PREFATORY FINDINGS IN THE
SOCIOLOGY OF MISSIONS*

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Sociological aspects of missionary activity are analyzed via a review of relevant literature. Two major strategies are identified, one oriented mainly toward social systems and the other toward individuals; the strategies appear to be associated with variations in the parent institution and the congregation of converts. Missionary tactics relate in part to types of "opinion change" postulated social psychologically; tactics also are aimed at dealing with structural conflicts between native and foreign sociocultural systems. Receptivity to religious innovations is found to increase under conditions of disorganization, a finding which fits current theories of value-oriented social movements. Foreign churches often are rejected if their social organization is too dissimilar to native patterns; further, the indigenous social organization, especially the ranking and kinship systems, channels diffusion.

REVOLUTIONS, industrialization, and urbanization have caused missionaries to shift their target populations and to modify some of their appeals, but missionary efforts have not been decimated by these secular forces and, indeed, new mission stations are being established yearly in foreign lands. The planned diffusion of religion is a present and potent force, significant both because of the magnitude of the operations and because of the crucial impact of these operations on sociocultural systems in developing areas of the world. Beyond the topical significance of missionary work, there is another feature of missions which makes them of sociological interest: missions are natural social laboratories in which the most critical (and dangerous) variables are customarily manipulated. The missionary routinely agitates and stimulates emotional crises, he systematically implants new beliefs, values, and behaviors, and when necessary he modifies existing social structures or founds new groups where his innovations can thrive. Rigorous research on missionary activities presents a unique (and relatively unexplored) opportunity for testing theoretical propositions concerning diffusion and influence, personality and value change, and relations between social systems and personality. A rich
variety of variables can be controlled in analyses, including the strategies and tactics used, the psychological and sociological manipulations employed for re-socialization, the degree of anomie preceding and following innovations, the social structure and culture of the recipient group, the social organization of the parent institution, and the personality, training, and ideology of the missionary.

This essay is a review of literature by and about missionaries in which an attempt has been made to abstract general formulations relevant to contemporary sociological theory. The literature reviewed consists of (1) scientific reports and essays, and (2) communications of missionaries among themselves. In the first group of materials are anthropological, sociological, and psychological writings, case histories, field studies, survey studies, etc. In the second group are theological works, biographies, inspirational writings, and handbooks. To distinguish the two distinct bodies of literature, a convention is adopted in footnoting: references from the scientific literature are listed first and preceding a slash; references following a slash are from the missionary literature.

Two Types of Strategy

In what may be called the diffuse or system-oriented strategy the missionary operates from a minimal, perhaps temporary, station and circulates widely among the population, distributing his attention and effort over masses of people but focusing special attention on leaders at all levels. The target in this approach is the social system rather than individuals, and the effective missionary frequently is disruptive of a group's equilibrium. He is adept at using pre-existing or instigated disorganization as a social force and at guiding social adjustment processes toward predetermined, new states of equilibrium. Successful application of the diffuse strategy tends to give rise to highly autonomous congregations of converts with respect to finances, organization, and religious doctrine. However, critics claim that with this approach converts' beliefs are shallow and often barely recognizable due to reinterpretation.

In the concentrated or personalistic approach the missionary seeks out a

1 Systematic bibliographic procedures were employed to obtain a representative list of sources for review. Ten volumes of the International Index to Periodicals were searched under 35 subject headings; in addition all articles in the International Review of Missions since 1950 were examined, and a search of the card catalog for the University of Chicago libraries was conducted employing numerous topic headings. Additional sources were obtained from bibliographies and personal communications.


3 This characterization is mainly from accounts in: A. Metraux, "Jesuit Missions in South America," Handbook of South American Indians, 5 (1949), Part 2, pp. 645-653; M. T. Price, Christian Missions and Oriental Cliti-
few individuals at a time, or even waits to be approached. Prospective converts are removed from their society and sheltered paternalistically in the mission complex (which may include a school, a hospital, orphanage, etc.) where they receive intensive reeducation. The effective missionary is adroit at selecting subjects ripe for change because they are dissatisfied or distraught and at resolving emotional crises (which he himself may generate) by inducing personality reorganization. Successful application of the concentrated strategy seems to produce steadfast congregations intimately tied to the mission and larger church community. Critics claim that the resulting congregations are static groups without proselytizing power and that usually they are not self-supporting.

**Strategy and the parent institution**

Roman Catholic missions seem to be concentrated more often than Protestant missions, and within the Protestant denominations there appears to be a tendency for churches with less centralized and pyramidal organization to favor the diffuse strategy. This suggests that the concentrated approach is more characteristic of churches with multi-level, centralized organizations while the diffuse approach is more characteristic of churches with flat, decentralized structures. The generalization is derived judgmentally from incomplete and often ambiguous descriptions of missions in the literature, and it requires validation, perhaps modification, by a systematic

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6 [Pickett et al., op. cit.; McGavran, op. cit.; Vicedom, op. cit.](#)
not expect individual changes to cumulate in significant sociocultural effects, and converts are not reimmersed in their old social system but are established in a new community under the management of the missionary. It may be that missionaries of the concentrated orientation demand such fealty that any “back-siding,” such as might occur in returning to old circumstances, is unacceptable. On the other hand it is possible that their methodology reflects a fundamental condition of social change: personality is a function of the sociocultural system, but a sociocultural system is not merely a cumulative product of the personalities within it at a particular time.

This hypothesis helps to clarify some of the peculiar problems and advantages of each strategy. Missionaries using the diffuse strategy have a simpler task in the sense that they can focus efforts on a single quantity—the sociocultural system—and expect consequences at lower levels in the form of mass movements sweeping through the affected population. At the same time, however, it is no easy task to effect changes in a sociocultural system which is operating more or less satisfactorily, and judging from the criticisms of the diffuse approach the particular personality changes which follow systemic changes are not highly predictable.

Missionaries using the concentrated strategy have a more tedious, complicated task in that they must engage in intensive interaction and at the same time found a community. However, there is a greater probability of results in even stable societies, since almost always there are some estranged individuals available for conversion, and in addition the approach provides more control over changes in character.

Functions of the missionary in each strategy

In the diffuse approach changes in individuals’ beliefs and values are sought by disrupting or opportunizing on the disruption of social equilibrium. One interpretation of the strategy is that social disequilibrium threatens leaders’ positions and prompts them to exert effort toward restoring equilibrium: when the missionary succeeds in having himself perceived both as source of disruption and as a possessor of power, leaders may try to secure their positions by accommodating the missionary and converting their own people. This hypothesis fits with the fact that missionaries of the diffuse orientation do focus special attention on leaders. It implies that the missionary’s visits to the masses are mainly agitative and aimed at producing general unrest, since it is the leaders who actually influence persons toward conversion.

Another plausible hypothesis is that in the diffuse approach missionary activities simply magnify the effects of existing social disorganization, increasing the rate of spontaneous personality disruption and readjustments, and at the same time provide some guidance in the direction of adjustment. The hypothesis implies that some existing social disorganization, some agitation by the missionary, and some resocialization work by the missionary are necessary if the diffuse approach is to be effective. In this hypothesis native leaders are postulated to have no special facilitating

\[7\] Numerous instances are recorded in which native leaders have persecuted missionaries: see P. H. Ashby, Christian Missions and Their Approach to Contemporary Primitive Cultures, unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1950; Metraux, op. cit.; Price, op. cit.; Rappoport, op. cit., pp. 27-28. J. V. Taylor, The Growth of the Church in Uganda (London: SCM Press, 1958). In at least one case (recorded by Taylor) an important factor leading to persecution rather than accommodation seemed to be the perceived weakness of the missionary.
function other than, perhaps disseminating information about the new religion.

A third possibility is that social disequilibrium leads to anxieties which a successful missionary converts into guilt, thereby disorganizing the present self and opening the way for new adjustments. Here again agitation and resocialization would be necessary. In addition, however, the missionary would have to "preach," that is, induce self-blame for anxieties. Some evidence indicates that only certain types of people and cultures would be susceptible to the diffuse approach if this is the underlying dynamic. 8

Examination of the concentrated approach provides a microscopic view of what happens psychologically in value conversion. Here the missionary's strategy bears resemblance to efforts of evangelists working in their own culture: it stresses isolation of the individual from normal social influences, exaggeration of personal conflicts and anxieties, and psychological dominance of the individual by the missionary. Necessary conditions for personality restructuring in this approach appear to be (1) a state of high tension or anxiety and (2) punishment of any attempts to resolve conflict in terms of old personality mechanisms. A third condition—internalization of the new roles, beliefs, attitudes, values, and needs—is necessary to determine the direction of change, and it seems that this occurs most often through direct education and through identification with the missionary. This analysis, based on an examination of the activities of missionaries, receives additional support from studies of personality change due to secular forces. 9

**GROUP-DIRECTED TACTICS**

In *community conversion* no formal conversions occur until everyone in the group is ready, then all are baptized at once. A number of claims are made in favor of this system: early adopters are not persecuted (they can remain anonymous if necessary) nor are they easily stereotyped so that diffusion is limited to definite population segments; early converts, whose initiation must "wait for the others," are motivated to proselytize; and the group ceremony makes the new orientation of all persons in the group manifest to all, thus perhaps permitting the adoption of structural innovations which are harmonious with the new beliefs and values. 10 Some missionary organizations have practiced controlled *cultural adaptation*, submitting their innovations within the framework of native institutions and practices: initiation rites, ceremonies of native religion, local songs and myths, and festivals have been reinterpreted by missionaries.

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9 Megaw, op. cit.; Pickett et al., op. cit.; Vicedom, op. cit.
as a means of minimizing resistance to conversion. Forced innovation has not been unusual where religion developed political ties. Several reactions to coercive innovation (besides conversion) are recorded in the literature: armed resistance, compartmentalization of new beliefs and attitudes, reinterpretation, and opportunistic adoption with later rejection after the coercion is lifted. An instance in which individuals were kidnapped, "brainwashed" and converted, and then returned to their group to reduce the group's resistance has been recorded.

Various auxiliary channels of influence are used for reducing initial resistances to innovation: for example, the mass media, leaflets, street chapels, and summer camps. The drafting and training of converted laymen for part time proselytizing is sometimes a systematized procedure.

TACTICS OF PERSONAL INTERACTION

Available statements by missionaries concerning tactics in the interpersonal encounter agree that the crucial matter is discovering the subject's primary problem area or source of anxiety. It is unclear in these writings, however, what proceeds after this is accomplished. In one early sociological study it is concluded, on the basis of an analysis of a mass of anecdotal and published materials, that the missionary in his encounters: (1) attempts to put non-Christian values and norms into internal conflict; (2) attempts to teach the new values and ideals he desires; (3) tries to accentuate existing personal conflicts and develop new ones; and (4) tries to attain mental dominance so that any anxiety resolution other than complete conversion is blocked. This procedure sounds much like what would be required to change attitudes and values through identification. The


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15 The missionary literature on use of the media is extensive but undistinguished. Some above-average articles are in H. W. Scott (ed.), Ways of Evangelism (Nisore, India: Christian Literature Society of India, 1953), which also includes the following on lay evangelism: S. J. Durnisamy, "Rural Service Fellowship Camps"; A. B. Ram, "The Neighborhood"; R. W. Scott, "Lay Visitation."

There is ample evidence that group facilitation is critical for the effectiveness of the training process. Two main goals of missionary training are: (1) to instruct the trainees thoroughly in the principles and dogma of the faith, and also in the competencies needed to diffuse the idea system; (2) to teach the language and customs of the people. These goals are achieved through didactic methods in the classroom, as well as through practical experience in the field. The literature on intercultural encounters is too vague to determine if there are generalizable patterns of behavior that can be observed in all cases. However, the approach taken by the missionaries is critical for their success in the field. The literature on psychological testing and personality shows that individuals who are high in extraversion and openness to experience are more likely to adapt successfully to the cultural environment. This suggests that the training process should focus on developing these personality traits in the trainees. The training process should also be designed to foster leadership qualities, as these are important for the success of the mission work. The training process should be evaluated on the basis of its effectiveness in fostering leadership qualities and cultural adaptation, rather than simply on its ability to impart knowledge. The training process should be flexible and adaptable, as the cultural environment in which the missionaries will work will likely be different from what they are trained for. The training process should also be designed to foster creativity and innovation, as these are important for the success of the mission work. The missionaries should be encouraged to think critically and creatively, and to seek out new ideas and solutions to problems. This will help ensure that the mission work is successful and that the missionaries are able to respond effectively to the unique circumstances they will encounter.
sion. Adolescents in Western societies, individuals in foreign circumstances (prisoners, patients, migrants, etc.), persons sorrowing over the death of a relative or friend, and persons subjected to intense emotional stimulation all are noted as excellent subjects for missionary effort. The materials in this area, therefore, are in substantial agreement with theories postulating either structural strain or psychological tension in the collectivity as precipitating factors of value-oriented social movements.25

Conversion as a special reaction to stress

Strain and anxiety precede movements other than religious conversion, e.g., panic, aggression, withdrawal, secular-value conversion, recovery of old organizations, etc. Available theoretical and empirical analyses in sociology26 provide some propositions concerning what conditions favor one movement rather than another. Recurring traumas, or disasters for which people have been prepared,


the old culture) do organize effective coping operations, and these agents exploit their upsurge in prestige and the suggestibility of the population to degrade old values and promote new ones.

**Structural Factors**

Groups tend to be more receptive of a religion whose church organization bears structural resemblance to native social organizations, while rejecting religions incongruent in this respect. For example, the original political system on Samoa was a decentralized federation; at present, four times as many Samoans belong to the loosely organized Congregational church as to the more centralized Methodist or Catholic churches although all three denominations introduced missions during the same period of 1830-35. Catholicism was introduced to the Eastern and Western Pueblo at about the same time; the patrilineal Eastern group accepted Catholicism while the matrilineal Western group rebelled against the priests. Related to this matter is the difficulty encountered by Christian missionaries in abolishing polygyny (except

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28 Brown, op. cit.


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34 Stark, op. cit., pp. 28-45, 229.


ties offered by the missionary or to obtain a coherent system of social values and norms for the masses to replace a discredited traditional system. The middle classes seem consistently to be the most resistant group, except for upwardly mobile persons in groups where the new religion has become associated with elite status.39

Once a few converts have been made, structural features of the recipient social system channel and limit diffusion. Whereas a religion identified with low ranking groups may not diffuse up the status hierarchy, especially if there are rigid class lines, association with the elite typically does result in diffusion downward.40 Kinship ties are extremely important paths of religious diffusion.41 For example, a study of a Galilean mission among the Navaho found that all but one of the youngest generation of converts had at least one older relative in the Galilean Church; two lineages, linked by a primary relation, accounted for 80 percent of all converts; and adding in the Galileans of a third lineage (linked to one of the first by a half-sibling tie) accounted for 90 percent of the stable convert group.42

Objective analyses of the time factor in religious diffusion are thus far somewhat rare. Crude estimates are available on the time required for converting most of the persons in a region,43 but generally these are based on conversion rates for geographical, administrative districts rather than for communities or societies, and no account is taken of births, deaths, or migrations. Materials available do substantiate the following generalization, however: missions are characterized by slow starts—no converts may be gained in one to ten years, and to convert the majority of a large population requires two or three generations.

42 Rapoport, op. cit., p. 66.
43 Rapoport, op. cit.; McGavran, op. cit.; Pickett et al., op. cit.; Vicedom, op. cit.