

Imperial missionaries?

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Colonial church in Goa, India. Thinkstock

Whether we like it or not, the world's religious landscape owes much to the long history of European imperialism. But the story of empire and missions is much more complex than we might assume, and some common assumptions need debunking. In the case of some of the largest and most enduring empires, the relationship between faith and empire was strongly counterintuitive.

To some degree, all the European empires claimed religious justification for their existence, citing a command to extend the light of God's kingdom into regions of pagan ignorance. But that is very different from forcing or demanding that their new subjects accept Christianity. The Spanish and Portuguese certainly did impose their faith, and we must ruefully admit their success in accomplishing this. Just glance at a map of the world's Catholic populations.

Other empires, though, conceived their role very differently. Until the mid-19th century, the British viewed their vast Indian possessions in strictly economic terms and actively discouraged any evangelization that could provoke the wrath of Hindu and Muslim elites. For many years, missionaries faced deportation, and only grudgingly did authorities tolerate newcomers like the famous missionary William Carey.

Although it is hard to generalize about long periods, the British, Dutch, and other imperial authorities usually had a strong prejudice in favor of Muslims as interlocutors, soldiers, and public servants. Muslims, they felt, were brave fighters, and they had a

strong sense of honor and the value of oaths, making them vastly preferable to pagans or polytheists. Also, once officials had dealt with Muslims in, say, India, they regarded them as a known quantity when encountered elsewhere.

Native Christians, in contrast, were disliked and distrusted. Secular authorities saw them as potential troublemakers who destabilized their familiar communities. Converts were disturbingly likely to claim equality with their imperial masters, and in extreme cases, successful missionaries might publicly denounce imperial abuses.

The empires therefore faced an impossible dilemma: they needed to be seen supporting missionary endeavors, yet they had very mixed feelings about any potential successes. Only beginning around the end of the 19th century did the empires devote themselves more enthusiastically to Christian expansion.

We see this paradox in the history of the Dutch empire, which is relatively little known to Anglo-Americans. In the East Indies, the Dutch empire was very long-lived—almost 350 years—and it ran a close second to British India in wealth and economic potential. But it never created a Christian society like those of Latin America.

The Dutch East India Company (the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) dates from 1602. In 1619, it founded its capital at Batavia (Jakarta) and spread its influence over much of the vast territory that we today call Indonesia. The Netherlands at this time was fiercely Calvinist to the extent that all public officials were required to be communicant members of the Reformed Church. You would never guess this established status, though, from the eastern colonies. In the immediate area around Batavia, the Dutch installed Reformed worship and prohibited other faiths, but they made few such efforts.

Evangelistic work—notionally the responsibility of the VOC—was patchy at best, and mainly involved keeping out rival Catholic missionaries. By the start of the 18th century, the Bible had been translated into Malay, the regional lingua franca used by the VOC in its commercial dealings. That Bible, however, was quite inaccessible to the vast majority of local people, with their many distinctive vernaculars. If they chose not to learn Malay in order to read the Bible, that was their misfortune.

Matters changed with the end of the VOC at the end of the 18th century. Mission work was thrown open to all denominations. The Netherlands Missionary Society dates from 1797. Even then, the Dutch pursued their primary goal of *rust en orde*

(peace and order) by strictly limiting the potential scope of missions. Evangelistic efforts were strongly directed toward animist believers on the fringes rather than toward Java's large Muslim majority.

The Dutch never forgot that their continued rule depended on maintaining the tacit acquiescence of Muslim spiritual and political leaders, and they constrained mission efforts accordingly. Dutch authorities, meanwhile, freely tolerated the practice of Islamic law among Dutch subjects and made no objection to Islamic expansion.

At first sight, the strong Christian presence in modern Indonesia seems to contradict the idea that the Dutch commitment to mission was halfhearted. At least 10 percent of Indonesians are Christian—some 25 million strong. A great many of these, though, trace their Christian roots to the Portuguese presence that predated the Dutch takeover or to very modern Pentecostal activism. Distinctively Reformed believers make up only a tiny minority. As the Dutch experience shows, the demands of empire and mission starkly contradicted each other.