BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND CAPITALISM: PROTESTANT MISSION WORK IN CUBA FOLLOWING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

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The Presbyterian Church has such an opportunity on that island to-day as comes not once in a century. Think of it—a million people loosed from their old religious moorings, ready to be anchored to the dominant faith of the country which has given them freedom and hungry for spiritual things with the hunger that comes from feeding on husks. Now is the hour for the Christian church to yield to the missionary impulse, inspired by her founder and directed by the providential opportunity.¹

— Reverend Charles L. Thompson

ABSTRACT

Following the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Protestant missionaries flooded into Cuba with high hopes of capitalizing on the enormous opportunities for evangelization that US occupation provided. Characterized by a legacy of limited religious freedom and disillusionment with the Catholic Church and devastated by the economic privation of the recent war, the population of the newly “liberated” island represented a relatively untapped market for religious conversion. However, evangelical Christians were far from the only group that recognized the monumental potential presented by Cuba and its people; American businessmen converged on the island with equal zeal to take advantage of its bountiful natural resources and equally promising supply of laborers. Although motivations for economic and religious intervention differed greatly, the interests of capitalism and Christianity soon converged. American businessmen provided the funding and infrastructure essential to the success of the church while Protestant missionaries advanced the ideals of consumerism and industriousness that encouraged Cuban society to accept the arrival of US corporations and become a tractable labor for them. Although the advent of this symbiotic relationship in 1898 was most likely a product of coincidence rather than calculation, the two groups continued to support each other in Americanizing the social and economic landscape of Cuba throughout the age of US imperialism, profiting by way of faith and finance in the process.

The damage to the Cuban countryside and economy wrought by Spanish colonialists during the war for independence contributed significantly to the almost immediate success of Protestant missions. Different evangelical sects quickly gained popularity by building public works projects to meet the needs of a society so afflicted by the aftermath of war that in early 1899 only 600 teachers instructed 30,000 children.² According to one missionary, the island was home to some 250,000 orphans.³ Protestants, who had divided Cuba into several spheres of influence to avoid competition between denominations, built dozens of schools and children’s homes to combat this problem. For example, in 1899, the Episcopalian church purchased, rebuilt, and furnished a dilapidated sugar warehouse in Matanzas that provided asylum to 60 orphan girls, founding other homes in Havana, Guantanamo, and Bolondrón in later years.⁴ In addition to aiding children, Methodists distributed food to poor farmers in Cienfuegos and nearly all major denominations established medical clinics across the island.⁵ In this manner, missionaries not only offered religious salvation to the Cuban people, but more importantly, salvation from the worldly threats of poverty, hunger, and disease. As a result, the evangelicals easily drew followers away from the
Catholic Church, which “had been inattentive if not indifferent to Cuban spiritual and material needs” and was associated with the Spanish colonialists from which Cuban society had struggled so recently to free itself. Episcopalian minister Reverend Albion Knight wrote that in 1898, “many villages and cities were sending invitations to the missionaries to visit them and establish missions.” By 1910, approximately 150 foreign missionaries served an estimated 10,000 church members, a powerful testament to the enthusiasm with which Cubans embraced the Protestant churches.

The arrival of North American Protestants coincided with that of US corporations, and just as missionaries established public works projects, businessmen worked to develop the island’s infrastructure and rejuvenate its devastated economy. Corporations constructed mills that revived the Cuban sugar industry, providing countless unemployed Cubans with jobs, and in 1901, the American-owned Cuba Company completed construction of the Cuban Railway, linking remote regions to major cities and ports of trade. Despite the ways in which capitalism negatively affected Cuban culture and society, businessmen, like their ecclesiastical counterparts, offered the hope of worldly salvation to impoverished farmers and their families in the years following a war that had killed hundreds of thousands of Cubans, destroyed 90 percent of the island’s livestock, and transformed formerly fruitful agricultural regions into vast wastelands. Observing the impact of American business investment on Cuba, missionary J. Merle Davis wrote, “The sugar industry has made for better or worse, modern Cuba… It has attracted more than a billion dollars in foreign investment to the island. It has provided employment for a third or more of the Cuban population…and has put Cuba into the current of world life.” Although missionaries and businessmen clearly possessed different motivations for their work, both groups produced the same effect—they offered hope to a devastated society. As a result of their shared impact on Cuban welfare, a strong link between Christ and capitalism was easily recognized by the Cuban people from the beginning of US intervention.

The relationship between Protestantism and business did not, however, exist only through their respective functions in rebuilding postwar Cuban society, but within the very attitudes with which missionaries regarded members of their flock. Evangelicals who were born and raised in the United States came to Cuba believing in the American values of consumerism, industrialism, and capitalism with an intensity that rivaled that of their faith in God. As a result, the aim of most evangelical missions was not simply to spread the Protestant faith, but the American way of life. One missionary remarked, “The Cuban people have generations of bad training and no training to outgrow, new habits to form, new customs to adopt, before they can reach the conditions of civilizations which they ought to have.” Another claimed that “untrained on a different basis from that of Anglo Saxons,” Cubans “had to be taught how to behave.” Such comments clearly indicate that missionaries were as concerned with teaching Cubans to mimic their white American “superiors” as they were with exposing them to the teachings of their spiritual savior.

In particular, the American Protestant condemnation of Cuban society stemmed from a frustration that Cubans did not share the same materialistic values and consumerist tendencies as their American tutors. In his book *Advance in the Antilles*, Howard B. Grose, a missionary and advocate of Cuban evangelization and civilization, included a chapter entitled “Lack of Taste,” in which he observed:

Clothing seldom requires her attention. The same dress lasts her year in and out….The husband gets his scanty outfit as best he can, and is no slave to collars and cuffs, starched shirts or tight shoes. But the Cuban family of this class would not understand if you tried to tell them that there was a better way of living, unless you offered up more potatoes and rice…. This, remember, is all the existence they know; and while ambitionless and ignorant and improvident, they are not unhappy….But what a distance they must be lifted to reach a real Christian civilization! It is in homes like these that the woman missionary carries new ideals and begins work with faith, soap, and water.

Although Grose almost comically equates a perceived lack of fashion sense with a complete dearth of civility, his comments exemplify the manner in which missionaries linked the absence of materialist attitudes with the need to civilize the Cuban family. Moreover, because Grose concedes the happiness of
the family he describes, it becomes evident that he did not view materialism as a humanitarian means of alleviating physical suffering, but as a moral ideal that must be embraced in order to reach God.

In addition to materialism, missionaries stressed the importance of a Protestant work ethic that “emphasized such merits as skill, labor, … industry [and] diligence.” Although in his survey of Cuba J. M. Davis generally held Cubans in extremely high regard, lauding their generosity and the creative potential they offered the church, he complained that “The Cuban…inclines to be improvident, readily yields to tropical indolence, and looks for returns from the least possible exertion.” Grose expressed similar sentiments in another chapter of his book entitled “Easy Conditions”:

A colonist once asked an intelligent looking elderly Cuban why he did not cultivate more of his land. “What is the use” was his reply. “When I need money I pick off some bananas and sell them. I get for them twenty or twenty five dollars, which lasts me a long time. When I need more money I pick more bananas.” That is the common Cuban view. His natural indifference combined with the exactions of Spanish government has kept his mind free from…making provision for the future.

Once again, Grose highlights the practices of a relatively content individual in order to demonstrate the need to civilize the Cuban population, implicitly equating qualities of industriousness with godliness. Furthermore, Grose not only chastises the Cuban farmer, but the subsistence-style economy which he represents. To the Protestants in Cuba, money was not the root of all evil but rather the road to salvation; the spirit of capitalism and Christ were one and the same.

Protestants perceived indolence and improvidence so pervasive in Cuban society that they feared these vices would corrupt their own compatriots. In fact, the primary goal of the Episcopalian church was not to convert Cubans to Protestantism but to maintain the religious convictions of believers who had immigrated to the island: “The first work, therefore, of our Church is the care of the American people who have settled in the Island of Cuba…. The environment is such that the tendency is to yield to the influences that naturally drag one down.” In particular, the church disapproved of the “gaming instinct of the nation,” condemning Cubans and Americans alike who succumbed to the temptation of gambling, an activity antithetical to a Protestant work ethic that stressed the virtues of thrift, prudence, and economy. At their national meeting, Southern Methodists complained that “many true Christians who have arrived in Cuba do just like the Cubans…they are not paying attention to the day of God, but rather…attending and patronizing horse races and similar activities on Sundays.” Such concerns suggest that Protestant missions not only sought to indoctrinate Cubans with the spirit of capitalism, but also to preserve the vitality of that spirit within the businessmen who were already at work on the island.

The importance of consumerism and capitalism to American evangelicals can be explained in part by the fact that many prominent missionaries were themselves successful businessmen who held personal stakes in the success of US corporations in Cuba. Warren Akin Candler, Methodist Episcopal Bishop of Florida and Cuba, enjoyed a close relationship with his brother Asa Grigs Candler, the founder and president of Coca-Cola, and owned shares in the company, which had a direct interest in the bottling and milling operations of Cuba. One of the most prominent members of the American Friends, Zenas Martin, was a respected businessman in Iowa before coming to the island. He was also an old friend of Captain Lorenzo Baker, head of the United Fruit Company, which owned vast tracts of Cuban land that in 1912, produced 261,326,640 pounds of sugar and 5,600,025 gallons of molasses. Witnessing the rapid success of the company, Martin eventually became a business associate of the corporation himself. In addition to Candler and Martin, countless other Protestant missionaries formed ties to big business both in the United States and in Cuba. As a result, the link between Christianity and capitalism in the minds of the Cuban people was reinforced by the identities of the evangelists themselves.

While the financial welfare of many individual missionaries may have depended upon the vitality of American corporations in Cuba, the success of the entire evangelical movement did as well. From the start, Cuban missionaries relied upon infrastructure built by US businesses, using roads and bridges to reach remote rural communities and transport materials for their churches, schools, and offices. Railroads were particularly important as a full “Map of Cuba Showing the Lines of the Cuban
Railroad” on the back cover of Reverend Knight’s 1916 account of the Episcopal mission, “Lending a Hand in Cuba.” A 1917 Methodist report stated, “In some ways Cuba may be called a model mission field…the railroads reach every part of the country [and] the people are anxious for education.”

Additionally, American Baptist missionaries received a 30 to 50 percent discount from the Cuba Railway Company. The introduction of electricity to the Cuban countryside also played a large role in the growth of missions, as evidenced by an offer from a streetcar company to furnish free light to a Methodist school in Camaguey. The degree of success achieved by Protestant missions could not have been attained without the businessmen who developed the island.

Although infrastructure built by US corporations was incontrovertibly important to Protestant missionaries, contributions of land were also essential to the growth of the evangelical church in Cuba. Approximately half of American Baptist mission properties on the eastern part of the island were “acquired by gift” from North American corporations and many of them were located either in company towns or regions dominated by American-owned mills or plants. The United Fruit Company invited the American Friends to “spread the Gospel, good morals, and education to thousands of native laborers on those lands,” offering them free real estate to establish their mission. The company also donated 300 acres of rent-free land to the Methodist Agricultural and Industrial School in Preston and the Chaparra Sugar Company greatly advanced Friends mission work in the company towns of Chaparra and Santa Lucia though its donation of a church.

But perhaps of greatest importance to missionaries were the financial contributions of businessmen and corporations. Although the Methodist mission, like most others, was funded largely through donations of individual Christian families residing in the United States, the United Fruit Company paid the salary of a Methodist missionary at Preston and donated $1,000 to the American Friends school at Banes in 1911. Company president, Lorenzo D. Baker, made a personal contribution of $2,000 to the mission. In addition to providing land, electricity, and water to the school in Preston, the United Fruit Company along with the Bethlehem Steel Company and the Atlantic Gulf Sugar Company contributed scholarship stipends for students. While the aforementioned examples of corporate contributions to evangelical endeavors represent only a small fraction of the support missions received from American companies, they document the degree to which the Protestant churches in Cuba depended upon capitalist “philanthropy” for survival.

Finally, the presence of US corporations and company towns provided missionaries with potential congregants. In the years prior to the Spanish-American War, farmers and independent cane growers were widely dispersed across rural areas of the island. However, when American corporations such as the United Fruit Company, began to infiltrate the Cuban sugar industry, they purchased a great number of small local mills, replacing them with a larger and efficient mill, known as a central, around which company laborers lived and worked. These centrals concentrated previously diffuse populations into one easily accessible workforce, which allowed missionaries to spread the gospel to large numbers of people with minimal effort. Reverend W. L. Burner, a Disciple in Mantanzas urged, “The sugar plantations gather together great groups of people and furnish an unequaled opportunity to present the gospel. There are one hundred and ninety-eight sugar mills in Cuba. Such opportunities should be seized upon and used.” In this manner, American businesses not only supported the church with goods, services, and funds, but with human capital.

While the motivations of individual American businessmen are debatable, it is abundantly evident that on the whole, the charitable measures taken by US corporations were far from altruistic. For one, companies used their relationships with Protestant churches in Cuba and other developing nations in order to establish a good reputation and gain the respect of the American consumers to whom their products were sold. The Baptist Messenger published a list of prominent “Christian Capitalists” and in “Industrial Magnates and Evangelical Work,” praised Heinz, Sherwin-Williams, Eastman Kodak, Colgate, Quaker Oats, Nabisco, and Postum Cereal as model Christian corporations, presumably encouraging Christian consumers to prefer these companies over less pious manufacturers. In this context, missionaries received free land, services, and funding while US companies enjoyed free publicity.
Furthermore, the ways in which the Protestant churches served big business extended far beyond the limited publicity that they offered—they helped establish a social milieu that accepted American economic penetration. Directly following the Spanish-American War, Cubans enthusiastically welcomed American businessmen, greeting them as liberators from oppression and a means of reinvigorating their devastated economy. However, it quickly became obvious that the United States did not enter Cuba selflessly to liberate its people, as the Teller Amendment claimed, but to control its land, laborers, and resources. As early as 1905, over 13,000 Americans held titles to land in Cuba, controlling an estimated 4.3 million acres; after just seven years of occupation, approximately 60 percent of all rural property was owned by American corporations or individuals. As more and more Cubans questioned their loss of autonomy, Protestant missionaries propounded a worldview in which financial success correlated with religious piety, and the endeavors of American capitalists were presented in a positive light.

More practically, missionaries assisted American corporations by transforming a “shiftless,” “ignorant,” and “improvident” society into a tractable supply of obedient laborers. Since their arrival in Cuba, missionaries viewed Cubans not only as possible converts but potential workers. As Howard Grose commented in 1910: “Not that you would ever set the Cuban down as a ‘hustler,’ or witness anything like the hurrying and scurrying of a colder climate and more ambitious race; but you would know that the Cuban can work steadily and well, and enjoy it,” equating a Cuban’s worth to his ability to labor. J. M. Davis shared in this opinion and in his survey of missionary work in Cuba, emphasized the shared mission of business and evangelical interests in converting the island’s laborers:

A high official of the United Fruit Company spoke pessimistically of the Cuban worker and the hopelessness of getting him to change his ways. He admitted, however, that there were...Cubans whom it might pay to train. In this admission of the potentiality of the Cuban peon, lies a principle in which the Christian sees the hope of the world. It sees in the Cuban a personality that can be re-created and helped to stand upon his own feet.

Grose and Davis’s comments reveal the tendency of missionaries to assess the worth of a Cuban by his work ethic and reflect the prevalent belief that by changing attitudes and behaviors, missionaries could transform Cubans into valuable members of both the religious and secular community. Missionaries and businessmen taught the same ideal of service and compliance to their new converts and workers. Furthermore, it should be noted that although Davis claims that manual training leads to self-sufficiency, he fails to mention that persons who were formerly independent subsistence farmers, such as the banana picker mentioned by Grose, became wholly dependent on the company wage. Davis’s remarks emphasize the Protestant conflations of salvation with salaries, which benefited the United Fruit Company and other corporations benefited tremendously.

American evangelical missionaries worked hard to convert Cubans into productive laborers. Missionaries established specific training programs that provided Cubans with the skills necessary to work at American-run centrales. In particular, Christian schools served as training grounds for the future generation of corporate workers. Irene Wright explained in 1911 that the Methodist program was “directed toward making the girls intelligent and cleanly homekeepers,” and the boys into “competent employees.” The board of the Methodist Agricultural and Industrial School included officials from Bethlehem Steel and the United Fruit Company, who greatly influenced curriculum development and admissions policy. As a result, students became familiar with North American methods of production and were therefore regarded as ideal employees by American corporations or as Edgar G. Nesman, former director of the school, recalled, “were looked upon kindly because they had graduated from the United Fruit-sponsored school.”

In addition to the Methodists, Presbyterians opened industrial institutes and schools that included agricultural training in their curriculum. Milton Hershey, who had already founded an orphan school whose “primary objective was to train boys for jobs on the farm or agriculture” and planned to build “a model sugar mill...to prepare the boys for careers in Cuba’s principal industries,” also funded a Presbyterian industrial school in Aguacate. Additionally, the curriculum of “La Progresiva,” one of the largest and most esteemed Presbyterian educational institutions on the island, focused on agricultural
training. An article entitled “For the Culture and for the People: La Progresiva” featured a picture of two young men working in a field with the caption, “The science of agriculture is a topic that greatly interests the teachers at La Progresiva. Here we see two students doing some…field work after having learned its theory.”39 Another pamphlet published by the Presbyterian mission depicted a group of young men with sledge hammers amongst a pile of rubble with the caption: “The boys themselves break stone for work of construction on polytechnic institute buildings,” underscoring the labor-oriented values upon which the school was quite literally built.40

Finally, higher education was also tailored to fit business interests as missionaries trained members of the middle and upper classes to work in American offices rather than fields. Candler College, named after Bishop Candler and largely funded by his brother, the president of Coca-Cola, expanded its business program in 1910 at the behest of American businessmen. In the 1940s, the upper division of La Progresiva graduated students from their commercial program, having trained them for careers as corporate secretaries. Although the skills gained at Christian schools in Cuba could be applied at non-US-owned corporations, this form of education clearly served American business interests, as American companies dominated the Cuban industrial sector.

The values of industriousness and the skills needed for manual labor were so entrenched in the Protestant curriculum that they played a major role in schools that trained Cubans to become ministers and other Church workers. The proposed curriculum for a Methodist school designed to “correspond to a Theological Seminary or school for Deaconesses in the United States” not only included classes in “Methods of Personal Evangelism and Extension Work,” “Religious Education,” and “Evangelical and Christian Doctrine,” but in “Home Industries,” “Agriculture,” and “Manual Training.”41 While graduates presumably would have spent their time in the pulpit rather than on the plantation, the school promoted business-oriented ideals and skills that future preachers would encourage within their congregations. Thus, even as Cubans began to gain higher ranking positions and a degree of autonomy within the church, they were taught to promote distinctly American principles, many of which supported corporate expansion. Additionally, the very structure of the curriculum conveniently aligned with corporate needs. The proposed school year was divided into quarters “so that a student could be out of the school for a quarter to teach, preach or work in the ‘zafre’ (sugar harvest).”42 While this provision was most likely instituted so the student could make money to support him or herself in school, it also encouraged them to contribute to the growth of big business through manual labor.

While the work of Protestant missionaries in Cuba undoubtedly facilitated American economic penetration of the island, the degree to which missionaries intentionally participated in this insular intervention is more debatable. While American businesses were almost certainly self-interestedly driven to aid the church in order to promote Cuban compliance and cooperation, missionaries seem to have been motivated by a sincere desire to save Cuban souls and a conviction that capitalism could offer relief to a suffering population. Therefore, it must be understood that the ideologies of industriousness and materialism with which North American missionaries sought to indoctrinate their pupils were not purchased by capitalist contributions, but already inhered in a religion that viewed hard work as the road to salvation. In fact, as time progressed and the more deleterious effects of corporate expansion became increasingly apparent, many missionaries acknowledged and even condemned the actions of “Americans who care[d] nothing for the Cubans.”43 In 1942, J. M. Davis endorsed a “redistribution of land by which the peasant worker c[ould] become an independent producer” and claimed that “the peon must be rehabilitated, placed upon his own acres, and trained in their remunerative use,” proposing a program that promoted hard work and self-sufficiency as opposed to reliance on the company wage.44

While the relationship between missionaries and corporations did not constitute a conspiracy to exploit Cuban laborers, it would be naïve to absolve missionaries of an understanding of the potentially dangerous effects of their affiliation with American companies. In fact, many missionaries acknowledged the dangers of their ties to business while strengthening them anyway. Zenas Martin cautioned against falling “in the shadow of a great godless company” whose “methods of business will be in opposition to our teachings,” but despite this warning, owned several plantations from which he sold his sugar crop to the Cuban American Fruit Company, the United Fruit Company, and Cúpey company mills in eastern Cuba.45 Similarly, in letters regarding the United Fruit-sponsored Methodist school at Preston, Lorraine
Buck stressed “the importance of avoiding even the appearance of an alliance between mission work and American business interests in Cuba” but backtracked by calling attention “to the fact that the United Fruit Company in Cuba is well known for its enlightened efforts for the welfare of its employees and that officials of the Preston Central have over a period of years been very friendly to our work and shown us many courtesies.” 46 Thus, it seemed that given the choice between allying with business or forgoing funding, missionaries overwhelmingly chose the former, despite their misgivings.

Regardless of their intentions, missionaries helped permanently to transform the landscape of Cuban society through their relationships with American corporations. Overall, Protestant churches promoted a shift from a subsistence economy to one centering on wage labor and consumerism—a transformation that proved a mixed blessing to the citizens of Cuba. By 1929, sixty percent of Eastern Cuba was controlled by mostly corporate-owned centrales and in 1931, Leland Jenks observed, “The growth of the sugar industry on the plains of Camaguey and Oriente has meant the elimination of small, independent farmers, as surely as it has meant enormous profits for the Cuban Railroad.” 47 However, despite the success of American corporations and the (mostly) noble intentions of Protestants, many of the benefits of capitalism that missionaries envisioned failed to materialize for Cubans. Although the wages of Cuban laborers significantly increased under American corporations, they were often squandered by individuals accustomed to receiving their payment in goods rather than currency. Ironically, an increase in material wealth did not bring Cuban converts closer to God, but rather to the poverty and corruption that plagued a society unfamiliar with the workings of a cash economy.

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