

The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries

They didn't set out to change history. But one modern scholar's research shows they did just that.

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...Fourteen years ago, Robert Woodberry was a graduate student in sociology at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill (UNC). The son of J. Dudley Woodberry, a professor of Islamic studies and now a dean emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, started studying in UNC's respected PhD program with one of its most influential figures, Christian Smith (now at the University of Notre Dame). But as Woodberry cast about for a fruitful line of research of his own, he grew discontented.

"Most of the research I studied was about American religion," he says of early graduate school. "It wasn't [my] passion, and it didn't feel like a calling, something I could pour my life into."

One afternoon he attended a required lecture that brought his vocational drift to a sudden end. The lecture was by Kenneth A. Bollen, a UNC–Chapel Hill professor and one of the leading experts on measuring and tracking the spread of global democracy. Bollen remarked that he kept finding a significant statistical link between democracy and Protestantism. Someone needed to study the reason for the link, he said.

Woodberry sat forward in his seat and thought, That's me. I'm the one...

"[Woodberry] presents a grand and quite ambitious theory of how 'conversionary Protestants' contributed to building democratic societies," says Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of history at Baylor University. "Try as I might to pick holes in it, the theory holds up. [It has] major implications for the global study of Christianity."

"Why did some countries become democratic, while others went the route of theocracy or dictatorship?" asks Daniel Philpott, who teaches political science and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame. "For [Woodberry] to show through devastatingly thorough analysis that conversionary Protestants are crucial to what makes the country democratic today [is] remarkable in many ways. Not only is it another factor—it turns out to be the most important factor. It can't be anything but startling for scholars of democracy."

"I think it's the best work out there on religion and economic development," says Robin Grier, professor of economics and international and area studies at the University of Oklahoma. "It's incredibly sophisticated and well grounded. I haven't seen anything quite like it."

When Woodberry talks about his work, he sounds like a careful academic who doesn't want to overstate his case. But you also pick up on his passion for setting the record straight.

“We don’t have to deny that there were and are racist missionaries,” says Woodberry. “We don’t have to deny there were and are missionaries who do self-centered things. But if that were the average effect, we would expect the places where missionaries had influence to be worse than places where missionaries weren’t allowed or were restricted in action. We find exactly the opposite on all kinds of outcomes. Even in places where few people converted, [missionaries] had a profound economic and political impact.”

The Nations’ Educators

There is one important nuance to all this: The positive effect of missionaries on democracy applies only to “conversionary Protestants.” Protestant clergy financed by the state, as well as Catholic missionaries prior to the 1960s, had no comparable effect in the areas where they worked.

Independence from state control made a big difference. “One of the main stereotypes about missions is that they were closely connected to colonialism,” says Woodberry. “But Protestant missionaries not funded by the state were regularly very critical of colonialism.”

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