Emerging Adults and the Future of Missions

Rick Richardson

Several recent studies have focused on emerging adults in the United States, considering the spiritual and religious lives of high school teens (ages 14–18) or of twenty-somethings (ages 19–29). Two works helpfully draw out the implications of this research for the spiritual formation of high schoolers and of twenty-somethings, but so far little attention has been given to the implications this research holds for mission. It is evident that shifts in the emerging generation (especially twenty-somethings) will have profound consequences for the recruitment, formation, training, deployment, and retention of the next generation of missioners and thus for the shape and sustainability of mission itself, as this generation will practice it. What do we know about emerging adults, and what are the implications for the future of global mission?

I start by exploring two broad interpretive ideas that enlarge our understanding of the spiritual lives of today’s emerging adults. Then I examine more closely the cultural and social forces that have shaped the spiritual and religious trajectories of teens and twenty-somethings. Finally, I draw out implications for cross-cultural mission in the twenty-first century.

Religious and Spiritual Trajectory

The best description of the spiritual and religious lives of teens aged 14 to 18 comes from Christian Smith. He labels the dominant religion of teens in America today “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). It is moralistic in that teens today believe that being a good and moral person, and especially being kind and fair to other people, is central to living a happy and fulfilled life. It is therapeutic in that, for teens, religion is about providing therapeutic benefits, that is, making people feel good, helping people with pain and fear, and giving them tools to deal with life’s traumas. American teen religion is also a form of Deism, in that God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when needed to solve a problem. Otherwise, people are on their own to pursue the endless activities and the multiple real and virtual social and relational connections that are such a ubiquitous part of life in the twenty-first century.

Kenda Dean compares MTD to a parasitic symbiote that draws its life energy from a stronger host—in this case, historic Christian faith—but in the end corrupts and deforms the host beyond recognition. MTD, says Smith, seems to be “colonizing many historical religious denominations and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.” For Smith, this is a moral indictment not so much of teenagers as of American congregations, for often the source from which teenagers have gotten their alternative faith has been their parents and their churches. From this observation Smith draws an astonishing conclusion: namely, that MTD is supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in the United States.

If such is the case for a majority of teens, including most churched teens, what of the faith of people in their twenties? Christian Smith, in a follow-up study of the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults (ages 19–29), discerns “a shift toward diluting the concentration of MTD among emerging adults over these years. They exhibit somewhat more variety and originality than did the teenagers.”

In place of images of MTD undergoing dilution, Robert Wuthnow offers an alternative overarching interpretive image: one of tinkering, or bricolage, which may better describe the twenty-something cohort in America.

The single word that best describes young adults’ approach to religion and spirituality—indeed life—is tinkering. Tinkers are the most resourceful people in any era. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote of the importance of the bricoleur (the tinkerer) in the societies he studied. The bricoleur in preindustrial societies is a handy person, a do-it-yourself crafts-person who uses the tools of his or her trade and the materials that happen to be at hand to fix things and keep them in good repair.

The spiritual tinkerer creates a do-it-yourself faith that cuts out and pastes together convictions and beliefs that work and that help one get along, get ahead, and do what one wants in life. In line with this bricolage approach to faith, twenty-somethings tend to embrace doctrines that make sense in a society that celebrates tolerance and scorns exclusion. Belief in hell, judgment, the seriousness of sin, and the lostness of all people without Christ tends to get short shrift among younger Christians. Some of the urgency of evangelism therefore leaks away. Conversely, doctrines about God’s love, inclusion, reconciliation, and social justice are embraced in cobbled-together fashion, making for an eclectic, tolerant collection of convictions.

As a result, mission training must address these biblical convictions and instill an urgency for evangelism in people who will be deployed that goes along with the increasing levels of concern for justice, compassion, and service. Mission organizations can no longer assume emerging adults will seek engagement in global mission with these convictions intact. What is more, those organizations focused on justice or compassion must give considered attention to how they will train and deploy people who pursue works of mercy and justice in the name of Christ and in ways that can lead people to respond ultimately to the Gospel. The distinctiveness of Christian mission for the future is at stake.

I should mention one caveat. Wuthnow’s data show that people aged 18 to 45 are becoming more polarized, with conservatives becoming more conservative and liberals becoming more liberal. In particular, Wuthnow found that approximately 9 percent of the twenty-something population is very conservative or traditional (double the percentage fifteen years earlier) and getting more so, at the same time that 19 percent of that age cohort is very liberal and getting more so. That means, in part, that a minority—an increasingly vocal minority—of twenty-somethings is embracing more traditional and conservative doctrines and beliefs and, at least in principle, lifestyles. This

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Cultural Trends

According to Christian Smith, contemporary culture stresses difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason, situated perspectives over objectivity, the local over the national, and audiences over authors. It also displays overall skepticism toward “master narratives.” One way to approach these cultural trends and to understand their impact on faith and mission is to examine the ways that people’s questions about faith have shifted. Elsewhere I have explored the new questions being asked, seeking to identify what lies behind them so as to gain a deeper understanding of the mind-set of people today and to see how they perceive Christians and Christian faith in a postmodern (or hypermodern) culture. Culturally significant questions and issues include the following.

Questions of identity. Who am I? Who will I listen to, to help me in developing my identity and sense of self? How can you Christians think that you can tell other people who they are? You church people have gotten it wrong so often, as with women, blacks, and now gays. Each person has to create one’s own meaning and identity and align with others to increase one’s leverage and security in the world. In postmodern (or hypermodern) culture, identity becomes the most contested human reality, and “Who am I?” becomes the central question of existence.

Questions of personal and group pain and suffering. Questions about how a good, loving, and all-powerful God can allow suffering and evil have become much less philosophical and much more personal and relational. How could God have let me be raped or abused when I was young? How could God let my child become so sick? Where was God when . . .? Christians can seem to have such trite and simple answers for profound and disturbing questions.

Questions of character, trust, and attractiveness. The question of trust is seen as a question not so much about ideas and propositions as about beauty, goodness, and utility. Something is true if it resonates in my experience, if it works in my life, if it helps people get along better, if it is inclusive and accepting and authentic and attractive. As David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons show, people in our culture today think Christians are narrow and judgmental and right wing and antihomosexual. But people in the broader U.S. culture think Christians are not very Christian, for they are not very attractive or good or useful!

Questions of interpretation. Is not the way you see the world completely dependent on your community and place of birth? Can you not interpret the Scriptures any way you want, and have you not actually done so? I do not care about the Bible’s reliability. I am concerned about its integrity and moral value and interpretability. After all, it was written by patriarchal, ethnocentric people. There is no God’s-eye view of reality, but only situated and culturally conditioned views of reality and of the meaning(s) of events, experiences, and texts such as Scripture.

What implications for mission flow from the cultural forces that have engendered these new questions and sensibilities? What will capture the missional imagination of younger people? The practice of mission today and efforts to stir up mission motivation among today’s twenty-somethings, if they are to be effective and inspiring, need to take seriously the questions and concerns delineated above. I suggest four characteristics essential to mission today.

First, expressed negatively, mission cannot act as though it is focused merely on gaining numbers for the Christian cause. More positively, it needs to focus on caring for people on their own terms and not just on our terms. The generation of emerging adults loves mission when it genuinely and authentically accepts people where they are, has no strings attached, cares for felt needs of the people themselves, honors the people’s perspectives on what actually helps them without being humiliating or creating dependency, and guards the dignity and worth of people today, even logical answers can feel like an exercise of colonializing power. To many people, Christians are just another tribe using logic to gain power. Postmodern thought has redefined truth as “whatever works for you, whatever rings true to your experience, whatever feels real to you.” There is no metanarrative, no grand story to inspire people, no explanation of everything. Any attempt to claim that one has the truth for everybody is experienced as an arrogant, offensive attempt at domination and control.

Efforts to stir up mission motivation among today’s twenty-somethings need to take these culturally significant questions and concerns seriously.
people at the same time as it challenges them toward conversion to Christian faith.

Second, mission motivation cannot be confined to urging potential missionaries to pursue a missional call and purpose or asking them to consider what people ought to be doing to expand the cause of Christ around the world. For emerging adults the call to cross-cultural missions must also speak to who they are as people now and with whom they will discover who they are becoming as persons. It is about identity and community; team expressions of mission are critical. Stories about the ways in which experience of mission is also an experience of identity discovery and formation are crucial. Mission mobilizers need to be able to speak about these issues through stories of struggle and identity formation and of genuine community and friendship. Too often the gap in sensibilities between mission mobilizers and younger people is a yawning chasm. Motivationally, mobilizers and the emerging generation speak different languages. Must mission motivators today therefore focus on what mission does for the missionary rather than on the benefits, spiritual and material, for the people being reached and served? No. Biblical motivations for mission still provide the structural framework; the cruciform life of Christ is still the pattern for mission. But stories built around team and around developing identity, community, and friendship are necessary to add color and humanizing depth to presentations of the biblical mandate for mission if younger people are to become involved in greater numbers and with greater passion.

Third, mission in the contemporary world is understood by emerging adults as being true and compelling if it goes beyond doctrinal purity and evangelistic success. It must also show itself to be humanly good, to be beautiful, and to be useful to people and communities. For the emerging generation, Mother Theresa, who prayed continually to be given “souls and saints,” is an inspiring example of mission because she embodied these qualities of moral beauty, goodness, and usefulness to dying and impoverished people.

Fourth, mission for the emerging generation has compassion, justice, and diversity at its heart; they are integrated into its core. For many emerging adults no dichotomy exists between evangelism and compassion, or between Jesus and justice. Causes that are capturing the missional imagination of the younger generation include, for example, present-day slave trafficking and AIDS prevention and cure.

Social Forces

In addition to these deepening cultural trends, with their disproportionate impact on twenty-somethings, a mix of social trends has significant implications for mission. In some ways these social trends are an expression of cultural changes in the ways people think, decide, and act. But these trends are also a result of technological change and of global economic realities. Christian Smith and Robert Wuthnow have identified later marriage and fewer children, economic shifts, globalization, and changes in forms of relationship as having a significant impact on the shape of faith for twenty-somethings. I comment here on each of these social trends, drawing attention to implications for mission outreach.

Later marriage and fewer children. Between 1950 and 2011, the median age of first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 26.5. For men during that same time the median age of marriage rose from 22.8 to 28.7. For both men and women the sharpest increase took place after 1970, but recent research shows the median age of first marriage in the past decade trending higher at an increasing rate. Various historians of religion have tied ebbs and flows in religious participation to larger social events, maintaining that religious participation grows during periods of social unrest and times of transition and that traumatic cultural events catalyze people into seeking spiritual and emotional comfort. But probably even more important are people’s everyday life circumstances and their geographic and social locations. Are they married? Do they have children? Do they live in areas where churches are more common and their presence more felt? In contemporary U.S. society, influences that reinforce religious participation are weaker than they were for past generations. In consequence, fewer young adults are participating in local congregations.

Furthermore, many of the people not in church on any given Sunday today are dropouts from faith or at least from church. Many were involved as high school students, but in the transition to college and work, they lost their connection to a congregation. According to research by the Barna group, 60 percent of Christian youth will drop out of church for a significant period during their twenty-somethings, and one-third of Christian youth will lose their faith or significantly doubt it at some point during that period. Whereas teenagers today are some of the most religiously active Americans, twenty-somethings in the United States are the least religiously active.

We are losing our youth as they wander or fall away from involvement in faith. Furthermore, the historically prominent motivators to come back, including marriage and children, are happening later, leaving long periods of time between high school involvement in a congregation and later emerging adult involvement in a congregation. Such a gap increases the likelihood that for emerging adults there will be no return.

How can we assure greater rates and levels of connection to congregations and to cross-cultural mission on the part of post-teenage emerging adults? One crucial step would seem to be to engage teens in genuine cross-cultural mission and service through urban plunges, service days, and experiences in short-term mission. Yet many scholars question the value of short-term mission, at least from a cost/benefit perspective, hesitating to call such projects “mission,” both because of the focus on the experience of the teens and because of the very marginal help they provide to hosts and nationals. Still, given the interest in justice and global issues expressed by a significant percentage of twenty-somethings, short-term and then longer-term cross-cultural mission experiences may be crucial. Although such projects may initially benefit the teens more than the “mission field,” such efforts, over the long term, may focus teens outward, helping them to grow beyond an MTD kind of faith. They may thus lead participants to genuine Christian connection, mission, and service when they enter their early twenties.
Economic factors: debt, lack of jobs, job changes, dual-income families, and the role of parents. Contemporary changes in the American and global economy often undermine stable, lifelong careers, offering instead careers with lower security, more frequent job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education. This dynamic pushes youth toward extended schooling, delay of marriage, and, arguably, a general psychological orientation of maximizing options and postponing commitments.

Christian Smith summarized the consequences of these economic factors by pointing out the degree to which today’s twenty-somethings live in transition.

They move out [of their parents’ home], they move back, they plan to move out again. They go to college, they drop out, they transfer, they take a break for a semester to save money, some graduate, some don’t. They want to study architecture, they hate architecture, they switch to criminal justice, a different career path. Their parents separate, make up, get divorced, remarry. They take a job, they quit, they find another, they get promoted, they move. . . . They find their soulmate, they get involved, their soulmate dumps them, they are crushed. . . . Changes are incessant.20

The flexibility and uncertainty of twenty-somethings offer both a strength and a weakness for mission. Many emerging adults are free of family responsibilities and often are not rigidly set in a career. This flexibility creates a potential cohort of missionaries who could take gap years (one year off during transition times) or even two to three years for creative expressions of mission in some of the most challenging places around the globe. Here the Peace Corps could be a wonderful model for mission agencies and for churches, and in a Peace Corps–style approach much less expensive economic models could be pursued. What if committed Christian young people were given the vision and had the opportunity and expectation to give two to three years to global service during their twenties?

Teach for America offers another model that has worked well. Young people are given a challenge, chosen competitively, trained, and deployed across the urban schools of the United States, providing needed human capital and resources. This same age group and similar flexibility are fueling the new monastic expressions of church. Some churches are beginning to create financial tracks that open the way for emerging adults who want to give one to two years.

A critical economic factor that needs to be addressed is the educational debt many emerging adults accrue for undergraduate and sometimes graduate education. At present, college debt in the United States totals over $1 trillion and is rising, with the average student burdened by more than $25,000 of debt upon graduation. Students who attend the top ninety-five U.S. colleges and universities leave with an average debt load exceeding $35,000. Peace Corps volunteers have their loans deferred for their period of Peace Corps service. Financial models for emerging adults who give two to three years of cross-cultural mission service would need to integrate ways to defer loans or to make regular payments to decrease debt during the time of service.

It also is critical that the process of raising support be streamlined and scaled back. The amount of funding and models of salary and benefits associated with long-term missionaries will not work for young people going for a year to three years. By the time they raise their support under present models, it is almost time to quit. Less costly economic models for younger people could help empower a whole generation of U.S. twenty-somethings to avail themselves of the current ease and affordability of travel. Economically affordable room and board could be sought among underresourced people who want help in developing their own economies, jobs, communities, and churches. In a globalizing economy emerging adults should find several years of global and cross-cultural experience to be a great asset to résumés they later send to potential employers.

A major challenge facing the effectiveness of mission-team stints of from one to three years is that learning a language often takes that long or longer, and effectiveness in direct ministry to nationals is limited until missionaries learn the language. All the same, as long as longer-term missionaries and, more important, nationals can oversee the activities of shorter-term missionaries, the benefits can far outweigh the costs, especially given the realities of globalization.

Global flows of people, resources, ideas, influence, and culture. Globalization consists of international and transregional flows of goods, money, services, power, information, ideas, images, and people. It describes the increasing interdependence—economically, politically, socially, culturally, and spiritually—that people experience around the globe. It also describes the decreasing importance of geographic distance in how the world functions. The ease and speed of transportation, computers and the Internet, cell phones, and cheap airline tickets have all contributed to the shrinking of the world and to the erasing of boundaries between domestic and foreign, between “here” and “overseas.” As a result, the nature of missionary work has changed, for often economic structures shape mission structures far more than mission leaders have recognized. In earlier days, with Western economic hegemony, the military-industrial complex of the West was mirrored by a missionary-industrial complex that exported and controlled the spread of Christian faith, combining it with the spread of Western culture. In the present era of globalization, mission structures are changing, necessarily so, and once again they mirror larger economic structures and realities.

Ralph Winter and other observers of mission anticipated these changes. Winter suggested that we have moved into a fourth era of mission,21 what he termed the Kingdom Era, and what Robert Priest has recently called the Missional Era.22 In this era, Priest contends, mission is best understood, not primarily as reaching the unreached and introducing Christian faith where it does not exist, but predominately as bringing resources and people to bear in order to strengthen Christian faith and witness where the church already does exist and in contexts in which the church has lost its leverage or reputation because of its past. Thus, mission is about using flows facilitated by globalization to increase the credibility and positive influence of Christian institutions and spokespersons. Missionaries are seen primarily as catalysts, coaches, facilitators, and brokers of these flows of people, resources, ideas, technology, and expertise that can improve the quality of life and human relating. In postmodern and post-Christian cultures, the credibility of the Gospel is under great threat, and facilitating life-enhancing global flows of people,
resources, technology, ideas, and influence becomes a way to build the credibility of the Gospel in countries all over the world.

The most desired and most successful missionaries are those who serve as nodes in larger networks and who best facilitate flows. The archetypal highly competitive, risk-taking, and individualistic Lone Ranger is not the ideal missionary today. Instead, people possessing skills who are also creative and collaborative networkers with a high social IQ better meet the needs of today’s global mission, which is itself highly networked. Interview processes, missionary personnel profiles, and assessment tools are being adapted to focus on recruiting cross-cultural missionaries of this type. Building, being part of, and leading collaborative teams becomes central to mission, something that is matched by an increasing desire on the part of emerging adults to do life in teams and in community.

Changing forms of relationship, including technological mediation (e.g., Facebook and texting) and the ongoing impact of the sexual revolution, hooking up, access to birth control, and Internet dating services. Defining relationships today is a very challenging task for emerging adults. Boundaries and roles, to say nothing of romantic relationships, can be confusing. According to Smith, “Romantically, the lines between just met, just friends, something a bit more than friends, ‘talking,’ ‘going out,’ ‘dating,’ being boyfriend and girlfriend, sleeping over, semicohabiting, cohabiting, and relating like married people can seem like passing through a series of gradually darkening shades of grey.”

Besides the changing nature of intimate relationships, our culture has seen exponential growth in the Internet, tweeting, texting, e-mail, YouTube, Facebook, multiple-player online video games, and other social media. A virtual social world now exists in which many emerging adults find themselves immersed 24/7. It is not unusual for emerging adults to be at an event or in one social context (e.g., with family) and simultaneously to be carrying on three or four other electronic conversations relating to several other social contexts. Whether people are in a worship service, at a movie, attending a concert, doing homework, or riding (and sometimes driving) in a car, texting is ubiquitous and constant. Much of the lives of emerging adults seems to be centered on creating and maintaining personal connections through such conversations.

Immersion in a virtual social environment has been accompanied by a withdrawal from civic life and the public square.

The apparent move of Americans away from civic participation in public life and toward the enjoyment of “lifestyle enclaves” . . . may for emerging adults be progressing yet further toward the nearly total subversion of self into fluidly constructed, private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates . . . . The instant feedback and stimulation from friends and family about every choice and action and emotion they make and feel seems to be very satisfying to them, sometimes perhaps addictive.

Mission in the future will need to adapt to the new reality of potential recruits’ immersion in extensive social connectivity. If bridging, facilitating, and brokering flows of people, resources, ideas, and influence are central to the missionary task in the twenty-first century, then facility with these social technologies can help. Facility in their use can help in fund-raising. It can help also with prayer, with quick and immediate communication, with catalyzing engagement and motivation for mission, with overall information flow. Each missionary is a central node for rapid and constant communication to a network of people and resources.

Fortunately, many mission agencies are rapidly acquiring skill in the use of social media.

In some ways we have entered an era of “liquid mission,” in which the flows are more important than the structures of mission. Not that the two are antagonists or mutually exclusive; rather, flows blur the boundaries between structures. Some mergers of mission agencies and networks reflect the liquidity of the present situation.

At the same time, mission leaders and agencies need to understand the social media’s downsides and limits. They must exercise wisdom and discernment in their use of today’s avenues of connection and communication. Social media and connectivity can be addictive, with virtual presence squeezing out actual presence. Mission has always played a spiritual role in the lives of people and churches, calling for lives to be lived by the way of the cross, the way of giving and sacrifice, in order to see people come to know Christ and become whole. In relation to the social media, the spiritual dimension exemplified by fasting, sacrifice, and incarnational ministry remains, and must remain, a counterbalance. Mission leaders and mission organizations need to continue to call emerging adults to walk in simplicity of service, maybe most especially in relation to patterns of faddishness and instant fulfillment highlighted by social media.

Conclusion

The faith trajectory of emerging adults may be summarized as movement from the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism of their teens toward the bricolage (tinkering and picking and choosing) of their twenties. This trajectory presents challenges for evangelism and discipleship and for recruiting the next generation of committed cross-cultural missionaries. The bent of the trajectory does not entail a sure and certain result. During their passage through this stage of life, emerging adults may pick and choose doctrines and beliefs that have greater appeal to them and may leave out more exclusive and challenging beliefs such as the lostness of humanity without Christ, the uniqueness of Christ in contrast to other religious figures for salvation, and the central truthfulness of the Christian metanarrative for all peoples of the world, convictions that historically have been important in motivating people to enter into cross-cultural mission and evangelism. Twenty-somethings may also display a significant gap between their moral convictions and their lifestyle. At the same time, the broad trajectory of twenty-somethings going from MTD to bricolage can conceal nuances within the emerging adult population—for instance, the growing polarization of increasing conservatism (9 percent) and increasing liberalism (19 percent) mentioned above.

The cultural trends (inputs) and closely correlated social consequences (outcomes) enumerated in this article lead strongly to the conclusion that priorities shaping the character of mission in the years, if not decades, ahead will include the following:

We have entered an era of “liquid mission,” in which the flows are more important than the structures of mission.
• For a generation that is skeptical that mission can rise above self-centered motives, other-centeredness and humility in mission are of paramount importance.
• In order for the Christian message to be received by emerging adults and by hosts and partners in mission as true, credible, or even moral, mission must be shaped so that it is attractive, good, and useful, contributing demonstrably to human flourishing.
• Mission must give pride of place to teams and community, creating spaces for missionaries to develop identity, personhood, and calling in their community and context. Neomonicastic and multicultural communities pursuing mission together are here to stay and will increase.
• Mission organizations must enable high school students to participate in more, not fewer, experiences of short-term cross-cultural service and mission in order to sustain and deepen their commitment to genuine Christian faith and mission as they enter their twenties.
• For emerging adults, mission must fully embrace integration of justice, compassion, relief, diversity, and witness.
• Younger mission mobilizers are needed who can set a high bar for sacrifice and service, doing so in ways that highlight the identity-shaping and community-enhancing dimensions of missionary engagement and sacrifice.

Mission-sending churches and organizations urgently need to develop new and less expensive ways to fund younger missionaries. They must create shorter term (e.g., two-year Peace Corps-type) models of mission, finding creative ways to defer to or to pay down debt. They need to develop innovative cross-cultural partnership opportunities through which emerging adults can be productive and fruitful in a two- or three-year time period, despite the limitations that brevity of time will place on their depth of language acquisition.
• Cross-cultural missionaries must become skilled as collaborative coaches, brokers, bridge-builders, and facilitators of flows of resources, people, skills, ideas, and influences who can use social media technologies with facility and wisdom to serve and strengthen these flows.

As mission leaders and mission organizations pursue these priorities, emerging adults will become more engaged and will chart a vibrant future for global mission. In addition, emerging adults will create new networks and initiatives based on these priorities, and they ought to be encouraged and funded to do so. The coming years promise to be exciting and creative times to be in collaboration with God on God’s mission for the world!

Notes
4. Smith, Soul Searching, 171.
6. Smith, Soul Searching, 166, 171.
15. Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 21–23; for the recent increasing trend toward higher age at first marriage, see www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low.
17. Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 70.
21. Winter’s First Era focused on establishing the church outside of Christendom, often in geographic spaces accessible to ships, such as the islands of the South Pacific and the coasts of Asia and Africa. The Second Era focused on expanding missionary efforts into the interior of countries (e.g., China Inland Mission) where the church was not yet present. The Third Era focused on “unreached peoples” and aimed at bringing the Gospel, the Scriptures, and the church into every ethnolinguistic group where they were not yet present, often envisioning the achievement of the evangelization of the world within a particular time period (e.g., the watchword of Edinburgh 1910: “the evangelization of the world in this generation”). In these eras, mission work was celebrated by the sending countries in part because missionaries and Christian conversions reinforced the economic, ethnic, and nationalist interests of these sending societies.
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