

# **How Missionaries' Ideas and Experiences Impacted a Broader American Christian Community in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By Dr. Gretchen Boger

Professor, Department of History  
Colorado College  
Colorado Springs, Colorado

[gretchen.boger@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:gretchen.boger@coloradocollege.edu)

© 2010 by Gretchen Boger

In May 2010 I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) for two days to collect data for my book on the evolution of American Protestant missions in Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. I first visited the Center in 2007 while writing my dissertation, in order to look at all the materials in the Rockefeller Family Papers related to the 1931-32 Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry, a large-scale study of American Protestant missions in Asia that was organized and sponsored by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.)

The Religious Interests series in the Rockefeller Family Papers included substantive reports, minutes, financial records and correspondence dating from the planning stages of the Inquiry, in which JDR Jr. was intimately involved, as well as correspondence between JDR Jr. and members of the commission during its year's field work in India, China and Japan. The series also contained press coverage and promotional plans from the years immediately after the commission's trip to Asia, when its findings were published in the United States as a single volume, *Re-Thinking Missions*, that stirred much debate in Protestant circles.

The research I conducted on that first visit was central to completing the fourth chapter of my dissertation, which looked at an international mission conference in Jerusalem in 1928 and the publication of *Re-Thinking Missions* in 1932 as two watershed moments in modern American

mission history. Both events helped make American Protestants aware that missionaries serving in Asia had traveled a considerable distance in their theology and their sense of purpose from many of their fellow believers at home, to the discomfort of stateside sponsors. That creative intellectual and spiritual ferment in the mission field, and its impact on American Protestantism at home, are at the heart of my project, which aims to identify just how missionaries' ideas and experiences impacted a broader American Christian community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Historians commonly, if erroneously, have identified *Re-Thinking Missions* as the intellectual work of Inquiry chairman William Ernest Hocking, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University who had studied under William James and Josiah Royce and who led the team to Asia. While Hocking appears to have authored a substantial portion of the introductory four chapters of the book, which excited some of the most spirited debate, it is not immediately evident from those chapters what motivated his recommendations for changes in mission strategy or his more general assertions about the state of Christian mission in 1932. Scholars often have written about *Re-Thinking Missions* as if it were a philosophical treatise by a Harvard scholar in isolation in Cambridge rather than a group report based on a year's intensive field research. Commission members themselves stated frequently that writing *Re-Thinking Missions* was a deeply collaborative effort and that the final product represented positions hammered out by all group members in consultation. In my dissertation I emphasized the collective nature of the endeavor and sought to show that the trip to Asia influenced the ideas that went into the report, arguing that Hocking could not and would not have written the same book had he never left the United States.

Nevertheless, for a book that aims to show the influence of missionaries on American Christianity, there remained a missing link. While it is clear that public reaction to *Re-Thinking*

*Missions* represented a critical moment in popular Protestant self-appraisal, and while the book obviously followed on an intensive study of the Asian mission field, it remained unclear exactly what experiences in the field influenced commission members' recommendations. In other words, I still wasn't sure how much the commission members, none of whom were missionaries or former missionaries themselves, formed their conclusions based on direct interaction with missionaries in the field (as opposed to conversations with natives of the host countries, demographic data, ex-patriot business people, etc.). In order to make the case that missionary experiences had a significant impact on American Protestantism in this period, as evidenced in part by a storm of responses to *Re-Thinking Missions*, I needed to be able to show that the conclusions in *Re-Thinking Missions* itself were influenced by missionaries.

Therefore I returned to the RAC in 2010 to review the materials on the Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry with closer attention to commission members' accounts of their specific activities in Asia. With whom did they meet, and what did they discuss? What were their daily activities while abroad? When I made my first visit I had been more concerned with how the Inquiry came into existence and what American reactions to the report had been. I had not spent time identifying the details of the Inquiry's daily activities in Asia. However, I remembered that the archival materials had included correspondence between JDR Jr. and commission members throughout the trip, and so I visited with the intention of looking at this material in particular much more closely.

While I was able to fill important gaps in my knowledge of the commission's reactions to Asia, overall the letters at the RAC did not shed as much light on the specific daily activities of the Inquiry members as I had hoped. Letters in the files suggest that commission member Albert Scott was in charge of sending JDR Jr. the most detailed, regular reports of the group's activities,

but unfortunately Scott's reports do not appear in the files. Multiple letters from JDR Jr. to other commission members reference Scott's elaborate and highly engaging reports with enthusiasm. Given the meticulous care with which less substantive correspondence was preserved, it was disappointing not to find these key missives among the materials at the RAC. Unlike other commission members, Scott was not a prominent academic or clergyperson whose personal correspondence might be more readily traceable, and I have been unable as yet to find his reports in alternative locations. Nevertheless, the material I collected at the RAC during this visit will allow me to start creating basic outlines of the commission's itinerary in the field. JDR Jr.'s correspondence with other commission members, as well as detailed minutes from some of the group's initial planning meetings — which offer insight into the ideas with which they embarked for Asia, as compared to those that appear in the final report — will inform the revised manuscript. I am thankful for this head start on the revision process.

*Editor's Note:* This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.