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Religions, Evangelism, and Government Support
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Protestantism has long emphasized evangelization, the bringing of new people to Christianity. This has been particularly true for America, where early settlers such as Roger Williams launched numerous missions to the natives.

The 19th century saw the great American missionary movements in which Americans sent thousands of their compatriots to evangelize the Africans, the Polynesians, and the citizens of many other countries. It continues today in evangelical Christianity's encouraging of its followers to "witness" to those around them and bring them to "know Jesus as their personal savior." The model for these activities is the early church, Protestants have often said, which grew through the evangelizing preaching of Paul, Peter, and hundreds of early Christians.

The Protestant emphasis on the personal evangelistic activities of individuals, whether one-on-one or in larger revival meetings, causes us to overlook the other way Christianity has grown, namely, through government support of the church. This can be seen most readily in the British Empire of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The British conquerors were always accompanied by the Church of England (the Anglican Church) which established schools, hospitals, and health centers for the natives and through them spread the word of Christianity. While conversion was never required, those who did convert gained preferential treatment, including jobs, from the imperial administration. Today, the worldwide Anglican Church has churches in more countries than any other Protestant denomination.

While missionary labors are important, the most effective missionary work is to convert a political leader, such as a king. When the King of Tonga converted to Mormonism a couple decades ago, a large number of his subjects converted as well. Today, perhaps 40 percent of Tonga's population is Mormon.

A similar thing happened at the dawn of Christianity. The period of the early Church is often thought to end in 311 A.D., when Emperor Constantine began favoring the Christians. In subsequent years, he sponsored the Church, giving enormous funds to help speak and to lead. It will be interesting to watch.

organize it administratively, and encouraged the formation and adoption of its official doctrine. He established bishops as key players in his court, and set the stage for the Roman Empire's adoption of Christianity as its official religion and its ultimate ban on paganism in later decades. A century later, nearly the entire empire had become Christian, from the southern Mediterranean shores as far north as the Empire reached into Europe, including parts of France, Germany and England.

It is not only Christianity which has spread through the combination of government and religion, but other religions that encourage conversion, such as Islam and Buddhism. In Islam, the alliance between government and religion began with the Prophet Muhammad (died 632 A.D.), who in the last decade of his life became the governor of a region around a city in Arabia now known as Medina. After his death, rebellion among some of his followers forced his successors to enforce a combination of political and religious allegiance. This led to the religious and military sweep of Islam across the Middle East and North Africa, ultimately traveling as far west as Spain.

Buddhism was a moderately successful religion in India during the centuries following Buddha's death in 483 B.C. But it was only with the conversion of Emperor Ashoka, who reigned from 273 to 232 B.C., that Buddhism gained a significant following. Similarly, it was Buddhism's support by the Thai dynasty that made it into the official religion of Thailand.

In China, after centuries of low-level acceptance, Buddhism became widespread through the support of the Tang dynasty in the early ninth century. Buddhism's dominance in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion of 1959 came from the dual role played by the Dalai Lama, namely, as the religious head of Tibetan Buddhism and the head of the temporal state.

So although personal evangelism is important to religions of conversion, often the most effective conversion strategy is to convert a single person, i.e., a national ruler, to the religion. That ruler then uses the administrative powers of his or her government to promote the religion, resulting in the conversion of many members of the society to that religion.