

HYMNODY OF FOREIGN MISSIONS

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“The foreign mission enterprise in its heyday (about 1880 to 1930) was a massive affair, involving tens of thousands of Americans abroad and millions at home. Even in the early nineteenth century, as a movement of huge aspiration but more modest dimensions, it exceeded most other reform or benevolent organizations in size and resources. It sent abroad, through most of its history, not only the largest contingents of Americans—dwarfing all other categories except that of short-term travelers—but also the most highly educated [including Drury grads!]. Missionaries on the whole belonged to the tiny cohort of the college-trained; and male missionaries generally had been educated beyond college. If deficient from a modern point of view in sensitivity to foreign cultures, they were measurably superior in that regard to most contemporaries at home and abroad. . . . the missionaries were the chief interpreters of remote cultures for the people at home, and as such played a central role in the shaping of American public attitudes.”—William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 1.

Introduction

1. The arrest of aid workers in Afghanistan before 9/11 and the current war in that country have made Americans not only aware of the missionary presence in many Muslim countries, but also remote parts of the world with which they are unfamiliar.
2. Missionary hymn books—such as *Missionary Messages in Song* (c.1910) by May Agnew Stephens opened a whole new world for church people at the “home base.”
3. The “errand into the wilderness” of the Pilgrims eventually became America’s “errand to the world.”

May Agnew Stephens—missionary and songwriter

1. Served in the Belgian Congo with the Congo and Balolo Mission (later the Regions Beyond Missionary Union) headquartered in London.
2. The hymnal was privately published by H. L. Stephens in Toronto; one may conclude that both May and H. L. Stephens were Canadians.
3. Missionary societies often published their own hymnals. The copy in my possession was used at the Missionary Training Institute at Nyack, New York, the leading school of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a para-church agency founded by A. B. Simpson (1843-1919). He became well known in radical evangelical circles for his belief in faith healing and the imminent return of Christ.
4. Few details currently known about her life.

Missionary Messages in Song

1. Traditional missionary hymns: “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” by Reginald Heber; “Jesus Shall Reign” by Isaac Watts with its famous second verse: “From north to south the princes meet, To pay their homage at His feet; While western empires own their Lord, and savage tribes attend His word”; “Onward Christian Soldiers” by Sabine Baring-Gould and Arthur Sullivan; “His Truth

Is Marching On” (“The Battle Hymn of the Republic”), by Julia Ward Howe, and “O Zion, Haste” by Mary A. Thomson, among others.

2. Hymns by May Agnew Stephens:

- A. Expression of evangelical concerns to fulfill Christ’s “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:19-20); the work of missions was accomplished both through institutions (schools, orphanages, social reform) and preaching.
- B. Reflect the sentiments of social Darwinism—“the white man’s burden”—Euramerican attitudes toward the rest of the world at the turn of the twentieth century.
- C. Conquering themes; light versus darkness; heathen versus Christian
- D. Reflect the passion of the missions movement
- E. Who sang these songs? What did they accomplish? (inspiration, information, recruiting, fundraising)
- F. Examples:
 - 1. “The Christian’s Marseillaise”
 - 2. “O Africa” (to the tune of “O Canada”)
 - 3. “Far Away in Heathen Countries”
 - 4. “What doest Thou Here?”
 - 5. “He’s Counting on You”
 - 6. “Beautiful Isles of the Sea”
 - 7. “I Leave My Dear Home”
 - 8. “We’re Bound to Take the Congo”
 - 9. “O Morning Land” (Japan)
 - 10. “Israel, Jehovah Loves Thee” (missions to the Jews)

3. Other hymns round out a global picture:

- A. “India’s Savior”
- B. “Bringing in Chinese”
- C. “China’s Millions”
- D. “Dark Africa”
- E. “Dark Soudan”
- F. “The Neglected Continent” (South America)
- G. “Far Korea”
- H. “Christ for the Philippines”
- I. Children’s songs: “I’ll Be a Sunbeam,” “Far Away in Heathen Countries”
- J. Farewell songs for the departure of missionaries: “God Be With You,” “I Leave My Dear Home”

Conclusion

Far more common than the missionary atlases, missionary hymnbooks opened the world to local churches and Christians; they challenged them to world service for Christ and country.

Recommended

Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (1986)

Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (1996)

Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (1983)

Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures* (1990)