



The New Opportunity of the Church Robert E. Speer (1919)

Robert Elliot Speer was a white American from Pennsylvania who became a nationally prominent Protestant lay leader. In the 1890s-1930s, he was head of the foreign missions board for the United States' largest Presbyterian denomination; in that capacity, he conducted various tours of Asia and Latin America. During World War I, he led the General War-Time Commission of the Churches, a body created by the ecumenical Federal Council of Churches to coordinate the work of different Protestant ministries supporting the US war effort. A year after publishing the book excerpted here, Speer was elected president of the Federal Council of Churches. In this selection from one of his many books, Speer touts the roles that Christian missions have played in both supporting and criticizing Western imperialism, and he argues that missions continue to have vital roles to play in the post-WWI global order.

[T]he missionary enterprise [...] has been in the world as an instrumentality of peace and international good will. Wherever it has gone, it has erased racial prejudice and bitterness, the great root of international conflict and struggle. It has helped men to understand one another. It has rubbed off the frictions. "Christianity continues to spread among the Karens," said the administration report for British Burmah for 1880-1881, "to the great advantage of the Commonwealth, and the Christian Karen communities are distinctly more industrious, better educated, and more law-abiding than the Burman and Karen villages around them. The Karen race and the British government owe a great debt to the American missionaries who have, under Providence, wrought this change among the Karens of Burmah." At the outset of the missionary work in India, Schwartz had illustrated this power of missions, commanding the confidence of the people and securing peace and order where the East India Company and the native rulers themselves were helpless. "Send me none of your agents," Hyder Ali said to the Company in some of their negotiations. "Send me the Christian missionary, Schwartz, and I will receive him."^a [...] "The benefits" of the missionary work in New Guinea, said Hugh Milman, a magistrate, "are immense; intertribal fights, formerly so common, being entirely at an end, and trading and communication, one tribe with another, now being carried on without fear."

Missionaries have been a conciliatory influence again and again and have allayed hostility which diplomats and traders have aroused. [...] And missionaries in the same conciliatory spirit have been the main factors in opening some sealed lands to international intercourse. The United States government's treaty with Siam was negotiated in 1856, and Dr. Wood of the embassy wrote that "the unselfish kindness of the American missionaries—their patience, sincerity, and faithfulness—have won the confidence and esteem of the natives, and in some degree transferred those sentiments to the nation represented by the missionary, and prepared the way for the free and national intercourse now commencing. It was very evident that much of the apprehension [the natives] felt in taking upon themselves the responsibilities of a treaty with us would be diminished if they could have the Rev. Mr. Mattoon as the first United States consul, to set the

^a Christian Friedrich Schwartz was a German Lutheran who spent the second half of the 1700s living in India as a missionary. Hyder Ali was a Muslim ruler in India; he resisted the expansionism of the East India Company, a British trading company that also waged military conquests.

treaty in motion.” In 1871, the regent of Siam frankly told Mr. Seward, the United States consul-general at Shanghai, “Siam has not been disciplined by English and French guns as China has, but the country has been opened by missionaries.” [...] For a hundred years, the missionary enterprise has been [...] getting men acquainted with one another, showing the unselfishness that lies behind much that seems to be, and often is, so purely selfish. It has always been, and is today, an enterprise of tranquility and of peace.

It has been an agency of righteousness. As the years have gone by, it alone has represented in many non-Christian lands the inner moral character of the Western world. By our political agencies and activities, we have forced great wrongs upon the non-Christian peoples—commercial exploitation, the liquor traffic, and the slave trade upon Africa and the South Sea Islands, the opium traffic upon China. Against these things, the one element of the West that has made protest has been the missionary enterprise. Year after year in those lands, it has joined with what wholesome moral sentiment existed among the people in a death struggle against the great iniquities that Western civilization had spread over the world. It has been an instrumentality of international righteousness.

It has been and is a great instrumentality of human service. It has scattered tens of thousands of men and women over many lands, teaching school in city and country, in town and village. It has built its hospitals by the thousand. It has sent its medical missionaries to deal every year with millions of sick and diseased peoples in Asia and Africa. It has been the one great, continuing, unselfish agency of unquestioning, loving, human service throughout the world, dealing not with emergency needs of famine and flood and pestilence alone, but, year in and year out, serving all human need and seeking to introduce into human society the creative and healing influences of Christ. “It is they,” the missionaries, says Sir H. H. Johnston of British Central Africa, “who in many cases have first taught the natives carpentry, joinery, masonry, tailoring, cobbling, engineering, bookkeeping, printing, and European cookery, to say nothing of reading, writing, arithmetic, and a smattering of general knowledge. [...] Instead of importing painters, carpenters, store clerks, cooks, telegraphists, gardeners, natural history collectors from England or India, we are gradually becoming able to obtain them amongst the natives of the country, who are trained in the missionaries’ schools and who, having been given simple, wholesome local education, have not had their heads turned and are not above their station in life.”

[...F]oreign missions [...] have promoted temperance; opposed the liquor and opium traffics, which are fatal to wise commerce; checked gambling; established higher standards of personal purity; cultivated industry and frugality; elevated woman; restrained anti-social customs such as polygamy, concubinage, adultery, and child marriage and infanticide; fostered the suppression of the slave trade and slave traffic; abolished cannibalism and human sacrifice and cruelty; organized famine relief; improved husbandry and agriculture; introduced Western medicines and medical science; founded leper asylums and colonies; promoted cleanliness and sanitation; and checked war. “Whatever you may be told to the contrary,” said Sir Bartle Frere, formerly governor of Bombay, “the teaching of Christianity among 160,000,000 of civilized, industrious Hindus and Mohammedans in India is effecting changes—moral, social, and political—which, for extent and rapidity of effect, are far more extraordinary than anything that you or your fathers have witnessed in modern Europe.” “When the history of the great African states of the future comes to be written,” says Sir H. H. Johnston, bearing witness out of ample personal knowledge

and experience, “the arrival of the first missionary will, with many of these new nations, be the first historical event in their annals.”

Foreign missions have been a great agency of human unity and concord. They, at least, have believed and acted upon the belief that all men belong to one family. They have laughed at racial discords and prejudices. They have made themselves unpopular with many representatives of the Western nations who have gone into the non-Christian world, because they have not been willing to foster racial distrust, because they have insisted on bridging the divisions which separated men of different bloods and different nationalities. [...] There could have been nothing more unwise than the proposition that we should recall in the war, from Africa and India, Japan and China, the men who are correctly interpreting to the non-Christian world the unselfish Christian ideals of our Western nations. In the early years of the war, our government sent to the consuls in China, especially, word that Americans ought not to come home; that if ever they were needed there, they were needed today, that they might correctly represent what the moral purposes of America are and that, by their good will and friendliness, they might be true ambassadors of our spirit. We need not less today, but more than ever, the shuttles of sympathy and service that fly to and fro across the chasms of race. The misunderstandings of the world are a tragic thing. We little realize how deep and terrible they are—the innumerable millions of men on the other side of the world whose minds are unknown to us, and to whom what we are thinking is unknown, in whose thought there has never entered the conviction of our unselfish interest in the whole human family and of our desire, not to injure, but to benefit both ourselves and, with us, all mankind. As never before in the history of the world, we require every possible agency of interpretation, of international fellowship and brotherhood, to be thrown across the chasms that separate the races and nations of men.

[...]n Christ alone, today, is the power of saving men and of redeeming society. To give Him to the world is to do the work the world needs more than it needs anything else. No man can do better with his life today or accomplish more for the world than by going out to acquaint men with Christ and to lead all nations to obey and follow Christ as Savior and Lord.

Source: Robert E. Speer, *The New Opportunity of the Church* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1919), 94-102, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ia.ark:/13960/t8df71k8r>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions (except for the spelling of names). The expression *millions of... peoples* corrected to *millions of... people* (plural → singular); however, the expression *by the thousand* (singular, not plural) reproduces the usage of the source publication. Several governmental terms capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization, including *administration report*, *states*, *government*, *governor*, *regent*, *consul*, and *embassy*. A divine pronoun capitalized here as per the source publication.

These edited excerpts from Speer’s book are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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