World War I and the Decline of the First Wave of the American Protestant Missions Movement

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The American missions movement has experienced two distinct waves. A first wave of effort originated in the early nineteenth century during the Second Great Awakening and largely collapsed amid theological controversy after World War I; a second wave began after World War II and continues to this day. This article examines the role played by World War I in the demise of the first wave.

The foundation of the earlier mission efforts was a consensus on the twin goals of “civilizing” and “Christianizing.” Missionaries wanted others to adopt their religious beliefs and practices and, at the same time, to embrace Western political, educational, and societal systems. The latter desires were born out of earlier attempts to convert American Indians. Puritan missionaries to the Indians strongly emphasized evangelism, yet they found that conversions seemed to require that they first “civilize” the Indians—that is, teach them colonial arts, sciences, and culture.

The missionaries thus considered education, democracy, health care, and economic growth to be complementing and tightly interwoven goals of missionary work.

Driving the movement were millennial expectations about the return of Jesus Christ. Postmillennial interpretations heavily influenced the early missionaries, as many foresaw a coming epoch of reason, peace, and godliness that would pervade the earth and lead to Christ’s return. In this view, mission work would inevitably succeed because the Bible had declared Christianity would reign supreme during the millennium. The millennium was within grasp if the missionaries would but reach for it. Significantly, the rallying cry and goal of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM)—a major source of American missionary recruits between 1891 and 1920—was “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”

Crumbling Foundations

By the eve of World War I, however, the theological and strategic foundation for American mission work was under substantial pressure. Two of its key pillars, postmillennialism and the civilizing/Christianizing consensus, were crumbling. Mainline missionaries began discarding beliefs in divine intervention, spiritual salvation, and a literal millennial kingdom. Hope for societal progress remained, but it was centered on human efforts rather than divine will. “Belief in Christ’s return on the cloud was superseded by the idea of God’s kingdom in this world, which would be introduced step by step through successful labors in missionary endeavor abroad and through creating an egalitarian society at home.”

The prevailing millennialism within the mainline churches, in other words, had removed any supernatural feature that stressed the workings of the Spirit in favor of the more secular civilizing advancements of education, health, technology, and democracy.

Writing in 1915, James Barton, the foreign secretary of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM)—one of America’s largest mission boards—publicly voiced views that would have been unthinkable thirty years earlier. He asserted that missionaries no longer believed unequivocally that all non-Christian religions were false. “The modern missionary goes out with the purpose of conserving all true values in the religious thought, life, and practices of the people whom he approaches. . . . The missionary today is conscientiously face to face with the great national, social problems of the countries in which he is located. . . . The successful solution of these problems will produce a religious as well as a social revolution for the non-Christian world.”

The deepest and most dramatic change he noted was a secularized reinterpretation of Christian “salvation”:

At the present time, the missionary preaches salvation no less than before, but it is salvation for the life that now is—salvation to oneself and for himself, and to society and for society—salvation for the sake of the world in which he lives. It is now taken for granted that if a man is saved for the life that now is, he will be abundantly prepared for the life that is to come. Our Lord announced that his mission upon earth was to give abundant life; the modern interpretation would say that Christ came to fit men to live and to live now. Missionaries today throughout the world are preaching to non-Christians the possibility through Christ of being saved now—saved from the sin of their present and past life, saved from evil habits, evil thoughts, evil purposes—saved from the destruction of their immortal life and made fit to live among men. Little emphasis is placed upon redemption in order that one may inherit an eternal life of rest and peace with God.

Barton’s views and those of the ABCFM did not reflect the sentiments of all mission organizations. For example, Robert Speer, head of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church (BFMPC), remained resolutely committed to evangelicalism. Yet Barton’s views highlighted the movement’s crumbling consensus on civilizing and Christianizing. When added to the changing views on millennialism, the movement’s foundation was precariously brittle as it entered World War I.

World War I and the “Failure of Christianity”

World War I had a powerful impact on the American religious landscape and, in turn, mission work. The sight of Christian nations engaged in brutal trench warfare contrasted with the secularized, postmillennial optimism that was infused into mainline Protestant beliefs. Moreover, the sight of so-called Christian nations at war challenged the hitherto unquestioned superiority of Western civilization. The doubts were summed up by the question, Has Christianity failed? Writing in 1916, Barton argued that the war’s impact on religion was greater than its impact on politics:

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No political changes however great and startling can equal in significance those that the war is bringing about in the realm of religion. . . .

We all distinctly recall the question that was heard upon every side when the war had been thoroughly launched and we began to realize its significance: Has Christianity failed? This was asked not only in countries not Christian and by those who were no friends of Christianity, but in the very citadels and historic centers of the Christian church and by those who for decades had been conspicuous Christian leaders. Christian and non-Christian, believers in Christianity and its opponents, suggested, by inquiry, the failure of Christianity because it did not prevent the conflict.8

The 1919 quadrennial conference of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) was another key indicator of how deeply these doubts had spread. Founded in 1886 out of a series of student Bible study conferences led by the popular evangelist D. L. Moody, the SVM did not directly send out missionaries but recruited students to work through established mission boards. By 1920 an impressive total of 8,742 SVM recruits had served, and far more had pledged a willingness to serve. The aim of the organization’s quadrennial conference was to call students to missionary service. At the 1919 convention, however, SVM leaders were on the defensive and forced to make the case for Christianity. Speaking from the stage, Robert Speer disregarded prepared remarks and acknowledged the convention’s doubts:

There are things being said in this convention today, there are thoughts in our minds, and desires in our hearts, expressed and unexpressed in group after group which we will do well right here in the middle of this convention, and before we go, unhesitatingly, unflinchingly, to face and see through to the end. I am not going to say anything more about the worth or the failure of non-Christian faiths. I am going to open quite candidly the question that some of you have been discussing right here in these days as to whether there is worth enough in our Christian faith . . . .

There are men here in this Conference, and women too, who are saying that Christianity here in America, and as expressed by this Student Volunteer Convention, is a failure. . . . Are these sayings true? Has the Christian religion failed? Are we failing Him? No, it has not failed. Christianity just as it is in Canada and in the United States today, imperfect, incomplete, discredited by the weakness of men, is the richest and purest and greatest power that is in the world. The religion that we have got, short as it falls of all that Christ meant us to have, is worth carrying to all the world. . . . No, Jesus hasn’t failed, and He isn’t going to fail, but I will tell you men and women that there is a danger of failure here tonight . . . that we ourselves may fail.9

Despite Speer’s impassioned pleas, doubts continued to deepen and spread within the SVM. One observer at its 1924 conference noted, “There was not any expression of conviction on the part of the students that the way of Jesus is the way.”10

A key point of contention between the students and the SVM’s leadership was the war. The leaders, despite pacifist hesitations, had strongly supported the war and were heavily invested in the conflict, both emotionally and spiritually.11 Robert Speer, for example, had declared, “The war was the greatest proclamation of foreign missions which we have ever heard.”12 When the harsh realities of war and its aftermath became apparent, however, students questioned the Christianity that had so strongly implored them into battle.

Theological and Missiological Changes

The disillusionment that followed the war was not limited to students but became pervasive among rank-and-file parishioners. The war dealt a near deathblow to social gospel theology, which had become widely adopted among the mainline churches; faith in unrelenting progress could no longer be held.13 Robert T. Handy, a longtime church historian at Union Theological Seminary, noted the widespread impact of the war: “Protestantism was deeply affected by the general disillusionment of the postwar decade. During the war itself, the American people, with the vigorous support of most religious leaders, maintained a spirit of high optimism. But the tide turned swiftly.” The decline of enthusiasm for the war led to “a wave of spiritual depression and religious skepticism, widespread and devastating.”14

While the war led many rank-and-file Christians into deep spiritual doubt, it prompted many mission leaders to change and politicize the goals of mission work. Ironically, the same social gospel theology that was being abandoned by the rank and file was used as the basis for a renewed call for missions. “The war hastened the redefinition of evangelization. To respond to the war, the gospel had to have a more social content.”15 Mission leaders were pressed to explain how Christian nations could engage in war against each other, and they began to recast salvation as a public social transformation rather than a private spiritual transformation. In this way, the salvation of society offered a permanent solution to the problems of war and poverty.

The expanded, politicized goals expressed by mission leaders had little chance of success, given the doubts of the laity. With the theological rug pulled out from under the movement, enthusiasm for mission work dissipated. Hans-Lukas Kieser, a historian with expertise in both Ottoman history and Protestant theology, points out, “After 1918, there was no more missionary America in the sense of the century before; no more confidence and commitment for a postmillennialist mission, a Jesus-centered building up of modern institutions and civil society. . . . During and after World War I, belief in the force of faith and the nonviolent coming of the millennium seriously suffered, and the postmillennialist American mirror of history broke.”16

The consequences of the theological earthquake could be seen across many dimensions of mission work. Students, long the source of missionary recruits, were now unenthusiastic about serving.17 The ACBFM’s annual report lamented, “Definite decisions for such service were comparatively few. Almost without exception, the colleges were found to be in the midst of the after-the-war reaction.” The board also noted a changing attitude among the students. “Students freely admitted in interviews that their main thought was to find a career in which they could make money.”18

This experience foreshadowed a decline in recruits. In 1920 some 2,700 students offered themselves for foreign mission work, but by 1928 that figure had dwindled to just 252.19 The declining number of recruits further eroded the missionary ranks. The
ABCFS missionary force, for example, peaked between 1922 and 1924 with roughly 820 missionaries worldwide; by 1927 it had declined to 762. The BFMPC similarly hit its peak in 1926 with 1,606 missionaries worldwide.

Mission agencies also began struggling financially. Costs from the war had driven both the ABCFS and the BFMPC into debt. Financial contributions from churches, in similar fashion to the number of missionaries in the field, peaked in 1928 and then began to decline. A study by the United Stewardship Council noted an almost 40 percent decline in donations between 1921 and 1929. These declines contrasted sharply with the rapid growth in contributions that had characterized the period before the war.

The ABCFS annual report of 1924 attributed the financial woes to a postwar decline in enthusiasm for mission work.

Congregationalists do not lack the means to support their mission board. The situation appears to be that the few have given generously, the many have given in pitiable amounts, or not at all. Moreover, let it be known, it has been a period of unusual expansion in the matter of home equipment. Church edifices costing unheard of amounts, commodious parish-houses, new organs, elegant stained-glass windows are in evidence on every side. We have witnessed a noteworthy development in the staffing of the home church. In the more prosperous parishes, pastors’ assistants, education directors, social service experts, are the order of the day. All this, we recognize, is a sign of life and progress. We offer no word of censure, only of congratulation—provided there is no diminution in missionary vision and endeavor. We tremble for the church that lengthens her cords and strengthens her stakes at the expense of the men and women she sends into the sacrifice of the foreign field.

Despite similar exhortations from other missionary leaders, contributions continued to sag, and domestic church projects held priority over foreign missions. The Great Depression, moreover, "threw the whole Protestant missionary enterprise in reverse." Contributions and the number of missionaries serving overseas dramatically declined. Yet the problem was not merely financial. As Robert Handy noted, "Even after the disastrous effects of the economic depression had overtaken the mission boards, there was clear recognition that the problem was much more than financial, and that it had predated the economic crisis."

The Hocking Report and Further Decline

By the 1930s the first wave of American missionary effort had collapsed amid theological turmoil. The modernist-fundamentalist debates, present also on the mission field, came to the fore with the 1932 publication of *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry after One Hundred Years*. John D. Rockefeller Jr., heir to the Rockefeller fortune and long-time contributor to mission organizations, was concerned about the flagging enthusiasm for mission work and funded the multivolume study as a means to reassess the movement and recommend a course of action. The final report heavily criticized mission work and spoke of "the necessity that the modern mission make a positive effort, first of all to know and understand the religions around it, then to
recognize and associate itself with whatever kindred elements there are in them. The Christian will therefore regard himself a co-worker.”

Such pluralistic, syncretistic language further eroded the prewar theological consensus on civilizing and Christianizing. A majority of church lay members still held conservative theological views, but the mission leadership was divided between liberals who espoused the revised evangelism of the Hocking Report and moderates seeking to find middle ground. Publication of the report and the wider modernist-fundamentalist debates pushed mission boards to plot a new theological course. Robert Speer and the BFMPC attempted to hold a moderate position. Speer heavily criticized the report, but there were internal divisions within the board. As early as 1922 the BFMPC felt compelled to require all of its missionaries to sign a statement agreeing that “Foreign Mission work is carried on to make our Lord Jesus Christ known to all men as their Divine Savior.” Speer’s criticisms of the Hocking Report, however, did not go far enough for fundamentalists like G. Gresham Machen, a former professor at Princeton Seminary who in 1929 had left the school to form a new, more conservative seminary. Machen strongly condemned the BFMPC’s reaction and became a constant critic of the organization’s theological doctrine.

The ABCFM responded to the theological controversy by resoundingly choosing a modernist path. It embraced the conclusions of the Hocking Report, with its secretary, Hugh Vernon White, declaring, “The Christian mission should be a man-centered enterprise” and “The service of man [should be] the regulative aim of Christian missions.” Copies of the Hocking Report were sent to all of the ABCFM’s mission stations. Such actions, however, alienated conservatives. One of its seminary graduates in the Middle East lamented the changes.

I cannot help but wonder what St. Paul and the dedicated missionaries after him would say about the work of our contemporary American Board of Foreign Missions that supports schools which forbid the mention of Jesus Christ and teach the Gospel of Mammon and Materialism. What, in fact, would the early founders of the American missions say about today’s Board, which joins our politicians and businessmen in defense of those
who justify or deny the Genocide and ongoing minority persecutions, lest the truth jeopardize business opportunities, covering all beneath the veil of “national security.”

The ABCFM missionary force rapidly declined from its 1922 peak of roughly 820 to 372 by 1942. The organization’s income from churches dropped 60 percent between 1928 and 1939. It never recovered. By 1960 it was still fielding only 363 missionaries—a figure comparable to the number active in 1942. In 1961 it merged with the Board of International Missions to form the United Church Board for World Ministries. In 1995 operations were combined with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to form Global Ministries—an entity represented by roughly 40 missionaries worldwide in 2014.

The SVM, for its part, had already undergone division and a modernist makeover prior to the publication of the Hocking Report. At the 1927 convention, Sherwood Eddy, a longtime leader within the SVM, acknowledged that the current generation of students no longer sought “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” In 1928 the Moody Bible Institute withdrew from the SVM because of its increasingly liberal outlook. The move had poignant symbolism because of the connection between D. L. Moody, the founder and namesake of the Moody Bible Institute, and the SVM. By the end of the 1930s the SVM was but a shadow of its former self, employing only four people at its New York City headquarters (down from a peak of twenty-nine). Likewise in 1938 it procured only twenty-five volunteers, down from nearly 3,000 in 1920. It eventually merged with the United Student Christian Council and the Interseminary Committee in 1959 to form the National Student Christian Federation (NSCF). In 1966 the legacy entity within the NSCF, the Commission on World Missions, was disbanded.

The decline of the SVM, ABCFM, and BFMPC underscores the direct and indirect influence international politics can have on mission work. World War I presented many practical challenges to the missions movement, including increased expenses, the interruption and destruction of mission work, and a limited ability to transport materials, personnel, and information to and from the field. The war also had a tremendous, indirect impact on the missions movement by raising questions and increasing internal tensions. The prewar consensus that had guided the movement for over a century ultimately broke apart under the strain, and when it did, mission efforts ground nearly to a halt. Not until after World War II did a second wave of American mission effort begin—a movement that ironically had little connection with the first wave.

Notes

4. Not all of the missionaries were postmillennialists. D. L. Moody is a good example of a premillennialist who enthusiastically supported the missions movement.
7. Ibid., 15–16.
13. “The First World War and the malaise that followed it shattered to pieces the confidence that was an indisputable ingredient of the Social Gospel movement” (Bosch, Transforming Mission, 326).
15. Ibid., 52; Grabill, Protestant Diplomacy, 252.
29. The report was also commonly referred to as the Hocking Report after the name of the committee chairman, William Hocking.
36. E-mail correspondence with Presbyterian Mission Agency, September 6, 2014.
39. Kieser, Nearest East, 126.
40. ABCFM, 1942 Annual Report, 55.
41. ABCFM, 1932 Annual Report (Boston: ABCFM, 1932), 32.
43. E-mail correspondence with Global Ministries, October 8, 2014.
46. Ibid., 161, 180–82.
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