

The American Theological Seminary And Missions

An Historical Survey

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The eighteenth century missionaries came out of the few colleges of that time, especially Harvard and Yale, but they came to their vocation by way of revivals rather than by way of instruction in missions or encouragement of teachers. Harvard College for a time had its Indian College and its trustees administered a fund for mission work among Indians, and the trustees of the College of New Jersey, later to be Princeton University, served as a Board of Commissioners of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge; but the colleges were not hotbeds of missionary inspiration and zeal. During the colonial period the British model was being followed in preparation for ministry: that is, theological education was obtained in the colleges, which were the American counterparts of the British universities. However, both in theology and in law, students were gathering around noted teachers, themselves practitioners, and were reading in preparation for professional service. Some were college graduates and some were not. These parsonage schools were the forerunners of the theological seminaries. Bellamy's home at Bethlehem, Connecticut, is sometimes called America's first seminary. As the seminaries emerged they became major agencies for the promotion of overseas mission, and this interest and concern spread from them to the colleges.

It was a student movement which brought forth the American overseas missionary movement and which made the new seminaries wellsprings of missionary inspiration and zeal. The first missionary society, chartered in Massachusetts in 1762, was disallowed by the King. Independence made organization possible. Beginning in 1787, numerous missionary societies were organized aimed at the American Indians, the frontier settlements, and the heathens overseas. However, the rapidly moving frontier absorbed almost all the men and money, leaving little for the Indians, and nothing at all for the projected missions overseas. Then the Litchfield County revival in Connecticut brought

in Williams College, at Williamstown, Massachusetts in 1806, a group of students who were ardently religious and zealous for evangelism. Samuel J. Mills became their leader. A Theological Society was formed among the collegians. Then the consequences of the well-known "Haystack Prayer Meeting" were the channeling of interest into foreign missions and the formation of the secret Society of Brethren on September 7, 1808. This organization was intended "to effect in the person of its members a mission or missions to the heathen." When the members went on to the new Andover Seminary in 1810 the Society was transferred with them. It endured in the Seminary until 1870, by that time having enrolled 527 members. Andover was a hotbed of New England evangelicalism and missionary concern, and the Brethren got good support from professors such as Moses Stuart and Leonard Woods. Mills and his student colleagues with the help of the professors planned and executed the clever strategy of the appeal to the General Association of Massachusetts in 1810, which resulted in the establishment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the actual initiation of the overseas mission.

Then Samuel J. Mills and his fellow student advocates of mission launched in 1811 another, broader organization for the propagation of missionary concern and action. It was the Society of Inquiry on the Subject of Missions. The stated object was: "to inquire into the state of the Heathen; the duty and importance of missionary labors; the best manner of conducting missions; and the most eligible places for their establishment." Zealously the leaders corresponded with members of religious societies already existing in the seminaries and colleges, beginning with Middlebury in Vermont in 1811. Success was assured when in 1813 the students at Princeton Seminary founded a Society of Inquiry patterned after the Andover model. The Berean Society at the Reformed Church Seminary in New Brunswick took the new name in 1820. There is instance after instance of such a society being founded within one to three years after the opening of a new seminary. Soon Societies of Inquiry were found at Auburn, Virginia Episcopal, Columbia (South Carolina), Newton, Lane at Cincinnati, Gettysburg, Gilmanton, Union of New York, Yale, and Rochester. There were seventy societies of missionary concern by 1857, and forty-nine of them were Societies of Inquiry. The societies in the seminaries were the backbone of the movement and the resources for those in the undergraduate colleges.

There was no recruiting of missionaries by secretaries of the mission boards and societies during the nineteenth century. Throughout the century and well into the next the Societies of Inquiry and related organizations in the seminaries spontaneously brought forth volunteers in abundance. The secretaries and directors of the boards had only to screen and select the appointees. So extensively was volunteering the result of cultivation by the societies that it came to climax towards the end of the seminary course, and the boards were swamped with applications from seniors about to graduate. Consequently Rufus

Anderson pleaded for earlier decisions. Secretaries would have preferred a long period of acquaintance, observation, and guidance before the time of selection and appointment. This tendency evidently long persisted, because Anderson's pamphlet, *On Deciding Early to Become a Missionary to the Heathen*, was issued originally in 1834 and reprinted as ABCFM *Missionary Tract* No. 7 in 1851.

It is evident that not all seminary professors were zealous for the cause of missions. That curious document entitled *An Appeal From the Missionaries at the Sandwich Islands to Their Friends in the United States*, published in 1836, declares that twenty out of the twenty-eight missionaries of that mission affirmed that sixty-eight seminary professors, college presidents, and ministers had tried to discourage them from becoming missionaries. They exhorted the professorial advocates of missions in the seminaries, and admonished them that if they were really serious about the importance of missions they would all resign their post and themselves go out as missionaries!

The missionary drive of the Societies of Inquiry passed over into the new collegiate YMCAs beginning in 1858 and then into the Inter-Seminary Missionary Alliance. The Intercollegiate YMCA was officially founded in 1875 with Luther D. Wishard as the first secretary. While studying at Union Seminary in New York, Wishard first learned about those pioneers, Samuel J. Mills and the Brethren. This inspired him to infuse a strong missionary emphasis into the movement. Wishard transferred to Princeton Seminary for his second year, and his zeal infected his classmate, Robert Mateer, who was already a candidate for service in China. Mateer and two friends -- the three of them convinced that the American church needed a great missionary revival which could come only through prior revival among seminary students, sent a letter to all evangelical seminaries inviting response. There was keen interest. The year 1880 proved to be one of spontaneous missionary enthusiasm in many seminaries. Responding to the call of the Princeton committee, twenty-two students from twelve seminaries met in New York on April 9, 1880, and planned to hold a national conference on missions. It was indeed held on October 12-24 at the Reformed Church Seminary at New Brunswick, New Jersey. It was the largest student assembly ever held in the United States up to that time. Two-hundred-and-fifty students from thirty-two seminaries attended. The participants went back to their respective campuses filled with new zeal for promotion of the cause.

This New Brunswick convention founded the American Inter-Seminary Missionary Alliance. Membership in this national body was open to all evangelical seminaries which would cooperate in fostering the aim of "the furtherance of practical interest in, and consecration to, foreign and home missions on the part of theological students, both as prospective missionaries and prospective pastors." The impact on the seminaries was tremendous. So was the general impact made on the churches through the individual students and

the campus groups. The Alliance held annual conventions. It established a liaison relationship with the Intercollegiate YMCA; and it undoubtedly stimulated missionary concern in the student YM and YWCAs on college campuses.

When the Student Volunteer Movement was founded as the product of the 1886 Mt. Hermon missionary explosion and in turn it had contributed to the organization of the World Student Christian Movement, the Alliance related closely to the S.V.M., and it asked affiliation with the W.S.C.F. However, the constitution of the Federation allowed recognition of only one unit in each nation. Affiliation in some manner seemed so desirable to leaders of the Alliance that they transformed their Alliance into the Theological Section of the Intercollegiate YMCA, which was the American unit of the Federation. This was done in 1898, after Student YMCAs had been formed in the seminaries. Many of the older seminary campus societies now became YMCAs. The Intercollegiate YMCA embraced both college and seminary campuses. Missionary recruitment now had as broad a base in the colleges as it long had on the seminary campuses. Fostered by the student Y and led by the S.V.M. with its watchword, "The evangelization of the world in this generation," a groundswell of missionary vocations swept the American student world. Thus by 1900 many students came into the seminaries from the undergraduate schools already interested in, and often committed to, foreign service.

The Student Volunteer Movement in its very first year, 1886-87, through campus visitation by Robert Wilder and John N. Forman, enrolled 2,100 volunteers. It is estimated that by 1945 some 20,500 of S.V.M. volunteers had served overseas. Until the Movement rapidly declined in the 1920s, it was a powerful force in the seminaries as well as colleges for missionary promotion, education, and recruitment.

The several student missionary societies in succession ceaselessly promoted knowledge of, and concern for, missions through meetings of the societies, the monthly Concert of Prayer, non-credit classes, lectures by visiting missionaries and board secretaries, and campus and public gatherings. Sometimes at their request their teachers conducted the courses or rendered other assistance. More often the students themselves instructed their fellows or led in group study.

Seminary professors produced very little of the literature used in mission study and promotion on the campuses. Secretaries of the boards were the major writers, especially Rufus Anderson in the fourth through seventh decades of the nineteenth century and his posthumous disciple Robert E. Speer beginning in the last decade of that century. Some of the fellow secretaries of Anderson and Speer in the American Board and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. were also prolific writers. Secretaries of other boards wrote primarily histories of denominational work and promotional

material. Biographies were perhaps the favorite study material, and throughout the nineteenth century the *Memoirs of David Brainerd* and of *Henry Martyn* stimulated vocations to service abroad above all others. Works by missionaries and the periodicals of the boards were extensively used. The activity of the Student Volunteer Movement stimulated regular mission study on the campuses in even a more continuous and systematic way than in the past, and led in 1902 to the formation of the Young People's Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, which after some years became more inclusive in sponsorship and took the name of the Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada. Its annual publications were used in the informal groups on the campuses as in the local churches. Two years earlier in 1900 the women had established the Central Committee for the United Study of Missions and in that year produced the first of its study books, *Via Christi*, a history of missions from the time of the Apostles by Louise M. Hodgkins. It was not until the establishment of chairs of missions in the schools that much literature of value began to come out of the seminary faculties and be employed in their institutions and in the churches.

Given the students' propensity to direct their own mission study, it is not difficult to understand why missions came so slowly and haltingly into the official seminary curriculum. During the first half of the nineteenth century there is only one instance of its admission. That was at Princeton Seminary. When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1811 adopted its "Plan for a Theological Seminary," one purpose of the institution was said to be "to found a nursery for missionaries to the heathen and to such as are destitute of the stated preaching of the gospel: in which youth may receive that appropriate training which may lay a foundation for their ultimately becoming qualified for missionary work." Foreign and frontier missions were thus explicit objectives. However, it was not until 1830 that the General Assembly added to the faculty a professor of Pastoral Theology and Missionary Instruction. His responsibility was defined as "using all proper means, by public lectures, and private interviews, to promote among all the students an enlarged spirit of pastoral fidelity, of Missionary zeal, and of liberal preparation and active effort for the advancement of the Redeemer's Kingdom." The professorship was intended to produce a parish ministry zealous for mission at home and abroad through whom the participation of the laity would be assured.

The published statement of intention well states what would be the underlying purpose of every chair of missions that would be established in American theological seminaries down to very recent years.

The spirit of the religion of Jesus is essentially a spirit of missions; and, undoubtedly, one of the first and highest duties of the Christian Church, is to nurture and extend this spirit,

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and to make all her establishments tributary to its advancement. The importance, therefore, of connecting an institution of the kind proposed, with a seminary in which a large number of candidates for the holy ministry are assembled, is obvious. Its native tendency, if properly conducted, will be to kindle among the rising ministry, a new and more fervent zeal on behalf of missions, to call forth, animate, and prepare larger numbers of missionaries, both for the foreign and domestic field; and, eventually, to diffuse, throughout all our churches more of that deep and practical sense of obligation in reference to this subject, of the want of which we have so much reason to complain, and the increase of which is so earnestly to be desired.

Charles Breckenridge was appointed professor in this chair in 1836, but three years later he was made secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, and no successor to him was provided. The subject remained in the curriculum but it is not clear whether any person actually gave instruction. It disappeared from the curriculum in 1855, and it was generally forgotten that any American Seminary ever had had a professor of Missions.

The next instance of the recognition of missions as a proper academic subject was at Cumberland University at Lebanon, Tennessee, where in 1885 H.C. Bell was recognized as professor of Missions and Homiletics without pay, after this superintendent of the missions of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church had been giving a series of lectures in the Theological School for some years. The name of the salaryless chair was changed to Apologetics and Missions in 1896. Unmindful of the claims of Princeton and Cumberland University, Union Theological Seminary in New York, which likes to claim so many “firsts”, holds that it has the distinction of first introducing missions into the curriculum and can justify the claim on the basis of continuity and permanence, although the beginning was on a part-time basis. George Lewis Prentiss was appointed professor of Pastoral Theology, Church Polity, and Mission Work in 1873. However, missions received only a small part of his time and effort, and this was true also of G. H. Knox, professor of History of Religions, to whom responsibility for mission instruction fell after Professor Prentiss. It was not until 1918 that Union got its first full-time professor of Missions in the person of Daniel J. Fleming. Very briefly Union cooperated with Yale and Columbia Universities in attempting a School of Foreign Service for a few years after 1906.

Meanwhile missions had been creeping into the curriculum of various seminaries in the 1890s and 1900s: Yale, Auburn, McCormick, Austin, Garrett, and others, so that President Charles Cuthbert Hall, himself a strong advocate of missions as a discipline and as a ministry of the church, could say at the Ecumenical Missionary Conference of 1900 in New York, “The study of missions

is slowly rising to the rank of a theological discipline.” Already William O. Carver had begun teaching in Southern Baptist Seminary at Louisville in 1896 and in 1899 had become the first full-time professor of Comparative Religions and Missions. The next year, 1901, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago added a Professorial Lecturer on Modern Missions, Alonzo K. Parker. The Yale chair was established in 1906 with Harlan P. Beach as professor and the Day Missions Library was founded. The Episcopal Theological Seminary at Cambridge instituted a professorship in 1907 with Philip M. Rhinelander as incumbent.

Robert E. Speer in 1902 published his book *Missionary Principles and Practice*, in which he advocates development in the United States of that Science of Missions, founded and promoted by Gustav Warneck in Germany as *Missionswissenschaft*. If there were such a science, there, of course, must be professors and practitioners of it. The name did not find general acceptance, but Speer’s advocacy of the discipline was effective. John R. Mott’s generalship and leadership in forming a vast company of auxiliary agencies and in keeping missions in the forefront of student interest was beneficial to missionary academia. The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 released a powerful impetus into American missionary circles. The reorganization of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America and the creation of the Missionary Research Library had some effect on furthering the cause of missions in the seminaries. American missions had now captured from the United Kingdom the numerical and financial lead in the Protestant enterprise. Churches now had to have a foreign mission board in order to appear to be in the mainstream of American religious life, and their seminaries tended to make a place for some instruction. There were enough teachers on the eastern seaboard to create a Fellowship of Professors of Missions of the Middle Atlantic Region. The establishment of the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford Seminary Foundation marks the climax of the academic development which began with the provision of a professor of missions at Princeton Seminary by action of the General Assembly of 1830.

It is my impression, although I have not made a satisfactory investigation of the question, that there was a renewed effort to establish chairs of missions in the seminaries in the 1920s largely through action by mission boards. There was a dual origin of the concern of the mission agencies. The Student Volunteer Movement suddenly declined, and volunteers for service were so few that recruiting became necessary. There was an increasing coolness of students in college and seminary to missions and consequently there was great fear that in just a few years there would be a widespread loss of support on the part of pastors and laity. Foreign mission agencies were losing their freedom of action and were being imprisoned within denominational budget and promotion structures. It was hoped that professors of missions might help to stem the waning tide in the

churches as well as reassert their old roles of recruiting missionary candidates and inspiring those who would be parish pastors. The economic depression which closed that decade ended further multiplication of teaching posts, and by the mid-1930s threw the whole Protestant missionary enterprise into reverse. World War II marked the end of the old order of overseas missions.

Mission teachers and scholars as well as field missionaries and board executives had the ground cut out from under them. New justification for the inclusion of missions in the seminary curriculum had to be found and the very existence of the discipline had to be defended. Our Association of Professors of Missions came into existence in 1950 not as an expression of the old missionary triumphalism but as an attempt to build a life boat for floundering brothers and sisters. It really marks the beginning of a new era rather than the climax of the older development. The biennial reports of the Association reveal the wrestling we have done over our reason for being, curriculum, and teaching methods during the past twenty-odd years.

NOTE. This paper has been written out of general knowledge and with reference to some of my own books and articles only. Therefore it has not been annotated and documented. There are no references to Roman Catholic mission teaching in the American seminaries, and some of the brethren may give information about this in our meeting. Our present fellowship and mutual action are one of the best features of the new era as there was scarcely any interaction in the previous time.



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