

Over 200 years, how has the mission map changed?

By [Emily Conroy-Krutz](#)

November 10, 2015

Two hundred years ago this fall, the first American missionaries opened the doors of their first school in India and the work of the American foreign mission movement officially began.

Bicentennials are often a time of commemoration and celebration, but they are also great opportunities to consider what has changed. Those first schools in India were a small start to what would become a large movement. By the Civil War, more than a thousand American Protestant missionaries operated in Africa, Asia, North and South America, the Pacific Islands, and Europe. Today, millions of Americans travel for international mission work every year.

In 200 years, some priorities have changed. Early missionaries cared about education and medical care, but they saw them as being at the service of religious conversion. (One 1830s missionary doctor in Singapore complained that the lines of people at his clinic were a tremendous distraction from his real work as a missionary.) The early movement's goal: conversion from "heathenism" to Protestant "civilization."

Many are surprised to hear how soon American missionaries were active around the world. The first decades of the 19th century were a time of weakness, certainly not the time you would expect to see a large foreign missions movement emerge from the churches of the Northeast. Missionaries were ambitious, hoping to expand their reach across the world. Yet they were also aware of the constraints they operated under. They did not have limitless funds; nor did they have access to all of the peoples of the world. The real constraints of shipping routes, political systems, and financial support all shaped where the missionaries went as they began the work of converting the "whole world."

Missionaries were quite clear about these choices. Some places, they explained, were of higher priority than others. In an example that might sound odd today, they asked supporters to think about whether Louisiana or Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) should

be a higher priority. The answer was Ceylon. It had a denser population and was close to other densely populated locations. It was also part of the British Empire, so missionaries could expect (or at least hope for) the support of the British government as they attempted to open schools and translate the Bible. Ceylon, then, was the better choice, even though it was much farther away.

Population and government support were not the only factors, though. Also important were assumptions about culture and race. One reason Louisiana was a low priority, in other words, was that the people there were Native Americans, believed by the missionaries at that time to be so backward and uncivilized that they would be difficult to convert. Because the people of Ceylon were under British rule, missionaries believed they were already on the road to civilization and ready to embrace the missionary project.

Decisions like this were repeated each time missionaries selected a new location or asked the Christian public for support. They weighed different places against each other, asking where their work would be most beneficial and which people would be most likely to convert.

In the process, they created a hierarchy of heathenism. This mindset inspired American missionaries' initial turn overseas and kept the missionaries more interested in Asia than Africa for the first decade of their work. The result was that over the course of the early decades of their work, the missionary map overlapped significantly with the Anglo-American imperial map.

This hierarchy of heathenism used by early-19th-century missionaries no longer exists in the same way. Yet we might consider what has emerged in its place. Much has changed in 200 years of American foreign missions, and yet decisions still need to be made about priorities for where to send dollars and bodies around the world. Certain places, disasters, and needs get more attention than others. What framework undergirds the mission map now? It seems safe to say that even in the absence of the empires that shaped the story in the early 19th century, similar dynamics are still at work.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Shalom Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).*