The Coloniality of Charity: Humanitarianism and Mission in the Age of Empire

The 19th century saw the spread of large-scale, institutionalised efforts that addressed poverty and human suffering around the world, commonly referred to as humanitarianism. While charity and compassion can be traced back to ancient religious and philosophical traditions, the modern concept of humanitarianism reached full bloom in the age of Empire. The period in which the concept emerged is central to understand firstly that imperial expansion and formal colonisation went hand in hand with humanitarian engagement. Secondly, the context in which it was created still has an impact on the underlying logics and power structures within humanitarian work today.

An important feature of humanitarianism that distinguishes it from previous forms of charity is that it aimed to alleviate hardship and spread prosperity by giving strategically through institutions. The founding of humanitarian organisations increased rapidly in the 19th century in the face of both European expansionism and the so-called social question in Europe itself. Many men and women of the upper and growing middle classes dedicated themselves to philanthropic and missionary projects at home and overseas.

Another characteristic of these humanitarian organisations is that they were generally aiming for long-term social change rather than simply addressing immediate needs. From the late 18th century, humanitarian discourse linked human suffering and economic misery with social or moral failure. This is why aid measures covered a broad spectrum of activities from medical and educational assistance to the international legal codification of war. The latter also included coordinated large-scale emergency relief.

Most importantly, humanitarian engagement in the 19th century was a global affair, creating lasting links between donors from various social classes in the so-called West – mainly Europe and North America – and recipients of donations in what was seen as the rest of the world – mainly the colonies. These structural roots of humanitarian organisations still have an impact today, both at the conceptual and organisational levels of humanitarian aid.

The history of one of the most famous humanitarian organisations – the Red Cross – shows how humanitarianism, religion and colonialism were intertwined at this time. In 1863, Henry Dunant and other devout Calvinists combined Christian ethics with

European humanitarian traditions to form the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded, which later became the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Before the founding of the Red Cross, Dunant was involved in a business venture in French-occupied Algeria, which played a significant role in shaping his later humanitarian work. This example shows that humanitarianism developed in a context shaped by colonial dynamics.

Mission societies belonged to the first and most important humanitarian organisations engaged in large-scale development projects around the world from the 19th century. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, they were driving forces in the abolitionist movement and facilitated imperial expansion by campaigning for the protection and supervision of people, particularly in Africa. Secondly, they were the first European institutions to operate globally, producing awareness of the suffering of people around the world, and offering resources and infrastructure to alleviate this suffering. Thirdly, they became indispensable partners in the civilising mission when the European colonial powers began to take an interest in the colonial populations.

The Abolition Movement and Imperial Expansion

A useful historical entry point for examining the relationship between missions and humanitarian engagement is the anti-slavery movement and its importance in the imperial expansion into the African interior. Already in 1807, the alliance of Enlightenment humanitarians and evangelical Christians led to the Slave Trade Act. While this had little effect on the overall numbers of people being enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic, it reinforced the British Empire's growing power over the West African coast and its trade infrastructure, and asserted its moral authority over the antislavery cause. The liberation of enslaved Africans was "simultaneously an act of emancipation and of colonisation", as historians have argued with regards to Sierra Leone.[1]

The abolition movement argued that the slave trade could only be eradicated once and for all with economic development, the tapping into resources and the creation of consumer markets in Africa, thus enabling Africans to improve their own state. The

[1] Richard Anderson, The Diaspora of Sierra Leone's Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and 'Liberation' at Freetown, 1808–1863, in: African Economic History 41 (2013), p. 101–138.

linking of commerce and Christianity became a guiding concept for the interplay of missionary and colonial ventures throughout the 19th century, most famously popularised by David Livingstone.[2] The abolitionist cause thus became an important motor for the colonial advance into Africa.

The abolition of slavery was framed as a moral imperative that required European oversight, leading to new forms of forced labour and economic exploitation under the guise of humanitarianism. It was in this context that the anti-slavery movement joined forces with colonisation advocates, forming unusual alliances and beginning to drum up support for an entirely different project – the 'civilising' and development of Africa. Missionaries played a crucial role in the expansion and consolidation of colonial rule by advocating for the need to bring the Gospel and European civilisation to non-European societies, even when they opposed formal colonisation and condemned colonial violence.

Tony Ballantyne illustrated this point with regards to New Zealand in his 2014 publication *Entanglements of Empire*.[3] He showed that British missionaries ran a large-scale campaign denouncing the physical suffering inflicted by Europeans on the Māori. Their depictions ultimately provided a powerful rationale for the British colonisation of New Zealand, which was portrayed as an act of protection. Missionaries were thus pivotal in entangling the Māori in the webs of empire despite their opposition to formal colonisation. This evangelical development activism morphed into a mainstream cause at the end of 19th century.

The Basel Mission also emerged in the course of the abolition movement. Created in 1815, during an evangelical revival on the European continent, the Basel Mission resulted from the synergy of the city's bourgeoisie and devout Pietists. The founding members of the mission seminary understood their evangelising aspirations as a form of atonement for the transatlantic slave trade initiated and controlled by Europeans. Such was the case for most mission societies emerging around 1800.[4] The first young men to complete their

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[2] Jörg Haustein, Development as a Form of Religious Engineering? Religion and Secularity in Development Discourse, in: Religion 51 (2020) 1, p. 19–39.

[3] Tony Ballantyne, Entanglements of Empire. Missionaries, Māori, and the Question of the Body, Durham/London 2014.

[4] Karl Rennstich, The Understanding of Mission, Civilisation and Colonialism in the Basel Mission, in: Torben Christensen/William R. Hutchison (eds.), Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era, 1880–1920, Aarhus 1983, p. 94–103; Brian Stanley, Christian Missions, Antislavery and the Claims of Humanity, c. 1813–

training in Basel worked for British and Dutch mission societies, mainly the Church Missionary Society, which held close ties with the British abolition movement.[5]

Global Networks of Charity

The success of the missionary project depended to a large extent on the establishment of charity networks across social strata and far-reaching fundraising campaigns. Donations by Basel's economic elite and financial pledges by the London Missionary Society had guaranteed the Basel Mission's early years but, as time went on, they did not continue to be the society's principal source of financing. Of course, Committee members and their families sometimes contributed large sums to the Basel Mission. They supported specific causes and activities, such as the establishment of mission stations in certain areas that were of interest to them. These donations, however, did not constitute a steady and diversified source of income, which is why the Committee members were desperately looking for an alternative.[6]

For this purpose, Karl Sarasin, a silk manufacturer, member of the City Council, the *Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige*, the City Mission and the Basel Mission Committee, initiated the so-called *Halbbatzen-Kollekte* – halfpenny collection – in the early 1850s.[7] He started collecting five Swiss centimes – a *halben Batzen* – from his domestic staff and workers in his silk factories as a donation to the Basel Mission on a weekly basis.[8] Soon after Sarasin's initiative, the Committee founded a specialised society for the *Halbbatzen-Kollekte* with district treasurers who supervised the

1873, in: Sheridan Gilley/Brian Stanley (eds.), World Christianities c. 1815–c. 1914, Cambridge 2006, p. 443–457.

[5] Founding members of the Church Missionary Society established in 1799 included famous abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton, John Benn and John Newton. See Elizabeth Elbourne, The Foundation of the Church Missionary Society. The Anglican Missionary Impulse, in: John Walsh/Colin Haydon/Stephen Taylor (eds.), The Church of England c. 1689–1833, Cambridge 1993, p. 247–264.

[6] Jon Miller, Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control. Organizational Contradictions in the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast, 1828–1917, London/New York 2003, p. 43–45.

[7] On Karl Sarasin, see Josef Mooser, Der "christliche Unternehmer" Karl Sarasin. Sozialer Protestantismus in der Schweiz und in Deutschland, 1860–1880, in: Thomas K. Kuhn/Martin Sallmann (eds.), Das "fromme Basel". Religion in einer Stadt des 19. Jahrhunderts, Basel 2002, p. 73–92; Marcel Köppli, Protestantische Unternehmer in der Schweiz des 19. Jahrhunderts. Christlicher Patriarchalismus im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung, Zürich 2012, p. 111–158; Bernhard C. Schär, Tropenliebe. Schweizer Naturforscher und niederländischer Imperialismus in Südostasien um 1900, Frankfurt a. M./New York 2015, p. 66–78.

[8] On the history of the Halbbatzen-Kollekte, see Beatrice Tschudi-Barbatti, Die Halbbatzen-Kollekte. Ein Kapitel aus der Finanzgeschichte der Basler Mission, Licentiate Thesis, University of Zurich, 1992.

collectors. In adopting this strategy, the Basel Mission followed earlier experiences by British missions, such as the Church Missionary Society in London.

The halfpenny collection turned out to be a highly profitable financial tool: over 40,000 people donated a total of 68,583 Swiss francs in the first year in 1855.[9] The *Halbbatzen-Kollekte* rapidly expanded beyond the city of Basel into the Alemannic countryside and became one of the main financing sources for the Mission. By 1880, the annual revenue summed up to 268,271 Swiss francs and in 1905 it reached 450,000 Swiss francs, generating more than fourteen million Swiss francs in the first fifty years of its existence. The number of individual people donating to the halfpenny collection grew from around 75,000 in the 1860s to over 165,000 donors in 1905.[10]

Moreover, the *Halbbatzen-Kollekte* illustrates that the Basel Mission fostered social connections and emotional ties across the colonial world. By contributing five centimes weekly, donors in Europe – among them many women and children from the lower strata of society – actively participated in the mission overseas. In return, they received the *Kollekteblättli*, a booklet that offered vivid depictions of missionary work abroad. They also witnessed the impact of their regular contributions by listening to itinerant preachers or missionaries on home leave, by watching a magic lantern show or by visiting a mission exhibition. The halfpenny collection "provided an opportunity for the poor to achieve great things by giving regular, small bounties", as Wilhelm Schlatter phrased it in the official chronicle of the Basel Mission in 1916.[11]

Although missionary narratives and images persist in the written and visual language of many aid campaigns to this day, the missionary discourse was by no means limited to cultural or racist stereotypes. The various appeals for donations tried to convey compassion, intimacy, and even identification with people around the world to solicit support for the missionary cause. However, the empathy produced through narratives and images of the 'other' were not based on actual interaction, but on an imagined encounter between European 'helpers' and African 'victims'.[12] By combining statements

[9] Wilhelm Schlatter, Geschichte der Basler Mission 1815–1915, vol. 1, Basel 1916, p. 224.
[10] Tschudi-Barbatti, Die Halbbatzen-Kollekte, p. 112–119.
[11] Schlatter, Geschichte der Basler Mission, vol. 1, p. 223.
[12] Richard Hölzl, "Mitleid" über grosse Distanz. Zur Fabrikation globaler Gefühle in den Medien der katholischen Mission (1890–1940), in: Rebekka Habermas/Richard Hölzl (eds.), Mission global. Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2014, p. 265–294.

of difference with assertions of human unity, mission societies highlighted the capacity of their work to bring both individual salvation and social development.

Constructive Imperialism and the Civilising Mission

The involvement of mission societies in providing education and delivering health care to the population in the colonies was increasingly valued by imperial policy-makers, who attached more and more importance to the physical well-being and cultural development of their colonial subjects. Since the colonial powers strived for economic gains and social improvement with minimal metropolitan investment, missions came to play a key role in the civilising mission.

The *mission civilisatrice* emerged as an official French colonial ideology in the mid 19th century, although its origins date back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution during which ideas of universalism and human rights coexisted with colonial ambitions. It gained prominence during the Second French Empire under Napoleon III and was further institutionalised during the Third Republic, especially with France's expansion into Africa and Southeast Asia during the 'Scramble for Africa' and the establishment of French Indochina.

In the British Empire, the appointment of Joseph Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary in 1895 marked the beginning of what he called as "constructive imperialism". He presented imperialism as beneficial for the colonised people and pleaded for the rational utilisation of colonial resources. Formal education, economic changes and medicine were thus essential for both bringing progress to Africans and Asians, and serving Britain's imperial interests. Chamberlain made the Colonial Office an important pillar of British colonial governance and extended colonial medicine to include healthcare for colonial subjects.[13]

In Germany, the restructuring of colonial bureaucracy following prolonged, costly and controversial wars in South-West Africa and East Africa and the appointment of Bernhard Dernburg as head of the German colonial administration in 1907 are generally considered

[13] Anna Crozier, Practising Colonial Medicine: The Colonial Medical Service in British East Africa, London/New York 2007, p. 3–4.

turning points.[14] He emphasised the necessity of reforming economic, legal and social policies with regards to the colonies: “While one used to colonise by means of destruction, one can now colonise by means of preservation, which encompasses the missionary as well as the doctor, the railway as well as the machine, the advanced theoretical and applied science in all fields.”[15]

These examples show that there was a marked shift in most colonial administrations from an initial emphasis on the welfare and success of white colonists to improving economic and social conditions for the colonised, ostensibly for their own benefit. One field in which this became particularly clear is medicine and health care. Hans Ziemann, head of the civilian and military medical service in German Cameroon from 1908, emphasised that economic, social and cultural progress of the German colonial territories was only conceivable in connection with the “hygienic conquest of Africa.”[16] According to him, medical missionaries had a crucial role to play in the advancement of the colonial project.

Likewise, Ludwig Külz, one of the most prominent figures in German colonial medicine, saw it as their duty not only “to preserve the full capacity of the indigenous people”, who represented the “main value”, “the most valuable possession” and “the actual organic capital stock” of colonial power, “but also to lift them as far as possible.”[17] These statements illustrate not only that missionaries were indispensable in implementing the civilising mission but also how humanitarian engagement was inevitably coupled with economic interest and imperial aspirations in this period in colonial history.[18] By the time colonial governments began to intensify their medical efforts towards their colonial subjects, many mission societies had already established themselves as a vital element of health care in the colonies, serving those excluded by the colonial state.[19]

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[14] Hermann J. Hiery, Die Kolonialverwaltung, in: Horst Gründer/Hermann Hiery (eds.), Die Deutschen und ihre Kolonien. Ein Überblick, Berlin 2017, p. 179–200.

[15] Bernhard Dernburg, Zielpunkte des Deutschen Kolonialwesens. Zwei Vorträge, Berlin 1907, p. 9.

[16] Hans Ziemann, Wie erobert man Afrika für die weisse und farbige Rasse? in: Beihefte zum Archiv für Schiffs- und Tropenhygiene 11 (1907), p. 235–259.

[17] Ludwig Külz, Die Volkshygiene für Eingeborene in ihren Beziehungen zur Kolonialwirtschaft und Kolonialverwaltung, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt (1910), p. 12–21, here p. 12.

[18] Walter Bruchhausen, Medizin zwischen den Welten. Geschichte und Gegenwart des medizinischen Pluralismus im südöstlichen Tansania, Göttingen 2006, p. 434–451.

[19] Linda Maria Ratschiller Nasim, Medical Missionaries and Colonial Knowledge 1885–1914. Purity, Health and Cleanliness, Cham 2023; Yolana Pringle, Crossing the Divide: Medical Missionaries and Government Service in Uganda, 1897–1940, in: Anna Greenwood (ed.), Beyond the State. The Colonial Medical Service

Conclusion

Mission societies linked ideas of development to ideas of religious progress, which still inform humanitarian actions today, even if most of the Christian vocabulary has been replaced by secular terms. The anthropologist of religion Anton van Harskamp has pleaded for a critical assessment of the concept of development by pointing to its religious roots: "The point is: when we realise that development is some kind of a substitute for the progressive, linear (and liberal) concept of history, we simply must become suspicious! In particular, when we reckon with the well-known interpretation that this concept is ultimately a secularised version of a Judeo-Christian idea – that the course of history is continuously moving forward to salvation."[20]

To be sure, the scope of humanitarianism has expanded over time alongside shifting perceptions of who counts as human and whose lives are worth saving. After decolonisation, most development projects tried to distance themselves from their colonial heritage. Many former missionary organisations evolved into secular NGOs. But legacies of colonialism persist: they inherited the humanitarian, and ultimately Christian, rhetoric of global human progress, alongside the structural resources of the established Christian missions and charities.

While humanitarian organisations have provided vital aid, their origins and operations are deeply entangled with colonial histories, raising questions about power, representation, and global justice. Many humanitarian organisations are still based in the Global North, often prioritising Western perspectives over local knowledge. Critics also argue that international aid can reinforce economic dependency rather than promote true self-sufficiency. Moreover, humanitarian efforts sometimes clash with local traditions, echoing past missionary interventions.

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in British Africa, Manchester 2016, p. 19–38; Markku Hokkanen, The Government Medical Service and British Missions in Colonial Malawi, c. 1891–1940: Crucial Collaboration, Hidden Conflicts, in: Anna Greenwood (ed.), Beyond the State. The Colonial Medical Service in British Africa, Manchester 2016, p. 39–63.

[20] Anton van Harskamp, Introduction, in: Oscar Salemink et al. (eds.), The Development of Religion / The Religion of Development, Delft 2005, p. 1–6, here p. 2.