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ADVENTISM IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

“The Adventist Missionary in the Public Square”

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Introduction

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists currently has about 940 cross-cultural missionaries¹ (IDEs, Inter-Division Employees) on the field, of which about 30% come from the North American Division.² Other categories, including those sent by world divisions, are shown in the footnote. The 30% of IDEs that comes from NAD is very multi-ethnic and the other 70% very multi-national. Thus, today’s SDA missionary work force is truly “from everywhere to everywhere.” In the past many or most NAD members had personal knowledge of a missionary serving abroad but that is no longer true because only about 30% come from NAD. Perhaps the loss of personal connection explains why NAD members frequently ask whether the GC sends missionaries anymore.

My experience, and thus my bias, comes from being born into a missionary family. Starting with my maternal grandparents, my children are the fourth generation to serve as missionaries. Including my childhood, I have lived and worked in Malawi for 31 years. Most of the examples in this paper come from Malawi because of my time there.

In general, the public square has been ambivalent about the Christian missionary. On one hand, there is the hagiographic perspective that makes missionaries seem super-human. On the other hand, missionaries are sometimes demonized as being colonial agents of cultural destruction. You can guess that I think both caricatures are inaccurate. During my years in Malawi I saw many missionaries whose service was very Christlike and a small minority with somewhat dysfunctional lives but I never met one who qualified either as a holy hero or wicked villain. What I did experience was the ambivalence of living and working as a cross-cultural missionary. Even though I learned two Malawian languages in childhood and understand its culture quite well I had to make constant adjustments of my attitudes and behaviors to accommodate the cultural differences. The Malawian culture has styles, values, and preferences that differ from those I learned from my American parents and living their required flexibility that is tiring. On the other side of the relationship, Malawians had to make constant adjustments to accommodate my cultural foreignness.

My son, Richard, and his wife, Hadassah, face the complex task of administering Nile Union Academy that is populated by Egyptian and Sudanese students who are mostly Coptic Christians. The academy is immersed within the larger Muslim culture in Cairo. There is true joy in such service but it comes with a level of complexity not found in American academies.

Missionaries work at junction points of cultures and religions. It’s no wonder that the missionary is an ambivalent figure on the public square, given that the experience of being a missionary is an ambivalent experience for missionaries, themselves. Having said that, I can confidently say that all of my

¹ Theologically speaking, every believer is both a missionary and a minister called to use their spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Functionally speaking, the church selects some to perform the ecclesial functions of “minister” or “pastor.” The church sends others, both lay and clergy, to be “missionaries” who cross boundaries of culture, language, and religion.

² The 2015 General Conference Annual Statistical Report reports that at the end of 2013 there were 5,682 “Missionaries Currently Serving” of all types. These include 1,097 in “Adventist Volunteer Service,” 1,894 “Global Mission Pioneers,” 1,750 “Other Missionaries,” and 941 “Inter-Division Employees.” Student missionaries are reported under “Adventist Volunteer Service.” Short term mission trips (a few days up to 1 year) are not reported. Supporting/independent ministry missionaries are not reported. (see <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2015.pdf>)

family, in its four generations who have been missionaries, feel greatly blessed by the call of God and the church to serve cross-culturally.

Adventist Missionaries and the Public Square

Globalization has created a global public square linked by the media, air travel, and the internet. Yet, each nation and global region has its own public square with its own unique features. By necessity, this paper narrows the focus to the North American public square, which has many sub-squares.

The current political campaign is reminding us that Adventists are not very well known in the public square. If Adventists, in general, are not well known, Adventist missionaries are even less well known. To approximate what the public square would think of Adventist missionaries if they did know us better, we need to identify what kind of missionaries we are.

Laying aside our unique beliefs and practices, Adventist missionaries belong to a larger group that is Protestant, evangelical, and wholistic. That means that we are conversionist. We work to convert Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, secularists, and others to our faith. That does not mean that every missionary works as a pastor or evangelist but that our shared intention is to convert people to Jesus Christ. But we do more than proclaim the Gospel, baptize converts, and plant churches. We offer education, healthcare, disaster relief, and development aid in different ways wherever we work.

Both my mother and my wife supervised bush clinics in Malawi. Malamulo Hospital, in Malawi, has an amazing collaboration with Loma Linda University, that includes a surgical residency. The Malawi Union, with its 450,000 members and in partnership with the world church, makes a significant contribution to the nation in healthcare, education, relief, and development. As is now appropriate, there are many fewer foreign missionaries in Malawi than in past eras but they continue to facilitate the local and global mission of the church.

Various groups in the public square respond differently to Adventist missionaries. Christians of other denominations resent SDA “sheep stealing,” even if they do it themselves. Some see Adventist missionaries as global promoters of a Christian cult. Mainline, conciliar Protestants tend to be embarrassed by conversionism but laudatory about social service ministries. Religious pluralists, whether secular or religious, disapprove of conversionism because they see all religions as equally valid, alternative pathways to God and salvation. Pluralism is particularly strong in academia. Muslims, Hindus, and Jews strongly oppose conversionism and sometimes charge that social ministries are deceitful tactics that do not come from a genuine love for humanity.

Biography

The portrait of the Christian missionary is carried to the public square in different ways, including missionary biographies. The prototypical book about the heroic missionary was Jonathon Edwards’ *The Life of David Brainerd* (1718-1747). The stories about Brainerd’s three years among the American Indians made him a folk hero and “inspired the first generation of US evangelical missionaries. It also defined the genre and furnished the rhetoric for writing about their own experiences” (Peterson 2014:77). As they wrote their memoirs, missionaries sometimes measured their own service by Brainerd’s.

As the modern missionary movement got under way in the early 1800s, the missionary-as-hero view was presented in many biographies and autobiographies. The work of William Carey (1761-1834) in India, David Livingstone (1813-1873) in Africa, Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) in China, Mary Slessor (1848-1915) in Africa, Lottie Moon (1840-1912) in China, and many others was reported in books that are still in print in some cases. Many children in Christian families, like my own, were raised with a steady diet of Bible stories and missionary stories. Stories about Eric B. Hare have been greatly beloved by three generations of missionary kids in the Doss family. When I was a child growing up in Malawi the lives of those missionaries of the past seemed much more heroic than the lives of the missionaries my parents worked with.

We should not toss out the heroic element too quickly. Missionary service of the 19th century, with its slow travel, poor communication, isolation, and inadequate medical care was exceedingly rigorous. West Africa as dubbed the “white mans’ graveyard” because of the many missionaries who died

of malaria, yellow fever, typhoid, and other diseases. Many missionaries went abroad believing they were likely to die abroad. Nevertheless, the heroic biography genre did give the missionary face too much make-up in the public square. If one had access to the original drafts of heroic autobiographies, in particular, I doubt they were as heroic as the published products coming from editors and surviving spouses.

Several factors have encouraged idealized missionary autobiographies and biographies. First, the prose was not only a report of mission work but also a spiritual, devotional narrative of the ideal Christian life. Second, mission boards have wanted to present their missionaries in the best possible light. Third, missionaries who depend on the support of individuals, congregations, or mission agencies have presented the best possible picture. Fourth, editors and publishers have wanted to sell more books. Finally, and more charitably, the heroic missionary genre of the 19th century was part of a different era. What was lost were lessons that came from the struggles of missionaries with marital problems, fear, doubt, agnosticism, pride, and bitterness. Realistic stories present a missionary face with real-life zits and blemishes.

Missionary biographies began to change in the 20th century. Elizabeth Elliot (1926-2015) is an author who exemplifies both the heroic model and a more realistic model. When she wrote about her martyred husband, Jim Elliot, in *Through Gates of Splendor*, she followed the heroic model but when she wrote her own story (*These Strange Ashes* and *No Graven Image*) she was forthright about her loneliness, doubt, and feelings that God had abandoned her. Some of her later writing was so critical of missions that some vendors refused to sell it (Peterson 2015:78).

Possibly the most dramatic contemporary example in popular fiction of the missionary as villain is *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. Perhaps missionary-as-fool would be the best way to describe missionary Nathan Price in the Belgian Congo. Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* narrates the disruption in Nigeria caused by the arrival of colonialism and missionaries. This is an example of the conflation of colonials and missionaries into a single category.

Movies

Movies are a significant vehicle carrying the missionary narrative. Jamie Scott (2008) has published an outstanding analysis of missionaries in the film media, that I will summarize here only briefly. Both home and foreign missions and missionaries were featured in the early silent movies. Charlie Chaplain directed *Easy Street*, which featured mission in South London. The silent movies featured missions in urban America and exotic locations like Africa, China, India, Turkey, and the South Pacific.

The arrival of “talkies” added depth and nuance to movies. A few of the many movies discussed by Scott stood out for me—*Hawaii*, *Madonna of the Streets*, *The Missionary*, *The African Queen*, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, *The Last Flight of Noah's Ark*, *The Mission*, *The Apostle*, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, *David Livingstone*.

A thematic analysis serves the purpose of this paper better than a review of individual films. Romance is a frequent theme, with missionaries of both genders falling in love with other missionaries, or other expatriates, or locals, for better or worse. The theme of evil vs. good is common, with missionaries frequently on the side of good against impossible odds. Redemption is a common theme, with either the missionary or others being pulled back from destruction. Roman Catholic priests and nuns are frequently featured, often in struggles that involve celibacy. Soldiers and mercenaries bring a frequent theme of conflict that involves the missionary. The faithful or lapsed missionary is caught up in every imaginable struggle of integrity and morality, involving love triangles, isolation, and alcoholism. World War II, the Korean War, and Communism form the backdrop of many movies. The theme of exploration is common, featuring missionaries like Livingstone. Missionaries often respond to natural disasters and care for orphans. In summary, there are movies that present the missionary all along the saint-to-villain spectrum. Viewed as a whole, popular movies present a complex, varied picture of the missionary in the public square.

One distinct movie genre is for the purpose of promoting or teaching mission. Bio-pics and documentaries feature great missionaries and events in world missions. The *Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Beyond Gates of Splendor*, and *Mother Teresa* stand out. Groups like New Tribes Mission, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Harvest Productions, and World Wide Pictures comprise a Christian film industry that produces missionary movies.

Academia

Academia has not been a generally welcoming place for Christian missionaries. Academics who approach their work with secular, agnostic, or atheistic presuppositions do not favor Christian evangelization and conversion anywhere. Many academics are well informed about the critique of colonialism. If postmodernity makes people more open to other peoples' religions, religious pluralism strengthens the opposition to conversionism. A Christian who recommends Christianity to a Muslim is seen as being bigoted and insulting. If these views are common in the general public, they are especially strong in academia.

One long-held assumption in academia is that missionaries were close partners with the colonial project. Malawian Harvey Sindima is representative of the view that "missionaries had planned an onslaught on African culture" (1999:123). He notes that "The close association between ... [colonialist] interests and Christianity has made Africans wonder what the real intentions of missionaries were in Africa" (61). Did they really care about African souls? Such scholars are well aware of the "three-C's" of the colonial era—colonialism, commerce, and Christianity. In their analysis, Christian missionaries willingly provided the ideological justification for colonialism and commerce.

Lamin Sanneh, born in the Gambia, a convert from Islam, and a professor at Yale, offers a perspective that differs from the typical view of academia. He does not challenge the fact that missionaries arrived in Africa feeling culturally superior in varying degrees. But missionaries did something that "gave local people a standard by which to question the claims of Western superiority," he says (1993:17). By quickly embarking on Bible translation projects missionaries empowered indigenous peoples to be Christians in their own languages and idioms. The converts' language and culture of was affirmed and validated when the Bible became available in their mother-tongues instead of only the white man's language. Unlike European peoples who suffered centuries with only Latin, Greek, and Hebrew Bibles, African converts often had mother-tongue Bibles within a few years. Sanneh advises against the "handy rhetoric of caricature and hagiography" that sees missions either as "cultural imperialism, or missions as God's favorite design" (18). Missionaries were and are imperfect servants, like all of God's servants. Many observers expected to see the religion of European colonials disappear with political independence but it did not. Instead, Christianity in independent Africa, under local leaders has grown dramatically because the initial seeds of the Gospel were planted deeply into new cultural contexts. Thus, Sanneh's argument that Christianity found an authentic cultural home in Africa is affirmed.

Recent researchers have shown that the relationship of colonialist and missionary was really quite ambiguous (Skreslet 2012:63). On one hand, there frequently was cultural affinity between colonial officials and missionaries. Missionaries used that affinity on behalf of missions. My father once negotiated with a British colonial civil servant to provide a bulldozer that carved out a jungle airstrip in 5 days for the cost of the fuel (500 gallons of diesel). On the other hand, affinity with colonial officials did not provide access to local peoples, win the first converts, and fill newly planted churches.³ Missionaries simply could not make an effective entry into a new area without permission from local chiefs. The number of local teachers and evangelists so far exceeded the number of missionaries that they must receive credit for most of the evangelization and church planting, except for the very first steps into new territory. Missionaries often worked with colonial authorities as advocates for local peoples to soften and humanize government actions. Missionary John MacKenzie, in what today is Botswana, negotiated a deal

³ Sixteenth and seventeenth century Roman Catholic missions in Inter-America and South America by Spain and Portugal involved political, military, and missionary partnership that sometimes obtained conversion by coercion.

with Queen Victoria in opposition to white settlers, without which “the nation of Botswana would likely not exist today” (Dilley 2014:34).

Dana Robert’s *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914* (2008) is a collection of well-argued and carefully researched case studies that explore the complicated relationships of missionaries with colonialism in Africa, India, and China. Robert asserts that the “experiences were far more diverse than the theories about them” (20). The case studies portray missionaries as frequent mediators who worked to improve the lives of locals under colonial rule.

Another voice from within academia is that of Robert Woodberry who studied the impact of “conversionary Protestants” in the developing world. Woodberry published “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy” in *American Political Science Review* (2012) and it was reviewed by Andrea Palpant Dilley in *Christianity Today* (2014). As a graduate student, Woodberry heard a professor’s theory that the development of democracy around the world was linked with Protestant missions. His interest in the theory sparked a 14 year research project at locations all around the world. After some highly skeptical pre-publication review and scrutiny of his data, the *American Political Science Review* published his 30 page article. In summary, Woodberry found that conversionary Protestants (CPs)

consistently initiated and spread factors that past research suggests promote democracy: mass printing, mass education, civil society, and colonial rule of law (267). ... [CPs] are associated with higher levels of printing, education, economic development, organizational civil society, protection of private property, and the rule of law and with lower levels of corruption (268). ... Religious imperatives to convert individuals and have these individuals read the Bible in their own language spurred CPs to consistently create new tools for mass education and text distribution (269).

As Dilley summarizes Woodberry’s research,

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 (2014:37).

Cultural anthropology is an academic discipline that has generally been critical of missionaries. Sjaak Van Der Geest offers an insightful perspective in an article titled “Anthropologists and Missionaries: Brothers Under the Skin” (1990). His perspective is well informed because he was a missionary before becoming an anthropologist. Van Der Geest presents a sequence of comparisons and contrasts between missionaries and anthropologists.

There are “well-known differences” (588) between the two groups, he says. Anthropologists see themselves as listeners, custodians, preservers, recorders, learners, professional doubters, and relativists. Missionaries are polar opposites who are talkers, preachers, changers, converters, teachers, professional knowers, and absolutists. Anthropologists want to study pristine cultures and leave them untouched, while missionaries want to convert them to Christ.

“The well-known similarities” (589) include working as guests in other cultures and enjoying each other’s company as fellow expatriates when abroad. Both have keen ethnographic interests and develop profound cultural insights. Missionaries often use anthropological methods and serve as key informants for anthropologists. Anthropologists resent missionary use of their discipline to “crack the code” or contextualize the gospel to culture. Although anthropology once charged missionaries with complicity in the colonial project, both groups now acknowledge that their work profited because of colonialism. Some groups, like the Sioux Native Americans, view the two professions as equivalent curses and undesirable aliens (590).

There are also “hidden similarities” (591). Both groups apply alien ideological categories to cultures other than their own. Missionaries present the Bible as the universal standard for all cultures that evaluates every culture, including their own. Anthropologists apply the scientific method in their analysis

and assume that all religion is mere superstition. Both the Bible and the scientific method are alien to traditional cultures. Anthropologists have come to acknowledge that

Their mere presence is in itself a formidable factor of change. The culture that that missionaries and anthropologists carry with them is “contagious.” Local communities must cope with their presence and respond to their cultural representations. . . . Whether they like it or not, anthropologists also make conversions, if only to the “gospel of the clean shirt” (594).

Van Der Geest asserts that “some missionaries fulfill the anthropological ideal better than anthropologists themselves. The ideal can be roughly described as: the outsider who becomes an insider, understands and respects ‘the others,’ and takes their side” (595). This is possible because the missionary who has a long stay, learns the language well, and lives life on the terms of the local culture resembles an immigrant. The anthropologist typically spends a shorter time doing research, learns the language only poorly, and remains a visitor. Missionary work changes people into Christians while anthropological research transforms them into data for academic journals.

Internet and Social Media

The internet and the social media is a feature of the 21st century that presents the missionary face in a dramatically new way. A quick search of words related to “missionary” produces millions of results, as shown in the table.

Google Search Results
Missionary—122 million
Missionaries—21 million
Missionary and colonialism—429,000
Good missionary—79 million
Bad missionary—53 million
Short term mission trips—2.4 million
Anti-missionary—24.6 million
Anti-Christian missionary: Jewish—501,000
Anti-Christian missionary: Islamic—589,000
“A Guide to Missionary Tactics Against Islam”
“Top 10 Missionary Tactics”
Adventist missionary, missionaries—812,000
Wikipedia Search Results
"American Seventh-day Adventist missionaries"—5
"Seventh-day Adventist missionaries"—13

My analysis of the search results is not extensive but several general observations emerge. Most of the sites offer information about a broad range of missional activities. Mission agencies and megachurches recruit missionaries, offer training, raise funds, plan short trips, sell books, and do many other things. The results of both the “good” and “bad” missionary searches often come from Christian sites that discuss proper and improper ways to be a missionary. The most dramatic anti-missionary sites I found are either Jewish or Islamic. Both religions have well planned strategies to resist Christian missions and offer their resources online.

Social media have made the missionary face more candid and less edited. Through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other types of social media missionaries on the field speak their minds unfiltered by editors and mission boards. Missionaries blog forthrightly about their own spiritual struggles, marital conflict, cultural conflict, mental health needs, illness, and lack of effectiveness. Jonathan Trotter sparked a lively debate in a blog called “The Idolatry of Missions” in which he challenged the notion that missionaries are the “crème of the crop” who are “set apart” for a special work

(<http://www.alifeoverseas.com/the-idolatry-of-missions/>). Occasionally development scams and crimes, like child trafficking at orphanages, have been exposed via the social media.

Missiological and General Christian Media

The discipline of missiology presents itself via all of the media. The website www.mislinks.org is a portal maintained by Wheaton College and Global Mapping International (GMI) that is amazingly comprehensive. Publishers like Orbis, Baker, InterVarsity, and Zondervan publish mission titles regularly. The main American mission periodicals are *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *Missiology*, and *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. General Christian periodicals like *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* regularly publish articles about Christian mission. Philip Jenkins has a regular column, “Notes from the Global Church,” in *Christian Century* that discusses global Christianity and mission. A recent column, “The Adventist Adaptation,” (Sept 30, 2015, p. 45) discussed Adventist worldwide growth and spoke very approvingly of Adventist humanitarian, relief, and health care work. The reach of the Christian media is smaller than the secular media but they do comprise a voice in the public square.

The perspective on Christian missionaries coming from the discipline of missiology can be briefly summarized as follows: First, the missionary mistakes of the colonial era must be humbly acknowledged and not repeated. Missionary training programs teach that the goal is to plant churches that are both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful—not to replicate the missionary’s cultural style of Christianity. Second, the caricature of the missionary as villain must be evaluated, not in defense of missionaries but in defense of the missionary message. The message is always more important than the missionary and care is needed to avoid invalidating the message through harsh criticism from within Christianity. Third, cross-cultural, long term missionary service of missionaries from-everywhere-to-everywhere is more needed than ever because there are more non-Christians living beyond the reach of local congregations than ever before in history.

In spite of doctrinal differences, Adventist mission enjoys a positive regard in missiological circles, like the American Society of Missiology (ASM), for two main reasons: First, Adventist mission has always been wholistic with its education, health care, disaster relief and development work alongside evangelization and church planting. Famed missiologist, Paul Hiebert, told any Adventist he met that his daughter’s life was once saved by an Adventist doctor in Karachi, Pakistan and that she later studied nutrition at Loma Linda University. Second, Adventists lead evangelicals in sending missionaries from-everywhere-to-everywhere. Typical evangelical mission agencies continue to have mostly monocultural work forces. The typical group of missionaries trained by the GC Institute of World Mission comes from 10-15 nations and goes to serve in 10-15 nations.

Short Term Mission

Short term mission (STM) has, in recent years, become the de facto definition of “mission,” for some Americans. Estimates of the number of Americans who leave USA each year on STM are 1 to 3 million. STM organizers, travelers, supporters, and sending organizations make a strong statement about mission in the public square. Because the general view of those who are involved in STM is positive and upbeat, their input is probably raising the general opinion of missionaries. Anthropologist-missiologist Robert Priest (2008) and many others are providing the same kind of thoughtful research and critique of STM that long-term mission has benefited from.

Adventist Media

Adventists have numerous media that discuss mission within the church and potentially reach the public square. The internet may provide the best cause for optimism about giving access to Adventist mission. Following some major official sites:

- Adventist mission statistics: <http://www.adventiststatistics.org/>
- General Adventist mission work: www.adventistreview.org/
- Global Adventist mission work: www.adventistworld.org/

- Comprehensive Adventist mission initiatives: www.adventistmission.org Facebook has many accounts that feature Adventist missions and missionaries. Numerous missionaries publish regular blogs. Unofficial groups, like Adventist Frontier Mission, maintain sites (<http://www.afmonline.org/>).

Conclusion

The public square was quite negative about the missionary at mid-twentieth century when the anti-colonial, pro-national independence movement was in full swing. A half-century later, the colonial critique may have weakened as the public memory of colonialism fades and as attention shifts to the governance of the former colonies. In the twenty-first century the postmodern assumptions of religious pluralism and ethical relativism probably provide the strongest negative voices about conversionist missionaries. However, humanitarian missionary ministries receive general approval and contribute to a positive view. The nature of the missionary task may mean that the missionary will always remain an ambivalent figure. Those who intentionally follow in the footsteps of Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy should anticipate nothing else.

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