

Christianity and commerce: the founding of the trading company

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The economic activities of the mission raised questions of principle and of management. The mission's industrial and commercial enterprises generated profits, required capital and management, and exposed the mission to the risks of business. The committee of the mission, many of whose members were merchants, decided to separate the commercial activities from the religious work and to entrust them to a distinct company. In 1859, the Basel Mission Trading Company, the *Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft*, was founded as a joint-stock company whose shareholders were supporters of the mission and whose purpose was to conduct trade and industry in the mission fields according to Christian principles, and to support the mission with its profits.¹

The trading company had several purposes. It supplied the missionaries with goods from Europe, which they needed for their work and their daily life. It provided employment for converts, who worked as clerks, craftsmen and agents. It offered an alternative to the European traders on the West African coast, many of whom dealt in alcohol and firearms, which the mission regarded as harmful. It also sought to demonstrate that honest trade could be profitable. And it generated profits, a share of which was paid to the mission to support its religious work.

The idea that Christianity and commerce could go together, and that legitimate trade would help to end the slave trade and civilise Africa, was widespread in the evangelical circles of the nineteenth century. The Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone expressed it in the formula of Christianity, commerce and civilisation, while the British abolitionists promoted legitimate trade as the economic alternative to the slave trade.² The Basel Mission Trading Company was one of the most consistent attempts to put this idea into practice.

1 Notes

1. On the foundation of the Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft (Basel Mission Trading Company) in 1859 as a separate company to conduct the trade and industries of the Basel Mission, see Wanner, Die Basler Handels-Gesellschaft A.G. 1859–1959, 1959. To be verified. ↩
2. On the evangelical doctrine of "legitimate commerce" as an alternative to the slave trade and David Livingstone's formula of "Christianity, commerce and civilisation", see the literature on nineteenth-century missions and abolitionism. To be verified. ↩

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