceptable but necessary and urgent undertakings, while theological outsiders consider them quixotic at best, paternalistic and damaging at worst. By pairing the perspectives of both missionaries and of secular on lookers through historical and literary scholarship, this study helps create a less biased and more balanced understanding of missionaries' accomplishments and unintended consequences.

Statement of Research Advisor

Along with a full semester of research preparation in early American literature and Christian writing (1620-1900), Nathan also studied a range of contemporary scholarship focused on American religious history. His final written study, focused on Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), an important Christian missionary to Burma, develops an original perspective on the moral outlook and political tendencies of Christian foreign mission activities through examination of Judson's life, work, and continuing influence on the evangelical missionary project.

—James Ryan, *English*

References

Trager, Helen. *Burma Through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century*. Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1966.

Butler, Jon. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990.