

The World the Missionaries Made

Rev. Dick Tripp

A major article in the Jan/Feb *Christianity Today* with the above title tells the story of Robert Woodberry's 14 year study of the impact of nineteenth century protestant missionaries on the growth of liberal democracy.

As a PhD student he was inspired to make this his life's work by a comment by Kenneth Bollen, a leading expert on the spread of global democracy that he kept finding a link between democracy and Protestantism.

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He travelled widely, talking with historians all over Europe, North America, Asia and Africa and digging into libraries and archives. Why was it that some countries developed stable representative democracies, while neighbouring countries suffered authoritarian rulers and internal conflict? He created a statistical model, which showed, after two years research with a handful of assistants, that the lasting effect of missionaries on global democracy was *huge*. Over 50 years academics had ignored its most important factor.

In 2002 he got a break after Charles Harper, vice president of the Templeton Foundation heard him speak at a conference. Three years later he was granted half-a-million dollars, hired 50 research assistants, set up a huge database project at the University of Texas, spent several years amassing more historical data and doing more historical analysis. He could now support his sweeping claim:

Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations,

In short: If you want a blooming democracy today the solution is simple. If you have a time machine, send a 19th-century missionary!

In 2012 his Article "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy" was published in the *American Political Science Review*, the discipline's top journal, together with 192 pages of supporting material. It has won four major awards. So far, over a dozen studies have confirmed Woodberry's findings.

There is much more in the article, which can be read on *Christianity Today's* website (christianitytoday.com).