



The Failure of the First Protestant Missionaries

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Nearly a third of the world's population, some 2.3 billion people, are Christians. That is a remarkable fact, for at least two reasons. First, it is the biggest religious community the world has ever seen, albeit a very diverse one. Second, that community is very widely spread. This map is based on 2015 statistics, but the numbers haven't changed markedly in that time: the darker the blue, the larger the Christian proportion of the population. And there are countries there like China or India where the Christian minorities are small in percentage terms but still tens of millions of people. If you compare this to Christianity's most serious numerical rival, its most longstanding competitor, Islam, whose 1.9 billion adherents account for just under a quarter of the globe, you see that while the numbers are not very different the geographical pattern is strikingly so, with Islam dominating a single, very substantial and contiguous block of territory.

In this lecture series I'll be telling a part of the story of how Christianity reached this astonishing level of global dominance, a strange, largely forgotten part which is, I hope, both interesting in its own right and also deeply revealing. Because the histories that brought Christianity and Islam to the two patterns, we've just been looking at are also very different. Both of them, of course, are missionary religions, conversionary religions which at least in theory aspire to bring all of humanity into their respective folds, although as we'll see that theory doesn't always apply. That missionary aspect sets them apart from most of the world's other major religions, and of course it helps to explain why, even if neither of them has yet converted the whole planet, they have managed well over half of the human race between them, a share which is projected to top 60% midway through this century. But they got there by very different routes. Islam's geographical base is basically what it has been since the first explosion of Muslim conquests from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. Whereas Christianity has ricocheted chaotically around the planet. It began of course as a Middle Eastern religion, and in the third century its heartland was in western Asia. But its chief vector was the Roman Empire, and so by the early 5th century the spread of Christianity looks pretty similar to that empire's boundaries. But then the sudden emergence of Islam in the seventh century overturned most of Christianity's historic centre, and it became confined to the north and west, becoming by default a European religion. Now the known world seemed to be Islam's for the taking, with the Christians bottled up on one corner of Eurasia: their horizons were limited, as maps like the famous Mappa Mundi show, a map which despite its name only shows a small portion of the world. It's easier for us to read it if we flip it round so that north is at the top, as we expect: there is the Mediterranean in the middle, a squashed Britain and Ireland in the north-west corner, and in the south-east, the Red Sea, a body about which the monks knew only one substantial thing, being, of course, its colour. But then, in the fifteenth century, European Christians began to go the only way they could, out into the Atlantic, feeling their way down the African coast and out to the minor islands like the Canaries and the Azores, leading a sudden pair of breakthroughs in the 1490s. The Portuguese circumnavigated Africa for the first time since the Phoenicians had done it in the sixth century BC – if you believe the Phoenician story, which I have to admit I do. And this Italian captain, mixing brilliant seamanship with crackpot geographical theories, managed the first crossing of the open Atlantic ever and established a viable sea route to continents whose existence no educated European suspected. And we know how the story played out: south and central America quickly fell to the armies and the pathogens of the Spanish and the Portuguese, and Christianity was taken to the new world far more comprehensively and brutally than the Arab armies had ever been when they conquered Christianity's ancient heartlands. And so by the end of the sixteenth century Christian missionaries had spread across the Americas, and also to large parts of Africa, to India, to Japan, even to China, where the great Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci produced

this world map for his hosts in 1602, diplomatically placing China close to the centre, but showing it was now European Christians who had encompassed the whole world in their imaginations and were set about making it their own, in religion and culture even when conquest was not as yet within their grasp.

But here comes the oddity about this first wave of Christian globalisation. Only a generation after those first transcontinental voyages by Christian mariners, Christianity's European heartland was struck by a new schism. The Latin Church which looked to the Pope in Rome was riven by a theological controversy which erupted in a small German university in 1517. By mid-century Christian Europe had split, with a third or more of the population now attached to one of the so-called Protestant churches which rejected the authority of the Pope and many of the doctrines and practices of Latin Christianity; the remainder held fast to what we can now meaningfully call Catholicism. Now these Protestant churches – and a varied, quarrelsome group they were too – were nothing if not energetic. They poured missionaries into Catholic territories, fought wars against their Catholic rulers, launched a barrage of polemic and propaganda to make their case, and tried to appeal to the common people by everything from translating the service of worship into vernacular languages through fostering new and lively forms of congregational singing to working to ensure that their ministers were properly educated and beyond suspicion of corruption. They did not go from a standing start to a third of a continent within a single generation by accident; this was a religion which knew how to spread, and it did so like a virus. At least, it did within Europe. But further afield ... the great global efforts of this age I was describing a few minutes ago were all the work of Catholic missionaries. Within Europe, the Protestants' missionary energies were formidable and almost uncontainable. Beyond it, they scarcely registered.

And this pattern persisted for nearly three centuries, or so we have been told. The conventional story goes like this. Eventually the Protestant powers did launch their own imperial projects. England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark all began to build maritime empires. Yet these empires, unlike their Catholic counterparts, did not see substantial missionary efforts. There was talk of spreading the Protestant gospel, but it remained mostly talk. When Protestants went to settle across the seas in North America and elsewhere, they made little effort to convert their indigenous neighbours and sometimes actively resisted any such schemes. The real change only came at the end of the eighteenth century, and is traditionally dated to 1792, when the English Baptist minister William Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, arguing that it was Protestant Christians' duty to take their soul-saving message, their good news, their gospel, to all the people of the world. And *this* triggered the great wave of Protestant and evangelical missionary activity which, two- and a-bit centuries later, has left us with a world that looks like this, in which there are close on a billion Protestants and most of them do not live in Europe.

So, you see the puzzle. Protestantism was an aggressively expansionist variant of an already expansionist religion, born at a historical moment when huge new opportunities for expansion were suddenly appearing and when its great rival, Catholicism, was doing its utmost to exploit those opportunities. And yet Protestants spent nearly three centuries turning a blind eye. I first stubbed my toe on this puzzle about ten years ago when I was researching something else, and I thought, it would be interesting to think and write a little bit about this. And surely it would only be a little bit: after all, I would be writing about something which did not happen, the great global Protestant missionary effort of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that did not take place, and the best part of writing about something that didn't happen is that there isn't very much to say. How wrong I was. As I dug into the many, many aspects of this subject, following in the steps of many brilliant scholars and specialists who have the deep knowledge of each individual territory and cultural context which I don't, it became clear that there was much, much more to this story than the conventional accounts tell us. So much so that I am still deep in researching it, and every time I think I might have reached the summit and at least got a decent overview of the subject I find there is another climb ahead of me. In these six lectures, I'm going to give you an overview of where I've got so far in reconstructing the largely untold story of the early global spread of Protestantism. The next four lectures will be devoted to the four continents in which this global spread took place, and the last one will try to tie the story together and offer some thoughts on what it all means. But today, I want to go back to my original puzzle, which has changed but had not become much less puzzling. Because it turns out that Protestants during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries really did make some pretty substantial efforts to spread their gospel to the non-Christian world. So why have we not noticed it? And it turns out the answer to *that* one really is interesting and important.

Now I know what you are thinking. You are detecting me seeking out molehills with my magnifying glass and preparing to proclaim them as mountains. That I am going to cobble together a few isolated examples of early Protestant missionaries and pretend that is the equivalent to the Spanish conversion of the Americas.

Well, I admit that the Catholic effort was on a larger scale. But there are more than a handful of isolated examples. They began close to home: in northern Scandinavia the Sami people were still at most superficially Christianised by this period, and the rival Lutheran churches of Sweden and of the united Danish-Norwegian state both launched contrasting efforts to bring these last European pagans into the fold. A rather different Arctic people, the Inuit of Greenland, were the recipients of an extraordinary missionary project undertaken from the 1730s onwards by the Moravian Brethren, a revivalist Protestant church with a particular zest for missionary work. As to North America, Protestants were talking earnestly about converting that continent's indigenous people well before they themselves actually arrived there; the leaders of the earliest Protestant colony, a short-lived French Protestant settlement in the 1560s, were convinced that the conversion of their new neighbours was within their grasp. The English in Virginia after 1608 spoke enthusiastically about conversion, raised a great deal of money to support missionary projects and proudly paraded their high-profile converts. The short-lived Swedish colony in what is now Delaware produced the first ever attempt to write down a North American language, the work of the colony's Lutheran pastor. Further north in Massachusetts, the Wampanoag peoples of the offshore islands were converted during the seventeenth century and the Boston minister John Eliot came to be known as the Apostle to the Indians; enormous sums were raised to support his work, which were used, amongst other things, to print the first full Bible ever printed in North America, in the Algonquin language, in 1663. Missionary work amongst Native peoples continued throughout the eighteenth century, much of it undertaken by the first missionary agencies in the modern sense of the word, of which the London-based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel is the most important. As well as Native Americans, the SPG made considerable efforts to make Christians of enslaved people of African descent, both on the mainland and on the Caribbean islands. Further south, Protestant ventures were more short-lived but still energetic. The disastrous Scottish colony established in Panama in 1699 was serious about its missionary intentions; the more substantial British presence on the Mosquito Coast in modern Nicaragua also included a missionary presence. But the boldest venture in this region was the work of the Dutch, whose West India Company conquered and ruled a large chunk of Brazil between the 1620s and the 1650s: they poured resources into efforts to win their most important indigenous allies, the Tupi people, over to Protestant Christianity. Dutch ambitions went further than Brazil, however: they made missionary attempts during their very short-lived conquest of Angola and during a pair of doomed, quixotic attempts to colonise Chile and Peru, attempts which were based on the hope that they might make a religious alliance with the indigenous people to liberate them from the oppression of the Spanish. The Dutch were joined by the English and the Danish in establishing footholds on the southern coast of West Africa in the eighteenth century, and there was some modest missionary work attempted here too, not least through two African converts who were ordained and then returned to their homelands as Protestant missionaries.

Further south, the Dutch waystation established at the Cape of Good Hope from 1652 also saw a series of optimistic efforts to convert the indigenous people. The most important Dutch missionary efforts, though, were further east. On the island of Sri Lanka, most of which was under Dutch rule from the 1650s to the 1790s, a comprehensive system of Christian churches and education was established; an even more ambitious version of this was attempted on the island of Taiwan, part of which the Dutch ruled from 1624-61. And in many of the islands of the eastern Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch poured in efforts to build Protestantism. Not that Asia is all about the Dutch. One of the best-known early Protestant missionary efforts – though that is not saying much – was launched at Tranquebar in, what is now, Tamil Nadu in 1706, a remarkably international effort, sponsored by the king of Denmark since Tranquebar was a territory of the Danish East India Company, but the mission was staffed by Germans and funded by donations from England.

So far I have talked about imperial ventures with a missionary dimension, and there is no doubt of course that imperial conquest was by far the easiest way for Christian missionaries to gain access to non-Christian peoples, but like the Catholics, Protestant missionaries looked beyond the scope of their own territories. China and Japan, the two most powerful states of the Far East, remained inaccessible to them, although there was certainly Protestant interest in missions to China, a subject about which the great mathematician Gottfried Leibnitz was enthused in the early 18th century. But closer to home there were other opportunities. Converting Muslims to Christianity was, by common consent in this period, almost impossible, although this did not stop several Protestant attempts to solve that vexing problem, ranging from the naïve and very hazardous attempts launched by some Quakers, who had a tendency to get off a boat and start declaring their gospel in the street; through the long theological debates which pious merchants were often keen to have with their Muslim hosts; to the attempts by English and other merchants surreptitiously to distribute Christian literature, in the improbable hope that some Muslim might stumble across it. But Protestant missionary hopes in the Middle East generally rested on the indigenous Christian communities, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, whom Protestants saw as both groaning under the Muslim yoke and also

sunk deep in error and corruption. A series of Protestant books for an eastern Christian readership were produced and distributed at considerable cost by rival Dutch and English missionary entrepreneurs; the German Lutheran minister Peter Heyling went one better, travelling to Egypt himself and, in the 1630s, thence south to the ancient Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, where he helped prepare a translation of the New Testament into the Ethiopian Christian vernacular language of Amharic. A common thread holding together all these Protestant projects in and near the Islamic world was the hope that the way to converting Muslims was through reviving and energising the region's ancient Christian communities, which it was assumed would be better placed to win over their Muslim neighbours than would European outsiders.

Those, then, are the main elements of the stories I will be telling in these lectures; this is not everything, but it is enough to be going on with. So: why has this story not been told? Why have we so long thought that early Protestants were not really doing this?

There are some rather humdrum reasons for that which don't need to detain us. Plainly the pace of Protestant missions really did pick up in the nineteenth century, so in contrast the earlier effort looks underwhelming. There's an archival dimension: a lot of missionary history has been written out of the archives of formal missionary societies, which helpfully gathered all the documents in one place, whereas I know to my cost that this story has to be hunted down through a much more disparate and varied set of sources. And there's the sheer matter of imperial reach. It was only in the nineteenth century that the Protestant powers started to amass really substantial territorial empires, giving them easy access to large numbers of potential converts. So perhaps it is not very surprising. But there's a deeper, or maybe more obvious, reason, why we have missed this subject.

You may have noticed I spent quite a lot of time talking about missionary efforts and enterprises and not very much about results. Because the inescapable truth about Protestant missionary projects in this early period, before the late eighteenth century, is that they were distinguished by their lack of success. There's variation within that, naturally. There are projects which were dead on arrival, like the attempt to spread Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire by circulating expensively printed books there. There were those which never had the time to get off the ground, as in short-lived colonial ventures from the Swedish in Delaware to the Scots in Darien to the Dutch in Angola. There were those which showed some promise for a while, but which then fizzled out for one reason or another; that was perhaps the most common pattern. And there were a handful which actually seemed to show some modest promise and built a small community over time, which was the case, for example, with the British mission to the Mohawks in the colony of New York, or with the slow church building project in Dutch Sri Lanka, or the contrasting transnational mission in Tamil Nadu, or, eventually, various missions to enslaved people in North America and the Caribbean. But let's not get carried away even with these comparative success stories, which were slow, hesitant, costly and fragile. I am aware that the title of this evening's lecture may seem stark, but I think it's inescapable, and it was also how most Protestants at the time saw it. When you read earnest attempts by Protestant mission promoters during these centuries, especially later in the period, to drum up enthusiasm for whatever their next project, it is hard not to hear the cheerfully defensive tones of someone engaged in the triumph of hope over experience. John Sergeant, a New Englander keen to press his new scheme for mission to the Native Americans in the 1740s, wrote, 'It is well known that Vertue and Piety make but a *slow Progress* among them in the Methods that have hitherto been used to promote these Ends.' He had, he believed, cracked the problem: but the disappointing results of his scheme suggested he had not. Everywhere, Protestant would-be missionaries faced something ranging from an uphill battle to a brick wall. Philip Quaque, who I mentioned earlier as the African who was ordained to the Church of England in 1765 and who returned to his home on the Cape Coast of West Africa the following year, was perhaps not unreasonable to hope that he, at least, might be able to break the cycle of failure. 'As a Native,' he wrote, 'I flatter'd my self, they wou'd give a more attentive heed' to his preaching, compared to the stony reception that his white predecessor had faced. But no, he wrote, after two years in post: 'they seem to be a very Stoborn & stiffnecked People, extreemly bigotted to their own Principals & Customs, which is the hardest thing in Nature for the most sagacious Man y^t ever lived to root out of them.' Twelve years later he was if anything more despondent, writing that '[I] am much of Opinion than Something more than a Human effort must work that effectual Cure of their Bigottry and Superstition' for which he still hoped and prayed. He remained in post for fifty increasingly bitter years, to no apparent avail.

William Carey, the Baptist who supposedly founded of Protestant missions with his 1792 pamphlet, was famously confronted by an older Baptist preacher who told him that when God wanted to convert the heathen, he would do it, without needing to call on any busybody do-gooders. That comment has been much derided by historians of the missionary enterprise as a prime example of self-satisfied obscurantism but given the previous two hundred years and more of experience, it was simple common sense. Converting the heathen

to Protestantism had been tried and the rate of success had been at best meagre. We know, from our perspective, that Protestant Christianity absolutely can leap across cultural and language barriers and win converts, which it has spent much of last two hundred years doing. But to expect that in the late eighteenth century took a pretty heroic act of faith.

So why were these early Protestant missionary efforts to unsuccessful? This, I think, is the really revealing question. Because what it shows is that early Protestants thought about these issues, about how they should relate to the rest of the world, in ways that are fundamentally different from what we might expect, but with consequences that are still with us. I said at the start that Christianity is a missionary religion, whose ambition is to convert the whole world, and that is more or less the case, but in this period, for these people, the story is more complicated than that.

The very principle was openly contested. A lot of these debates came to turn around one iconic verse of the Bible, at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, in which the risen Jesus tells the apostles, immediately before his ascension into heaven, 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' This command, which became known as the Great Commission, was and still is *the* key proof-text for the legitimacy and necessity of the missionary enterprise. It was the centrepiece of William Carey's 1792 book. But earlier Protestants were not at all agreed on what it meant. For a great many of them – and this was in particular the view held by the Lutheran churches of Germany's Protestant heartland – this was a command that Jesus had given to the apostles *themselves*, and which was specific to that handful of first-century men. And indeed, they cited statements in some of the early Church Fathers who said that the apostles had preached the Gospel to the whole world and argued that that claim should be taken literally. The great seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard argued that the apostle Thomas had not only travelled to India, as longstanding and not implausible tradition held, but had then gone further east, across Asia and ultimately to America, which he argued was the same place as Plato's Atlantis and was therefore known to the ancients. And he, like many others, pointed to various supposed features of Native American culture and language which seemed to echo Christian or Jewish ideas to argue that these people had in fact been converted to Christianity in ancient times and had subsequently fallen away from the faith. It was not ridiculous to think that someone could have crossed to the Americas; after all, the ancestors of the Native Americans, who were usually assumed to be descended from central Asian peoples or even from the lost tribes of Israel, had done it. Even so, the whole idea seems a bit far-fetched, and by the early eighteenth century it was being widely questioned, though plenty of scholars still defended it. Because, implausible as it was, it really mattered. If the Christian gospel had already been preached to all the peoples of the world, and some of them – most of them indeed – had rejected it or fallen away from it, then Jesus' initial command to preach to them had expired and there was no need to renew it. Indeed, no right to renew it: Jesus also told his disciples not to cast pearls before swine.

Perhaps this still sounds like a perverse and self-serving argument to you, an over-clever way of reaching a conclusion plainly opposed to centuries-long Christian practice. Fair enough, but if so, why? To some extent this reflects the tenuous political situation in seventeenth-century Germany, in the age of the Thirty Years' War and its aftermath: the definitive Lutheran ruling that missions to the heathen were illegitimate came only three years after that war ended. The treaty of 1648 which tried to establish religious peace in Germany forbade cross-border attempts by either Catholics or Protestants to convert each other, and the Protestants, who with very good reason felt themselves to be on the back foot in the face of resurgent Counter-Reformation Catholicism, saw this more as a vital defensive line than as a restraint on their own activities. Missionary ventures overseas were not banned by the treaty, but they weren't exactly in keeping with it either; they looked like dangerous, destabilising radicalism. But there was a more principled side to the question too. The disparity between the huge, apparently successful and energetically publicised Catholic missionary effort and its much less dramatic Protestant counterpart was already obvious, and Catholic polemicists seized on it triumphantly. A true Christian church, they argued, spreads the gospel and wins converts; well, we're doing it, and the Protestants aren't, so who's the true church? It was a painfully powerful argument, and many Protestants took it to heart, berating themselves and each other for their shortcomings in this area. But many others, including these Lutheran mission-sceptics I keep going on about, turned the argument around. Let's look at these great missionary achievements the Catholics are boasting of, they said. Are they really what they're cracked up to be?

It wasn't difficult to mount a critique. It's not just that the Catholics tended to favour breadth over depth of conversions, often being content with bare conformity to Christian sacraments and certain outward forms; given that for Catholics the sacraments themselves had real and intrinsic power to save souls, that approach made a certain amount of sense, and it was the pattern that Catholic missionaries had followed with the

pagan peoples of Europe for many centuries, even if Protestants didn't approve. More to the point was the violence and cruelty which accompanied Catholic missions, in which conversion was sometimes enforced at gunpoint and in which people who had 'converted' in this way suddenly found themselves subject to the Inquisition. The brutality especially of the Spanish conquest of the Americas did not really need to be exaggerated, but Protestants did it anyway. Citing especially the work of the Spanish bishop Bartolome Las Casas, a passionate sixteenth-century critic of the brutality of the conquest, some Protestants argued that this sort of thing discredited the entire missionary project. The cruelties of the Spanish, Gerhard argued, were not converting Native Americans, but instead alienating them permanently from Christianity.

As well as missionary cruelty, these Protestants were quick to criticise missionary arrogance. I don't mean that they were modern cultural relativists who thought that every religion had its own truth; they were quite clear that Christianity, and one form of it in particular, was the universal and absolute truth. But they were very sceptical of anyone who set themselves up as a preacher of that truth, who came up with clever schemes to pre-empt what ought to be God's work, who believed that they could get off a boat and with a few words convince peoples who had been sunk in barbarism for a thousand years to abandon their time-honoured rites and embrace a new faith. The conversion of the heathen would take a miracle, they argued; and miracles are God's business, not humanity's. Who do you think you are, the saviour of the world? Drop that Messiah complex, remember that you are a small Christian in a big world, serve God in the place where he has actually put you by his providence, and be grateful.

Now as I've been saying, the extreme version of this position, the version that turns its back on missions of any kind, was a long way from a majority opinion, especially amongst the maritime Protestant powers who actually came up against non-Christian peoples. But those missionary-minded Protestants had many of the same concerns. If there is one claim that Protestant settlers in the Americas made more than any other, from the very earliest times onwards, it is that they were not like the wicked Spanish. They were not going to conquer the native peoples but treat them fairly and trade with them equally. In particular, they were not going to impose Christianity on them. They were instead – and this word was very often used – they were going to *allure* them to the true faith. Their principal missionary method, at least in the beginning, was to establish model Christian communities amidst the heathen, and to demonstrate by the means of their peaceful, orderly, pious and prosperous lives that their mode of living, and the Christian faith which underpinned it all, was self-evidently superior to living in filth, chaos and barbarism, subject to the tyranny of their witch doctors. Now put aside for a moment the profound condescension and cultural arrogance here. There is a genuine restraint; as arrogance and condescension go, this is almost charming, and certainly naive. Protestant settlers were genuinely surprised and perplexed when it failed to work, or, more commonly, they blamed that failure on their own failure actually to live out the pious standards they had hoped to model. One major reason why Protestant missionary projects were so slow to get off the ground is that, in most settings, the first generation spent their efforts simply in quietly demonstrating Protestant living, and only latterly began to wonder if something more active might be necessary. Now don't get me wrong: the reality of relations between Protestant settlers and indigenous peoples, in almost every setting, was far uglier and more violent than this idealistic nonsense suggests. The difference is simply that the violence was not being done in the name of religion. Protestant settlers were just as content as any other Europeans to find pretexts to torch villages, enslave captives and seize land from indigenous peoples. But those pretexts were almost never connected to converting them.

Behind all this lurks a question which is worth addressing directly, and that is the issue of *race*. As we all know, by the nineteenth century Christian Europeans had generally embraced one of various forms of human racial hierarchy, which divided humanity up into distinct groups based on appearance and descent, with skin colour the most important but not the only signifier, and which assumed that some of these so-called 'races' were innately superior to others, chiefly intellectually and morally but sometimes in other ways too. We are still living in the toxic dregs of this worldview, a worldview which most of us have consciously disowned but which is deeply woven into our culture and habits of mind, nevertheless. As such, it is quite difficult to get our heads around the fact that sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans really did not see the world and its people in that way. They were aware of ethnic differences, of course, and were keenly interested in them. But the overwhelming consensus of all thinking people – and especially of anyone whose thought was shaped by Christianity – was that those differences were superficial and malleable. They believed, generally, that the earth was less than six thousand years old, and that all humanity was directly descended from Adam and Eve, and indeed more recently from Noah and his sons. Plainly, whatever differences they had had time to acquire in that brief span could only be skin deep. Physiological differences between different human populations were not really taken to signify much except for God in his mercy shaping people to fit their

environment; and it was usually assumed that these differences were trivial and that anyone who moved to a different environment might soon assume the same traits, or at least that their descendants would. So, when Europeans called the peoples they encountered around the world heathens, barbarians, savages, degenerate, 'the very ruins of mankind', they did not mean quite what our ears hear them meaning. Because those insults were accompanied with the unspoken words, there but for the grace of God go we. They assumed that whatever people they met around the world were fundamentally no different from themselves; that they could easily become as civilised and sophisticated as Christian Europeans. The Moravian Brethren, one of the most enthusiastically missionary Protestant sects, openly celebrated the multi-ethnic nature of their converts, from Greenland through the Caribbean to South Africa and beyond; this was their vision of the kingdom of God, and it seems almost churlish to point out that amidst it all their Jesus is still white. But this assumption that barbarism could be thrown off like a cloak had its opposite: civilization, too, was only skin deep, and Christian Europeans who fell in with indigenous people could degenerate fast.

I am not saying that they were not prejudiced, obviously they were, but the nature of their prejudices was different from ours. Racism in the sense that we know it was not something they brought to their encounter with alien peoples. As we'll see in some of the following lectures, it was something they developed *through* that encounter, when their naive expectations of how easy it would be to remould those peoples in their own image were disappointed.

If there is a key distinction, they used to interpret the world and its peoples, it was not white versus black, nor even Christian versus non-Christian, but civilised versus heathen. As my Durham colleague Patrick McGhee has pointed out, *heathen*, and its equivalents in other Germanic languages, is a loaded word. It is linked to the word 'heath' and so the notion of wilderness. Heathen people are wild people, whereas the civilised are the civis, citizens, people of the city. And what do you do with a wild, barren heath? You cultivate it. You tame it, tend it, and make it fruitful. You turn it from a tangle of thorns into a garden. That is what early Protestants who met non-Christian peoples thought they were trying to do. I have been using the word *missionary*, and that was a term they used, but it wasn't the language they preferred. *Missionary* comes from the Latin *mittere*, to send, and so implies a hierarchy in which a church charges certain specialists with this particular task: for many Protestants that felt a bit too Catholic for comfort. They preferred another term which the Catholics also used, the *propagation* of the faith, which is of course a horticultural metaphor. New churches were to be planted; the seeds of the faith were to be sown in heathen hearts; they were to be watered with tender care. And the process is by definition a slow and organic one. You can't simply roll out the Astroturf. It happens at its own pace, and calls for patience, for an understanding of the local conditions, and a recognition that the real miracle of growth is not something which any would-be missionary or propagator can perform him- or herself. One plants, another waters, but God gives the growth. It may lack the spectacle and speed of the mass conversions the Spanish boasted of, but unlike them it had deep roots.

Which makes it all sound very comforting and cuddly. But those of you who are gardeners will know that gardening is a violent business, at least from the perspective of the plants and the land. Genocidal, indeed. Weeds are rooted up, unruly growth is rigorously pruned, soil is cleared and harrowed. The propagation of the faith to new lands could, after all, be done in two ways. The preferable route, to be sure, was to cultivate the native plants, to train and civilise them. But if that turned out to be impossible, or simply more laborious than was worthwhile – if you had scratched yourself on their thorns one time too many – there was a perfectly viable alternative, which was to root them up and replace them with imported varieties, varieties which you knew you could trust to grow reasonably straight and true. The new land would be cultivated and claimed for God's church either way.

Perhaps that is not what mission, what preaching the Gospel to all nations, means to modern sensibilities. But again, there are deep underlying assumptions here that we do not share. Part of what made William Carey's call for missionary activism controversial was his assertion that the time to act was now, and his confidence or at least optimism – in the face of long experience – that winning converts would be possible. This was because he, in common with most Christian missionaries in any age, fitted his ambition to spread the Gospel into his theory of history, his hopes and expectations for the future. He thought, and the spread of European empires gave him reason to think, that it was the time to act. Some Protestants in earlier centuries agreed with him. They read the signs of the times and concluded, as people are liable to conclude, that they stood at a moment of crux in God's plan for history; perhaps all previous efforts to win converts had failed, but then they remembered God's words to the prophet Isaiah, 'Behold, I do a new thing.' Others took a different view. It's important to realise that those Lutheran opponents of missionising didn't intend to leave the heathen in their blindness for all eternity. They simply believed that God had laid down a strict sequence. First would come the great cosmic battle with Antichrist. Then, at the crux of that battle, prophecy told them

to expect the conversion en masse of the Jews to Christianity. Only then, at the end of time, would the harvest of the heathen be reaped. On this view attempting to convert the heathen was not fundamentally wrong, simply premature: as doomed as trying to plant a new garden in midwinter.

And even for those who did favour missionary efforts, this was only a part of their larger apocalyptic expectations. Above all, that meant the great battle with Antichrist, and since we are talking about Protestants, Antichrist above all meant the church of Rome, the whore of Babylon, the synagogue of Satan. The central mission of a Protestant church was to confront that cosmic evil and trying to convert the heathen might or might not be one arena of that battle. There has been a lively discussion amongst scholars about the Dutch commercial empire of the seventeenth centuries, spanning as it did the Atlantic and Indian Oceans: was it solely a commercial entity or was its religious dimension a genuinely important feature? But this is misleading. Its commercial mission was fundamentally a religious one: to wage economic war against Spain and Portugal, to break those great empires of the Popish Antichrist and to liberate their oppressed subjects, trading with them freely and offering them the true gospel rather than seeing them enslaved to brutality and false religion. And if the Dutch state had found a way to wage this war which also happened to pay for itself, that simply proved that their struggle was favoured by God.

I hope by now I have persuaded you of one thing at least: that these arguments and preoccupations do not fit neatly into our modern categories. To modern eyes, the very notion of Christian mission, of converting the heathen, can seem fatally compromised by cultural imperialism and moral condescension. But which is worse, the person who does the best according to their own lights to bring a better way of life to people in desperate need, or the person who ignores them or who conquers and commodifies them? Or the person who chooses not to act because the right moment in history has not yet come? Should we praise those who took on themselves responsibility for alien peoples, or join with those who condemned them for asserting that they had a right to do so? Are these people admirable for their blindness to our modern category of race, or risible for their cultural arrogance? Is the notion of cultivating the wilderness gentle or sinister? Is the Moravian vision of the first fruits splendidly inclusive or crassly homogenising? I don't want to pretend we can ignore these questions: they touch on too many neuralgic points in our own public moral debates. What I hope to do in these lectures, however, is to chart a path through the subject that does not simply give in to our modern categories. If you are looking for things to praise or to condemn in this subject, you will find plenty of both, and in the way of things, maybe rather more of the latter. But both praise and condemnation are basically about making us feel good, and that is not really what I am trying to do here. These people, encountering a much wider world for a first time, thought about it in ways that are deeply unfamiliar to us. They did not know that they were part of the early history of Protestant missions; if anything, they thought of themselves as a continuation of the Protestant Reformation in a new theatre. As we follow their adventures around the world in the rest of these lectures, I don't expect you to like them. But I hope it is worth the effort to understand them, and the world they bequeathed to us.

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