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Abstract:

This paper examines the attitude of American evangelical missionaries toward decolonization in the immediate post-World War II period. It focuses in particular on the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade (FEGC), a group active at the moment of Philippine independence from the United States. Rather than viewing decolonization as a crisis or challenge to their expansionist ambitions, these missionaries understood the changing world order as providing unprecedented opportunity for evangelism. The weakened position of European imperial powers opened the way for both the US government and American missionaries to exert new forms of influence in the decolonizing world. Evangelical missionaries, once suspicious of the American state, increasingly came to identify with its global power.

**“The greatest opportunity since the birth of Christ”:
American Evangelical Missionaries at the Dawn of Decolonization**

I should start with the confession that I don't really work on evangelicals anymore, but Axel's kind invitation to me to participate in this conference was too good to pass up and it has given me an opportunity to revisit an earlier article I wrote on American evangelical missionaries in the immediate post-World War Two era. That article focused on the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade—an evangelical missionary group founded by U.S. army chaplains that worked in Japan and the Philippines in the 1940s and 1950s before moving on to other areas and changing its name to SEND International, which is still in operation. In that piece I was more concerned with how missionaries contributed to a domestic revival of evangelicalism in the context of the end of World War II and America's changing role on the global stage.

But how might things look differently if we understood these American missionaries in the context of decolonization (which is, of course, tightly intertwined with the war and its end)? When using decolonization as a frame for this story what is striking is the utter *lack* of concern

among FEGC missionaries about what decolonization might mean for them. The FEGC was founded in the Philippines, which, until 1946, was a colony of the United States. Why wasn't Philippine independence a problem for the FEGC?

I would argue that there are a few reasons for this absence of concern: American evangelicals' alienation from the U.S. state and mainstream society in the early 20th century and, conversely, their increasing association with both. This seeming contradiction only makes sense if we understand the late-1940s as a period of contingency and transition for American evangelicals, many of whom decided to reject separatism and embrace American nationalism in a moment when Europe was ceding global authority to an ascendant United States. Decolonization, of course, coincided with the rise of the U.S. as the world's foremost military power. Far from hampering American global expansion, decolonization helped to amplify it as the U.S. sought to shape the course of decolonization toward its own ends. FEGC and other missionaries were on the front lines of this emerging phenomenon. To them, the shifting world order posed an opportunity, not a crisis.

American Protestant missionaries frequently worked directly with the U.S. state to promote mutual interests and often self-consciously aimed to spread Americanism abroad. A notable example of this is the role of American missionaries in Hawai'i, who promoted a closer relationship between the U.S. and the Hawaiian Kingdom, which eventually led to Hawai'i's annexation to the U.S. However, unlike their British counterparts, American missionaries were never particularly dependent on U.S. colonial structures to establish and maintain most of their foreign posts—in Hawai'i, for instance, they created the conditions that led to American

colonialism.¹ But American missionaries did not exactly flock to the colonial Philippines, with fewer than 500 working there in 1925, out of estimated worldwide total of well over 10,000.² By contrast, there were nearly 4,200 British missionaries in India in 1916, out of around 7,700 British missionaries in total.³ Elsewhere, many American missionaries tended to follow on the heels of British counterparts, only venturing to fields that were under British colonial control or after British missionaries had laid the initial groundwork, notably in China.

For British missionaries, decolonization posed a crisis as their role in colonization, however complicated, meant that they struggled to maintain their legitimacy among people working to overturn British rule.⁴ Decolonization also forced a reckoning for French Christians, who split between defending colonialism and arguing that Christianity itself should be decolonized.⁵ The situation was a bit different for American missionaries in the era of decolonization because they were rarely formally linked to state power, either in the form of

¹ British missionaries were not directly sponsored by the colonial state—and in many instances clashed with it. But, compared to the American missionary case, there was much greater geographical overlap between British missionary fields and British empire.

² Philippines statistics taken from Frank Laubach, *The People of the Philippines: Their Religious Progress and Spiritual Leadership in the Far East* (New York: George Doran, 1925), 481-82. I couldn't track down an exact worldwide figure for 1925, but the number for 1935 is nearly 12,000. See Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 80. Evidence suggests that the 1935 figure was a decrease from 1925, due to the effects of the Great Depression and a general decline in interest in missionary work during this period. See Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," *Church History* Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 1960), 4.

³ The 4,200 figure comes from Rosemary Seton, who writes that there were 2,500 British female missionaries in India in 1916, and from Jeffrey Cox, who asserts that around 60% of British missionaries in India were women (2,500 is 60% of 4,166). See Seton, *Western Daughters in Eastern Lands: British Missionary Women in Asia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger), 33; and Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 269. See Cox p. 267 for 7,700 figure.

⁴ John Stuart, *British Missionaries and the End of Empire: East, Central, and Southern Africa, 1939–64* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

⁵ Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

colonial authorities or established churches. While empire—and British empire in particular—had helped to expand their reach, it had usually done so in indirect fashion.

The worldwide struggle against colonialism did pose something of a problem for American liberal Protestants, who during the interwar period began to question whether they could promote Christianity in the non-European world in an anti-colonial way. In 1932, a multi-volume report titled *Re-Thinking Missions*—the result of a study directed by Harvard philosopher William Hocking and commissioned by John Rockefeller and seven major denominations—shook the American missionary world. It condemned missionaries’ Western cultural biases, calling for them to cooperate with other world religions and focus on the “secular needs of men” rather than direct evangelism.⁶ Writer and missionary Pearl Buck—author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Good Earth*, a sympathetic portrait of Chinese peasants—wholeheartedly endorsed this stance in a review in *The Christian Century* and would later go on to describe most missionaries as “narrow, uncharitable, unappreciative, ignorant.”⁷

But while many liberal Christians in the U.S. were attempting to reckon their proselytizing with a burgeoning cultural pluralism, most conservative Protestants did not recognize this as a dilemma. In contrast to mainline Protestant missionaries, evangelical missionaries did not go through a process of rigorous self-evaluation over the relationship between imperialism and Christian evangelism. Instead, when the Hocking Report came out, a number of prominent evangelicals called on the Board of Foreign Missions to denounce it, and also remove Buck as a missionary of the Presbyterian Church.⁸ When the Board refused to do

⁶ Milton Coalter, et al., *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 169.

⁷ Hilary Spurling, *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to The Good Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 206

⁸ James A. Patterson, “Robert E. Speer, J. Gresham Machen and the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions,” *American Presbyterians* Vol. 64, No. 1 (Spring 1986), 58-68.

either, the controversy exposed another major rift in the ongoing debate among modernists and conservatives within American Protestantism. For conservatives, the Board of Mission's tepid response to the Hocking Report—along with the national humiliation of the 1925 Scopes trial, the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, and the Democratic party's embrace of urban Catholics—reaffirmed the sense that they “ideological strangers in their own land.”⁹

So while they may have felt alienated from their fellow Protestants, evangelical missionaries entered the postwar period unburdened by new structural limitations on evangelizing foreign populations, or by ethical concerns over doing so. In fact, World War II both aided and inspired American evangelical missionaries. It also facilitated a much closer relationship with the U.S. state. Appropriating the rhetoric of military conquest, they spoke of “invading” other nations with the gospel and “occupying” mission fields until Christ's return. As evidenced by the formation of the FEGC, military service itself had a direct impact on the evangelical missionary movement, as thousands of young men raised in evangelical communities were thrown into violent conflict on faraway shores and came home with a renewed sense of missionary purpose. The FEGC was only one of several evangelical missionary groups—among them the New Tribes Mission and the Missionary Aviation Fellowship—founded by military personnel. Evangelicals also capitalized on America's military might by buying out surplus stockpiles of war materials for use in overseas missions.¹⁰ U.S. military power and the increased capacity of American missions were often quite literally connected.

It was the war, rather than U.S. colonialism, that brought huge numbers of Americans—among them the founders of the FEGC—into contact with the Philippines. At the height of

⁹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1980), x.

¹⁰ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178, 180–81.

America's postwar military occupation of the Philippines in 1946 there were over 800,000 U.S. troops stationed there.¹¹ By contrast, before the war, when the Philippines was a U.S. colony, there were only around 4,000 U.S. military personnel and another 8,700 American civilians.¹² A strong American presence would remain in the Philippines after its independence from the U.S. in the form of multiple military bases, which would play a significant part in the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Philippine independence, in short, did not lead to the expulsion of the U.S. government or of American residents—far from it. Rather, the number of Americans in the Philippines *increased* after independence.

For FEGC missionaries, the highly visible U.S. military in both the Philippines and Japan reinforced American supremacy—as well as their belief in America's providential role in the world. Allied success was directly linked to the fact that the United States was a Christian nation singled out by God. While all the Allied countries had been the recipients of divine help, in the end it took the United States, “a nation with a living God,” to secure victory and “thwart the evil purposes of those who denied the Deity and power of our Lord.”¹³ The FEGC frequently criticized the military over troops' behavior—for their drinking, dancing, and introducing local women to lipstick and other immoral consumer goods from America. Yet the FEGC's qualms about certain elements of the U.S. military were outweighed by their positive assessment of American military power. In their correspondence, and in the evangelical press's coverage of

¹¹ Hal Friedman, *Creating an American Lake: United States Imperialism and Strategic Security in the Pacific Basin, 1945-1947* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2001), 129.

¹² Catherine Porter, “Preparedness in the Philippines,” *Far Eastern Survey* Vol. 10, No. 6 (April 7, 1941), 67; Gerald Wheeler, “The American minority in the Philippines: Prewar Commonwealth period,” *Asian Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1966), 363.

¹³ *The GI Gospel Hour Monthly Bulletin* No. 5, September 1945, Billy Graham Center Archives, Records of SEND International, Box 3, Folder 19.

FEGC activities, G.I.s were largely portrayed as agents of benevolence—ministering to the material needs of local communities, distributing candy to orphans, and the like.

FEGC missionaries also knew they were only in Japan and the Philippines because American troops had opened the way. They were well aware of the connection between American military power and what they called “the greatest opportunity since the birth of Christ for reaching the peoples of the Pacific with the story of God’s transforming love.” While suggesting that years of war had left people in Japan and the Philippines “eager, curious, receptive” to evangelical proselytizing, the FEGC also emphasized the importance of the American postwar presence in Asia as a catalyst to revival. “International conditions allow unhindered missionary effort,” the FEGC proclaimed, “Military leaders, government authorities encourage missionary occupation of the islands.”¹⁴

The statement about encouraging military leaders was no doubt a nod to one in particular—General MacArthur, who Lawrence Wittner describes as a kind of pro-Christian renegade running a missionary movement out of his military post without official government sanction. In response to a letter from an American missionary complaining about U.S. occupation policies against favoring Christianity, MacArthur told a member of his staff that “the Occupation has every right to propagate Christianity.”¹⁵ To that end, MacArthur abolished Shintoism as Japan’s state religion, and his occupation authority gave preferential treatment to American missionaries, allowing them to enter Japan before anyone else unconnected with the occupation and granting them use of military transportation. In a particularly striking series of correspondence, MacArthur even agreed to censor Japanese textbooks with “evolutionary and

¹⁴ FEGC pamphlet on its second annual convention, 1948, BGC Archives, Collection 406, Box 2, Folder 11.

¹⁵ Lawrence S. Wittner, “MacArthur and the Missionaries: God and Man in Occupied Japan,” *Pacific Historical Review* 40 (1971), 78.

progressivist bias” at the behest of American fundamentalists back home.¹⁶ The FEGC, for its part, seized on MacArthur’s proclamations about “Christianizing” Japan, emphasizing that “General MacArthur is carrying forward the Occupation on Christian principles.”¹⁷ In reprinting his statements in newsletters and tracts, the figure of MacArthur came to represent for the FEGC the embodiment of American military power combined with Christian evangelistic purpose.

While the FEGC was spreading the Gospel in Asia, other American evangelicals were turning to a relatively new mission field, one far removed from the “heathen” societies usually associated with missionary work. Europe—the traditional source of Christian missionaries—now appeared desperate to be saved itself. American evangelicals’ revival efforts in Europe seem to me to be a significant piece of the story of their postwar global ascent, though this doesn’t get much attention in the historiography. Just a few months before Billy Graham held his first official crusade—in Michigan—in September 1947, he went on a tour of Europe. Over the course of half a year in 1946-47, Graham, along with other members of Youth for Christ, spoke at hundreds of meetings throughout England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden—“almost every one packed to capacity”—in an effort to convert audiences to Graham’s brand of neo-evangelicalism. Like missionaries outside of Europe, they had to endure a lack of access to American-style comforts and other basic services, frequently staying in people’s homes because so many hotels had been destroyed during the war.¹⁸ The Youth for Christ tour was emblematic of the broader shift in the balance of power between the U.S. and Europe, and between American and European global religious leadership. Americans had surpassed the British among Protestant

¹⁶ Wittner, 87-8.

¹⁷ *The Far Eastern Gospel Crusader*, May 1947, BGC Archives, Records of SEND International, Box 1, Folder 9. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Billy Graham, *Just as I am* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 100.

missionaries) by 1910 (and by then represented around one third of all Protestant missionaries).¹⁹ By 1969, North Americans constituted 70% of the worldwide missionary force.²⁰ For American evangelicals fed a steady stream of images of a war-ravaged and starving Europe, the Youth for Christ tour in 1946-47 would have been yet another example of the Old World's descent, with once-great powers now struggling to hold onto their empires and in dire need of the Gospel (whether they knew it or not).²¹

The FEGC, meanwhile, was determined to root out one of the most enduring European influences on the newly independent Philippines—Catholicism. Catholics had long served as the ultimate foil for evangelicals, who believed that veneration of the saints and prayers for the dead were vestiges of paganism. Bias against Catholics historically had been linked to the growth of evangelicalism in America—revivalist movements flourished in the nineteenth century by promoting an antiestablishmentarian brand of popular religion that disdained traditional church hierarchies, which were associated with feudal Europe. Drawing on this anti-Catholic tradition, the FEGC portrayed Filipino Catholics as both frighteningly primitive and pitiable—led astray by a corrupt church. Unfortunately, the FEGC told its followers back home, Catholics in the Philippines had been highly successful. “Catholics use education to the advantage of their cause,” wrote Betty Honeywell, the wife of the FEGC’s Philippines field chairman Russell Honeywell. “It makes my heart sick to see the lovely institutions they have all repaired and operating while the fundamental Protestants are so slow!”²²

¹⁹ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers in Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 142; Richard Pierard, “*Pax Americana* and the American Evangelical Advance,” from *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and foreign missions, 1880-1980*, edited by Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 158.

²⁰ Pierard, 158.

²¹ Graham, 100.

²² “News Flashes for Deputational Workers,” letter from Mrs. Russell Honeywell, Feb. 26, 1948, folder 22, box 2, Records of SEND International (Collection 406). Emphasis in original.

Another possible reason for the absence of concern over decolonization among American evangelicals in the early postwar period was their low-ranking status on the world stage. Compared to Catholics and mainline Protestants, evangelicals were relatively small in number outside the United States and did not have the same kind of well-established international religious networks.²³ This posed obvious disadvantages. But it also provided evangelicals with important rhetorical tools. More so than their liberal and Catholic counterparts, evangelicals saw (and had) tremendous room for missionary growth, and they frequently emphasized both the opportunity and the challenge of the postwar moment as a way to galvanize domestic support. According to the FEGC, for instance, evangelicals in the late-1940s had been blessed with an “unparalleled opportunity for the cause of Christ,” yet it was one that “seems largely to remain unmet.” Meanwhile, “The mere trickle of evangelical missionaries is far overbalanced by the activity of our spiritual enemies” (i.e. liberalism, communism, and “Romanism”).²⁴ This emphasis on opportunity—a word evangelicals used a lot in this period—followed by raising the alarm over “unmet” demands and formidable opponents, was typical of the language in evangelical mobilization efforts.

Evangelicals framed themselves as representatives of a new Christian front poised to take the reins from the old guard—embodied by Europe, Catholicism, and mainline Protestantism. Despite their professed conservatism, many postwar evangelicals thought of themselves as young and innovative. They might have been “overbalanced” by their enemies, but this in a way this gave them an edge—allowing them to take the stance of “pugnacious underdogs” in opposition

²³ Hans Krabbendam, “Opening a Market for Missions: American Evangelicals and the Re-Christianization of Europe, 1945-1985,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* Vol. 59, No. 2 (2014), 153-175.

²⁴ “FEGC News Release,” Dec. 29, 1948 and Pacific News Letter, [1948?], both in folder 22, box 2, BGC Archives, Records of SEND International.

to the international ecumenical status quo.²⁵ This was an identity already well-honed during the modernist-fundamentalist debate of the interwar years. But it took on new valence among “neo-evangelicals” like Billy Graham and FEGC missionaries who were determined to go beyond lamenting the sorry state of secular society and instead convert those who seemed lost to Christ through persuasion rather than condemnation. Youth for Christ—a parachurch group known for its energetic mass rallies—was particularly adept at projecting an image of themselves as friendly and modern challengers to a moribund establishment. One Youth for Christ missionary claimed in 1955 that “more people have been converted to Christianity in the past eight years than in the hundred years prior to 1947.”²⁶

Just as the U.S. government was proclaiming itself to be a new kind of world power for the postwar world—one in which European empire would give way to a global system of nation-states loosely overseen (and sometimes not so loosely) by the U.S.—American evangelicals were forging a similar identity in the context of the global missionary movement. It was an association that both parties were eager to exploit.

²⁵ Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 8.

²⁶ Eileen Luhr, “Cold War Teeninitiative: American Evangelical Youth and the Developing World in the Early Cold War,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* Vol. 8, No. 2, (Spring 2015), 306.