Missions in the Sandwich Islands

Samuel Colcord Bartlett

(*Events described:* 1820-1870)

The first Christian missionaries to work in the Hawaiian Islands, also known then as the Sandwich Islands, were sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a joint Congregational-Presbyterian initiative headquartered in New England. A group of ABCFM missionaries first arrived in Hawai'i in 1820. The group consisted of seven white American married couples and four Native Hawaiian men who, in their youth, had traveled to New England on merchant ships and there converted to Christianity. The missionaries happened to arrive in Hawai'i in the wake of a cultural revolution that overthrew traditional Hawaiian religion and its taboos. This cultural revolution had been led by two wives of the recently deceased king Kamehameha I, named Ka'ahumanu and Keopuolani, and by Kamehameha's son Liholiho, who reigned as Kamehameha II. Ka'ahumanu, Keopuolani, and Kamehameha II became supporters of the ABCFM missionaries.

These selections come from a celebratory history of ABCFM missions published in 1872 by Samuel Colcord Bartlett, a white Congregational minister and seminary professor who was later president of Dartmouth College. Bartlett refers in passing to several missionaries, whose full names are as follows: Native Hawaiians Thomas Hopu, John Honoree, and William Kanui (a.k.a. Tenooe), and white Americans Samuel Ruggles and Sheldon Dibble.

["A race in the lowest stages of barbarism"]

The ten islands of the Hawaiian group—an area somewhat less than Massachusetts—were peopled by a well-formed, muscular race, with olive complexions and open countenances, in the lowest stages of barbarism, sensuality, and vice. The children went stark naked till they were nine or ten years old, and the men and women wore the scantiest apology for clothing, which neither sex hesitated to leave in the hut at home before they passed through the village to the surf. [...] The natives had hardly more modesty or shame than so many animals. Husbands had many wives, and wives many husbands, and exchanged with each other at pleasure. The most revolting forms of vice, as Captain Cook had occasion to know, were practiced in open sight. When a foreign vessel came to the harbor, the women would swim to it in flocks for the vilest of purposes. Two thirds of all the children, probably, were destroyed in infancy—strangled or buried alive.

The nation practiced human sacrifice, and there is a cord now at the Missionary Rooms, Chicago, with which one high priest had strangled 23 human victims. They were a race of perpetual thieves; even kings and chiefs kept servants for the special purpose of stealing. They were wholesale gamblers and, latterly, drunkards. Thoroughly savage, they seemed almost destitute of fixed habits. When food was plenty, they would take six or seven meals a day and even rise in the night to eat; at other times, they would eat but once a day, or perhaps go almost fasting for two or three days together. And for purposes of sleep, the day and the night were much alike. Science they had none—no written language, nor the least conception of any mode of communicating thought but by oral speech.

A race that destroyed their own children had little tender mercy. Sons often buried their aged

parents alive or left them to perish. The sick were abandoned to die of want and neglect. Maniacs were stoned to death. Captives were tortured and slain. The whole system of government and religion was, to the last degree, oppressive. The lands, their products, and [their] occupants were the property of the chiefs and the king. The persons and power of the high chiefs were protected by a crushing system of restrictions called *tabus*. It was tabu and death for a common man to let his shadow fall upon a chief, to go upon his house, enter his enclosure, or [...] to stand when the king’s [...] bathing water was carried by or his name mentioned in song. [...] In like manner, it was tabu for a woman to eat with her husband or to eat fowl, pork, coconut, or banana—things offered to the idols—and death was the penalty. The priest, too, came in with his tabus and his exactions for his idols. [...] Whatsoever the priest demanded for the god—food, a house, land, human sacrifice—must be forthcoming. If he pronounced a day tabu, the man who was found in a canoe, or even enjoying the company of his family, died. If anyone made a noise when prayers were saying, or if the priest pronounced him irreligious, he died. When a temple was built and the people had finished the toil, some of them were offered in sacrifice. In all these modes, the oppression of the nation was enormous. [...]

Such was the forbidding race on whom the missionaries were to try the power of the cross. “Probably none of you will live to witness the downfall of idolatry”—so said the Rev. Mr. Kellogg to Mr. Ruggles as they took breakfast together at East Windsor, the morning before [Ruggles] left home. And so thought, no doubt, the whole community. But God’s thoughts are not as our thoughts.

[“And now the missionaries entered”]

Hopu called up his friend Ruggles at one o’clock on a moonlit night (March 31), to get the first glimpse of Hawaii; and at daybreak, the snow-capped peak of Mauna Kea was in full view. [...] A boat is put off, with Hopu and others in it, which encounters some fishermen and returns. As the boat nears the vessel, Hopu is seen swinging his hat in the air; and as soon as he arrives within hail, he shouts, “Oahu’s idols are no more!” On coming aboard, he brings the thrilling news that the old king Kamehameha is dead; that Liholiho, his son, succeeds him; that the images of the gods are all burned; that the men [...] eat with the women; that but one chief was killed in settling the government, and he for refusing to destroy his gods. [...] The missionaries wrote in their journal, “Sing, O heavens, for the Lord hath done it.” The brig soon anchored in Kalui Bay, the king’s residence, and a fourteen days’ consultation between the king and chiefs followed. Certain foreigners opposed their landing; “they had come to conquer the islands.” “Then,” said the chiefs, “they would not have brought their women.” The decision was favorable. [...]

And now the missionaries settled down to their work. They had found a nation sunk in ignorance, sensuality, and vice and nominally without a religion, though really still in the grasp of many of their old superstitions. The old religion had been discarded chiefly on account of its burdensomeness. We cannot recount here all the agencies, outer and inner, which brought about this remarkable convulsion. But no religious motives seem to have had any special power. Indeed, King Liholiho was intoxicated when he dealt to the system its finishing stroke by compelling his wives to eat pork. And by a providence as remarkable as inscrutable, the high priest threw his whole weight into the scale. Into this opening, thus signally furnished by the hand of God, the missionaries entered with wonder and gratitude. The natives educated in

America proved less serviceable than was expected. Tenooe was soon excommunicated, although in later years he recovered, and lived and died a well-reputed Christian. Hopu and Honoree, while they continued faithful, had partly lost their native tongue, lacked the highest skill as interpreters, and naturally failed in judgment. Hopu, at the opening of the first revival, was found busy in arranging the inquirers on his right hand and his left hand, respectively, as they answered yes or no to the single question, “Do you love your enemies?” and was greatly disturbed at being interrupted.

The king and the chiefs, with their families, were the first pupils. They insisted on the privilege. Within three months, the king could read the English language; and in six months, several chiefs could both read and write. [...] The first baptized native was Keopuolani, the mother of the king, and others of the high chiefs were among the earlier converts. The leading personages, for the most part, showed much readiness to adopt the suggestions of the missionaries. In 1824, the principal chiefs formally agreed to recognize the Sabbath and to adopt the ten commandments as the basis of government. They also soon passed a law forbidding females to visit the ships for immoral purposes. [...]

The missionaries labored on [...] Eight years from their landing found them at work, some 32 in number, with 440 native teachers, 12,000 Sabbath hearers, and 26,000 pupils in their schools. At this time, about 50 natives, including the queen regent Kaahumanu and many of the principal chiefs, were members of the church. And now, in the year 1828, the dews of heaven began to fall visibly upon the mission. For two or three years, the way had been preparing. Kaahumanu, converted in 1828, and several other high chiefs, had thrown themselves vigorously and heartily into the work. “They made repeated tours around all the principal islands,” says Mr. Dibble, “assembling the people from village to village and delivering addresses day after day, in which they prohibited immoral acts, enjoined the observance of the Sabbath, encouraged the people to learn to read, and exhorted them to turn to God and to love and obey the Savior of sinners. [...] The chiefs gave orders to the people to erect houses of worship, to build schoolhouses, and to learn to read—they readily did so; to listen to the instructions of the missionaries—they at once came in crowds for that purpose.” [...]

With multitudes, it was, no doubt, but sympathy or fashion; but there were also a large number of real inquirers and many hopeful conversions. All the converts were kept in training classes a year before they were admitted to the church, and then only on the strictest examination. [...] During the six years from 1838 to 1843, inclusive, 27,000 persons were admitted to the churches. [...] The next twenty years added more than 20,000 other members to the churches, making the whole number received, up to the end of the connection with the American Board in 1863, some 50,000 souls. [...]

At length came the time when the islands were to be recognized as a nominally Christian nation, and the responsibility of their Christian institutions was to be rolled off upon themselves. In June 1863, Dr. Anderson, senior secretary of the American Board, met with the Hawaiian Evangelical Association to discuss this important measure [...], and the Association agreed to assume the responsibility hitherto sustained by the Board. [...T]hose stations no longer look to the American churches for management and control. “The mission has been, as such, disbanded and merged in the community.”

["The value of the work achieved"]

On January 15, 1864, at Queen's Hospital, Honolulu, died William Kanui (Tenooe), aged 66 years, the last of the native youth who gave rise to the mission and accompanied the first missionaries. [...] God had spared his life to see the whole miraculous change that had lifted his nation from the depths of degradation to civilization and Christianity. Could the spirit of Henry Obookiah[a] have stood in Honolulu, soon after the funeral of Kanui, he would have hardly recognized his native island except by its great natural landmarks. He would have seen the city of Honolulu, once a place of grass huts and filthy lanes, now marked by substantial houses and sidewalks and a general air of civilization; a race of once naked savages decently attired and living, some of them, in comparative refinement; a nation of readers, whom he left without an alphabet; Christian marriage firmly established in place of almost promiscuous concubinage; property in the interior exposed with absolute security for an indefinite time, where formerly nothing was safe for an hour; the islands dotted with a hundred capacious church edifices built by native hands, some of them made of stone, most of them with bells; a noble array of several hundred common schools, two female seminaries, a normal school for natives, a high school that furnished the first scholar to one of the classes in Williams College; a theological seminary and 29 native preachers, besides 18 male and female missionaries sent to the Marquesas Islands; near 20,000 living church members; a government with a settled constitution, a legislature, and courts of justice and avowing the Christian religion to be "the established national religion of the Hawaiian Islands."

These facts exhibit the bright and marvelous aspect of the case. But, of course, they have their drawbacks. The Sandwich Islands are not paradise, nor even America. The plane of civilization is, as it must be, far below that of our own country. The old habits still shade into the new. Peculiar temptations to intemperance and licentiousness come down by inheritance. Foreign interventions and oppositions have been, and still are, grave hindrances. Church members but fifty years removed from a state of brutalism cannot, and do not, show the stability, intelligence, and culture of those who inherit the Christian influences of a thousand years. [...]

There is one sad aspect about this interesting nation. The population has been steadily declining since the islands were first discovered. [...] In the lapse of a few years after the first visits of foreign vessels, half the population are said to have been swept away with diseases induced or heightened by their unholy intercourse. The mission has done what could be done to save the nation. But the wide taint of infamous diseases was descending down the national life before the missionaries reached the islands, and the floodgates of intemperance were wide open. The gospel has retarded the nation's decline. But foreign influences have always interfered—and now, perhaps, more than ever. The sale of ardent spirits was once checked but is now free. The present monarch stands aloof from the policy of some of his predecessors and from the influence of our missionaries. And the population, reduced to 62,000 in 1866, seems to be steadily declining. [...] Commercial forces and movements, meanwhile, are changing the islands. The lands are already

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[a] *Henry Opukahaia was—like Hopu, Honoree, and Kanui—a Native Hawaiian expatriate who converted to Christianity while living in New England. He began studying at an ABCFM school to prepare himself to return to Hawai'i as a missionary, but he became ill and died before completing his studies.*

passing into the hands of foreign capitalists, and the islands are falling into the thoroughfare of the nations.

The proper sequel, therefore, of this grand missionary triumph may be taken away, and the race itself, as a nation, may possibly cease to be. But in no event can the value or the glory of the work achieved be destroyed. Not only will thousands on thousands of human souls thereby have been brought into the kingdom—by the labor of a hundred missionaries and the expenditure of perhaps a million dollars from America—but a grand experiment will have been tried before the world, and an imperishable memorial erected for all time, of what the remedial power of the gospel can accomplish, in an incredibly short time, upon a most imbruted race. “Fifty years ago,” says Dr. A. P. Peabody,[b] “the half-reasoning elephant, or the tractable and troth-keeping dog, might have seemed the peer, or more, of the unreasoning and conscienceless Hawaiian. From that very race, from that very generation, with which the nobler brutes might have scorned to claim kindred have been developed the peers of saints and angels.” [...]

The history of the Sandwich Islands will stand forever as the vindication, to the caviler, of the worth of Christian missions and as a demonstration, to the Christian, of what they might be expected to accomplish in other lands, if prosecuted with a vigor at all proportioned to the nature and extent of the field and crowned with the blessing of God.

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[b] *Andrew Preston Peabody was a white Unitarian minister and a professor of Christian morals at Harvard University.*

Source: S. C. Bartlett, *Sketches of the Missions of the American Board* (Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1872), 40-57, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951001510441y. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings added by Duffy. Spelling, punctuation, and the formatting of dates emended in line with modern American conventions, but names spelled as per the source publication. The title *queen regent* has been relocated to appear before the office holder’s name, for clarity. The titles *queen regent* and *senior secretary*, capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase, as well as the terms *normal school* and *paradise*. The lowercasing of *cross* and *ten commandments* replicates the source.

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