

A missionary society in a merchant city

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In 1815, the year of the Congress of Vienna and of the final defeat of Napoleon, a group of Pietist citizens of Basel founded a missionary society. Its initial purpose was modest: to train young men as missionaries for service with other missionary societies, in particular the British and Dutch societies, which lacked candidates. The society opened a mission school in Basel, which recruited young craftsmen and farmers from Württemberg, Switzerland and other German-speaking regions, gave them a theological and practical education and sent them abroad. Within a few years, the society began to send missionaries under its own direction, first to Russia and the Caucasus, then to West Africa and India.¹

The Basel Mission became one of the largest Protestant missionary societies of the nineteenth century. Its missionaries worked in the Gold Coast, today Ghana, in southern India, in China, in Cameroon and in other regions. There they founded churches, schools, hospitals and workshops. The mission was also an economic enterprise. It founded a trading company, the Basel Mission Trading Company, which traded with the mission fields, employed local converts, introduced new crops and industries and generated profits that supported the mission. In the Gold Coast, the trading company became one of the principal commercial firms of the colony. It played a role in the development of the cocoa economy that made the Gold Coast the largest cocoa producer in the world in the early twentieth century.

This chapter examines the Basel Mission and its trading company as a case study in the relationship between religion, commerce and colonialism. It forms the counterpart, in this book, to the part of the companion volume on Geneva that is devoted to Africa. Where Geneva's links with Africa pass through commodity trading, banking and diplomacy, Basel's links pass through the mission, the trading company and the cocoa economy. Both

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show how Swiss cities without colonies became involved in the economic and social transformation of Africa.

1 Notes

1. On the foundation of the Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft zu Basel (Basel Mission) in 1815, its origins in the circles of the Christentumsgesellschaft and its mission school, see HLS, article "Basler Mission"; the publications of Mission 21. To be verified. ↩

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