

§ 17.3 Democracy and Protestantism

While seeking a subject for his PhD thesis, Robert Woodberry, an American sociology student listened to a lecture indicating that there was a *statistical* link between Democracy and Protestantism, and the need to research the reason for such a link.

“That’s me, I’m the one” he thought.

Thus Woodberry embarked on a world-wide investigation of the stereotype that missions were invariably related to colonialism, seeking to prove that, in essence, missionary work was more often the precursor to democracy. In fact, Woodberry was digging into one of the great enigmas of modern history – why some nations develop stable representative democracies while neighbouring countries suffer authoritarian rulers and internal conflict. Public health and economic growth can also differ dramatically from one country to another, even among countries that share similar geography, cultural background and natural resources.

As an early illustration Woodberry contrasted the limited dated stock of books in the University of Togo with the comprehensive modern collection in the neighbouring University of Ghana. He explained this as a result of British missionaries in Ghana in the colonial era, establishing a whole system of schools and printing presses, while in Togo the French colonial power restricted missionaries and educated only a small intellectual elite. More than 100 years later, education was still limited in Togo, but flourishing in Ghana.

Although worried that his findings might be unbelievable and offensive to secular academics, Woodberry made a further dramatic early discovery. While both French and Belgian Congo suffered colonial-era exploitation with horrendous cruelty through rubber extraction, in the former, where Protestant missionaries were not allowed, the cruelty was largely ignored. In the latter, however, Baptist missionaries with photographic evidence of atrocities, helped to raise a public outcry in both the US and Britain against these abuses.

Woodberry’s hypothesis was that **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, less corruption, greater literacy, and higher educational attainment** (especially for women). If he was to prove it, he needed more than random case studies. Thus he spent 2 years coding data and refining methods to create a statistical model that could test the connection between missionary work and the state of nations. The results bowled him over. The impact of missions on global democracy was huge.

However, Woodberry was well aware of the statistical pitfall of mistaking correlation for causation. In other words, early missionary activity may have been present where democracy has developed, but did it cause such a development? Other factors needed to be brought into the equation such as climate, health, location, accessibility, natural resources, colonial power, disease prevalence, and various others. As these variables were entered into the computations, Woodberry was amazed at the robustness of his thesis.

Largely ignored by his contemporaries, Woodberry’s work attracted little recognition until he received a substantial grant enabling him to magnify his database project several times over, amassing more statistical data and historical analyses, over a number of years to confirm his proposition as set out in bold above. Finally, his work was appreciated and endorsed by leading University figures in the worlds of history, political science, economics and international studies.

While Woodberry acknowledged the racist, detrimental effect of mission in some situations, his research revealed this as far from the norm and that in most cases missionaries had a profound political and economic impact.

One caveat to all this, stressed by Woodberry, was that the positive effect of mission on democracy applied only to those he called “conversionary Protestants,” that is, not those financed by the state, nor Catholic missionaries. As examples, he quoted mission work in China to end the opium trade, in India to curtail abuses by landlords, in the West Indies to alert to the evils of the slave trade and so on. Mission workers didn’t set out to be political activists or even social reformers, but distanced themselves from the colonialists. They were first and foremost people who loved and cared about others.

On the other hand, mass literacy and mass education were more deliberate Protestant projects, partly motivated by the need for everyone to have access to the Bible in their own language. Broad-based literacy helped people rise out of poverty and undergirded the movement towards democracy. Woodberry also noted that in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, most of the early nationalists who led their countries to independence graduated from Protestant mission schools.

Other studies have confirmed Woodberry’s findings, changing the way scholars, aid workers and economists think about democracy and development. The church too has rejoiced in the possibility of transforming the prevailing negative opinion of missionary work and in recognising God’s wider purposes. Christians collectively can make a transforming and enduring difference in society.

Source: *Christianity Today*, Jan/Feb 2014, posted by Andrea Dilley, based in Austin, Texas, 8th Jan 2014. Précis by Cherry Brierley. Full article at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/world-missionaries-made.html.