

Mission and Motivation: The Theology of the Early American Mission in Hawai'i

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On March 30, 1820 the Pioneer Company of missionaries to the Sandwich Islands arrived at Kawaihae on the Big Island of Hawai'i. The company included two missionaries, twelve assistant missionaries, five children, and three Hawaiian helpers. The assistant missionaries included a doctor, a farmer, a printer, two teachers, and seven wives. It was a small group, but one filled with a purpose. Their task was to bring the unenlightened Hawaiians into God's Kingdom through preaching the Gospel and teaching the rudiments of civilization as defined by New England social mores.

The missionaries were gratified to find that God had already prepared the way. The young king, Liholiho, with the encouragement of his mother Keopuolani, the *kuhina nui* Ka'ahumanu; and even the high priest Hewahewa, had abolished the *kapu* system the previous year as symbolized by having men and women eat together (*ai noa*). Though the Hawaiians were in no hurry to replace their religion, and, in fact, maintained their personal worship, the missionaries realized that their task had been made easier by the removal of the state religion.

With some misgivings Liholiho gave the small band permission to remain a year on a trial basis. He was not impressed with their religious purpose but saw some value to education and the services of Dr. Thomas Holman whom he kept with the court. Holman, the Reverend Asa Thurston, and their wives remained with the king at Kailua-Kona, while the others were granted permission to continue on to Honolulu. And so the mission was established. If it did not exactly prosper during those early years, it managed to survive.

The pioneers were excited by the arrival of the second company of

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missionaries on April 27, 1823. The new group included three missionaries, eleven assistant missionaries, three Hawaiian helpers, and one Tahitian helper. This time the assistant missionaries were composed of a business manager, three teachers, six wives, one servant, and a new doctor (Dr. Holman had been dismissed for lacking a proper missionary spirit). Now the mission had both sufficient manpower and a command of the language, acquired through the assistance of William Ellis, a missionary from the London Missionary Society who had arrived from Tahiti in 1822, to begin the work in earnest.

As any history of Hawai'i will inform the reader, the work of the missionaries in conjunction with the arrival of other Europeans and Americans transformed Hawai'i. Hawaiians became known for their high literacy rate. The island kingdom established a government which enabled it to deal with other governments from a position of competence, if not equality. Hawai'i became a center for the whaling industry and developed a thriving merchant community. Often the needs of whalers and businessmen clashed with the missionary opinions of what was best for the Hawaiian people. In all of these issues the missionaries, especially those at Honolulu and Lāhainā, played a key part, and have been both praised and reviled, by their contemporaries and by historians, for their actions.

What the missionaries achieved in Hawai'i is a matter of public record. Who the missionaries were as people is not nearly so well known. The missionaries of the first two companies were members of the same generation and had been exposed to similar experiences of New England social and educational training. They were a unique group, the product of a specific period of American and New England history, and, therefore, lend themselves to a study of why a given group of people became missionaries.

The investigation of motivating factors, whether of a group, an institution, or an individual, is a difficult one. It requires the researcher to attempt to so become immersed in the history and social milieu of the period as to get under his subjects' skin and understand why and at what point they made the decisions that would affect the rest of their lives. Certainly such decisions are very personal and are the result of individual conclusions that are determined, in part, by the peculiar and unique circumstances of the individual himself. However, the individual is also shaped by the issues of his or her generation.

In New England the evolution of a personal identity was closely tied to religion and theology. The Puritans who arrived in New

England in 1630 were adherents of a theology most commonly referred to as Calvinism or the Reformed tradition. These Puritans brought with them certain beliefs and practices which would shape not only New England, but also the other peoples with whom New Englanders came in contact. The Puritans believed in a doctrine of predestination which left them very insecure in their relationship with their God. In an age when the assurance of salvation and of admission into God's Kingdom was of paramount importance, a Puritan never knew for sure whether he was truly a member of God's Elect. There were, of course, certain signs of God's grace such as earthly prosperity, and there were tests to determine whether a candidate for church membership had truly undergone a saving experience. Usually brought on by the contemplation of Scripture or reflection on a sermon, the converting experience brought the candidate into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Levi Chamberlain, a member of the Second Company, wrote that one morning Christ "appeared to be the centre point the grand focus where the Spirit concentrates the only visible amidst invisible. I could conceive of him as standing between heaven and earth."¹ In response, Chamberlain gave himself up to Christ's service.

The converting experience was an individual one, a point where the individual stood alone before God and when he realized his total dependence on God. Having met with God, the candidate must then meet with his neighbors and convince them of his true conversion. It was a difficult thing to judge another's experience with God, so certain rules were made to define what constituted a legitimate experience. It was hard to be sure, because an individual might act as one who was saved, but only God really knew. And so neither the individual nor his neighbors ever had any real certainty of who was saved and who was not. This would have definite repercussions.

The individual, of course, often suffered great personal anguish from this insecurity. Elizabeth Edwards Bishop, a member of the Second Company, lived a life of exemplary piety but was always aware of "the danger of leaning on earth, of danger feeling anything without the glory of God in view."² In her effort to serve God, Elizabeth Bishop chose the missionary life, believing that such a sacrifice would free her from the constant doubt of her salvation. Still Mrs. Bishop doubted and began to worry that she did not really love the heathen. By the theological principle of disinterested benevolence which will be discussed below, the sacrifice would be of no avail if it was done for selfish, rather than selfless reasons.

The journals and correspondence of the first and second missionary companies clearly indicate that their respective members had undergone a converting experience, but conversion alone does not explain why they chose to become missionaries. The answer to that question lies in the development of the New Divinity movement, an offshoot of Calvinism in the late 18th century, which proposed that conversion alone was not enough. To accept Christ also meant to work for his Kingdom.

The roots of the New Divinity can be found in the work of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was responding to an unfortunate development of empty piety among the Puritans. In their efforts to define the conversion experience and bind God to man's needs, the mystical elements of Calvinism had become overshadowed by legalism. For example, if an individual attempted to follow God's law, realized that his sinful state made this impossible, repented and waited for grace, God could not legally withhold it. The relationship between man and God had become contractual with the interesting result that conversions became less frequent.

Jonathan Edwards and the English evangelist, George Whitefield, reversed this trend with a return to the sensate experience of God's majesty and man's insignificance. Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God", is a premier example of this method. The purpose was to cut through man's desire for a contract in order to reach his emotions, for only if he came to realize the fear of God's wrath could man truly accept his insignificance and dependence upon God, and thus be open to a converting experience as opposed to an intellectual contract.

Now that the individual was again experiencing conversion, he could relate that experience for admission into the church. The age old problem remained, however, of how to judge the validity of someone else's conversion. Edwards was the first to say that only God, the omnipotent, knew, but he strongly suggested that "Christian practice . . . is the chief of all the evidence of a saving sincerity in religion."³ By this Edwards meant that in conversion the individual's will merged with God's will. Thus, the true fruit of conversion was to do God's will, not as a passive, personal contemplation of his holiness, but as an active, public participant in his world.

Edwards' disciples evolved into the New Divinity movement. Comprising about five percent of New England's clergy during the late 18th Century, the New Divinity did not have a broad popular appeal, but it set the tone of active service which would characterize

the Second Great Awakening. Samuel Hopkins was particularly influential in his concept of "disinterested benevolence" by which he meant man's total, selfless love of God and his neighbor.⁴ One must not convert because he fears hell, for that is selfish and does not constitute a true conversion. Rather, the sinner must convert because he truly loves God to the point that if God's justice demands that he go to hell as the just punishment for his sins, the sinner will do so joyfully, because it is a part of God's governance of the universe.

By the same token, the true convert will exhibit a universal, disinterested benevolence to all intelligent beings at the expense of his own personal safety and comfort. In this way the convert works for God's Kingdom and the greater good of all mankind, converted or not. This concept is consistent with both the legal and mystical strands of Calvinism. Mystical, because of the convert's love of and consequent merging with God and his higher purpose. Legal, because it acknowledges God's sovereignty and man's dependence and justifies man's damnation for any deviation from God's purpose, specifically anything which may be construed as selfishness. Man is not in a contractual relationship with God, because he cannot force God to grant him salvation. What is new about the Hopkinsian development is the idea that man must actively work for God's Kingdom as an actual rather than implicit part of dogma.

The evangelists of the Second Great Awakening found Hopkins' conclusions more than a little grim. It would be difficult to convince the public that they must return to a position of religious insecurity or that they must joyfully go to hell. However, the idea of actively working for God's Kingdom had appeal, especially as the Congregational churches of Massachusetts and Connecticut were disestablished; that is, they would no longer be sponsored by the states. Voluntary associations would keep religion foremost in people's minds while continuing the church's influence on secular society.

The revivals of the Second Great Awakening in New England had a broad appeal. In part this was due to the fact that society was in a state of flux during the early national period. Richard Birdsall has indicated that the new individualism created a desire for new support groups. Lois Banner has demonstrated that the need for both lay and spiritual leaders in the voluntary reform societies, such as temperance, offered an alternative to young men who did not wish to go into business, but did feel the social pressures to hold assertive positions. Certainly, the conversion of Levi Chamberlain provides a clear example of a successful businessman whose new religious convictions

influenced him to change careers. In this case, the young man became a successful missionary in the Sandwich Islands; others, such as the abolitionist, Theodore Dwight Weld, did not find it necessary to travel so far from home and family.⁵

It is reasonable to conclude, then, that conversion was an individual experience which required the candidate to work for the success of God's Kingdom, whether as a volunteer or a philanthropist, a Sunday school teacher or an abolitionist; no task was too small, no worker too great. With all the opportunity at home, why did Americans need to send missionaries to Asia and the Pacific?

John Andrew has made a strong case for the use of the foreign missionary movement as an organizing factor for the entire system of voluntary societies. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions did more than send out a few individuals to spread the gospel; the Board provided an entire network of supporting societies. Their newspaper, the *Missionary Herald*, kept the cause of missions ever in the public eye, as well as the cause of consistent Calvinism, evangelism, temperance, and the other benevolent undertakings. Foreign missions served to focus the public eye on the cause of God's Kingdom, with the implication that if these individuals could martyr themselves among the barbarous heathen, then the respective readers could hardly complain about their duty to participate in the great work.⁶

But what of the missionaries themselves? Why did they decide to make the sacrifice of home, family, country, and friends? Clarissa Lyman Richards confided to her diary that after her conversion, "I felt that no sacrifice would be considered too great to make for the promotion of [God's] word."⁷ In the zeal of such commitment, when the opportunity to marry William Richards and join the second company of missionaries to the Sandwich Islands presented itself, Clarissa Lyman Richards accepted.

Elizabeth Edwards Bishop revealed more anguish about her decision. She chose the missionary life because she perceived it as her duty, and she was sure of her unhappiness should she fail to serve the heathen well. Aboard the *Thames*, however, Mrs. Bishop worried that she did not love the heathen as she should. This was a legitimate concern, because if she was not embarking on the mission from a true regard for the heathen, then Mrs. Bishop's sacrifice was for nothing. In fact, it would be selfish and undermine the legitimacy of her conversion.

Elizabeth Edwards Bishop died at Kailua-Kona on February 21,

1828. She was the first adult death of the Sandwich Islands mission. Mrs. Bishop died in great physical and spiritual pain. Hiram Bingham later wrote that Elizabeth Bishop's "views of the doctrines and duties of the gospel were clear and correct, but she set the standard of duty so high, as hardly to think it possible that she could be a christian."⁸

Mrs. Bishop represents an extreme case, but not necessarily an unreasonable one. Her insecurity in faith and her desire for salvation were an outgrowth of the Calvinist tradition. Fortunately, other members of her missionary family did not indulge in the same conclusions on Calvinist doctrine, at least as it applied to themselves.

Hiram Bingham later recorded in his memoirs that the day the *Thaddeus* departed for the Sandwich Islands was one of the happiest of his life. In his mind, "the object for which the missionaries felt themselves impelled to visit the Hawaiian race, was to honor God, . . . and to benefit those heathen tribes" by turning them from their crimes and idolatries to the service of God. To this end the missionaries would give the Hawaiians the Bible and teach them to read it.⁹ The missionaries would also teach the islanders New England culture, because in the Calvinist mind religion could not be separated from civilization as they knew it.

The rigidity of Calvinist doctrine, with its intense concern that church membership could only be granted to those who received a true converting experience, would inhibit the reception of Hawaiian members into the church. In his memoirs, Hiram Bingham defended the early cautiousness with regard to receiving native converts to Christianity. As early as 1821, a Hawaiian called Holo exhibited signs of serious concern for his salvation. Thomas Hopu, a Hawaiian helper who had attended the Foreign Mission School at Cornwall, Connecticut, thought that Holo seemed to have undergone a conversion.

Bingham responded that with such a brief knowledge of the gospel it would be hard for either the chiefs or the people to form a well-grounded opinion of the presence of saving grace. "Though human nature is the same in all climes and ages, and conversion from sin to holiness . . . must be radically the same in all cases, yet the forms of manifestations may be widely different in different circumstances." Some missionaries would have readily baptized Holo, but Bingham would not. As he would later state when he first refused Ka'ahumanu's request for baptism in 1824, "we had no confidence in baptismal regeneration, or the efficacy of consecrated water to wash away sin.

Nor did we baptize any hearers of the Gospel, merely because they were hearers, or . . . asked to be baptized."¹⁰

Although the missionaries did not expect the Hawaiians to understand the fine points of theology, they believed very strongly that before a candidate could be baptized, he must first exhibit signs of a true conversion over a period of time. These signs of the love and worship of God and the love of God's law included a change in lifestyle to demonstrate that the candidate had rejected his former, evil ways, specifically to include oppression, intemperance, idolatry, covetousness, polygamy, and incest.¹¹

This concern for a candidate's sincerity would carry over into the political realm. In June, 1825, after Lord Byron returned the bodies of Kamehameha II and Kamamalu, ten prominent chiefs and chiefesses presented themselves as candidates for baptism. Among these were Ka'ahumanu, the regent for Kamehameha III, and her chief advisor, Kalanimoku. Bingham later recorded that although all had given true evidence of conversion for several months, the missionaries "hesitated to baptize them, until as candidates they were set before the church and the world for the trial of a few months more, under watchful missionary care and instruction."¹²

The chiefs exhibited their new commitment in a way the missionaries could not doubt. By the close of the month, they agreed to suppress vice, intoxication, theft, and the violation of the Sabbath. In August, 1825, the chiefs proclaimed the first, though informal, code of laws in the Hawaiian Kingdom. The chiefs required that all Hawaiians attend school and church, that they observe the Sabbath, and that they desist from gambling and adultery (which included prostitution). The merchants and whalers were quick to grasp that these laws were the result of growing missionary influence. The missionaries realized that these candidates were, indeed, sincere in their desire for baptism, and received them into the church on December 5, 1825.

The missionaries' solicitude for the sincerity of the Hawaiians' commitment to Christ and his church was a direct outgrowth of their own concern for the legitimacy of their respective conversions. Calvinist theology, as it had been tempered by Edwards and Hopkins, had compelled these young men and women to change their lives completely in order to serve God and the heathen. Consequently, the missionaries conscientiously demanded to see a true change in the lifestyle of candidates for baptism. Such a change in the Hawaiians could only mean a repentance of their former life

which the missionaries defined as inherently sinful. When chiefs desired to demonstrate their respective commitments to a new life in Christ, they did so not only in their own personal lives, but in the way they governed their people. What to the merchants, whalers, and future generations would appear as excessive meddling by the missionaries in secular affairs, the missionaries themselves and their defenders would perceive as the natural result of a given chief's conversion, a conversion which the missionaries could only judge by Calvinist standards.

NOTES

- ¹ Levi Chamberlain, Journal, 3 September 1818. I have kept the spelling and punctuation of quotations as they originally appeared. Unless otherwise noted, the journals and correspondence are from the Journal Collection and the Missionary Letter Collection at the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, Honolulu.
- ² Elizabeth Edwards Bishop, Journal, 4 April 1822.
- ³ Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections," in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) 531-532.
- ⁴ Samuel Hopkins spent two years studying with Jonathan Edwards. Hopkins edited Edwards' posthumous publications and became the systematic theologian of the New Divinity movement, publishing the two volumes *System of Doctrines* (1793).
- ⁵ See Richard D. Birdsall "The Second Great Awakening and the New England Social Order," *Church History* (September 1970): 345-364; and Lois Banner, "Religion and Reform in the Early Republic: The Role of Youth," *American Quarterly*, 23 (1971): 677-695. More precisely, Theodore Dwight Weld was not converted during the early period of the Second Great Awakening. He was of the later generation, receiving conviction under the auspices of Charles Grandison Finney's "new measures." Nevertheless, the principles of those serving abroad versus those serving at home remained the same.
- ⁶ John A. Andrew, *Rebuilding the Christian Commonwealth: New England Congregationalists & Foreign Missions, 1800-1830* (Lexington, Ky.: UP of Kentucky, 1976).
- ⁷ Clarissa Lyman Richards to her parents, letter, 20 September 1822.
- ⁸ Hiram Bingham to Jeremiah Evarts, letter, 12 March 1828.
- ⁹ Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands* (1849; rpt. Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1981) 60-61 and 64.
- ¹⁰ Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years* 147-148 and 214-215.
- ¹¹ Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years* 268.
- ¹² Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years* 214-215.