

MISSIONARIES — THE FIRST 12 CENTURIES

“Go throughout the World and preach the Gospel to all peoples”. This quotation from the Gospels showed that from the outset, Christians believed that an essential part of their faith was to teach others about Jesus and to carry his message to the world.

After the Middle Ages, missionary activities were more a part of the exploration and conquest of new colonies under the control of the two great powers of the time, Spain and Portugal. As a result of this political arrangement, the concerns of God became secondary to the desire to acquire new lands, great wealth and prestige.

This unit looks at the work of Christian missionaries from the first to the twelfth century.

INTRODUCTION

The word missionary often brings to mind an image of a priest or preacher in deepest darkest Africa, teaching the natives, or stuck in a large cooking pot surrounded by a circle of hungry cannibals with bones through their noses!



A common stereotype of a missionary

When people say someone has missionary zeal, they often mean the person is full of enthusiasm and will work relentlessly and tirelessly for the cause he or she believes in.

Although these images are stereotypes, they illustrate some of the qualities of missionaries, give some idea of the dangers they faced and show the almost superhuman effort they needed to make to overcome difficult situations.

They also highlight the problems which missionaries had to resolve when going into another culture, such as:

- What aspects of the non-Christian culture should they encourage converts to retain?
- Should the language of the non-Christian culture be used for liturgy?
- What festivals and celebrations were harmonious with Christian ideals?

These were only a few of the questions missionaries had to resolve.

In the last twenty years or so, missionaries, particularly those since the fifteenth century, have been strongly criticised for their inflexible views about what form of religious practice and morality should be expected of those being evangelised. Some missionaries have been regarded as a bad influence on native cultures. Missionaries often tried to destroy the indigenous (native) culture believing it to be immoral and inferior to their own.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

In the Scriptures, the word mission meant: God sending a person to communicate to others what needed to be done on earth. The individual was carrying out a task assigned by God. It usually meant spreading the word of God to others in different ways.

The Apostles and St Paul were the first Christian missionaries. *The Acts of the Apostles* tells of their activities and of the early mission and organisation of the Christian Church.

However, it was not long before all members of the Christian community were involved in spreading the Gospel and many of these early Christians died as martyrs.

MISSIONARY WORK IN A TIME OF DANGER

With the death of the Apostles and the first generation of Christians, missionary work came under the direction of the bishops. Historians tell us that this was a time when Christian preachers travelled a great deal to all parts of the Roman Empire.

During the second and third centuries C.E., Christians were persecuted by the government of Rome. Christians, and in particular missionary preachers, were in constant danger of being imprisoned and put to death. Christian communities kept in touch with each other through letters, which

provided information on community organisation, faith and way of life, and during these difficult times, information about persecutions or places that needed to be avoided.

CHRISTIANITY BECOMES A LEGAL RELIGION: THE EFFECTS ON MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

When the Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion in 313 C.E., missionary activity increased dramatically. Preachers travelled throughout the Roman world and beyond its borders. After 313, more educated people and members of the aristocratic classes became Christians, whereas previously they were reluctant to become Christian.

Can you give any reasons why the aristocratic classes were reluctant to become Christians? Do you think that their conversion would have had any effect on the rest of the Roman people?

Historians have estimated that before 313 C.E. about one-eighth of the 50 million people of the Empire were Christian. When Christianity became officially acceptable, missionaries could go and preach in all parts of the Empire without fear of persecution; as a result, the numbers of Christians grew rapidly. Though they were no longer persecuted by the Roman authorities, it was not always easy or safe to preach to tribespeople. Beyond the borders of the Empire, the task of the missionary became harder and more dangerous.

MISSIONARIES TO THE BARBARIANS

For five centuries after 313 C.E., missionaries concentrated more on converting the barbarian tribes which were moving into the territories of the Empire.

Missionaries were usually supported by the nearest church, which offered them moral support and prayers as well as money to carry out their activities. Some missionaries were also given money by the local government.

Although some missionaries were women, there is very little information available about their work. Can you suggest reasons for this?

HOW MISSIONARY ACTIVITY WAS CARRIED OUT

Pope Gregory's advice to missionaries in the fifth century:

Destroy as few pagan temples as possible; only destroy their idols, sprinkle them with holy water, build altars and put holy relics in the buildings, so that, if the temples have been well-built, you are simply changing their purpose, which was the cult of demons, in order to make a place where from henceforth the true God will be worshipped. Thus the people, seeing that their places of worship have not been destroyed, will forget their errors and, having attained knowledge of the true God, will come to worship him in the very places where their ancestors assembled. In former times, they used to sacrifice a large number of cattle in honour of demons; there is no need to change their customs at festivals. Thus, on the Feast of Dedication or on the Feast of Martyred Saints whose relics have been placed in the Church, they should build booths out of branches round the Church as they used to round pagan temples and celebrate the festival with religious banquets, . . .

Allowing them to give outward expression to their joy in the same way, you will more easily lead them to know inner joy, for be assured that it is impossible to rid such deluded souls of all their misconceptions at once. You do not climb a mountain in leaps and bounds but by taking it slowly.⁴

Scholars say that Gregory's advice to missionaries was both sensible and practical. What do you think they mean by that?

From the fifth to the thirteenth century, Gregory's writings were used to guide the activities of missionaries throughout the territories now known as Europe.

WHAT SORT OF CONVERSION?

The conversion of some barbarian tribes was spectacular. When the chief was baptised the whole tribe usually followed his example; in one case, three thousand at once. Not all of these converts had thought much about their reasons for becoming Christian. The tribes, particularly the Germanic tribes, were strongly bound by ancient traditions of tribal loyalty, so conversion to Christianity often came about for political and material reasons rather than from personal conviction.

The bond which united most Germanic tribes was the bond of kinship and loyalty to the tribal chief. Therefore, if the chief was converted to Christianity, or, as was often the case in the third to the fifth centuries, to Arianism (a heresy based on a false teaching about Jesus), the whole tribe followed the chief's example. As historians have commented, conversions tended to be widespread but superficial.

BRINGING CIVILIZATION TO THE BARBARIANS

Becoming a Christian also meant coming into contact with the culture of the Christian Roman world. By the fifth century, the teachings of Christianity, as well as Church organisation (that is, how the Church was run) and liturgy had become part of Roman culture. Most of the Christian sacred writings were in either Latin or Greek. When the missionaries set out to convert non-Christians, especially those without a written language, they believed they should teach them to read and write so that they could learn about their faith. As a result, one of the side-effects of missionary work was teaching about the culture of the Graeco-Roman world.



Areas of Missionary Activity

The missionaries believed that to communicate the message of the Gospels and other holy writings, they needed to present them in a written form so that converts, and then later, any convert who became a priest, could read and study them.

In the case of some tribal groups which had no written language, an alphabet had to be invented. The Arian Bishop Ulfilas invented a script, or system, for writing the Germanic language. He then translated the Bible into this language for his converts. Two scholars, Cyril and Methodius constructed the first written Slavic language for the same purpose (the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets).

Everywhere the missionaries went they brought literary education and eventually the use of Latin as a means of writing and teaching about the Gospels and carrying out Church business. The missionaries also incorporated local customs and festivals into Christian rituals.

BARBARIAN CULTURE: WHAT WAS RETAINED WHEN THE TRIBES WERE CONVERTED ?

Each barbarian tribe's culture was distinct and the converts brought these traditions to their new religion. The message of the Gospels and the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection remained unchanged but certain aspects of Christianity were adapted to the local culture and customs.

For example, the Germanic races, whose culture included beliefs in demons and good spirits, belief in the power of totems, spells and incantations, became deeply interested in the mysterious and supernatural elements of Christianity.

Some scholars say that this is why the Germanic people had such a great interest in the relics (remains) of saints and their ability to protect them from illness and bad luck.

In their pagan past, the Germanic tribes believed



An illumination (a hand painted page) from an ancient manuscript, showing St Mark, the Gospel writer.

in an elaborate system of gods and magic spells to ward off bad luck, and grant their wishes. When they went to battle, they carried figures and images taken from sacred forests to protect them. They believed that, as long as they did the right things, the gods would help them in every aspect of their lives. These ancient beliefs were adapted to Christianity and the cult of saints became very popular in the Germanic territories.

SOME FAMOUS MISSIONARIES

PATRICK

Patrick was born in England. His father was a deacon in the Church and a government magistrate. When Patrick was sixteen he was taken prisoner by raiding pirates and sold as a slave in Ireland. He worked there for six years as a shepherd.

Eventually Patrick escaped to Gaul (modern-day France) where after some time he entered a monastery, remaining there for the next 20 years.

In 432 C.E., Patrick was made a bishop and given the mission to preach the Gospel to the Celtic peoples of Ireland. The year before, another bishop, Palladius, had been sent to Ireland but he died shortly after his arrival.

The small number of converts made by Palladius gave Patrick a place to stay and begin his work. Patrick's knowledge of the language and the religious beliefs of the Celts that he had gained while he was a shepherd helped him work out how best to tackle the job of converting the stubborn, argumentative and fiercely hostile Celts.

PATRICK'S MISSIONARY STRATEGY

From ancient times Ireland had been divided into five main tribal kingdoms known as "tuathas". Patrick decided to take on each tribal chief in turn, and see what impact he could have on him by debating questions of belief.

Patrick was a very persuasive talker and usually, if nothing else, the chief was impressed. The druids, (the pagan priests who served as judges, teachers and advisers to the tribal leaders), were less easily



An early Celtic Christian carving of Christ on the Cross

The decorations and style of the carving are Celtic. Why do you think the sculptor carved the crucifix in this manner?



A plaque marking the site of the well where Patrick is said to have baptised Christian converts in the fifth century. The well was uncovered beside St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

impressed, so Patrick decided to tackle them head on. In doing so, he placed himself in an extremely dangerous situation, because the druids were hostile to anyone who challenged their power and authority. As a result, there were many attempts on Patrick's life, and he was constantly harassed.

Eventually, after twenty-five years of patient and persistent preaching, all the Celts in Ireland were converted to Christianity. The ancient tribal kingdoms, the tuathas, became the boundaries of episcopal dioceses.

There are many legends about St Patrick and his battles with the druids. He is said to have travelled throughout Ireland in a chariot, using his extraordinary powers to overcome the magic of the druids. If the druids caused a snowstorm, Patrick would make the snow melt. If the druids turned day into night, Patrick would make the sun shine. In fact, the way Patrick set about converting the druids was to compete with them and show that the culture, religion and way of life of

Christians were superior to their own. Eventually many of the pagan priests became Christian leaders and preachers.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE IRISH MISSIONARIES

The monastic way of life seemed to appeal to the Celts. Monasteries were built throughout the country. Not only that, but large numbers of Irish men and women migrated to Europe and either joined established monasteries there or established new ones. They became centres of learning and of apostolic work.

This is what has been written by a historian about the important influence of the Irish monks on the development of monasteries:

Irish monks proved to be the indispensable means of Christianising the peasants, whose life and work the monks shared. The monks cleared the forests and put back into cultivation much of the land desolated (laid waste) by the barbarians. But more importantly, the monks completely remodelled the peasant culture in the spirit of the new religion. The sacred wells, sacred trees and sacred stones were still revered (worshipped) only now they were associated with Christian saints.⁵

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES IN BRITAIN

Christianity was first introduced into Britain during the time it was occupied by the Romans. (In about 200 C.E., the Roman legions withdrew from the northern and western parts of the country because of the increasing raids by the Angles, Jutes, Picts and Scots.)

Many Britons became Christians and they founded the Celtic Church. However, they made little attempt to convert the barbarians who lived among them or in nearby settlements.



A pagan Celtic monolith with a Christian sign carved on it

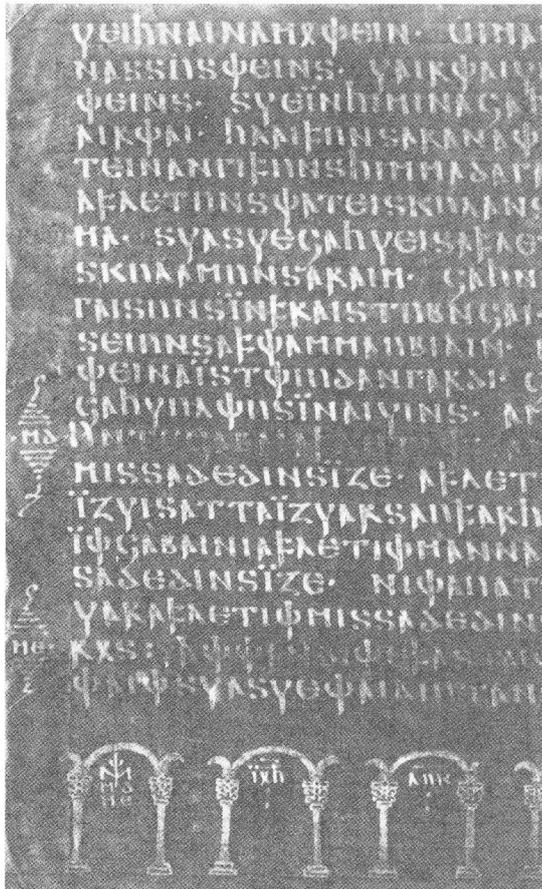
POPE GREGORY AND THE MISSION TO BRITAIN

In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great sent missionaries to England.

The story goes that, as a Benedictine monk, he had seen some fair-haired, fair-skinned children for sale in the slave market in Rome. He was saddened by the fact that such intelligent and attractive looking youngsters were pagans. He asked where they came

from and was told they were Angles from Britain. His reply was “Non Angli sunt, sed angeli” which means “They are not Angles, but angels”. When told that they came from the province of Deira, Gregory replied with a pun on the word “they must be saved from ‘de ira Dei’ ” (meaning the wrath of God), and as their king’s name was Aelle, Gregory added “they could sing Alleluia!”

In 590 C.E., when he was elected Pope, he sent a group of forty Benedictine monks to convert the



A page from the Gothic Bible translated by Bishop Ulfilas (who was an Arian Christian not a Catholic Christian) He converted a number of barbarian tribes to Christianity. The writing is in gold and silver on purple parchment. This page shows the Lord's prayer from the words “hallowed be thy name” – Veihnai Namo Thein.

Britons. In a letter to the missionaries going to Britain, Pope Gregory gave them encouragement and alerted them to some of the difficulties they would face.

Let then neither the toil of the journey nor the tongues of evil-speaking men deter you; but with all constancy and all fervour go on with what under God's guidance you have commenced, knowing that great toil is followed by the glory of an eternal reward. Obey in all things humbly Augustine (who became known as Augustine of Canterbury) your provost (the one who was in charge) who is a father to you... May Almighty God protect you with His grace and grant to me to see the fruits of your labour in the eternal country. God keep you safe, most beloved sons.⁶

After a dangerous and long journey through Gaul, they landed in Kent in 597. As with Patrick in Ireland, their mission to preach to the Britons was difficult. There were seven kingdoms. The Angles were ruled by powerful chieftains who were jealous of their authority and suspicious of the missionaries.

AUGUSTINE AND THE CONVERSION OF KING ETHELBERT

King Ethelbert of Kent was married to a Catholic princess. He was the first ruler to allow the missionaries to preach to him. But, like other pagan leaders, he was suspicious of Augustine and his monks. When Augustine first arrived, he had to preach to the King out-of-doors because the king was afraid that the monks might put him under a magic spell if they spoke to him inside a building.

In a short time the King came to trust Augustine and believed in his good advice on religious as well as state matters. He was baptised and so were most of his followers.

The conversion of the rest of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was much slower. Often it seemed that the monks might be driven out of England. As well as trying to convert the Anglo-Saxons, the Benedictine

missionaries also had to win over the Celtic Church which wanted nothing to do with them.

The Celtic Christian Church felt it had nothing to learn from these monks from Rome and was determined to protect and maintain its own heritage and power. To complicate matters, there was also the influence of Irish missionaries in England, who favoured the Celtic Church rather than the Roman missionaries.

The two Christian groups disagreed on a number of matters, for example: the date of Easter (which both sides believed was crucial), the correct shape of a monk's haircut, and the ritual of various Church services. These disagreements continued for years and caused bitter arguments and backbiting. Finally, in 663, a meeting was arranged at Whitby in the north of England to decide what form of Christianity would be followed in Britain. Both Celtic and Roman Catholic bishops argued their case for days. Finally, the Roman bishops proved stronger and their form of Christianity was accepted as standard.

However, it was only after several centuries that the whole of the British Isles was converted to Christianity.

The advice given to the missionaries from the sixth century onwards was similar to that initially given by Pope Gregory. Below is an extract from a letter to a missionary called Boniface from Bishop Daniel of Winchester on how to convert non-Christians. Boniface was later to be known as the Apostle of Germany.

Do not begin by arguing with them about their false gods. Questions should be put to them, not in an offensive and irritating way but calmly and with great moderation. From time to time their superstitions should be compared with our Christian dogmas and touched upon indirectly so that the heathens, more out of confusion than exasperation, may be ashamed of their absurd opinions and may recognise that their disgusting rites

and legends have not escaped our notice.⁷

MISSIONARIES TO THE SLAVIC PEOPLES

The Slavs were the most numerous of the people living east of the Germanic tribes in Europe (approximately the territory now covered by the U.S.S.R.). In 862, at the request of the Duke of Moravia, the Emperor in Constantinople sent two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, as missionaries to the Slavic people. Both Cyril and Methodius were well educated and knew the Slavic languages. They decided to preach the Gospel to the Slavs in their native language. To do this, they used a combination of Roman and Greek letters to write down the Slavic language. They then translated Scripture and the liturgy into Slavonic.

Some bishops and other Church teachers criticised Cyril and Methodius for using the Slavic language in the liturgy. These authorities believed that there were only three sacred languages that should be used – Latin, Greek and Hebrew. (These languages were considered sacred because they were the ones used for the inscription on the Cross of Jesus.)

Cyril and Methodius did not agree with the criticisms. Usually in such disagreements the Church authorities would get their way, and the two missionaries would have had to stop their work. As it happened, Cyril and Methodius had the support of Pope Hadrian II and for a time this protected them.

On a visit to Rome, Methodius was consecrated a bishop and some of his Slavic parishioners were ordained priests and deacons. Cyril, who had accompanied them, died in Rome in 869. Methodius returned to his missionary work and continued his translations of liturgical and religious books.

The controversy surrounding the use of the Slavonic language in liturgy did not end there. The Frankish (French) clergy in particular were strongly opposed to it. Because of their influence and power in church matters, they had Methodius imprisoned and it took the Pope three years to get him released. Eventually, it was this intolerance by the Franks that

led the Slavic Churches to turn more to the Church in Constantinople than to the Church in Rome.

When the split between the Eastern and Western Churches occurred, the Slavic Churches remained loyal to the Eastern Orthodox faith.

The translations of the Scriptures and other texts done by Cyril and Methodius form the basis of the extensive religious heritage of the Slavonic Church.

THE MISSION TO THE VIKINGS

All missionaries faced dangers. They travelled to unknown lands and confronted people who were often hostile and suspicious of their motives. Their living conditions were usually appalling, their personal possessions minimal; they were often hungry and had to rely on the goodwill of the local inhabitants for food and shelter. These local people were not always friendly. The missionaries faced years of hardship, with little to show for their hard work.

The story of the missions to the Vikings is a good example of missionary determination and dedication.

From the seventh century onwards, the Vikings were feared for their ferocity and brutality in battle. Their raids devastated many of the prosperous centres of Mediterranean Europe for almost three hundred years. Unlike other barbarian raiders, the Vikings did not spare churches and monasteries.

In 825 C.E., a monk called Anskar was asked to go to lands we now know as Denmark to preach the Gospel to the Norsemen.

The Viking chief who wanted the Christian missionaries to preach to his tribes was called Harold Klak. He had become a friend of Louis the Pious, a Christian king, and had seen firsthand the valuable contribution churchmen made to the running of a kingdom. As he had plans to conquer the whole of Denmark, Harold hoped to get similar help for his new kingdom. Harold's support would have made Anskar's task easier, but the Viking chief was defeated in 827 by other Viking lords.

Not daunted by the fact that he could no longer rely on Harold's protection, Anskar went to Denmark and established a small mission there. The process

of Christianising the Vikings was very slow. The local population was unresponsive. More often they were hostile.

It was too hazardous to stay in Denmark permanently to preach. So in 831, a diocese was set up in Hamburg, in northern Germany, to be responsible for the mission to the Vikings. It was from here and from Bremen that Anskar and his helpers would set out periodically, when it was considered safe, to preach in Denmark and Sweden.

Missionary journeys such as Anskar's continued for 100 years before small mission stations were able to be established on a more permanent basis in the northern islands without being wiped out.

As Anskar and his monks discovered, the Christianising of the Vikings was no easy task. Often the missionaries had to withdraw to the safety of the Christian cities of Bremen and Hamburg and wait for a more peaceful time to return to the Vikings and continue their work. It was not until the twelfth century that the Vikings became a part of Christendom.

CONCLUSION

The story of the Church's missionary activity in the first twelve centuries is remarkable. To go to lands that were distant and unknown, to confront people who in most cases were hostile to the message that was brought to them, to endure every possible hardship, hunger, thirst, cold, loneliness and to face death, and even to die for one's beliefs, took rare courage and great spiritual strength. Often the missionaries had to wait years for the satisfaction of baptising their first converts. Sometimes they died before they knew if they had made any substantial impact or not.

This unit has looked at only a small fraction of the work done by missionaries. There are many other stories of courage and hard work done by men and women. For every one missionary we know of by name and deed, there were many more dedicated men and

women who are now unknown who devoted their lives to do what they believed to be God's work.

Review Questions

1. Explain the meaning of the word 'missionary' in your own words.
2. Who were the first missionaries?
3. Why was their task difficult and dangerous?
4. Some of the mass conversions to Christianity were conversions in name only. What problems do you think would arise when people were not genuinely converted to Christianity?
5. In what ways did the missionaries influence the various cultures they came in contact with?
6. How was Christianity influenced by the barbarian cultures?
7. Why do you think Cyril and Methodius wanted to preach to the Slavic people in their own language?
8. What do you think might have been the major reasons certain tribes resisted the preaching of the missionaries?
9. Legends are often part of the story of great leaders and saints. What purpose do you think these legends served then and now? How do you think these legends might have developed?
10. What do you think might be the reason the debate between the Benedictines and the Celtic Church leaders about the correct date of Easter was considered so important?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION EXERCISE

Read Bishop Daniel's advice to a missionary called Boniface; then discuss the following:

1. Do you think his advice was good? If yes, then why do you think it took such a long time to convert the pagan Germans? If you do not think the advice was particularly good, is there anything you would have added?

2. Looking at the situation in present times, list some of the reasons why people might convert from one religion to another. What are some of the similarities and the differences between the conditions faced by the missionaries in the past and the situation today?



An eighth century mosaic of a Vandal shown as a North African landowner, leaving his villa

What does this mosaic demonstrate?