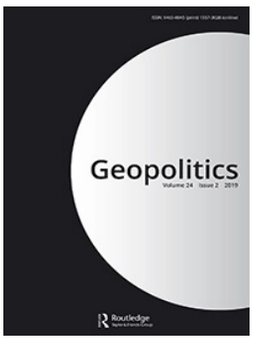

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Christian Short-Term Missions: Creating Global Citizens?

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of affluent, white, young Americans travel overseas each year on mission trips organised by Christian churches and organisations. Like secular study-abroad and gap-year programmes, contemporary short-term missions (STMs) are informed by liberal cosmopolitan discourses that elevate affinities to 'humanity' and 'the world' above attachments to nation and locality. Also like secular overseas programmes, STMs aspire to transform young people by immersing them in 'foreign' places. STMs, at the same time, are motivated by a distinctively Christian ethos of 'witness' and self-sacrifice. Drawing on interviews with youth pastors, mission leaders and young missionaries, this article explores the ways that mission leaders encourage young Christians to engage with and to imagine their place in the world. In addition, it considers the particular contradictions presented by Christian variants of cosmopolitan discourse and practice. Missions are intended to be spiritual experiences in which young people recognise the image of God in every person, no matter how abject. Yet young missionaries learn little about the causes of the poverty they observe. By casting the missionised in the role of authentic foreigners and instruments of spiritual awakening, youth missions reproduce the exploitation that have long characterised American evangelicalism's global engagements.

Introduction

As the instructor of introductory Geography courses at a US university, I cross paths regularly with students who have encountered 'the global' as short-term missionaries. Short-term missions (STMs) gained popularity in the 1980s as part of a broader resurgence of missionary activity led mostly by US evangelical Christian denominations. By one estimate, nearly 1.5 million people (many of them high school and university students) participate in STMs each year (Priest et al. 2006) – compared with around 300,000 US students who participate in study-abroad programmes (Institute of International Education 2015). The short-term mission today has become a rite of passage among many US Christians, especially those who are affluent and white. Yet scholars outside the field of missiology have given little attention to the ways in which mission experiences shape young American Christians' understandings of themselves as

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members of, and active participants in, a global field (exceptions include Han 2015 and Baillie Smith et al. 2013).

Youth short-term missions can be contextualised in a long history of American Protestant evangelicalism, which in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sent scores of American missionaries to the colonised world. But contemporary missions differ from earlier missionary ventures in important ways. While many missionaries are still in the business of saving non-believers and instilling white, middle-class, Protestant values among them, they are more inclined to describe their work in terms of self-transformation, leadership development, relationship-building and service. The contemporary language of mission, in this respect, overlaps significantly with the language of liberal cosmopolitanism that underpins secular[1] study-abroad, gap-year and other global-education programmes. This language, which flourished in the post-World War II context of internationalism, and which has regained traction in an era of intensified globalisation, elevates loyalties to 'humanity' and 'the world' above attachments to nation and locality, treating universal values and norms as fundamental to democracy, international cooperation and world peace (Calhoun 2003; Delanty 2006; Harvey 2002; Van der Veer 2002).[2]

This article explores the ways that Christian organisations, in parallel with secular educational institutions, engage with ideas of 'the global' as a field of membership and belonging and define what it means to conduct oneself and to act within a global context. In both the secular education sector and STMs, the global/universal appears as a site of personal transformation through which one overcomes the narrowmindedness and ethnocentrism of national citizenship to become more broadminded and capable of operating in a non-US-centred world. Yet Christian globalism also offers up a distinctive set global imaginaries and practices centred on notions of 'witness', 'discipleship' and 'living missionally'. Drawing on interviews conducted with pastors, youth ministers, mission leaders and young missionaries, I explain the distinctive ways that short-term missions encourage 'authentic' relationships with foreign Others and, in doing so, unsettle deeply held beliefs among young missionaries about American/Christian 'self' and foreign/non-Christian Other. Nonetheless, by casting people in the Global South as the spiritual saviours of young, white Americans, short-term missions ultimately fail to subvert the exploitative relationship that has long characterised encounters between Western missionaries and missionary 'hosts'. This case, as I discuss in the conclusion, raises important questions about the ways in which liberal cosmopolitan discourse, in its various forms, might shape young people's political commitments to communities abroad and at home.

The Emerging Global Youth Citizen

Young people in the United States today are regularly urged to embrace 'the global' and to appreciate and to act upon an awareness that their lives are

connected in myriad ways to people and places beyond the borders of the United States. Foremost among the purveyors of liberal-cosmopolitan subjectivity have been education professionals in schools and universities, who have argued that young Americans are woefully unprepared to deal with the many challenges of globalisation, including labour-market competition, climate change, global pandemics and terrorism. Educators, school and university administrators, and education policy think tanks have advocated curricular reforms that will encourage young people to understand themselves as world citizens as much as national citizens and that will foster global awareness and the 'cross-cultural competencies' required to participate in an interconnected world. The assumption here is that with the appropriate skills, dispositions and outlooks, young people will experience globalisation as an opportunity for adventure, prosperity and personal growth rather than as a threat to their wellbeing (e.g. Hunter 2004).

Advocates of global education in the liberal-cosmopolitan mould often criticise traditional, classroom-based modes of 'factual learning' as incapable of producing effective global citizens. Political philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2002), one of the most prominent advocates of liberal-cosmopolitanism, calls for a shift to more experiential, active, forms of learning and for an instructional model built on critical reasoning, global knowledge and the sharing of experience. This kind of teaching, Nussbaum suggests, is necessary to produce 'adults who can function as citizens not just of some local region or group but also, and more importantly, as citizens of a complex interlocking world' (Martha Nussbaum 2002, 295). This idealised global citizen, according the Nussbaum, practices empathy and self-criticism, shows respect towards other 'cultures' and acts upon a sense of moral obligation to humanity.

The commitment to experiential, active learning espoused by Nussbaum (and others) underpins the growing enthusiasm among educational professionals for overseas experiences, including study abroad, gap years, 'alternative Spring Break', and voluntourism programmes.[3] The logic behind the overseas experience is that young people 'learn best when they make emotional connections with the content being studied through concrete experience or form relationships with people who make the content come alive' (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2002, 50). By leaving what is comfortable and familiar and coming face-to-face with cultural difference, young people undergo a process of self-discovery and personal transformation and become more aware of and open to difference. They learn both to appreciate human diversity and to recognise the common humanity that transcends cultural differences. This kind of experiential global education, as Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich describe it, works to 'empower' students and to prepare them to become 'responsible global citizens' leading 'ultimately to improved international relations and global understanding' (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2002, 47). Palacios (2010) similarly describes the value of

international volunteering programmes as developing global perspectives that will shape participants' long-term career paths, political commitments, and connections to places.

Whether overseas experiences produce the global citizens imagined by the advocates of global education is a matter of considerable debate. Empirical studies (based mostly on self-reporting by returning study-abroad students) indicate that overseas-experience participants generally do have more geographical knowledge and more 'tolerant' attitudes than their less travelled peers (Stone and Petrick 2013). But critics are troubled by what they see to be the elitist and colonialist assumptions that pervade experiential global education and liberal cosmopolitanism more generally. Jefferess (2012), for instance, argues that global citizenship pedagogy produces an 'ethic of being' attached to a position of privilege that treats 'Third World' Others as objects of benevolence rather than independent political subjects. Other critics describe experiential global education as complicit in the neoliberalisation of society by producing mobile, hyper-individualised subjects unencumbered by affiliations and loyalties to any particular place (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Jones 2011; Mitchell 2003). Overseas ventures, from this perspective, serve primarily to confer cultural capital on affluent young people, who gain cosmopolitan 'street cred' by 'toughing it out' in a risky (though highly managed) Third-World settings (Ansell 2008; Lyons et al. 2011; Roman 2003; Simpson 2004; Snee 2014; Zemach-Bersin 2007). Even where young people *are* motivated by a genuine desire to 'make a difference', Butcher and Smith argue, experiential programmes generate a very limited understanding of what 'making a difference' can and should entail – one that signals (neo)liberal 'narrowing of human subjectivity away from collective solutions to social problems towards individual life choices' (Butcher and Smith 2010, 31).

In spite of these trenchant scholarly critiques, liberal cosmopolitan discourse continues to thrive in schools and universities, as well as in a range of extracurricular youth activities and organisations (Parker 2011; Pashby 2012). This article calls particular attention to globalist discourses circulating among Christian youth organisations in the United States. Christian institutions have a well-documented role in the everyday lives of a sizeable segment of the US population, imparting spiritual, moral and civic values to millions of Americans (Gordon 1964; Jones 2016; Smith and Faris 2005). Yet scholars of youth citizenship have given relatively little attention to the ways Christian organisations may be shaping the globalising outlooks of many American youth. A notable exception is historian Eileen Luhr (2015), who describes how conservative Christian leaders in the Cold War era enlisted young Christians in the global struggle against communism, urging them to remake the post-colonial world in America's image. In her work on Cold-War Christian mobilisation, and in her work

on more contemporary Christian youth culture (Luhr 2009), Luhr has highlighted the ways that Christian youth movements have tended to uphold patriarchal authority, nationalism and neoliberal politics. Yet she also notes that some young Christians in the 1960s and 1970s began to criticise American militarism and to question notions of American-led progress in the 'Third World'. Such criticism, King (2012) demonstrates, produced a surge of humanitarian activity in the late twentieth century among American Protestants, seen with the formation of large Christian NGOs like World Vision (see also Gerhardt 2008). Recent geographical scholarship explores this humanitarian ethos among contemporary Christian youth, suggesting that faith-based action can destabilise dominant geopolitical imaginaries and practices. Megoran (2010), for instance, describes a 'reconciliation walk', organised by an Christian youth organisation, in which young Christians travelled through the Middle East to ask forgiveness for the Crusades, becoming aware, in the process, of pernicious Western stereotypes of Muslim-majority societies. The work of Baillie Smith and associates (2013) similarly highlights the ways that mission trips, while perpetuating popular conceptualisations of 'Third World' poverty and (under)development, can provide moments of reflection in which Christian youth look critically upon their own culture and recognise the injustices faced by people in the places they visit (also Hancock 2013).

The analysis offered here contributes to these recent efforts to take seriously the role of religion and faith in the formation of youth subjectivity, and to bring Christian youth more squarely into recent discussions of youth identity, globalism and overseas experiences. My aim is also to complicate current analyses that highlight the tight linkage in the United States between white, evangelical culture and a sense of white victimisation at the hands of undeserving minorities and foreigners (e.g. Emerson and Smith 2001; Jones 2016; Tranby and Hartmann 2008). These analyses are not groundless; as I explain at various points in this article, missions, and conservative Christianity more generally, are fraught with assumptions of white racial innocence (if not superiority) that sideline structural explanations of poverty. But as the recent literature on Christian youth organisations indicates, a singular focus on the politics of grievance embraced by many conservative white Protestants obscures the ambiguities and complexities of Christian identity, practice and belief. What interests me are the ways that white Protestant Christians have sought to engage with cultural difference and 'the global' as a field of action, and how, in doing so, they draw upon and rework secular liberal-cosmopolitan concepts.

This discussion draws on evidence collected in an ongoing qualitative study of short-term missions involving intensive semi-structured interviews and observation of multiple pre-mission trip sessions (the next phase of the research involves participation in actual mission trips). Of the 42 people

interviewed thus far for this study, 28 are pastors, youth ministers and mission leaders affiliated with Protestant churches and university-student ministries in Columbia, SC. Many of these individuals also participated in youth missions as high school or university students. The remaining 14 interviewees are young returning missionaries, ages 16–21, whom I identified through pastors and mission leaders. More than three-quarters of the interviewees can be described as evangelical, reflecting the composition of congregations in the study site that offer overseas youth missions. Used since the eighteenth century, the term 'evangelical' signifies adherence to a conservative theology of salvation through Christ alone. Evangelicals uphold the inerrancy of scripture, the requirement for individuals to be 'born again' by accepting Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour, and the Biblical mandate to reach non-believers with the Gospel. Contemporary evangelicals can be distinguished from mainline Protestants, who are more liberal in their theological outlook and who take a less literal approach to scripture.[4]

Significantly, all but one of the respondents in the study are white, reflecting the overwhelming whiteness of the short-term mission phenomenon in the United States – this despite a strong evangelical tradition among African Americans and the growing influence of evangelicalism among Latinos/as (Priest, Wilson, and Johnson 2010). The racial selectivity of STMs speaks both to enduring patterns of racial homogeneity within US Protestant congregations, which maps onto patterns of residential segregation (Blanchard 2007; Dougherty 2003), and to persistent socio-economic inequalities that put overseas trips out of reach to many non-white people.[5] At a more basic level, the notion 'venturing into the wilderness' that has inspired Protestant missions since the creation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810 has been highly racialised. While African Americans and other nonwhite people have participated actively in US Protestant missions since the nineteenth century (McCarver 2004), people of colour have more typically been the objects of missionising ventures. To be sure, the racial dynamics of missions are becoming more complicated, for instance, with the surge of missionary activity among Korean and Korean-American evangelicals (Han 2015) and the growth of intentionally multicultural evangelical churches in the United States. With respect to the latter, my study does include a racially mixed Assemblies of God congregation that reports the successful recruitment of non-white congregants to participate in mission trips to Central America. But historical patterns persist, and my inventory of churches in the Columbia metro area indicates that overseas mission trips are primarily a feature of congregational life in white churches. Certainly, the stock image of the short-term mission – affluent white teenagers surrounded by smiling black children – speaks to the dominant racial dynamic of contemporary missions (Hancock 2014). The discussion below explores the racialised underpinnings of missions in greater detail, starting with the development of missionary evangelism in the nineteenth century.

Liberal Cosmopolitanism and American-Protestant Missionary Globalism

American Protestantism is a fractious collection of denominations that have taken shape through myriad political-theological disputes over everything from slavery to alcohol to same-sex marriage.[6] Amidst these differences, however, has been a common commitment to evangelism and missions – common especially in predominantly white denominations. This commitment bears the imprint of the Puritanism planted by English settlers in North America in the seventeenth century and the transatlantic Christian revivalism that inspired the 'Great Awakenings' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early evangelical Protestants –Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and others – expressed a hostility to slavery and an aversion to the materialism and greed that characterised the incipient Atlantic economy. At the same time, they imagined the young American republic as uniquely blessed by God – as a divinely ordained beacon of freedom and righteousness for the world (Hutchison 1987).[7] Confident in their moral rectitude, white, middle-class evangelical Protestants in the nineteenth century sought to mould American society according to their own norms and values, most notably through the Temperance movement, but also through 'home missions' among America's abject populations, including Native Americans, freed blacks and recent immigrants. In their belief that abject groups could rise above their deplorable circumstances to become worthy of membership in the American polity, Protestant home missionaries subverted dominant racist ideologies (and formed the core of the nascent Progressive movement). Yet missionaries were at the same time aggressively assimilationist, having little regard for the cultural practices of non-white groups (Chang 2005; Coleman 1980). This same assimilationism informed American missionary activities overseas, which increased in scope in the nineteenth century as European powers wrested control over Asia, Africa and the Middle East and as the United States grew in wealth and stature. Some mission leaders cautioned against imposing American cultural practices on missionised people, urging a more singular focus on saving souls and establishing indigenous churches. But by the early twentieth century, the focus of American Protestant missions was the civilisational transformation of the world's benighted peoples through missionary-led schools and institutions (Hutchison 1987; Makdisi 1997; Sharkey 2013).

Protestant overseas missions waned by the mid-twentieth century, due both to anti-colonial movements and to major theological rifts between 'fundamentalists', who continued to adhere to traditional evangelical tenets (e.g. scriptural authority, salvation through Christ alone), and 'modernists', who embraced ecumenicalism, scientific inquiry and a broad humanitarian ethos. But overseas missions enjoyed a revival in the 1970s and 1980s, as fundamentalism

(inheriting the evangelical label) took hold in American public life, especially among politically conservative suburban whites (Wilford 2009).[8] This renewed commitment to mission has been coloured both by longstanding beliefs in American exceptionalism and by a growing adherence to dispensationalist eschatology among evangelicals. Dispensationalism, which holds that Christ will return to earth to gather up his saints to heaven (the Rapture) before a final battle with the Antichrist, lends a sense of urgency to mission work, as believers try to save as many 'unreached' people as possible before the End Times unfold (Gallaher 2010). A key global imaginary for those holding these eschatological beliefs has been the '10/40 window', a geographical concept popularided in the early 1990s that references a large swathe of the world (including the Middle East, North Africa and much of Asia) between 10 and 40 degrees North latitudes. Evangelicals view these places as the 'least reached' by the Gospel and therefore in most urgent need of salvation (Han 2010). Guided by such beliefs, scores of Christian organisations, as well as many individual churches, support American missionaries in the 10/40 window.[9] As critical-geopolitics scholarship has shown, evangelicals have also supported aggressive, interventionist US foreign policy as a means of opening up missionary access to parts of the world where the existential struggle between Christianity and other belief systems (particularly Islam and Hinduism) is seen to be most acute (Agnew 2006; Sturm 2010).

In their insistence on a single authoritative 'truth' and their unshakable conviction in their moral superiority, contemporary evangelical Christians could not be further from the empathetic, self-critical open-minded global citizens that many advocates of liberal-cosmopolitanism wish to foster. Christianity, especially in its evangelical variants, is built upon a stark dualism between the saved and the unsaved, the reached and the unreached, that is at odds with the cultural and moral relativism of liberal cosmopolitanism. Yet a closer look at contemporary evangelical global imaginaries reveals more complexity in outlooks and motivations reflecting Christian engagement with, and re-tooling of, liberal cosmopolitan discourse. This can be seen in the growing recognition among white evangelicals of their historical complicity in colonialism, segregation, and racial oppression, and in their increasing involvement in community outreach and international humanitarian activities (Agensky 2013; Elisha 2008; Hearn 2002). It is also evident in contemporary missionaries' vocal repudiation of American cultural and political arrogance towards non-Western people and their embrace of 'relational ministry'.

Relational Ministry and Contemporary Christian Engagements with the Global

The pastors and mission leaders with whom I spoke insist that the purpose of missions is not to create Americans; nor is it to 'convert' people. Rather, it is

to share the Gospel through dialogue, conversation and the building of authentic relationships with people. This mode of relational ministry works from the premise that all people are made in the image of God and that 'Christian commonality can be engendered not only in spite of difference but that it embraces this diversity' (Gallaher 2007; Pelkmans 2007). Relational ministry thus attempts to break the link that evangelicals have often made between Christianity and Americanness, and it disrupts the assumption that being a Christian requires the adoption of American cultural values. As explained by a student ministry worker I interviewed,

> Without realizing it, most Christians in America, we live out our faith in a very American way, but I don't believe that Christianity is an American religion. It didn't start in America. I didn't start with white people. It didn't start with middle-class people. So I think going overseas—unless you're going with that kind of imperialistic 'I'm going to convert them to live the way I live and to want the things I want', you're going to learn to die to that part of yourself and realize that there are faith communities all over the world who live out the Christian faith in very different but very true ways.

So while the ultimate aim of evangelism is to win souls for Christ, relational ministry requires that missionaries 'meet people where they are' and that they be sensitive to and respectful of God-given cultural differences – that they live out the Gospel through compassionate encounters with people, rather than by 'ramming it down people's throats' (a phrase some of my interviewees used when describing past missionary practice).[10] As one pastor remarked,

> We're there to come alongside the cultures, because the Gospel does not fit in the American mold. The Gospel transcends all cultures, all molds, and we're there to love and to present the Gospel, and there will be an indigenous church that's unique to their culture, unique the people groups that are there. The American niceties that we do, the American rituals and traditions that we do as Christians in this country, they're not equal to the Gospel, and we're not there to pass on American tradition.

Certainly, evangelicals' newfound respect for cultural Others is partly instrumental – an acknowledgement, borne from experience, that people may not be receptive to the Gospel if they are being told to forsake their communities, traditions and families (see, for instance, Sharkey's (2013) account of American missionaries in Egypt in the early twentieth century). Evangelicals' instrumental approach to 'diversity', in turn, can reproduce static, essentialised conceptions of differences.[11] This can be seen with the Joshua Project, an evangelical organisation that has attempted, with Linnaean fervour, to identify and to map out the world's 'people groups', which are invariably represented through stereotyped, romanticised imagery – that is, wearing 'traditional' dress and doing 'traditional' things.[12] Such representations, while romanticised, at times betray contempt

towards non-Western people and places. Country profiles on the Operation Mission website, for instance, usually begin by praising the rich cultural heritage of each country, but then belittle or condemn various political and cultural beliefs found in that country. The prayer for Kazakhstan on this website reads:

> Thank You, Lord, for the country of Kazakhstan, with its unique heritage of Russian Orthodoxy and Folk Islam. We pray that the Kazakh people will hear Your word all over the country, see the futility of their own, often only superficial, beliefs and turn their hearts to You.

American Protestantism's growing sensitivity to 'culture', in short, does not eliminate the troubling power dynamics that have always been involved in 'reaching out' to those presumed to be materially and/or spiritually deficient.[13] Still, many contemporary mission organisers recognise these dynamics, and they do attempt to destabilise American-Christian preconceptions about the mission field and the 'unreached'. The genuine desire among many contemporary missionaries to learn from others, rather than to instruct, and to build a truly global church with overseas partners raises intriguing questions about the global subjectivities of the thousands of young Christians who participate in short-term missions. The following section explores the ways in which white, relatively privileged short-term missionaries learn to think globally and to imagine their role in the world.

Young Christians' Engagements with the Mission Field

Churches and mission organisations pitch short-term missions to young American Christians in a way that very closely resembles secular gap-year and voluntourism programmes in their emphasis on stepping out of one's 'comfort zone' to achieve self-transformation, personal maturity and intercultural awareness. Such themes are salient on the websites of the dozens of private organisations that plan short-term mission trips. One such organisation, Experience Mission, asks prospective missionaries, 'What happens when you leave everything that is comfortable and fully embrace a culture unlike your own?' The answer provided could just as easily be found a secular gap-year programme website: participants will 'see the world in a different way' and will 'live alongside and soak up the wisdom found in these cultures' in a way that will 'develop leaders for the future'.[14] The emphasis on life-changing adventure is usually more subdued among individual churches who organise their own, independent mission trips. Still, pastors and youth ministers recognise that young affluent, young, white people are eager for adventure, and they conceive of overseas missions as 'experiences' that go beyond ordinary tourism by providing access to 'authenticity'. The pastors with whom I spoke emphasised the immersive, getting-hands-dirty nature of short-term mission trips, and they criticised trips in which missionaries (so

I was told) stay in walled-off compounds or luxury hotels. *Our* mission groups, pastors assured me, live within the community, meet local people and coordinate their efforts with local partners (usually a church or a group of long-term missionaries).

Trips to impoverished countries like Guatemala and Haiti, pastors suggested to me, have a 'shock value' that opens the eyes of privileged young people to the world's richness, as well as its many ills. Mission leaders are keen to convey to young people that most people in the world do not live like Americans do, and that Americans 'don't know it all'. The lesson imparted to young missionaries about the need to place themselves in a diverse world and to recognise valid cultural differences draws quite directly from the lexicon of liberal-cosmopolitanism. Yet missions also revolve around a distinctively Christian set of values and imperatives. As much as youth pastors describe missions as mind-expanding adventures, they conceive of them as spiritual journeys, 'like pilgrimages… where one temporarily leaves the ordinary, compulsory, workaday life "at home" and experiences an extraordinary, voluntary, sacred experience "away from home"' (Priest, Wilson, and Johnson 2010, 433). Many of the young missionaries I interviewed described themselves not so much as choosing to go overseas as responding to God's call for them to leave their protective bubble and to minister to all his people. Hannah,[15] a young woman whose first trip abroad was as a missionary to Uganda, explained, 'I needed to be uncomfortable. I completely believe that when the Lord is calling you to someplace, you can't just shove it away'. Two other young women I interviewed were adamant that they had not wanted to go on a mission trip, but that they felt called to go.[16] For these young people, mission is not a lark or a vacation. They are looking to experience the world not as tourists or as study-abroad students, but as 'kingdom-builders' – that is, as creators of faith communities dedicated to living out the Gospel and 'sharing their lives in mission together' (to quote a Presbyterian pastor).

Typically, short-term missionaries participate in a service project during the trip – usually a construction project or a 'Vacation Bible School' for local children. These service projects are a way of getting young people to put others before themselves – to serve as the 'hands and feet of Christ' instead of being served by others.[17] Pastors and mission leaders, however, are under no illusions that these service activities will alleviate poverty in the host community, and they are refreshingly honest about the limited capacity of short-term missions to 'make a difference' in a material way. As one pastor explained, 'Westerners can send money and pay to have something built much cheaper than a bunch of unskilled Americans going to a Third World country can do. So it's never about the physical project' (cf Palacios 2010; Priest, Wilson, and Johnson 2010). The deeper purpose of service projects, in this respect, is to provide an opportunity for young missionaries to grow in faith through the act of

'bearing witness' – that is, testifying to others about the workings of Christ's love in one's life. This is the centrepiece of relational ministry, with evangelical mission leaders encouraging young missionaries to present their 'testimony' of faith to local people (almost always with the help of translators). Bearing witness can take many forms: informal gatherings of US and local youth organised by local churches, door-to-door visits to share the Gospel, or impromptu conversations with people on college campuses and city streets.

However much one may object to proselytising, it is difficult to dismiss the act of bearing witness as an exercise in resume-padding or as a performance of class identity, though mission trips undoubtedly serve this purpose for some young Christians (as the pastors I interviewed readily admitted). There is something radical embedded in these practices of Christian witness – something beyond the mere celebration of global diversity. Sharing their faith with strangers is a deliberate, and usually uncomfortable, act that requires invariably white, middle-class missionaries to engage directly with people very different from themselves – including street children, prostitutes, drug addicts and refugees – as equals in the eyes of God. Bearing witness in circumstances of great poverty was described to me as a spiritual 'wake-up call' that forces affluent young Christians to think about the meaning of their faith and that alerts them to the hollowness of their materialistic desires (Priest and Priest 2008). One pastor describes how, as a young missionary to Kenya, he was struck by 'the joy that people had. I was like, all right, it's not about things, it's about finding your peace in the Lord. When you see people who have next to nothing compared to what we have in America; seeing that, it's like, where is my joy coming from?' Similarly, the returning missionaries with whom I spoke described their experiences as deeply humbling – as making them cognizant of the pettiness of their own concerns and worries. Some spoke in dramatic terms of being emotionally 'wrecked' and 'heart-broken' by the experience. One young woman, Hannah, related to me the personal crisis she experienced shortly after her return from Uganda, and her fear that she would never again experience God as she had experienced him in the slums of Kampala.

With this emotional turmoil comes those moments of critical reflection and openness that many theorists view as the goal of cosmopolitan pedagogy and practice (Noble 2013). In these moments, young people challenge received wisdom about the 'unreached' and negative media images of foreign people and places (Baillie Smith et al. 2013; Hancock 2013; Megoran 2010).[18] The young missionaries I interviewed look back with embarrassment at the way they had imagined their mission destination (i.e. mud huts, dirt roads, drug cartels and terrorists). They seemed to figure out quickly that the mission field is more complex than they had been led to believe. This was the case with Molly, who arrived at a very different understanding of the

Middle East over the course of several mission trips, including a year-long stint in the region. Molly, a first-generation college graduate, had gone to the region with a fervent desire to share Christ with non-believers whom she had imagined to be spiritually empty, but she came away with lasting friendships with Muslims and high regard for their religious and cultural beliefs. This, in turn, allowed her to think about the region's politics in a new light, and she shared with me that she had come to question evangelical support for Israel. She stated, 'I just don't buy into… this huge Christian moral agenda to support the nation of Israel. I realize it's more complex than maybe it gets played out for us'. Another young missionary, Samantha, found herself acting as an educator to friends and parents whose views of 'foreigners' (including immigrants) are overwhelmingly negative. She stated, 'I don't think other people know exactly how it is and are able to really put themselves in someone else's shoes unless you've been there…[People say], 'It's their own fault', blah blah blah. No, it's not. It's what you're born into, and you can't help what you're born into'.

Yet the transformative power of mission as a mode of being global is muted by the profound ignorance of places that mission leaders and youth pastors tend to perpetuate. Missions, to reiterate, are designed to remove young people from their comfortable environs and to immerse them in 'the foreign', and more specifically, in the *impoverished* (Gina, a young missionary, heard fellow congregants describing Costa Rica as not a 'real' mission field because the country is not poor enough and 'the people don't really need you there'). Yet mission leaders provide very little information about *why* these places are poor. Prior to departure, STM participants might attend three to five training sessions, but these are generally dedicated to 'team building', logistical information and instruction on sharing one's testimony, rather than in-depth information about places they are visiting. When mission leaders do impart information about localities, they typically focus on the cultural foibles of local people and points of etiquette to avoid giving offence. This lack of information about destinations is purposeful. Mission leaders explained to me that it is difficult to impart meaningful information to people in a few short training sessions, and that most people are bored by such information in any event; more importantly, historical-geographical information can detract from the *experience* of being immersed in unfamiliar surroundings. Mission leaders, want young missionaries to have pure, unmediated encounters with the people they visit ('loving on people' is the phrase commonly used to describe these encounters) so that they are better equipped to do the work of 'discipleship' (that is, acting as Christ's followers and making followers of others).

This lack of attention to context attenuates the kinds of learning that can occur on mission trips, as participants come to understand the 'mission field' as an 'undifferentiated place of generic spiritual and material need' and

mission hosts as people without history living in a natural state of poverty (Howell 2009, 206). This, of course, is the same criticism that has been levelled against secular overseas programmes, which, scholars have argued, normalise the conditions of privilege that allow affluent, white Westerners to arrive *en masse* in poor countries (Cook 2012; Jefferess 2012). With little understanding of the violent processes of colonialism and neo-colonial/neo-liberal development that have produced poverty and inequality in many parts of the world, young missionaries come away with the impression that people with few material resources are content to live in poverty. So, for instance, Beth, who had been on multiple trips to Haiti – one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere – remarked, rather naively, on 'how beautiful Haiti is and how beautiful poverty can be…When you have nothing, how you still trust in Jesus and how you still have faith in Jesus. Like, he'll provide for you, and it's going to be okay, and he really is working all things for your good'. The observation that poor people can be kind, generous and happy is eye-opening to young missionaries, yet, as missiologist Ver Beek (2006) argues, it also mistakes hospitality for well-being and glosses over the real suffering that results from poverty and injustice.

Conclusion

As a growing number of young Americans – especially middle-class, white Americans – respond to the call to experience the global, it is crucial to ask how these young people encounter the world and conceive of themselves as actors in a global field. This is especially the case for the growing numbers of young people who venture overseas on mission trips. Short-term missions draw upon the same liberal-cosmopolitan language that informs secular overseas programmes, with mission leaders framing trips as life-changing 'experiences' that foster personal maturity, worldliness and an appreciation for cultural differences. Woven into this liberal-cosmopolitanism is a distinctly Christian vocabulary centred on concepts of spiritual transformation, witness and discipleship. At the same time that they are learning to break free from their parochialism and to be 'citizens of the world', young missionaries are endeavouring to create a global Christian church, to express 'God's love for the nations' and to build Christ's kingdom on earth.

While some young Christians undoubtedly view missions simply as an opportunity to travel abroad, they, like mission organisers, also conceive of these trips as journeys of faith. Young missionaries are taught to 'die to' themselves – to place others before self, and to see the image of God in every person, no matter how dire their circumstances. The young missionaries I interviewed were humbled by their experiences, and they seemed to develop a genuine love for the people they met overseas. But there is a troubling conceit at the heart of missions. Mission leaders emphasise to youth

participants that mission is 'not about them' and that they travel abroad to serve others; yet youth participants, as mission leaders will readily admit, are clearly the main beneficiaries of the trip. Like secular overseas programmes, missions promise access to charismatic, authentic foreigners who serve as instruments of personal growth for privileged white Americans. In this respect, missions reproduce forms of exploitation that have always been central to Westerners' ventures abroad, whether as missionaries, aid workers, students or tourists.

Some pastors and youth ministers, despite their recognition of these power dynamics, remain unequivocal in their support of missions, describing mission trips as 'lighting a fire' in young people and as having lasting impacts in their lives – encouraging some to become full-time missionaries or to enter ministry, or to choose careers oriented around serving others. Others, though, are more circumspect, focusing on the immense challenge involved in translating the 'feel-good' aspect of missions into a sustained commitment to 'living missionally' regardless of where one is. There is much at stake in this soul-searching, I wish to suggest, not only with respect to the production of global citizens but also with respect to the production of national citizens. My research is still in progress, but I have noted thus far that young evangelical missionaries, while eager to travel abroad, lack interest in issues of poverty and injustice closer to home. Young people routinely spoke of their passion for Africa or Central America and their desire to 'love on' people in Guatemala, Haiti, Uganda and elsewhere. But very few expressed a similar passion for addressing poverty and racism in South Carolina (despite the abundance of both). Some suggested that it was too difficult to communicate across racial and class lines in the United States, given the historical baggage of slavery and segregation. Others stated simply that they had not been called by God to meet the needs of people at home. This preference for the charismatic foreigner over the abject local is perhaps to be expected, but it is concerning when viewed in light of evangelical tendencies to view poverty and inequality as the result of personal, moral failings and to respond to poverty as a matter of charity and benevolence rather than justice (Elisha 2008).

It may be, as a female mainline Methodist minister suggested to me, that the contradictions that arise when privileged Westerners travel to poor countries are unresolvable – that 'experiencing' the world, whether as a missionary, a tourist, or a gap-year participant, necessarily involves some degree of objectification that can be damaging to host communities and to home communities alike. This minister suggested that missions, despite their problems, are, on balance, worthwhile and valuable both to missionaries and mission hosts, but only if missionaries can connect the 'blessings' of affluence in America to difficult histories of race, class and imperialism at home and abroad – histories in which Protestant missionaries have had a prominent role. This requires, in turn, the prioritisation of learning about the political

and economic circumstances that shape the mission field. Without this more critical perspective on the mission field – this deeper geographical knowledge about unequal relationships between places (Harvey 2002) – evangelical Christians may find that building a global church of believers who are equal in the eyes of God, and equal in the eyes of each other, remains an elusive goal.

Notes

1. I use the term 'secular' cautiously here to signify beliefs, outlooks and practices that do not make explicit reference to the workings of a divine being. The secular suggests the compartmentalisation of the spiritual and the temporal in Western modernity. However, I dispute Wilford's (2009) description of religion in modern societies as a 'sacred archipelago' – islands of spirituality isolated from the workings of the public and the political. My thinking is more in line with Tse's (2014) notion of the religious and the secular as 'grounded theologies' that produce myriad claims relating to personal and public morality and behaviour.
2. Liberal cosmopolitanism's roots extend back much farther than World War II, however, to the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Van der Veer (2002), in turn, connects the popularisation of Kantian ideals to nineteenth-century Western imperialism and nation-state formation.
3. Experiential education – a key tenet of International Baccalaureate and Global Studies programmes – is also integral to 'service-learning' initiatives in many US schools and universities.
4. The dividing line between evangelical and mainline churches, however, can be hazy. Denominational families (e.g. Presbyterianism, Methodism) encompass both evangelical and mainline branches, and individual congregations can lean one way or the other. The churches and campus ministries included in this study are affiliated with the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church of America, the Assemblies of God (a Pentecostal denomination), and the Southern Baptist Convention; a small number of non-denominational churches are also included in the study.
5. Mission trips in the churches included in my study are usually partly subsidised by churches but still cost $600–$1500 per person. Young people raise funds for their trips through carwashes, t-shirt sales, crowdsourcing, and the like – strategies that work well in communities with disposable income.
6. For a fuller discussion of white Protestants' involvement in key political debates through American history, see Harvey (2012), Curtis (2001), and Williams (2012).
7. The of America as uniquely blessed by God has coloured mainstream American political discourse since the early twentieth century (Kruse 2015).
8. As Wilford (2009) describes, evangelical churches grew through the 1980s and 1990s by perfecting forms of community and worship – exemplified by the megachurch – that resonate with middle-class suburbanites. Liberal 'mainline' Protestant denominations, meanwhile, have experienced a sharp decline in membership and political influence (Jones 2016).
9. As described by Woods (2013), some of these missionaries operate in the guise of teachers, students or aid workers to circumvent restrictions on proselytising.
10. This embrace relationality is also evident in evangelical 'outreach' activity at home (see Elisha 2008; Garces-Foley 2007).

11. This tendency to essentialise culture and place is not unique to Christian organisations. Rather, it is a common feature of 'diversity talk' across Western societies, as discussed by Nagel and Ehrkamp (2017). See also Harvey's (2002) discussion of cultural and geographical essentialism within cosmopolitan discourse.
12. The mapping of people groups is intended to add scientific rationality to evangelisation efforts (Han 2010; Hancock 2014).
13. Such power dynamics, of course, are not unique to Christian missions – see Doerr (2015).
14. See https://experiencemission.org/; for other examples of the adventure-in-missions theme, see jesusfilmmissiontrips.org and http://ywamdp.org.
15. All names are pseudonyms.
16. Most of my young interviewees stated that their parents encouraged them to go, or, at least, did not discourage them. In many cases, short-term missions are inter-generational, with parents accompanying high-school and college-aged students.
17. It should be noted, though, that many evangelically oriented groups do not engage in any service activity, focusing instead on engaging with local people. See Hancock's (2013) description of Cru.
18. For related discussion of critical reflection among study abroad students, see Dolby (2004) and Mitchell and Parker (2008).

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