From Soul Saving to Character Building:
The Transformation of International Service at Bowdoin College

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BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR, CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WORK characterized college students’ and recent graduates’ international service activities. At Bowdoin College, support for Christian missions in various forms, such as missionary prayer groups and monetary support, was prevalent on campus from the early part of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the First World War. During the period between World Wars I and II, however, missionary activity dissolved mostly because of a national focus on the war effort and economic turmoil within the United States during the Great Depression. By the late 1950s, participation in international service once again became an increasingly popular undertaking for recent college graduates. By this time, though, the independent organizations they tended to serve with did not have religious purposes. Instead, this form of secular international service was epitomized by the Peace Corps, which quickly recruited thousands of young volunteers, including many Bowdoin College graduates, following its establishment in 1961.

Why was the type of international service that emerged after the
Second World War so different from the religious missionary activity that characterized this form of service prior to the war? One simple answer can be found in the secularization of higher education and American society more broadly, between the early part of the twentieth century and the 1950s. A more nuanced, and probably more accurate answer to this question, however, lies within changes that occurred in the field of international service prior to the period of secularization. Taking Bowdoin College’s support for Christian missions as its central case, this study illustrates changes in ways that missionaries both approached their work and conceived of its purpose, which paved the way for the emergence of secular international service in the post-World War II era.

At the national level, a large majority of support for missionary work came from the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), especially the college campus chapters. Changes in the purpose of Christian missions, therefore, can best be understood through the framework of educational historian David Setran’s three phases of YMCA history. Setran’s first phase, which lasted from 1858 to 1888, was characterized by “evangelism and soul saving,” through which YMCA members worked to spread the Christian message by encouraging other colleges and universities to start their own YMCA chapters.1 During this phase, YMCA members also worked to spread the Christian message of salvation to their peers. Evangelism was seen as the best way to accomplish one’s Christian duty and provide help to those in need.2 The second phase, which lasted from 1888-1915, witnessed the rise of what scholars have labeled “muscular Christianity,” which encouraged young men to perform useful service for those in need in order become strong Christian men. The duration of the last phase, from 1915-1934, focused on Christian social reconstruction. World War I and the Great Depression, which occurred during this last phase, led the YMCA to focus most of its efforts on domestic issues and on helping in the war effort. As a result, international missionary work was at best minimal during this

2 Setran, p. 42.
period.³

Support for missionary activity at Bowdoin College, both from Bowdoin’s YMCA and a student-led organization called the Praying Circle, generally followed Setran’s first two phases. A closer examination of the phases, however, offers insight into the purpose of missionary activity during these particular time periods. Finally, consideration of these phases, along with other national trends affecting religion on college campuses, reveals the complexities of the changing purpose of international service from the nineteenth century to the beginning of World War I and helps us to understand changes in the character and purpose of secular international service by the 1950s.

**Evangelism and Soul Saving**

The Bowdoin College Praying Circle spearheaded the movement to support and participate in missionary service work in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the Praying Circle was not affiliated with the YMCA, its purposes on Bowdoin’s campus were nearly identical to those of the YMCA’s during the first phase of YMCA history as outlined by Setran. This first phase of the Praying Circle’s development placed an emphasis on evangelism and soul saving.

Originally called the Praying Society of Bowdoin College, the Praying Circle was founded on July 17, 1815, by a small group of six students and professors who wrote the society’s constitution outlining its purposes and rules. The Praying Circle provided a forum for students to come together for fellowship and prayer for the glory of a benevolent God.⁴ The idea to start such a society arose from contact with other colleges and universities in the Northeast that had their own Praying Societies, a result of evangelism from other campuses whose students were urged to spread the Christian message to peer institutions. In fact, although the society’s first aim was purely religious, it also served the purpose of keeping Bowdoin College

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³ Setran, p. 155.
connected with other colleges and universities in New England.\textsuperscript{5} It was through these connections with other institutions that Bowdoin students received a letter from Brown University’s Praying Circle inviting them to “join the concert of prayer for the missionary cause” that Brown and other New England colleges held on the first Monday of each month.\textsuperscript{6} As a result, Bowdoin Praying Society members added an article to their constitution calling for participation in the monthly missionary prayer.

Minutes from the Praying Society’s meetings, especially on the days of these special missionary prayers, reveal students’ views about the purpose of missionary work. Frequently, students “prayed for the prosperity of the benighted heathens,” for the “success of missionary expeditions in heathen lands,” and for the “general advancement of the Messiah’s Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{7} Their motives for prayer were for the wellbeing of missionaries serving abroad, but more importantly they hoped for the “enlightenment” of native peoples targeted by the missionaries and a dissemination of the Christian message of salvation. In this way, the Praying Society was a clear example of the evangelistic goals of religious campus organizations during this time period.

By 1833, the Praying Circle (as it was by then known) had become popular on Bowdoin’s campus, with its more than 50 members accounting for more than a quarter of the student body.\textsuperscript{8} With the organization’s a large presence on campus and members’ commitment to the missionary cause evident in its constitution, it is not surprising that many Bowdoin graduates became both missionaries and leaders in the movement following graduation. Rufus Anderson, Class of 1818, for example, became the foreign secretary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, one of the leading missionary societies in the United States.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, between the years 1827 and

\textsuperscript{5} Helmreich, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{6} Praying Circle, Volume 1 Student Organizations, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
\textsuperscript{7} August 4, 1817; May 3, 1819; July 5, 1819; October 6, 1817; July 7, 1816, Praying Circle, Volume 1, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
\textsuperscript{8} Cyrus Hamlin, \textit{My Life and Times} (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, 1893), p. 111.
\textsuperscript{9} Helmreich, p. 52.
1847, Bowdoin alumni pursued missionary work in places such as Syria, Turkey, the Sandwich Islands, and Micronesia.\textsuperscript{10} Most of these graduates were involved in the field of education, with Bowdoin-affiliated missionaries serving as teachers, founding higher education institutions, and acting as college and university administrators. This emphasis on education directly reflected Christian missions’s evangelical purpose during this time period. Through teaching, missionaries hoped to reach the native peoples they served and “enlighten” them to the “truth” of Christianity.

One notable Bowdoin alumnus, Cyrus Hamlin, Class of 1934, was a member of the Praying Circle during his time on campus. His experiences at Bowdoin as well as his missionary work in Turkey serve as examples of the emphasis that campus religious organizations placed on soul saving. In his autobiography, Hamlin wrote about the Praying Circle’s nondenominational nature and described it as a place where college rivalries did not enter.\textsuperscript{11} Hamlin also provided several accounts of fellow students’ conversions to Christianity after intense, spiritual conversations with Hamlin in which he frequently shared his religious convictions with the hope that his fellow students would join him in his faith. Although certain that his life’s work belonged to the ministry, it was not until his years at Bowdoin that Hamlin decided to pursue the life of a missionary. Hamlin wrote that, while at college, he came to an understanding that he was to give up a life of comfort and financial security in order to fulfill what he believed was his duty to God.\textsuperscript{12}

Because Hamlin’s decision to become a missionary came after studying at Bowdoin, his participation in the Praying Circle and its evangelical activities with other students undoubtedly had some influence in his pursuing missionary work. When Hamlin graduated from Bowdoin in 1834, he enrolled at Bangor Theological Seminary to prepare for his missionary work.\textsuperscript{13} In Turkey, where Hamlin served

\textsuperscript{10} The Bowdoin Orient, February 18, 1910.
\textsuperscript{11} Hamlin, p. 97, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{12} Hamlin, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{13} Malcom P. Stevens and Marcia R. Stevens, “A College on the Bosporus,” ARAMCO World Magazine, (March-April 1984), p. 16-21, Box 2 of Cyrus Hamlin Manuscript Collection, Bowdoin College Special Collections and
as a missionary, he worked first as a teacher and later used his skills for innovation to create jobs for Protestant Armenians. These jobs included cleaning linens for the British Army during the Crimean War and operating a bakery to boost local employment and feed British troops. His most well-known accomplishment, however, brought him back to the field of education. In 1863, with the help of wealthy American Christopher Robert, Hamlin founded Robert College, which was one of the most esteemed higher education institutions. Both as a student at Bowdoin and as a missionary in Turkey, Hamlin followed the evangelical purpose of the Praying Society and worked to spread the Christian message through education.

By 1882, many members of the Bowdoin Praying Circle had begun attending meetings of the Intercollegiate Branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association. On October 19 of that year, several Bowdoin students held their first YMCA meeting on campus, effectively creating a YMCA chapter at Bowdoin College. At that meeting, students drafted a constitution outlining the purpose of the organization, which they indicated was to “promote growth in grace and Christian Fellowship among its members, and aggressive Christian work.” The constitution’s second article reiterated that, “It shall be the duty of the members to seek out the students of the institution and endeavor to bring them to a saving faith in Christ, and to enlist them in active service for Him. They shall also engage in such Christian work as may be determined by the Association or by the Executive Committee.” The constitution of Bowdoin’s YMCA chapter reflected an evangelical and soul saving purpose, while also revealing a new emphasis on engagement in “Christian work.” The appearance of these two goals, side by side in the YMCA’s constitution, perfectly demonstrates the transition between Setran’s first and second phases of YMCA history. In fact, the week following the first meeting of the

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14 Stevens and Stevens, p. 19.
15 Helmreich, p. 57.
16 “Praying Society Constitution,” Bowdoin Student Groups and Organizations Records: 1815 [4.8.17], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
17 Constitution, YMCA.
Bowdoin YMCA, members of the Praying Circle voted to make all those belonging to the Praying Circle members of the new YMCA.\textsuperscript{18} By this action, the Praying Circle was effectively absorbed in the YMCA.

**Character and Service**

A discussion of the second phase of the YMCA’s history necessitates a concurrent examination of “muscular Christianity” and the changes it brought to college campuses towards the end of the nineteenth century. This new emphasis on a “muscular faith” brought concepts of masculinity to the religion; bodily discipline and active service to others characterized the key components of the formation of a masculine character.\textsuperscript{19} At Bowdoin and other college campuses, this meant that being a “good Christian” involved more than evangelizing and knowledge of the Bible. Muscular Christianity quickly became associated with success in sports, active participation in the YMCA, and service to one’s alma mater. The construction of a statue called “The Christian Student” on the Princeton University campus in 1913 highlighted the influence of muscular Christianity on conceptions of the Christian religion at higher education institutions.\textsuperscript{20} Commissioned as a memorial to Princeton graduate Earl Dodge, who had been captain of Princeton’s football team, served as president of the YMCA’s Philadelphian Society, and graduated near the top of his class, the statue depicted Dodge in his football uniform holding several books and with an academic robe over his shoulder. The way in which Earl Dodge was portrayed is a clear example of the influences of muscular Christianity on college campuses. Dressed in his football uniform, the statue of Dodge emitted masculinity tempered by his apparent commitment to his schoolwork and to his alma mater. As president of his local YMCA society, Dodge was to be seen as an example of the ideal Christian student.

Religious life at Bowdoin was no exception to the influences of muscular Christianity. Historian Charles Calhoun explains that,

\textsuperscript{18} Helmreich, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{19} Setran, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{20} Setran, p. 128.
in 1885, William DeWitt Hyde became president of the college and “for the old orthodoxy and evangelicalism, he substituted ‘muscular Christianity.’” Indeed, further examination of the constitution of the Bowdoin chapter of the YMCA provides evidence of the influence of muscular Christianity even before Hyde’s arrival at the college. As previously indicated, the constitution outlined its purpose to engage its members in “active service for [Christ]” and “Christian work.” To provide a mechanism through which to realize these goals, the constitution also outlined the creation of various committees, including a Missionary Committee that was responsible for “Home and Foreign Missionary Work” and stimulating “interest among students in the missionary cause” This new phase of the YMCA, including the way in which it affected religious life at Bowdoin, led to greater support for missionary activity both on campus and in the lives of Bowdoin alumni.

Support for Bowdoin College graduate and Indian missionary Anand S. Hiwale from the Bowdoin YMCA demonstrated how the trend of muscular Christianity influenced the purpose of missionary work. Upon graduating from Bowdoin in 1909, Hiwale returned to his native India where he became a missionary in the Satara District. The YMCA quickly rallied behind Hiwale, referring to him as “Bowdoin’s missionary.” Moreover, the Bowdoin newspaper, the Orient, published several articles detailing the nature of his work. In one such article, Hiwale referred to his alma mater and said, “It [missionary work] is a very hard and difficult field, but Bowdoin men like to tackle hard things.” He suggested that perhaps spending four years at Bowdoin prepares one for hard work such as that undertaken by missionaries. Other publications by the YMCA also emphasized the tough nature of Hiwale’s work as a missionary. Instead of staying

22 Constitution, YMCA.
23 Constitution, YMCA.
25 The Bowdoin Orient, March 18, 1910.
26 “YMCA Dollar Worth Pamphlet,” Bowdoin Student Groups and Organi-
in the United States and enjoying a prosperous life, Hiwale chose to return to India to spread the Christian message. Hiwale’s willingness to take on a difficult task was seen as a reflection of his masculinity and the combination of his masculine behavior, service to his alma mater, and his dedication to academics made him a prime example of the ideal “Christian student.”

During the second phase of YMCA history, an emphasis on practical, tangible service reflected themes of Progressivism and utility. The Bowdoin YMCA organized the distribution of various pamphlets such as a “Mission Study Prospectus,” which was published by the Student Volunteer Movement in New York City and advertised various courses in mission study.27 Another similar pamphlet advocated courses for students entitled “The Decisive Hour in Missions” and “India” and encouraged students to “do their share” by educating themselves about missions.28 Often, courses in mission study were designed to develop students’ interests in an effort to attract students to missionary work or encourage them to make financial contributions to the missionary cause. Other distributions from Bowdoin’s YMCA attempted to raise money to send to Hiwale to help him with his mission. These pamphlets often contained messages such as, “As Bowdoin men, we are taking our responsibility by Giving: toward the support of Mr. Hiwale. Every penny you give helps in this work, it may educate a boy, or help Hiwale to buy a bicycle or save someone from the plague,” and “every dollar you invest in Hiwale is raised to the nth power of usefulness.”29 A June 3, 1910 Orient article confirms the YMCA’s success in raising awareness and support for missionaries in general and, specifically, Hiwale’s mission in India. The article reported that 103 students were enrolled in an extracurricular mission study course and that the YMCA had raised nearly $800 to send to their former classmate.30 Setran writes that “the seamless blending of moral righteousness and active

27 Mission Study Prospectus, Bowdoin Student Groups and Organizations Records: [4.8.10], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
28 Missionary Study Pamphlet, [4.8.10].
29 “How Much Is A Dollar Worth?” [4.8.10]
30 The Bowdoin Orient, June 3, 1910.
service under the larger banner of ‘character building’ demonstrated a resonance with Progressive-era themes within the culture and on the American campuses.”  

This “blending” of Progressive reforms with the YMCA’s emphasis on service and character building marks the transition to Setran’s third phase of YMCA history, Christian social reconstruction.

After 1915, however, support on Bowdoin’s campus for the missionary cause began to weaken when the United States became involved in the First World War. As the YMCA entered its third phase of Christian social reconstruction, the organization’s efforts on both the national and college level still reflected Progressive-era ideas like service and utility. They became less centered on missionary activity, however, and more focused on providing aid to soldiers and helping other men to become soldiers. Bowdoin continued to play a role in war-related service through the YMCA. In 1915, for instance, David Richard Porter, Class of 1906, became general secretary for the national YMCA.  

The reforms Porter developed and implemented for the YMCA during the war years increased support for America’s war effort and centralized the YMCA on the national level. They also, however, marked an end to the association’s involvement in the missionary cause.

Effects of Missionary Trends on Secular Service after WWII

In the years following WWII, small private organizations began providing opportunities for secular international service to promote international understanding and exchange. Although the purpose of this new type of international service was usually devoid of any religious mission, it nevertheless contained echoes of the previous two phases of YMCA history. An emphasis on character building, service, and social reform ran through the purpose of these smaller organizations and later, the Peace Corps.

Participation by Bowdoin students and alumni in secular,

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31 Setran, p. 129.
32 Setran, p. 154.
international service in the late 1950s provides examples of the influence of the purposes of religious missions from the previous century. On campus, Bowdoin’s first secular service group, Campus Chest, organized fundraisers such as concerts, dances, and auctions to raise money for various charities aimed at Progressive-era-like social reform.33 Bowdoin’s alumni magazine, *Alumnus*, also highlighted service-related trips abroad taken by Bowdoin alumni and students. A December 1961 article, for instance, detailed alumnus Peter D. Relic’s service in Turkey with the American Friends Service Committee and work with East German refugees in Hamburg, Germany, through a Swiss organization called Service Civil International.34 Claiming that he felt grateful to provide meaningful service for the people of Turkey and German refugee children, Relic also commented on his own personal growth and increased understanding of what it meant to be a citizen of the United States as a result of his service.

Earlier that year, the *Alumnus* ran a similar story about Bowdoin student Terry N. Clark who spent the summer before his senior year at Bowdoin as an interpreter for the International Affairs Department of the Guinean Trade Union.35 Clark spoke highly of his experience and of Guinea in general, recommending in reports published by his hometown newspaper that the African nation be considered an ideal location to establish a new Peace Corps project. Both on campus and abroad, Bowdoin students and alumni took part in the secular, international service movement in ways that reflected themes from the last two of Setran’s phases of the YMCA.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the combination of national enthusiasm for the Peace Corps and the frequent presence of recruiters on campus clearly affected Bowdoin students’ decisions to serve as Peace Corps volunteers. Class of 1962 graduates John Rex and David R. Sherwood, for instance, became the first two Bowdoin students to join the Peace

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33 Campus Chest, Student Groups and Organizations Records: [Various Student Groups Box 1 Folder 37], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
34 “...A Part of Much More,” *Bowdoin Alumnus*, December 1961, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives, p. 2.
35 *Bowdoin Alumnus*, October 1961, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives, p. 10-11.
Corps, with both taking two-year teaching posts in Africa. By 1967, 33 Bowdoin alumni had either served or were currently serving with the Peace Corps; clearly, many students were motivated to serve abroad after their years at Bowdoin. When interviewed about their decisions to join the Peace Corps, Rex and Sherwood both mentioned that they felt the experience would be beneficial to them by helping them decide on their life goals. Sherwood further observed that he was “impressed by the fact that the Peace Corps stresses mutual benefits [to volunteers and countries].” The origin of this idea of “mutual benefits” reflects the service and character building elements of Setran’s second phase of YMCA history. The missionary work that characterized Setran’s first phase was intended to help the people of developing countries by bringing to them the Christian message of salvation. During the second phase of YMCA history, however, missionary work was also intended to help young missionaries develop the characteristics of muscular Christianity that would make them good Christian men. The Peace Corps’ design clearly emphasized both service to the host country and character development of the volunteer. In this way, themes from Christian missionary service reappeared and helped shape the purpose of secular, international service after WWII.

Conclusion

The secularization of the United States between the two World Wars affected the role of religion on college and university campuses. Although Christian missionary work characterized international service prior to World War I, most international service organizations

36 Bowdoin Alumnus, June 1962, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives, p. 7.
38 Bowdoin Alumnus, June 7, 1962, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
lacked a religious purpose following World War II. The transition from religious to secular international service was in some ways simply a reflection of the secularization of American society. However, to call the re-emergence of the popularity of international service for recent college graduates an entirely secular movement is, in some ways, misleading. Although organizations such as the Peace Corps did not have explicit religious goals, volunteers’ character building and personal development sometimes took a religious form. In a recent interview with one of Bowdoin’s first Peace Corps volunteers, for example, John Rex shared how his experience in the Peace Corps actually led him to question his own religious beliefs. Upon returning to the United States in 1964, he began a spiritual quest that eventually led him to become a minister in the Unitarian Universalist Church. In 2003, before being accepted to serve a second term with the Peace Corps in Namibia, Rex was described by Bowdoin magazine writer Sara Bodnar as “grateful for a life that is rich with experience and discovery.” Although organizations like the Peace Corps lacked an explicitly religious purpose, trends in the nature of religion on college campuses during a period of popularity of missionary work continued to pervade “secular” international service.

41 Bodnar, “Alumni Profiles.”