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 had few, if any, 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.

As this 1967 letter from Joseph Chapon, the Peace Corps’ northeast region director, highlights, Bowdoin alumni’s participation in international service was not restricted to missionary work. Indeed, Chapon’s claim that students “could both contribute to and benefit from a Peace Corps experience” provided Bowdoin graduates with a compelling rationale to engage in international service.

Bowdoin students pose with other members of the 1907 Maine State delegation to the YMCA’s annual Northfield Conference. Historian David Setran notes that “the greatest legacy of the Northfield conferences related to their nourishment of the foreign missionary emphasis of the movement.” Nevertheless, by the 1880s evangelism had begun to take the form of social activism while missionary work became focused on service and character development.

Article 12 of the Praying Society’s constitution recommended that Bowdoin join other colleges with similar societies in their monthly concert of prayer for both the wellbeing of missionaries and the successful salvation of the “benighted heathens” with whom the missionaries worked. Members of the Praying Society frequently communicated with students from other colleges and were encouraged to spread the Christian message of salvation to their peers. Many students perceived missionary work as an extension of this form of evangelism.

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, paving the way for the emergence of secular international service in the post-World War II era.