

From Evangelization to Enterprise: A Comparative Analysis of Missionary Economic Legacies in the 1800s and the Retreat of Contemporary Churches from Community Development

Mbwoye Divine Ngome

Department of History, Kangwon National University

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a comparative historiographical methodology to examine the transformation of Christian missionary engagement with socioeconomic development from the nineteenth century to the present. Comparing missionary enterprises in America, Africa, and Asia with selected contemporary church movements, it analyzes shifts in theological vision, institutional practice, and economic orientation. While acknowledging the colonial entanglements and moral ambiguities of nineteenth-century missions, the study argues that many functioned as proto-development actors by integrating evangelization with education, agriculture, healthcare, and institution-building. Engaging major historiographical debates, it situates missionary activity within complex imperial, cultural, and political contexts.

In contrast, the study contends that many contemporary churches, shaped by neoliberal market forces and prosperity-oriented theology, have reduced their emphasis on structural development in favor of individualized spiritual and financial aspirations. Recognizing its regional selectivity and limited generalizability, the paper offers a focused comparative analysis that highlights broader shifts in faith-based development. It ultimately calls for renewed reflection on the relationship between spiritual mission and socioeconomic responsibility while remaining attentive to the historical complexities of missionary modernity.

Keywords: Missionary, Evangelization, Community Development, Enterprise, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the evolution of Christian missionary engagement with socioeconomic development from the 19th century to the present, contrasting the missionary enterprise of the 1800s, notably in America, Africa, and Asia, with the activities of modern churches. Throughout history, religion has been a powerful catalyst for social transformation, shaping values, governance, and patterns of economic development across civilizations.

During the 19th century, European and American missionary movements not only sought to spread Christianity but also served as agents of modernization. They established schools, hospitals, and printing presses. Missionaries not only spread religious beliefs but also introduced Western knowledge systems, educational structures, and technological innovations¹. These initiatives laid crucial foundations for modern education, literacy, and institutional organization in many non-Western societies, profoundly influencing their morals, social, and economic trajectories.

In contrast, according to Paul Gifford, the role of the church in contemporary society has undergone significant evolution. Particularly in developing regions such as Africa and Latin America, the focus of many modern churches has shifted away from social empowerment toward doctrines of personal prosperity and institutional expansion. Rather than promoting community self-sufficiency, collective welfare, and structural reform

¹ Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.78.

principles that once defined missionary engagement, Gifford argued that many churches now emphasize individual financial success and spiritual consumption².

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative historiographical research design, drawing on primary missionary records where available and a broad range of secondary scholarly literature to analyze the evolution of Christian engagement with socioeconomic development from the nineteenth century to the present. The comparative framework juxtaposes missionary enterprises in the 1800s across selected regions (America, Africa, and Asia) with contemporary church movements in Africa, Latin America, and the United States, in order to trace continuities and discontinuities in theological vision and economic practice. Sources were selected based on their scholarly credibility, regional relevance, and representativeness within major historiographical debates, incorporating both sympathetic and critical interpretations of missionary activity. The analytical method combines historical reconstruction with thematic comparison, focusing on key indicators such as education, agricultural enterprise, institutional sustainability, theological orientation toward work, and models of economic engagement. To mitigate bias, the study engages competing historiographical perspectives, including postcolonial and feminist critiques, and remains attentive to the limitations of missionary archives, which often reflect Eurocentric and paternalistic assumptions. Moreover, the scope of the study is geographically selective and interpretive rather than exhaustive; it does not claim statistical generalizability across all Christian traditions but instead offers a focused comparative analysis intended to illuminate broader patterns in the relationship between faith and development.

Historical Background of Missionary Activities in the 1800s

In the early and mid-1800s, American missionary movements, most notably those organized by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), pursued a comprehensive vision of social and spiritual transformation³. According to Andrew F. Walls, these missionaries combined evangelism with education, literacy, and technical training, believing that moral conversion must be accompanied by material and intellectual advancement. Mission stations, therefore, were not merely places of worship but multifunctional centers of learning, agriculture, and artisanal production⁴. Through these hubs, local converts were taught to read and write, often using vernacular translations of the Bible, while also acquiring practical skills such as carpentry, weaving, and farming⁵.

In regions such as Hawaii, the Philippines, India, and West Africa, missionary initiatives introduced printing presses, Western-style schools, medical clinics, and modern agricultural tools, which collectively fostered early forms of social modernization⁶. For instance, in Hawaii, missionaries established one of the first printing presses in the Pacific, producing religious texts as well as literacy materials that contributed to the islands' remarkably high literacy rate by the mid-19th century⁷. By the 1850s, scholars widely estimate that literacy among Native Hawaiians reached between 70% and 90%, largely due to mission-sponsored vernacular schooling and printing.

Also, in parts of West Africa, mission compounds became centers for agricultural experimentation and artisanal craftsmanship, introducing plows, mills, and irrigation methods that transformed local economies.⁸ Some of them included the Basel Mission, Pallottine Fathers, German Baptist Mission, and Presbyterian Mission.

² Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), p. 3.

³ William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 27.

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 71.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), p. 102.

⁶ Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 143.

⁷ Albertine Loomis, *To All People: A History of the Hawaii Mission Press, 1822–1860* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, 1970), p. 47.

⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 84.

Similarly, in Southeast Asia, mission schools became among the first institutions to provide education to women and lower social classes, challenging traditional hierarchies and expanding access to learning⁹.

Dana Robert¹⁰ and Andrew Walls¹¹ argue that these missionaries understood evangelism as inseparable from human upliftment. Conversion was envisioned not as an isolated spiritual event, but as part of a broader process of civilizational and moral renewal. This holistic approach aimed to cultivate communities that were “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating,” a principle later formalized in the “Three-Self Movement.” This movement aimed to establish indigenous churches that could sustain themselves financially, administratively, and evangelistically without relying on perpetual foreign control. In this sense, early missionary work functioned as both a religious and developmental enterprise, intertwining faith with the practical tools of modernity to reshape societies from within through missionary activities. By the late nineteenth century, Fourah Bay College and affiliated mission schools had trained several hundred African clergy, teachers, and civil servants, contributing to the formation of one of the earliest Western-educated African elites.

In Africa, during the 19th century, missionaries such as David Livingstone, Mary Slessor, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther played pivotal roles in linking Christian evangelism with socioeconomic development¹². Their mission stations were more than religious outposts because they served as hubs of agricultural innovation, literacy, and local craftsmanship that reshaped the social and economic fabric of many African communities.

David Livingstone, for instance, envisioned “Christianity, commerce, and civilization” as interdependent forces capable of uplifting the continent and countering the slave trade. According to Andrew C. Rose, his expeditions promoted the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton, coffee, and sugarcane, which were introduced as alternatives to slave-based economies¹³.

Today, cocoa production serves as a source of employment in many parts of Africa. Similarly, Mary Slessor’s work in Calabar (modern-day Nigeria) combined evangelism with advocacy for women’s rights, child protection, and social reform, establishing a model of mission work that merged faith with public welfare¹⁴. Meanwhile, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop, emphasized the indigenization of Christianity, encouraging education and literacy in African languages. Under his leadership, mission schools multiplied along the Niger River, becoming crucial sites for training teachers, translators, and artisans¹⁵.

Moreover, Mission societies such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris (SMEP) institutionalized these efforts, introducing industrial schools and agricultural training programs across West and Central Africa¹⁶. These institutions encouraged entrepreneurial self-reliance, teaching techniques for cultivating cocoa, coffee, and cotton commodities that would later become central to African export economies. Mission workshops also produced textiles, furniture, and tools, blending European craftsmanship with local materials¹⁷. Through such initiatives, missionaries effectively laid the groundwork for a literate, semi-industrialized middle class that would later play key roles in anticolonial movements and nation-building.

⁹ Susan B. Bayly, *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age: Vietnam, India and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.132.

¹⁰ Robert, *Christian Mission, 2009*, pp. 70-80

¹¹ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, 1996*, p. 74

¹² Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p.189.

¹³ Andrew C. Ross, *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire* (London: Hambledon Press, 2002), p. 156.

¹⁴ Rosalind I. J. Hackett, *Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 112–115.

¹⁵ J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965), pp. 204–208

¹⁶ François G. Richard, *The Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris and Colonial Education in Africa, 1822–1914* (Paris: Karthala, 2002), 89–92.

¹⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 101–104; Toyin Falola, *Economic Reforms and Modernization in Nigeria, 1945–1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004), 17–19; Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, 1996*, pp. 147–149.

In Asia, missionary influence was equally transformative, particularly in the spheres of education and scientific learning. The Serampore Trio, William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward, founded one of the most influential mission complexes in early 19th Century India¹⁸. Beyond translating the Bible into numerous Indian languages, they established schools and Serampore College (founded in 1818), which combined religious education with instruction in science, mathematics, and vocational skills¹⁹. This fusion of theology and technical learning marked one of the first efforts to align Christian mission work with Enlightenment ideals of rational inquiry and empirical knowledge.

In China, both Jesuit and Protestant missionaries played crucial roles in the diffusion of Western science, medicine, and agriculture²⁰. Jesuit missions had already introduced astronomical instruments and advanced cartography in earlier centuries, but in the 19th century, Protestant missionaries expanded these efforts through mission hospitals, teacher training institutes, and agricultural experiments²¹. Figures such as Peter Parker, who founded China's first Western-style hospital in Canton in 1835, combined medical practice with evangelistic outreach²². According to Bay's study, Missionary agricultural projects introduced new techniques for irrigation, pest control, and crop diversification, which were later adopted by local farmers. These missions thus became early catalysts for rural transformation, embedding Western medical and scientific practices within local contexts and paving the way for China's later educational and agricultural reforms²³.

Collectively, these African and Asian missionary enterprises reflected a broad 19th-century vision of Christian modernity, one that fused spiritual salvation with material progress. Missionaries did not merely preach; they sought to reconstruct societies through education, health, and economic participation, laying the intellectual and institutional groundwork for modernization long before the arrival of formal colonial administrations.

Missionary Strategies for Economic and Social Sustainability

The 19th-century missionary enterprise embodied a holistic model of transformation that intertwined spiritual conversion with social and economic progress. Missionaries did not perceive evangelism as separate from material advancement; rather, they believed that faith, education, health, and productive labor were inseparable components of human flourishing. Their mission stations, therefore, functioned as early laboratories of sustainable development, long before the emergence of formal aid agencies or international development institutions²⁴. This model rested on three interwoven strategies: education as empowerment, agricultural and industrial training, and healthcare and sanitation, each reinforcing the other in the pursuit of both spiritual and social renewal.

Firstly, Education stood at the heart of the missionary vision. By establishing thousands of mission schools, seminaries, and colleges across Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, missionaries sought to empower local populations intellectually and morally. Literacy was seen as both a spiritual and civic virtue, enabling converts to read the Bible while engaging with the modern world. In West Africa, institutions founded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyan Mission produced an educated elite that later became leaders in commerce, journalism, and anti-colonial politics²⁵. Figures such as James Africanus Horton in Sierra Leone and Samuel Ajayi Crowther in Nigeria emerged from this missionary education network, embodying the fusion of Christian ethics with intellectual ambition²⁶.

¹⁸ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792–1992* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), p.45–48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50.

²⁰ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 45–52.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2009), pp. 45–47.

²⁵ Andrew E. Barnes, "Religion, Education, and the Discourse of Cultural Improvement in Early Colonial Nigeria: CMS and Government Schools," *Journal of African History* 42, no. 1 (2001): 107–09.

²⁶ Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, 1983), pp.89–91.

In India, the “Serampore Trio, William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward” established schools and colleges that integrated scientific, linguistic, and vocational education into religious instruction²⁷. Similarly, in China, missionary educators introduced Western curricula, creating a generation of reform-minded students who contributed to the modernization of the Qing Empire²⁸. Through these efforts, missionaries laid the foundations for modern educational systems, promoting literacy, critical thinking, and civic responsibility as pathways to both personal salvation and social progress.

Alongside education, missionaries emphasized economic self-reliance through agriculture and technical training. Mission compounds often included model farms, workshops, and demonstration fields where converts learned improved methods of cultivation, irrigation, and animal husbandry²⁹. In Africa, figures like David Livingstone and mission organizations such as the Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris introduced cash crop farming coffee, cocoa, cotton, and sugarcane as alternatives to exploitative labor systems and the slave trade³⁰.

Industrial schools taught weaving, carpentry, brickmaking, and printing, skills that not only provided livelihoods but also stimulated local economies. In Ghana, for instance, Basel Mission workshops became major producers of building materials and furniture, while in Nigeria, agricultural missions pioneered the cultivation of cocoa, which would later become the backbone of the national economy³¹. By linking faith with work and productivity, missionaries instilled a sense of dignity in labor, encouraging the belief that economic independence was both a spiritual duty and a social good.

Another great pillar of the missionary development model was healthcare and sanitation, rooted in the conviction that spiritual salvation must be accompanied by physical and communal well-being. Missionaries founded dispensaries, clinics, and hospitals, which became the first formal healthcare institutions in many parts of the developing world³². The London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) established mission hospitals across Africa and Asia, introducing Western medical practices such as vaccination, surgery, and hygiene education³³.

In China, medical missionaries like Dr. Peter Parker opened hospitals that combined healing with evangelism, while in India, women missionaries pioneered the training of local nurses and midwives, addressing gender barriers in access to healthcare. Improved sanitation, nutrition, and maternal health significantly reduced mortality rates and enhanced productivity, reinforcing the idea that a healthy community was a prerequisite for moral and economic growth³⁴.

A critical dimension of missionary sustainability strategies concerns the gendered structuring of education, labor, and social reform. While mission schools expanded literacy for girls and opened limited avenues for female participation in public life, they often reinforced Victorian gender norms by emphasizing domestic training, modesty, and obedience as core virtues of Christian womanhood. Industrial and boarding schools for girls frequently prioritized sewing, childcare, cooking, and household management over advanced academic or vocational training, reflecting a gendered division of labor embedded within missionary ideology. Women missionaries occupied an ambivalent position within this structure: on the one hand, they carved out unprecedented transnational leadership roles as teachers, nurses, and reform advocates, particularly in campaigns against practices such as child marriage or infanticide; on the other hand, they operated within patriarchal ecclesial systems that restricted ordination, authority, and theological voice. Thus, missionary development both expanded opportunities for women and simultaneously reproduced hierarchical gender arrangements that mirrored nineteenth-century European social norms.

²⁷ Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792–1992*, (1992), pp. 48–50.

²⁸ H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, (2012), pp. 92–94.

²⁹ Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 167–170.

³⁰ Porter, *Religion versus Empire?* (2004), pp. 221–224.

³¹ Paul Jenkins, *The Basel Mission and the Development of the Gold Coast, 1828–1917* (Basel: Basel Mission, 1970), pp. 156–160.

³² David Hardiman, *Healing Bodies, Saving Souls: Medical Missions in Asia and Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp.12–15.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 45–49.

³⁴ H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, (2012), 98–101.

While nineteenth-century missionary enterprises contributed significantly to educational, medical, and agricultural development, their impact was neither uniformly benevolent nor socially neutral. Missionary expansion often entailed cultural disruption, as indigenous religious systems, social structures, and epistemologies were delegitimized or displaced in favor of Western Christian norms. Economic initiatives, though framed as tools of self-sufficiency, at times fostered new dependency patterns by integrating local communities into colonial trade networks and European-controlled markets. Mission education frequently reproduced Victorian gender hierarchies, promoting domestic training for women and reinforcing patriarchal family models even as it expanded female literacy. Moreover, missionary activity was not passively received; indigenous communities selectively appropriated, adapted, resisted, or contested Christian teachings and institutional reforms. Recognizing these tensions complicates any singular narrative of missionary “transformation” and situates mission history within broader dynamics of power, negotiation, and cultural exchange.

Historiographical Reflection of the Missionary Activities in the 1800s

Historians have long debated whether nineteenth-century missionary work should be understood primarily as an altruistic enterprise or as an extension of imperial domination. Jean and John Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution* remains foundational in framing missions as vehicles of cultural imperialism³⁵. They argue that missionary activity in southern Africa operated as a form of “colonial evangelism,” embedding Western epistemologies, moral codes, and social hierarchies within indigenous societies³⁶. The Comaroffs contend that missionaries did not merely preach Christianity, but also reconfigured local economies, temporalities, and identities in ways that served the ideological and administrative goals of the empire³⁷. In this interpretation, missionary work becomes an instrument of soft power, complementing the coercive mechanisms of colonial rule.

In contrast, Lamin Sanneh’s *Translating the Message* presents a more nuanced and, in some respects, rehabilitative account of missionary engagement. Sanneh emphasizes the “vernacularization” of Christianity, how translation of the Bible and religious texts into indigenous languages fostered literacy, cultural preservation, and even proto-national consciousness³⁸. For Sanneh, missionary linguistics inadvertently empowered local actors by legitimizing indigenous languages as vehicles of sacred knowledge, thereby facilitating new forms of identity and resistance³⁹. In this view, the mission encounter was dialogical rather than purely imperialistic, generating spaces of cultural negotiation and agency within the constraints of colonial power.

Subsequent historiography has tended to occupy the middle ground between these two poles. Scholars such as Andrew Porter and Brian Stanley have highlighted the complex entanglement of humanitarian idealism and imperial complicity in missionary work. Porter argues that while missionaries often operated within imperial frameworks, their moral critiques of colonial abuses and advocacy for indigenous welfare sometimes placed them in tension with secular authorities⁴⁰. Similarly, Elizabeth Elbourne underscores the gendered dimensions of missionary activity, showing how women’s missionary societies both reinforced patriarchal norms and created unprecedented transnational networks of female activism⁴¹.

Thus, the historiography reveals that missionary work cannot be easily categorized as either altruistic or imperialistic. Rather, it occupied a liminal space in which moral conviction intersected with imperial ambition. Despite their ambivalent legacies, it is indisputable that missionaries contributed enduring social infrastructures, such as schools, hospitals, and linguistic institutions, that advanced both spiritual and material well-being. Yet these same institutions also embedded Western epistemological dominance, leaving a legacy that continues to

³⁵ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 16–20.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 30-35

³⁸ Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 1989), pp. 51–55.

³⁹ Ibid, pp.121-125.

⁴⁰ Porter, *Religion versus Empire?*, 2004), pp. 3–7

⁴¹ Elizabeth Elbourne, “Religion in the British Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V, Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 331–335.

provoke debate about the intersections of faith, culture, and power in the modern world. This study positions itself between the critical interpretation of the Comaroffs and the more rehabilitative account advanced by Sanneh. While recognizing that missionary activity operated within colonial power asymmetries and often reinforced racial and gender hierarchies under the banner of a “civilizing mission,” it also acknowledges that these missions produced durable educational, medical, and institutional infrastructures with long-term developmental consequences.

By integrating feminist and postcolonial critiques, this analysis treats missionary history as morally complex marked by domination and disruption, but also by adaptation, negotiation, and local agency. This balanced stance undergirds the comparative argument that follows, situating missionary developmental legacies within an ethically self-aware framework.

Contemporary Churches and the Shift from Development to Prosperity

In contrast to their nineteenth-century predecessors, many contemporary churches, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the United States, have increasingly deprioritized developmental engagement in favor of spiritual and financial individualism⁴². While earlier missionary enterprises intertwined evangelism with social reform, education, and agriculture, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a decisive reorientation toward individualized spirituality and market-oriented theology⁴³.

This transformation coincides with global neoliberalism’s rise, which has reshaped religious institutions to mirror consumer capitalism. The prosperity gospel, in particular, reframes salvation and divine favor through the language of personal success and material accumulation. Scholars such as Paul Gifford⁴⁴ and Kate Bowler argue that this theology represents both a continuation of and a rupture from missionary modernity: it affirms the Protestant ethic of diligence and discipline but detaches it from communal ethics of stewardship, emphasizing personal gain instead⁴⁵.

It is important, however, to avoid overgeneralization. While many contemporary churches have shifted toward individualized and market-oriented forms of spirituality, significant sectors of global Christianity remain deeply engaged in development work. Catholic social teaching institutions, mainline Protestant agencies, and numerous faith-based NGOs continue to operate schools, hospitals, microfinance initiatives, and rural development programs across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Pentecostal and charismatic networks in some regions have also sponsored entrepreneurship training, savings cooperatives, and informal welfare systems that strengthen community resilience. Moreover, interpretations of prosperity theology remain contested. Some scholars argue that, rather than merely promoting consumerism, prosperity-oriented teaching can encourage entrepreneurial initiative, cultivate disciplined financial practices, build dense social networks of mutual support, and provide psychological resilience in contexts of economic precarity. These regional and theological variations suggest that contemporary Christianity cannot be uniformly characterized as developmentally disengaged; rather, its economic and social impact varies significantly across institutional, doctrinal, and geographic contexts.

One of the most visible features of this shift is the commercialization of faith. Contemporary megachurches and charismatic movements invest vast resources in infrastructure, including multi-million-dollar cathedrals, media empires, and global branding, while reducing their direct engagement with social and economic uplift. Theologians such as J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu note that Pentecostal media networks in West Africa have transformed churches into transnational corporations, with pastors operating as CEOs and congregants as consumers⁴⁶.

⁴² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 210–214.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–210.

⁴⁴ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), pp. 37–40.

⁴⁵ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 210–214.

⁴⁶ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp.112–114.

This entrepreneurial turn has produced new forms of religious participation, where faith is mediated through commodified symbols, merchandise, branded events, and digital content. Yet, critics argue that such commercialization often supplants the communal ethics of the early missionary model, redirecting resources from community development to institutional maintenance and personal enrichment⁴⁷.

Whereas nineteenth-century missions often established schools, vocational institutes, and agricultural cooperatives, few contemporary churches sustain comparable enterprises. Early missionary movements saw education and productive labor as both spiritual disciplines and instruments of emancipation embodied in projects such as mission farms and teacher-training colleges across Africa and Asia. In contrast, modern churches have largely relinquished this developmental mandate.

As Brian Stanley observes, the older integration of evangelism with “civilizational uplift” has given way to ministries focused on liturgical spectacle and spiritual warfare⁴⁸. Consequently, the church’s economic footprint has turned inward, aimed at preserving large institutional edifices rather than building communal capacities. The erosion of mission-based education has also weakened the church’s historical role as an incubator of intellectual and civic leadership⁴⁹.

Another defining feature of the modern religious economy is its persistent dependency on foreign sponsorships and donor-driven projects⁵⁰. While early missions sought to cultivate local self-reliance, albeit within paternalistic frameworks, many contemporary churches and faith-based NGOs rely on Western philanthropy and short-term humanitarian relief. This model, as Dena Freeman has shown, perpetuates economic dependency and aligns religious charity with global development agendas rather than local empowerment⁵¹. Churches often mobilize funds for visible acts of charity, disaster relief, food drives, or scholarship programs, but rarely invest in structural reforms or sustainable livelihoods. The shift from self-sustaining enterprise to donor dependency reflects both the pressures of globalization and the decline of mission-era ideals of productive, community-based labor.

Finally, the weakening theological integration between work and faith marks a profound departure from earlier Protestant and missionary paradigms. Nineteenth-century missions advanced the idea of “work as worship,” connecting vocational discipline with divine calling, a view deeply rooted in the Protestant work ethic described by Max Weber⁵². In the prosperity gospel, however, faith is increasingly cast as a tool for personal advancement rather than a framework for ethical labor. As Ruth Marshall argues, this “spiritualization of success” reflects a broader cultural logic in which consumption replaces vocation as the measure of divine blessing⁵³. The emphasis on miraculous prosperity over industrious effort undermines traditional Christian conceptions of stewardship and community service. The result is a theology of faith detached from material production, a religiosity of aspiration rather than vocation⁵⁴.

In sum, the historical trajectory from missionary developmentalism to contemporary spiritual consumerism reveals a deep restructuring of religious economies. Where nineteenth-century missions sought to transform society through education, work, and moral discipline, many modern churches operate within the symbolic economy of late capitalism, translating spiritual authority into financial capital. This evolution underscores both the adaptability and the moral peril of religious institutions navigating a globalized, market-driven world.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 175-178.

⁴⁸ Stanley, “Christian Missions and the End of Empire,” (2001): 183-185.

⁴⁹ Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, (2009), pp.98-101.

⁵⁰ Terence O. Ranger, “Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa,” in *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, ed. Terence O. Ranger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 22-25

⁵¹ Dena Freeman, *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 72-76

⁵² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001 [1905]), pp.39-44

⁵³ Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 191-195.

⁵⁴ Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, (2013), pp. 198–202

Case Study: From Mission Legacy to Modern Drift

The following regional case studies, from West Africa, Latin America, and the United States, are selected as illustrative rather than exhaustive examples of broader global patterns in Christian developmental engagement.

These regions were chosen because each represents a distinct historical trajectory of mission influence: West Africa as a site of intensive nineteenth-century Protestant mission institutionalization, Latin America as a context shaped by both liberationist and Pentecostal movements, and the United States as the birthplace of both the Social Gospel and contemporary megachurch culture. Together, they provide comparative insight into shifting theological and economic paradigms across different sociopolitical environments. While not statistically comprehensive, these cases highlight recurring structural transformations in the relationship between faith, development, and institutional economics.

In West Africa, the legacy of mission-established schools such as Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone (founded in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society) and Achimota School in the Gold Coast (founded in 1927) exemplifies the historical nexus between Christianity, education, and nation-building⁵⁵. These institutions served as early incubators of African intellectual and political leadership, producing generations of clerics, teachers, and nationalist figures who later spearheaded decolonization movements.

Historians such as Andrew Porter and Lamin Sanneh have highlighted how missionary education combined evangelical zeal with a belief in the “civilizing mission,” creating a literate African elite capable of both absorbing and contesting colonial authority⁵⁶.

However, the postcolonial trajectory of these schools reveals a profound transformation in the church’s social role. Where nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century missions emphasized broad access to literacy and vocational training as tools of communal uplift, many of today’s church-run institutions have become fee-based and elite-oriented.

The commercialization of Christian education mirrors broader neoliberal trends across African societies, where privatization has supplanted public and missionary commitments to social equity. Scholars such as Paul Gifford⁵⁷ and Birgit Meyer⁵⁸ argue that Pentecostal and charismatic churches increasingly frame education not as a form of communal service but as a marker of divine favor and upward mobility. Consequently, while mission-founded schools once embodied an ethos of collective advancement, modern church education in West Africa often reproduces class hierarchies and reinforces access disparities, signaling a shift from empowerment to exclusion within Christian social practice.

In Latin America, the church’s relationship to social and economic life has undergone a similarly dramatic evolution, oscillating between radical activism and spiritual individualism. During the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of Liberation Theology, articulated by thinkers such as Gustavo Gutiérrez,⁵⁹ Leonardo Boff,⁶⁰ and Jon Sobrino⁶¹ reinvigorated the social mission of Christianity.

Rooted in Marxist social analysis and a theology of “God’s preferential option for the poor,” Liberation Theology sought to align the church with struggles for justice, land reform, and workers’ rights. Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) across countries like Brazil, Nicaragua, and El Salvador became hubs of grassroots activism, where faith was inseparable from political consciousness and collective empowerment. As historians like Phillip Berryman and Enrique Dussel observe, this movement marked one of the most profound attempts to

⁵⁵ Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, 1983), pp. 94–99

⁵⁶ Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?*, 2004), pp. 222–227; Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 1989), pp. 215–219

⁵⁷ Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 2015), 109–114;

⁵⁸ Birgit Meyer, “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 458–462.

⁵⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 36–41.

⁶⁰ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 52–56.

⁶¹ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 18–22.

reconcile spirituality with structural transformation in the modern era⁶².

Yet by the late twentieth century, Liberation Theology faced strong opposition from both the Vatican and emerging Pentecostal and charismatic movements. The rise of neo-Pentecostalism in the 1980s and 1990s, fueled by media evangelism, miracle crusades, and prosperity-oriented preaching, redefined Latin American Christianity around individual experience and material blessing. Scholars such as David Stoll and Cecilia Mariz note that this theological shift resonated with populations seeking personal hope amid neoliberal economic crises, but it also depoliticized religious engagement⁶³.

The collective ethic of social transformation characteristic of Liberation Theology gave way to an emphasis on personal deliverance and consumption-oriented spirituality. Today, many Pentecostal churches in Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala function as entrepreneurial networks rather than community-development institutions, embodying a transformation from faith as liberation to faith as privatized success⁶⁴.

In the United States, the contrast between the nineteenth-century Social Gospel movement and contemporary megachurch culture encapsulates a broader shift from social reform to spiritual consumerism. The Social Gospel, championed by figures such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Jane Addams, interpreted Christianity as a mandate for social justice. Rooted in urban industrial contexts, it inspired initiatives in labor reform, public education, and poverty alleviation. Churches became engines of social progress, founding settlement houses, schools, and advocacy networks dedicated to improving working conditions and addressing racial inequality.

As Christopher Evans⁶⁵ and Gary Dorrien argue, the Social Gospel wove together Christian ethics and democratic idealism, producing a theology of collective responsibility that deeply influenced Progressive Era reform and early welfare policy⁶⁶.

In contrast, the rise of megachurches in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, exemplified by ministries such as those of Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, and T.D. Jake's signals a reorientation of American Christianity toward personal fulfillment and market logic⁶⁷. These churches often employ corporate models of organization, professionalized branding, and consumer-oriented worship experiences that parallel entertainment culture.

Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow have observed that this religious form privileges emotional gratification, motivational rhetoric, and individual salvation narratives over systemic social engagement⁶⁸. The result is a faith deeply compatible with neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing self-improvement, prosperity, and voluntary charity rather than structural critique or collective ethics. While the Social Gospel sought to Christianize the social order, contemporary megachurch theology often sanctifies the existing economic order, offering spiritual affirmation for material success.

The decline of developmental engagement in modern Christianity reflects not merely an institutional withdrawal but a profound shift in the theology of mission itself. Nineteenth-century missionaries conceived of the “kingdom

⁶² Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 62–66; Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 95–100.

⁶³ David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp.137–142; Cecilia Mariz, *Coping with Poverty: Pentecostals and Christian Base Communities in Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 118–123.

⁶⁴ Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, 1990), 168–173; Meyer, “Christianity in Africa, (2004): 460–463; R. Andrew Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 102–106.

⁶⁵ Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 85–87.

⁶⁶ Gary Dorrien, *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 73–76.

⁶⁷ Bowler, *Blessed, 2013*, pp. 183-193

⁶⁸ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 76–82; Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45–51.

of God” as both a spiritual and social reality, a divine mandate to cultivate moral virtue through tangible transformation in education, agriculture, industry, and civic order. Figures such as David Livingstone and Samuel Ajayi Crowther embodied a holistic theology in which evangelism was inseparable from social reconstruction⁶⁹.

Mission schools and vocational institutes were not ancillary to faith but expressions of it: they sought to discipline character, promote literacy, and instill habits of productivity that reflected divine order in daily life. As Lamin Sanneh (1989) and Andrew Walls (1996) have noted, this vision of mission linked salvation to the building of institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and farms, that fostered communal uplift. The kingdom of God was thus imagined as an earthly project of moral and material renewal, integrating spiritual conversion with practical modernization⁷⁰.

By contrast, modern churches operating under the influence of global capitalism and neoliberal individualism have largely redefined the meaning of mission and success. The economic and cultural logics of the late twentieth century have infiltrated ecclesial structures, reorienting theology around personal prosperity, private spirituality, and institutional expansion rather than community transformation. The rise of the prosperity gospel and celebrity pastor culture illustrates this shift vividly: wealth, influence, and media visibility have come to signify divine favor and ecclesiastical vitality. As Paul Gifford and Ruth Marshall observe, this reframing of faith through capitalist categories has rendered churches less invested in developmental work and more preoccupied with branding, audience growth, and spectacle⁷¹. Mission is no longer conceived as a collective vocation aimed at societal redemption, but as an individualized pursuit of success within a religious marketplace.

Sociologically, this transformation has weakened the church’s credibility as a developmental partner in many regions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missions played a pivotal role in building educational and agricultural infrastructures that outlived colonial empires, laying foundations for postcolonial civil societies. In contrast, contemporary congregations often channel resources into massive auditoriums, multimedia production, and online platforms, constructing what Birgit Meyer calls “spectacular Christianity.”⁷² These investments serve the performative dimensions of religion visibility, charisma, and affect rather than the productive dimensions of labor, skill, and community enterprise. The gap between faith and production has thus widened: churches that once trained farmers, teachers, and artisans now train worshippers, donors, and followers. The economic ethos of Christianity has shifted from productive ethics (work as a divine calling) to consumptive ethics (faith as access to blessing).

This evolution also signals a theological redefinition of the “kingdom of God” itself from a collective moral order to a personalized spiritual experience. The emphasis on individual salvation and material prosperity has displaced older notions of corporate sanctification and social duty.

Consequently, the church’s moral authority as an agent of development has eroded: where missionaries once partnered with local communities to build capacity and self-reliance, many modern churches depend on external donors or corporate sponsorships to sustain their own operations. The result is a paradoxical inversion of the missionary legacy: a religion that once measured faith by labor and communal renewal now measures it by spectacle and consumption.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, nineteenth-century missionary movements, despite their paternalistic assumptions and entanglement with imperial expansion, articulated a holistic understanding of Christian mission that linked evangelization with education, economic production, and institutional formation. Faith was conceived not solely

⁶⁹ Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, (1990), 86–92; Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?*, (2004), 198–203; Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, (1983), 71–75.

⁷⁰ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, (1989), 213–218; Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, (1996), 241–246.

⁷¹ Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, (2015), 121–126; Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, (2009), 197–202.

⁷² Meyer, “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,” (2004): 459–461.

as personal conversion but as a social ethic expressed through literacy initiatives, vocational training, agricultural innovation, and healthcare provision. While these efforts operated within asymmetrical structures of power and often reinforced cultural hierarchies, they nonetheless contributed to durable infrastructures that shaped emerging civil societies in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The missionary paradigm thus reflected a particular theological and institutional configuration in which spiritual commitment and socioeconomic engagement were closely intertwined.

By contrast, the comparative analysis presented here suggests that many contemporary churches operate within markedly different economic and cultural conditions shaped by globalization, neoliberal market logics, and religious pluralism. In numerous contexts, institutional growth, media expansion, and prosperity-oriented theology have reconfigured the relationship between faith and development, often privileging individualized spiritual advancement over structural socioeconomic intervention. At the same time, regional variation remains significant, and sectors of global Christianity, including Catholic social institutions, mainline Protestant agencies, and faith-based NGOs, continue to sustain substantial developmental engagement. The shift identified in this study, therefore, represents not a uniform decline but a broader transformation in theological emphasis, institutional priorities, and economic imagination within modern Christianity.

This study remains subject to several limitations. Its comparative framework is regionally selective and relies primarily on historical and secondary sources rather than comprehensive quantitative datasets, which constrains the generalizability of its conclusions across all Christian traditions. Reliable statistical data on literacy rates, institutional finance, and long-term socioeconomic outcomes are uneven across regions and periods, necessitating cautious interpretation.

Future research would benefit from systematic empirical investigation, including comparative quantitative analysis of church investments in education, healthcare, agriculture, and media infrastructure across denominations and regions. Longitudinal studies assessing measurable developmental outcomes associated with mission-founded and contemporary church institutions would further clarify the scope and significance of the transformation outlined here. Such work would advance scholarship on faith-based development by complementing historiographical interpretation with data-driven institutional analysis.

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