Philip Dow uses his exploration of a relatively obscure issue, the mid-twentieth century relationship between the United States and Ethiopia, to make a very consequential methodological argument. Specifically, Dow contends that the history of American foreign policy cannot be understood without studying American missionaries, yet international historians have thus far almost completely neglected the missionary enterprise. Historians may differ on whether this indictment is good news (because it opens a new realm of insight, inquiry, and dissertation topics for our doctoral students) or bad news (because it reveals that we do not understand American diplomatic history as well as we may have thought), but regardless Dow makes a persuasive case for its veracity. As he documents, literally hundreds of thousands of American evangelical missionaries lived and worked abroad during the twentieth century alone. Nor was this a new phenomenon, as it carried on a tradition of American missionary work begun in the early nineteenth century. In the process missionaries shaped America’s interaction with the world in myriad ways, including molding elite and popular American perceptions of their host countries, informing American government policy, and influencing host country leaders.

Dow begins by documenting the dearth of historiography on missionaries and American foreign relations.¹ The question is why this lacuna exists. There is no single reason, but I

¹ To the very few scholarly works he mentions that address in some manner the specific question of missionary influences on U.S. foreign relations, Dow might want to add David S. Fogelsong, The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”: The Crusade for a “free Russia” since 1881 (Cambridge, England, 2007); Michael Oren, Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present (New York, 2007); and chapter four of William Inboden, Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment (New York, 2008).
suspect it might result from some combination of factors. These may include the fact that missionary dimension lags behind the growing yet still inchoate study of religious influences on American foreign policy, the unfamiliarity or possibly even discomfort that many historians might have with the missionary enterprise itself, and the fact that most archival records documenting missionary work are not found in the customary archives frequented by diplomatic historians such as government records repositories, but rather in less-visited places such as divinity school libraries and mission agency headquarters.

Regardless, I hope that Dow’s article will spur further scholarly inquiries into missionary influences, for his case study on Ethiopia suggests numerous other possible dimensions of research. Yet to Dow’s credit he resists the temptation to overdetermine his own argument. While he demonstrates that American missionaries played an important role in shaping the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship during World War II and the early Cold War, he readily acknowledges that missionary influence alone was not the decisive factor. He describes the strategic calculations that led the U.S. to forge a close relationship with Ethiopia at mid-century, including the American need for a reliable partner nation and intelligence collection station in the Horn of Africa. In Dow’s words, “while these geopolitical concerns explain why an important Cold War marriage of convenience developed between the two nations, they do not adequately explain the extent and intimacy of the relationship” (864). This can only be understood, he argues, from the missionary dimension.

Here Dow identifies three specific ways that evangelical missionaries influenced the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship: direct interaction with American policy-makers and intelligence agents, shaping American public opinion, and forging close relationships with Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Dow provides abundant evidence to demonstrate each of these dimensions. For example, he has uncovered extensive records of missionaries providing intelligence assessments of political and economic conditions in Ethiopia to the U.S. Government during World War II – in part because the missionaries were virtually the only Americans living in Ethiopia, and in part because of their exhaustive linguistic and culture expertise. He documents the multitude of books, articles, films, and personal accounts of Ethiopia in general and Selassie’s Christian faith in particular that missionaries provided to their fellow Christians in America, all of which helped reinforce the American public’s support for the U.S. relationship with Ethiopia as the largest African recipient of U.S. foreign assistance. And he illustrates the deep relationships that missionaries developed with Selassie himself through numerous personal testimonials and memoirs.

Dow is a skilled writer, and in addition to describing the structural factors in the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship, his narrative brings alive singularly fascinating characters. Foremost among these is Della Hanson, an American Seventh-Day Adventist missionary wife who for fourteen years enjoyed a second role as resident palace advisor to Emperor Haile Selassie on protocol, hospitality, palace décor and cuisine -- and matters of state such as the bilateral relationship with the U.S.
For all of the article’s manifest strengths, it does leave unexplored some questions and comparisons that I hope Dow might examine in future iterations of his work. For example, while he focuses almost exclusively on evangelical Protestant missionaries, I am curious as to whether mainline Protestant missionaries were also active in Ethiopia during these decades, and if so whether their theological differences from evangelicalism also led to a different political influence on U.S.-Ethiopia relations. Similarly, were many non-American missionaries present in Ethiopia during these years, particularly from traditional missionary-sending countries such as Great Britain, and if so did they have any foreign policy influence?

The figure of Haile Selassie is likewise very intriguing, and brought to mind some similarities with Chiang Kai-Shek. Both men were American allies in World War II against Axis enemies, and continued those alliances in the early Cold War against communist foes. Both attempted to project a benevolent, democratic image to the United States while ruling their own countries in a decidedly more autocratic manner. And both made vocal professions of Christian faith, cultivated friendships with American missionaries, and made direct appeals to American Christians for continued military and economic support from the United States in part because of their purported Christian identity. This suggests that Dow’s analysis might be enhanced by a comparative study of Chiang, Selassie, and possibly other allied rulers during the Cold War with close ties to American missionaries. There may be an archetype to explore here; other potential candidates could include South Korea’s Syngman Rhee, Lebanon’s Camille Chamoun, or Vietnam’s Ngo Dinh Diem for a Catholic comparison.

Finally, perhaps the categories that Dow articulates for the missionary role in shaping American foreign relations could be expanded further. As an empirical matter in the case of Ethiopia, Dow has judiciously adhered to the available evidence in identifying the three primary areas of missionary influence. In a broader sense I would suggest at least two other ways in which missionaries have influenced U.S. foreign policy. The first is personnel, considering the very large numbers of missionary offspring who grew up on the mission field and later served in the U.S. Government, particularly in diplomatic, development, and intelligence positions. This category could also include other influential shapers of American foreign relations such as Henry Luce, born and reared in China as the son of missionaries. The second is ideational, specifically the extent to which the voluminous numbers of missionaries deployed from the United States over the past two centuries have also contributed to the American identity as a “missionary nation” attempting to spread the values of liberal democracy around the globe.

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