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# The Second Text: Missionary Publishing and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress

David N. Dixon

Pliable. Come, neighbor Christian, since there are none but us two here, tell me now further, what the things are, and how to be enjoyed, whither we are going.

Christian. I can better conceive of them with my mind than speak of them with my tongue; but yet, since you are desirous to know, I will read of them in my book.

Pliable. And do you think that the words of your book are certainly true?

Christian. Yes, verily, for it was made by him who cannot lie. [Titus 1:2]

Pliable. Well said; what things are they?

Christian. There is an endless kingdom to be inhabited, and everlasting life to be given us, that we may inhabit that kingdom forever. [Isa. 45:17; John 10:28–29]

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the interior of Africa was invaded by Europeans. Armies moved in to secure “peace” for settlers. Farmers came to grow coffee on vast plantations. Hunters came to kill big game. Missionaries came to save souls.

The role of the missionaries has sometimes been lumped in with other forces of colonialism that appeared in Africa about the same time. And indeed, the missionaries shared many of the values and attitudes held by the European colonialists. The missionaries, however, had a distinctive ideological approach—a religious ideal—that affected their dealings with the Africans in ways quite different from those of other Europeans. At the center of their efforts was the printing press. For many missions, a printing press was among the first pieces of equipment brought to the work. Translation, printing, and literacy education all had one simple aim: to provide the Bible in the African vernaculars. The effort, however, had the unintended consequence of providing tools that could be put into service by African politicians seeking to create new entities, the nations of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

When English-speaking missionaries began their work, often the first text translated into the local dialect was the Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four gospels. But with surprising regularity, the second text that missionaries translated, often even before translation of the Bible itself had been completed, was *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the classic allegory by John Bunyan. The missionary character of the book can hardly be overestimated. The front matter for a 1903 edition published by the Religious Tract Society of London noted that the society alone had by that date aided in translating the work into 101 languages in all regions of the world.<sup>2</sup> A 1920 report by the Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions found that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was second only to the Bible in the number of translations made.<sup>3</sup>

What makes this phenomenon especially remarkable is that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written in the seventeenth century—by the time the missionaries were translating it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a 200-year-old book! Something about the book gave it incredible staying power, capturing the imagination of generation after generation of readers and making it a favorite subject for missionary translation. But what caused missionaries to esteem this work so highly?

In asking this question, I seek to add nuance to some of the excellent research on the topic by Isabel Hofmeyr, as collected in her book *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of "The Pilgrim's Progress,"* and other writers who have explored the appropriation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* by Africans.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, I argue that African readers did not merely subvert the message of the book but actually followed its logic, which missionaries fundamentally supported. While the missionaries did not always approve of the specific applications of the ideas they planted, they nevertheless favored a radical, or at least progressive, social movement that stood against the colonial powers in key ways. Their use of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not an accident; they translated the text not merely because it was in their library but because it embodied the ideology they sought to promote. That is, the missionaries were far more than simply agents of colonialism; they also resisted it, providing a space and a rationale for the later growth of African nationalism, especially in the countries dominated by Great Britain.

## **Historical Background**

John Bunyan lived from 1628 to 1688, one of the most turbulent periods in English history. The era saw the collapse of the monolithic state church; the Civil War, in which Oliver Cromwell ousted the monarchy in the 1640s; and the return of a now-weakened Stuart monarchy in the 1660s. Bunyan himself was a victim of the religious strife, a dissenter who spent twelve years in jail (1660–72) for preaching without government permission. During this time he wrote the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Stuart Sim and David Walker point out the subversive character of Bunyan's work, which implied the radical idea that authority resides in the individual reader of Scripture, not in either the political or the religious authorities of society.<sup>5</sup> As Sim and Walker note, "Few can claim his long-term influence in encouraging individuals to stand up for their own beliefs in the face of adversity, with *The Pilgrim's Progress* alone having attained near-mythic status in this regard."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the social struggle reflected in the work has made it a subject of study by Marxist scholars, who see Bunyan's individualism as fundamentally democratic and anti-elitist.<sup>7</sup>

This nonconformist view placed him in the mainstream of the church movement that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would become the Evangelical churches. Evangelicals shared the radical notion of the individual's ability to interpret and apply Scripture, rather than relying on a central authority to dictate the meaning of the Bible. Furthermore, they emphasized local authority over churches, rather than a strong hierarchy as in both the Catholic and the Anglican churches of the time. Evangelicalism represented a democratization of the church, just as radicalism attempted to democratize politics. From that perspective, the seventeenth-century English and twentieth-century African contexts are perhaps not so distant from each other; readers in each era found in Bunyan a writer who empowered their dissent.

The appeal of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is evident from the simple fact that it is still in print today, after over 300 years. It has been interpreted in music, plays, movies, even comic books. It has even been rewritten in a version composed entirely of one syllable words.<sup>8</sup> Some literary scholars consider it to be the first English novel; it continues to inspire scholarly research in both literature and history.

## **Missionary Background**

*The Pilgrim's Progress* traveled to Africa with the great missionary movement that coincided with the rise of European colonialism. In 1885 the European nations signed the Congo Basin Treaties in Berlin, dividing up Africa into "spheres of influence" that each would dominate. This date is commonly held as the beginning of the "scramble for Africa," which led to the colonial powers' dominating virtually the entire continent. When this process started, only a handful of missionaries worked in Africa. By 1910,

just twenty-five years later, Africa had over 10,000 missionaries—6,000 Catholic and 4,000 Protestant.<sup>9</sup> Colonialism provided the political context that fostered missionary activity.

To understand the early missionary movement in Africa, one must understand both the religious motivation for missions and the political motivations for colonialism. The missionaries' primary concern was to save the souls of Africans by converting them to Christianity. But their activity was also heavily influenced by the antislavery movement and by a sense of social responsibility that flowed both from their religious ideals and from their cultural paternalism.

For its part, colonialism was motivated by a quest for political and economic power. Politically, the European nations sought to develop their own strategic interests and national prestige during the late nineteenth century. The colonies also promised the possibility of new markets for goods and new natural resources to exploit. Colonialism generally failed to produce economic benefits for the European masters, but the prospect of wealth from Africa nevertheless spurred colonization.

The complex motivations of the time are perhaps illustrated best in the period's most prominent missionary and English explorer, David Livingstone. As a missionary, Livingstone was a profound failure: after thirty years of tramping around Africa, he had only one convert to show for his efforts. But his geographic discoveries in southern and central Africa—including Victoria Falls, Lake Nyasa, and the Lualaba River (the Upper Congo)—made him famous in Europe. From his high-profile position he urged Europeans to save the continent from the slave trade by introducing the three Cs: Christianity, commerce, and civilization. After his death in 1873 a new generation of missionaries was inspired to take Christianity to Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The missionaries' opposition to slavery colored their relations with the colonial powers, especially in East Africa, where the institution of slavery, though not the slave trade, was still legal. On the one hand, Prime Minister Lord Salisbury used opposition to the slave trade to justify European imperialism, culminating in the 1892 Slave Trade Agreement, which was signed by seventeen countries. On the other hand, by 1888 the Anglican Church Missionary Society station in Rabai, near Mombasa, harbored 900 runaway slaves, with 500 more at other stations nearby, because slavery as an institution still existed legally under the laws of Zanzibar, despite its being a British protectorate. The colonial administrator, Admiral Sir Edmund, obtained an agreement by which the Arab slave-owners were compensated so the slaves could be freed peacefully in 1889, but the underlying problem of slavery continued to plague relationships among the Arabs, the British, and the missionaries, usually with the missionaries and Arabs in conflict and the British administrators trying to keep the peace and find compromises.<sup>11</sup>

Missionary perspectives regarding slavery were captured in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, according to Christopher Hill's critical reading:

*With The Pilgrim's Progress, written by a man of the people for the people, English popular prose broke through into world literature. And what is its theme? A man with a burden on his back. The burden is sin, the product of centuries of unequal society. The prospect of getting rid of the burden offered consolation to subordinate classes everywhere: and Bunyan's pilgrim taught them courage to endure. . . . For Bunyan true humanity was alienated by sin: conversion meant dedicating oneself to a nobler cause than one's self, meant self-denial. Conversion is miraculous; it comes from the outside, cannot be willed; but it leads to union with God and therefore with humanity.<sup>12</sup>*

In essence, the book provided an explicit promise of future hope but also a picture of this present life as an active struggle. Readers could see themselves as not trapped by some inexorable fate but as empowered to take up arms—figuratively or even actually—against the evil Apollyons of the world. In a particularly vivid example, Hofmeyr describes a photo taken for a Kongo-language version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* from central Africa, in which an African Christian holds a machete over a Portuguese-looking Giant Despair.<sup>13</sup> The photo was ultimately not used in the publication. But the very fact that the photo was created by the Baptist Mission Society, an English mission, suggests that the missionaries were not above critiquing colonialism, especially when it happened to involve a European power other than their own. It suggests that, at the very least, the missionaries sympathized with the Africans under colonial oppression, and arguably they were advocating even more resistance.

### **The Missionaries' Religious Agenda**

The missionaries were not mere social reformers, however. Regardless of their organizational affiliations, they were among the most evangelical of Christians at the time, and they saw their mission primarily as converting Africans to Christianity, not necessarily conquering or changing the social order.<sup>14</sup> Their motivations, then, were primarily religious, even when tinged by social concerns. Many of them held millenarian views, the belief that Christ would eventually return to directly and personally rule the earth and that the coming of this kingdom was linked to evangelism.

In this vision the missionaries closely followed Bunyan. The need for individual salvation, the struggle in this life, and the eventual triumph of the church in the millennial kingdom were reflected in Bunyan's writings, including *The Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>15</sup> Theologically, the book has shaped missionaries' thinking, and so they held it to be an important text to pass on to new converts.

Not surprisingly, Protestant missionaries to Africa emphasized the importance of translating the Bible and other religious texts into the vernacular and teaching the people to read. Roman Catholics, by contrast, learned to speak native languages but did much less translating and printing of texts, since they relied on Latin as a universal language for Scripture and liturgy.<sup>16</sup>

The primary reason for translation was evangelism; as evangelicals, the Protestant missionaries believed that reading the Bible itself was sufficient to convert unbelievers. Education and especially literacy, then, were essential to allow the people to read the text. Other activities the missionaries engaged in, such as medical work or vocational training, served their social agendas or earned them a hearing as they preached the Word of God.

In their work, the missionaries were part of a worldwide effort that emphasized the importance of Bible translation. For instance, at the Centenary Conference on Protestant Missions, held in London in 1888, the closing meeting was devoted entirely to the role of Bible translation and literature in mission work. Besides evangelism, delegates saw two important reasons for providing the Bible in the vernacular. First, it was a way of detaching Christianity from its European cultural trappings, at least to some extent; second, it was necessary for establishing self-governing churches.

The missionaries saw *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a key tool in their effort. It clearly embodied their conception of the Christian life, its narrative format made it readily translatable, and it was simple enough for beginning readers to understand.

### **Cross-Cultural Translation**

Interestingly, the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress* were treated differently as they were translated cross-culturally. The Bible was seen as acultural, or at least as detached from Western culture. As R. Wardlaw

Thompson of the London Missionary Society expressed it in the late 1880s: “Do what we may to prevent it, our converts are disposed to copy us far too literally and exactly; and this mechanical reproduction of our dress, our isms, and our ideas is a great weakness in the Mission Church. The less we do to encourage or allow our native Christians to lean on us, the more speedily and the more thoroughly we can set them on their own feet, the more wisely and worthily our work be accomplished. But to this end we need from the very outset of our work to make provision by which they may learn for themselves the truth of God.”<sup>17</sup>

In practice, of course, the missionaries had much difficulty distinguishing between Christianity and European culture, and they certainly had difficulty allowing their churches to become self-governing. The language of paternalism echoes in Thompson’s phrase “our native Christians.” Nevertheless, the ideal of a self-governing, culturally appropriate church was present in the mission movement, even in the nineteenth century.

If the Bible was seen as acultural, however, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was seen as culturally bound but open to cultural as well as linguistic translation. In fact, translation of the book began before the entire text had even been completed. The book was published originally in two parts, the first part in 1678, which was then translated into several languages by the time the second part appeared in 1684.<sup>18</sup>

The underlying plot crossed cultural bounds, even religious bounds, creating a story that was able to transcend the specific cultural and historical context of its birth. As Roger Sharrock notes, “Bunyan wrote a book to express the views on God, man and salvation of an English seventeenth century Particular Baptist and created a work for the world which has appealed even to those of other religions than Christianity or even of no religion (it played a role for instance among the liberalizing tendencies in Islam in the nineteenth century).”<sup>19</sup> The result was a text that missionaries could transport easily and that—at least to missionary minds—would still contain the essential picture of the Christian life.

Finally, the simplicity of the text appealed to the missionaries’ sense of paternalism. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was already in use among evangelicals as a children’s text, appropriate to them because of the supposed simplicity of the English text and the readily understood story line.<sup>20</sup> The missionaries tended to view the Africans especially as childlike, culturally and spiritually immature, and thus *The Pilgrim’s Progress* seemed appropriate to that audience as well.<sup>21</sup> Just as *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was used to teach English children how to read and to understand the Bible, so it was used in an effort to teach Africans the same skills.<sup>22</sup>

This again had political significance, because it was not entirely self-serving. In teaching the Africans to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, the missionaries were providing an outside authority that could and would eventually be used to challenge themselves. This effect, however, was not unintentional, but a central part of missionary strategy among Protestants, with the goal of establishing self-governing churches.

### **A Permanent Church**

The first reason for missionaries’ interest in translation was evangelism, based on the belief that the text spoke for itself. But a second reason for translation—especially of the Bible— was to ensure the permanence of the church by establishing a self-governing institution that would stand on its own after the missionaries had left. As R. Wardlaw Thompson explained in the late 1880s, “If we then desire to have lasting work, . . . we shall never be content with the ministry of the spoken message however eloquent; we shall give them that Book which has in the past done such marvelous things for all who have received it humbly and read it prayerfully, that Book which shall abide with them.”<sup>23</sup>

The text was viewed as timeless, thus providing a constant authority for the church. Again, the implication was that missionary work would cease when an established church could govern itself based on the precepts contained in the text. Missionaries themselves clearly shared these views.

While the missionaries found these ideals difficult to live up to, the institutions they formed—churches and schools—became sites at which African participation and leadership were expected. Schools, perhaps more so than churches, became the locus of political struggle between conservative missionaries and Africans anxious to control their own institutions. As such, the schools provided opportunities for Africans to express dissent and exercise control in a more direct manner than was possible relative to the colonial government.

Most of the Protestant missionaries entering Africa came from an evangelical background, an outgrowth of the Nonconformists of Bunyan's era. They clearly applied Bunyan's message of the authority of the believer to themselves and saw their own experiences through the character of Christian. What they sometimes missed, however, was how clearly the same message was appropriated by their converts, who recognized the implication that missionary authority was not absolute either. So, for example, bits of *The Pilgrim's Progress* story were retold as having happened to Simon Kimbangu, the leader of an independent and reactionary Christian group in the Congo in the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> The implication was that Kimbangu held the same authority as Christian. Outside Africa, the Taiping Christian sect in China adopted *The Pilgrim's Progress* as metaphor for their military actions in the mid-1800s.<sup>25</sup> Christopher Hill sums up nicely: "Missionaries carried *The Pilgrim's Progress* all over Africa and Asia, where its readers may have appreciated Bunyan's appeal to the downtrodden and the persecuted better than those who had it translated."<sup>26</sup>

The missionaries may not have condoned the more radical applications of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but they nevertheless credited it with helping establish churches that could stand on their own without missionary support. In her 1920 study of mission history, Helen Barrett Montgomery claimed that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was instrumental in preserving and growing the church in Madagascar after the missionaries were driven out in 1835.

The missionaries, before going, buried their boxes of Bibles, Testaments and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, to await their return and the dawn of better days. Well that they did not dream that twenty-six years were to pass before the mission stations could again be opened. . . . The only legacy which the missionaries had been able to leave to their sorely tried converts was the books which they had printed. Since these books were the only ones in the language, they had been read without distraction by all classes of people. On the New Testament and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the Christians were to feed their souls during the black years that followed. . . .

When the missionaries had been driven out, there were about fifteen hundred Christians. When they were allowed to return, there were seven thousand. During the twenty-six years ten thousand people had been sentenced to death or slavery or exile.<sup>27</sup>

Such stories established the mythic status of the book among missionary supporters in Europe and the Americas, whether or not the explanations were factually accurate. But more, they illustrate the difficulty of labeling the missionaries as merely conservative agents of colonialism. Local converts were not simply co-opting the missionaries' message for their own ends; the message of self-rule was implicit in what the missionaries were about. *The Pilgrim's Progress* embodied both the missionaries' spiritual message and their social message.

## Conclusions and Implications

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* profoundly influenced the specific branches of Protestant Christianity that were most active in missionary work in British-dominated Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They chose it as one of the first subjects for translation in part because of its unique role in their own religious culture but also because of its apparent relevance and usefulness to the task at hand: teaching converts to read, training them in the fundamentals of faith, and establishing self-governing churches.

That the converts learned their lessons too well and at times reacted against the missionaries does not necessarily mean the converts were simply subverting the message for their own ends, as some interpreters would have it. Instead, it reflects the uncomfortable paradox of the missionaries' ideology, that they were both agents of their own cultures and agents of opposition within those cultures. The oppositional element that led them to struggle against slavery and at times colonialism itself were echoed in their converts, and when the missionaries themselves sometimes acted as oppressors, the texts they had brought authorized resistance.

This finding has some interesting implications for the study of the history of print and for the study of current religious media used by missionaries. In terms of history, it suggests that both the imperialist and the critical interpretations of missionary activity have validity, and that a more nuanced understanding of how the missionaries affected political development in Africa is needed. To simply assign missionaries to the category of imperialists underplays their empowering role, whereas to suggest that they were merely subverted by outside social interests also underplays their empowering role.

History always helps understand the present and suggests directions for the future. The significance of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a second text reveals the particular ideology of the missionaries. They were not just Christians—they were Christians of a particular kind, and their specific ideas still reverberate in Africa today. The worldwide controversy in the Anglican church over homosexuality is just one example, with African church leaders vocally presenting a conservative viewpoint authorized by their own reading of the Bible—just as Bunyan would have suggested.

Over 325 years have passed since Bunyan penned his novel, written “as in a dream.” Amazingly, the effects of the simple English preacher's book are still felt around the world.

## Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of this historical process and its effects, see David N. Dixon, “Inventing the African Nation: The Influence of Missionary Publishing on Language, Literacy, and Identity in Colonial Kenya, 1895–1963” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana Univ., 2000).
2. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come, Delivered Under Similitude of a Dream* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1903), p. 8.
3. Helen Bartlett Montgomery, *The Bible and Missions* (West Medford, Mass.: Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1920), p. 105.
4. Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of “The Pilgrim's Progress”* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004). See also her article “How Bunyan Became English: Missionaries, Translation, and the Discipline of English Literature,” *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 1 89 (2002): 84–119.
5. Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority: The Rhetoric of Dissent and the Legitimation Crisis in Seventeenth-Century England* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 24.



6. Ibid., p. 217.
7. David Herreshoff, "Marxist Perspectives on Bunyan," in *Bunyan in Our Time*, ed. Robert G. Collmer (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 161–65.
8. *Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, in Words of One Syllable, with Numerous Illustrations, Designed by Frederick Barnard and Others, and WaterColor Reproductions* ([Philadelphia?]: Pilgrim's Progress Publishing Company, [1895]).
9. Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 419.
10. Literally hundreds of books have been written on the work and impact of Livingstone; he also looms large in every history of the period. For a concise overview of Livingstone's life, see *Christian History* 16, no. 4 (1997).
11. M. F. Hill, *Permanent Way*, vol. 1, *The Story of the Kenya and Uganda Railway*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1961), pp. 38, 46–47, 14–16.
12. Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), p. 377.
13. Isabel Hofmeyr, "Bunyan in Africa: Text and Translation," *Interventions* 3, no. 3 (2001): 332.
14. Peter Hinchliff, "Africa," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 457.
15. W. R. Owens, "John Bunyan and English Millenarianism," in *Awakening Words: John Bunyan and the Language of Community*, ed. David Gay, James G. Randall, and Arlette Zinck (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2000), pp. 91–92.
16. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, p. 267.
17. *Report of the Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World*, ed. James Johnstone (New York: Fleming H. Revell, [1888?]), p. 447.
18. Roger Sharrock, *Life and Story in The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: Dr. William's Trust, 1978), p. 5.
19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. W. R. Owens, "The Reception of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in England," in *Bunyan in England and Abroad*, ed. M. van Os and G. J. Schutte (Amsterdam: VU Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 91–104.
21. Hofmeyr, "Bunyan in Africa," p. 325.
22. Kathleen M. Swaim, *Pilgrim's Progress, Puritan Progress* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 65.
23. *Report of the Centenary Conference*, pp. 447–48.
24. Hofmeyr, "Bunyan in Africa," p. 329.
25. C. Hill, *Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 375.
26. Christopher Hill, "John Bunyan and His Publics," *History Today* 38 (October 1988): 19.
27. Montgomery, *The Bible and Missions*, pp. 129, 131.