

Missionary Schools of the era of British Imperialism
By
Narveen Singh Aryaputri

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Missionary schools of the British Empire were commonly known by the names of various saints from the Christian faith with names such as St. Mary's or St. Joseph's. These schools had nuns or monks as the administration staff and teachers hired from the local community. A few of the nuns or monks would be from the parishes in Europe, and the rest would be converted nuns or monks from the local community. The nuns were called Sister or Mother, depending on their level in the administration. Monks were called Brother or Father. The emphasis was on men or women of god.

All these schools typically had uniforms specific to the order or the school. Within the school were 4 groups with various names of various saints. Part of the uniform was to wear the necktie of the color of the group for identification. These groups would have an intra-school rivalry on all aspects of the curricula. During assembly in the morning all the students would line up according to the groups they had been assigned to during their admission or at the beginning of the school year.

All the schools were segregated based on gender.

There had been, historically, a strong bias towards conversions into Christianity. After independence from the British in India, this conversion had been prohibited by direct communication to the Christian Missionaries who had been told to stop converting or else leave India. However, behind the scenes there was a strong approval expressed towards those who did voluntarily convert. In Africa such a direct communication to the Missionaries had not been given. In China, Japan and the other countries in the Far East the numbers of Missionaries had been lower in numbers in the later years of the British Empire.

The curricula seemed to be good to the eyes of colonized people, who would pay the extra money to send their children to these 'Convent' schools, compared to the other local schools which were free of cost. The

stress in the Missionary schools was on excellent English pronunciation and vocabulary, where the children were taught the Queen's English. There was also stress on the 'Westernization' of the students. Both of these were attractive for the parents of the colonized countries, in keeping with the 'victor-vanquished' psychology. The pressure on conversion was marginal for most of the simple parents in the colonies who gave greater importance to the curricula. The most significant consideration was that the children trained in these Missionary schools stood to get better and faster employment in the competitive business world. The girls were more 'marriageable' because of these very skills taught in these westernized schools.

This is the thumbnail sketch of the facade. This façade was developed over many years of the Empire.

Now I wish to step behind this thumbnail sketch and look into the answer to the question: **Could the British Empire have reigned over such large territories with such few 'official' governmental people without the mass of the Missionaries?**

Both India, with its enormous wealth, and Africa, with its enormous natural resources were the main thrust of the Missionary schools. The economic appeal of China and Japan and the Far Eastern islands were comparatively limited. Conversions did exist, but not to the scale as they did in India and Africa. Tibet was a total 100% failure for conversions. The Buddhist did not want to have anything to do with the Christian god who sounded very much like Mara, the demon-like entity who, in Buddhist thought, grips Samsara or the world-experience.

The question of what the Missionaries brought to the British Empire.

Despite seemingly carrying out God's work, missionaries reinforced both the cultural and power structures of the empire. By the end of the nineteenth century there were 12,000 British missionary workers across the globe. Missionary societies spent 2 million pounds per year – the equivalent of an astonishing 2% of government expenditure.

Economics and power are the traditional explanations of overseas expansion, and undoubtedly, wealth and prestige are the primary driving forces behind imperialism. Christian Mission provides a less fashionable explanation for Britain's empire. However, Christian Mission made inroads that provided the open doors for the governmental officials who came in for trade and commerce, gaining power in their wake.

LOGISTICS:

One of the great and often insufficiently recognized contribution to the hand and glove spread of empire and religion is the logistical one. Empires enable bearers of the word to move around a wide sector of the globe thanks to the roads, seaways, and trade routes which empires bring in their wake. Empires not only promote the physical movement of individuals and, with them, a traffic in new religious ideas but they also enable the transmission of the written word physically: the mounds of paper circulated by the London Missionary Society.

These deep inroads into territory unknown to the British governmental rulers gave huge advantages to the imperialistic motives soon to follow.

The postage sized tiny British island needed these inroads. This logistic and practical advantage to the Empire and its Imperialistic inroads into foreign lands has been historically understated. Possibly it has been deliberately understated to give the impression of 'God's Work' being the good, pure work.

Missionaries often possessed an unrivalled knowledge of local conditions. For example, in Nigeria, they provided the British government with geographic and strategic information about the Yoruba, Niger and Benue regions.

More directly, missionary work openly stimulated imperialism. In 1873, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society conducted a successful parliamentary campaign to persuade Disraeli's government to annex the Pacific island of Fiji. In 1883, John Mackenzie of the LMS formed a South African Committee to apply pressure on Britain's government to establish a protectorate over Bechuanaland. The British did so, and Mackenzie was appointed commissioner.

In such ways Christian missions were, on occasion, according to historian Brian Stanley, the ‘ideological arm of Western imperial aggression.’

Arguably, the archetypal Victorian imperialist held a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other. In some cases, it can be said that the British flag followed the Bible into new territories.

One well documented example is Dr. David Livingstone whose expeditions in central Africa demonstrate these forces at work. They were financed at first by the London Missionary Society and then by the Royal Geographical Society of London and also by the government. His letters reflect this constellation of interests. The work of David Livingstone demonstrates some of this link between trade and mission. Livingstone began as a missionary but developed as an explorer/ scientist charting new territories and reporting back to his sponsoring organizations in London and Europe.

Mary Slessor’s efforts in Nigeria are particularly well documented, while the likes of John Budden in northern India made significant headway in terms of both Christian and colonial conversion.

It is important to see the victor – vanquished psychology at play in these colonies. Christianity became part of the identity matrix of the ruling class, just as English was the language of the rulers their religion became the religion of choice.

Professor John Gascoigne, in his paper ‘Introduction: Religion and Empire, an Historiographical Perspective, published on May 21st 2008, says:

” Empires need creeds to sustain their expansionist energies and provide them with a justification for domination. In many times and places such creeds have taken a religious form but the link between empires and Christianity, ... has historically been far from straight-forward. ”

You can see this suppression of fact with writings, even in the most recent summation of British imperial history: ‘*The Oxford History of the British Empire*, “the study of Christian missions has not developed as a recognized and coherent branch of British Imperial and Commonwealth history.”

In fact, up till now, the factor of the legacy of colonial-era Christian missions operating throughout India has been neglected to even be mentioned, and pointed out, as a vital factor in the **opening** of territory for the Empire and its imperialistic intentions, as well as the vital factor in maintaining that very imperialism after the inroads had been made.

COMMERCE AND CULTURE:

Missions often supported not only British commerce and culture but direct political control or intervention. In many of my readings across the board I read arguments that the missionary movement and expansion of British Christian denominations were a distinct form of cultural and institutional imperialism.

There is an oft repeated comment (a favorite with Archbishop Tutu), "*When the white man arrived, he had the Bible and we had the land; now, we have the Bible and he has the land.*"

How did this happen?

Christianity's expansion as part of British culture and its activities overseas in the nineteenth century were unprecedented in scale. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and other denominations recreated their churches overseas and adapted them to new environments in the process.

The [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#), the Moravian Mission, the Mission of Bremen, the Methodists, and Roman Catholic missionaries all established themselves on various territories, opening elementary schools for boys and girls, a seminary, and eventually a secondary school. Protestant missions were opened, and the Roman Catholic missions entered and opened the first catechism, primary, secondary, and "normal" schools. The [Church Missionary Society](#), the Universities Mission to Central Africa, the [White Fathers](#), and the London Missionary Society opened the first mission schools between 1840 and 1900. Areas covered were The Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria, Badagry, Abeokuta, Lagos, Bonny, Kenya, Uganda among others.

Generally, the British 'official' government preferred to leave education to missions, which were given variable financial aid cementing this hand and glove approach to the Empire. Typically, for the innocent and simple mind

the concept of the 'White Man of God' being involved with political agenda was so far from reality that they never saw it coming. As the imperial powers of Europe set their sights on new geographical regions to expand their spheres of influence, and the wealth of natural resources unknown to Europe were sought, the Missions began their work, opening the paths into those areas. The leaders of this movement used the poem by Rudyard Kipling as a moral justification for imperialistic expansion citing the term 'the white man's burden' with its 3 'C's of Colonialism : Christianity, Civilization (westernization) and Commerce.

There was, then, a sense of 'civilizing' work. Some missionaries were aware that their task was not merely to convert to Christianity but also to convert to Western culture. However, it was more of a sanctimonious justification for the ruthlessness of the Empire.

Here is the first stanza of the poem 'The White Man's Burden' by Rudyard Kipling:

'Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need'

The Missions were, in all actuality, "imperialism at prayer," according to one scholar. Jeffrey Cox has summed up, "missionaries . . . [are], simply, imperialists; if different from other imperialists, it is because they were marginal, or because they were worse."

A brief mention about the Charter Acts passed by the British Empire: In the interests of making trade more efficient and profitable the British began to interfere in local laws creating Charter Acts as needed. All the transitions that occurred in the Charter Acts can be understood in that way

The Purpose of Colonial Education

The idea of assimilation is important to colonial education. Assimilation involves the **colonized** being forced to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonizers. Gauri Viswanathan points out that "cultural assimilation [is] ... the most effective form of political action"

because “cultural domination works by **consent** and often precedes **conquest by force**”. **Colonizing governments realize that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control, but through mental control. This mental control is implemented through a central intellectual location, the school system, or what Louis Althusser would call an “ideological state apparatus.”**

Much of the reasoning that favors such a learning system comes from supremacist ideas of the colonizers. Thomas B. Macaulay asserts his viewpoints about British India in an early nineteenth century speech. Macaulay insists that no reader of literature “could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

Because of the small size of the British islands, and few numbers of the official governments controlling just vast areas across the globe, the ultimate goal of colonial education is this according to the words of Thomas Macaulay: *“We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”* While all colonizers may not have shared Macaulay’s lack of respect for the existing systems of the colonized, they do share the idea that education is important in facilitating the assimilation process. Such liberal imperialism involved the provision of higher education (e.g. the Madras Christian College) and schools, whether they were Presbyterian, Jesuit, Church of England, Franciscan or convent institutions.

In keeping with the purpose of Colonial education, the curricula of these schools was changed to suit the imperialistic purposes. The subject matter was controlled by the imperialists from small, far-off Britain.

To further this goal, the valued, original texts of the colonized people were either burnt or discarded with the purpose of keeping them distant from the Missionary and Colonial education system.

These schools became to be called ‘ English-Medium’ schools the others were called ‘ Hindi-Medium’ school or any of the other vernacular of the area.

What is Colonial Education?

The process of colonization involves one nation or territory taking control of another nation or territory either through the use of force or by acquisition. As a byproduct of colonization, the colonizing nation implements its own form of schooling within their colonies. Two scholars on colonial education, Gail P. Kelly and Philip G. Altbach, define the process as an attempt “to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule”

Kelly and Altbach argue that “*colonial schools...sought to extend foreign domination and economic exploitation of the colony*” because colonial education is “*directed at absorption into the metropole and not separate*

and dependent development of the colonized in their own society and culture”. Colonial education strips the colonized people away from their indigenous learning structures and draws them toward the structures of the colonizers.

The effect of this type of education: The implementation of a new education system leaves those who are colonized with a limited sense of their past. The indigenous history and customs once practiced and observed slowly slip away. In effect, the foreign culture is superimposed.

Growing up in the colonial education system, many colonized children enter a condition of **hybridity**, in which their identities are created out of multiple cultural forms, practices, beliefs and power dynamics. Colonial education creates a blurring that makes it difficult to differentiate between the new, enforced ideas of the colonizers and the formerly accepted native practices. The process “annihilate[s] a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves” Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind*.

Not only does colonial education eventually create a desire to disassociate with native heritage, but it affects the individual and his or her sense of self-

confidence. Colonial education instills a sense of inferiority and disempowerment with the collective psyche of a colonized people

This is calculated with the purpose of keeping the colonized as 'property' easy to govern.

Post-Colonial Development:

*Postcolonial nations are connecting their own experiences of colonialism with other nations' histories.

*A reclaiming is occurring. Names are being reclaimed to restore the original names. For example: you will see the names of Burma reverting to Myanmar, the various cities in India reverting to their original names, as with Africa where cities and countries are reverting to their original names.

*Sections of history that had been suppressed is being reclaimed.

*Educational institutions are expanding curricula to include national heritage.

* English-Medium schools are administered by local staff without the colonial emphasis of western culture and conversion to Christianity and without the presence of nuns or monks.

References:

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Professor John Gascoigne is a member of the School of History and Philosophy, University of New South Wales.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*

