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Missionaries and Monarchy:

How Protestant Missionaries Influenced the Hawaiian Government from 1820 to 1863

Susanna R. Spendlove[1]

Introduction

In 1820, Protestant missionaries first went to Hawai'i, then known as the Sandwich Islands. Despite being told by their governing board "to abstain from all interference with the local and political interests of the people," they very quickly exerted a significant influence over the Hawaiian monarchy.[2] Missionaries Hiram Bingham and William Richards, in particular, proved well suited to hold political discussions with government leaders. William Richards said in a 1825 letter that he would regularly instruct the chiefs, though he remained vague on the specifics of his instructions. Over time, King Kamehameha III came to rely on Richards for political advice so much that he appointed him as his advisor in 1838. Richards said the king expected from him "free suggestions on every subject connected with government and on their duties as rulers of the nation."[3] This event shows the rapidity with which the missionaries gained access to Hawaiian politics. Within just five years, a missionary who had never been to Hawai'i before became a very important political figure.

Previous books and papers on this topic have tended to overglorify, undervalue, or overvilify the missionaries. Older writings in particular have claimed that the missionary's success was almost entirely due to their own hard work and determination. On the other hand, more recent publications have often characterized the missionaries as greedy colonizers or lucky bystanders of circumstances outside of their control. As is often the case, the truth is likely a complex combination of these and other viewpoints. Therefore, this paper will use all available sources and research to present the complexity of the circumstances surrounding missionary involvement in the Hawaiian monarchy. More non-native primary and secondary source material is available than Native Hawaiian material. Given the present and unfortunate imbalance, this paper will attempt to give equal voice to both sides of the narrative by carefully analyzing available sources to develop a more comprehensive viewpoint.

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[1] Susanna R. Spendlove is currently a masters student at the University of Alabama, studying library and information science. She is from Laie, Hawaii, and was inspired to write this paper to learn more about the history of her state.

[2] American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *Instruction of the Prudential Committee of the American Board of Commissioners for Missions to the Sandwich Islands Mission* (Press of the Mission Seminary, 1838), p. 41.

[3] Samuel Williston, *William Richards* (privately printed, 1938), p. 49; William Richards, "Letter of William Richards to [unknown]," 2 October 1830.

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This paper will use this information to discuss exactly how and why the missionaries so readily exerted such a profound impact on the politics of Hawai'i. It will do this by examining the unique circumstances surrounding their arrival in Hawai'i and their interactions with the monarchy. These include: (1) major changes to Hawai'i's traditional religion that took place prior to missionary arrival, (2) the intentions of the missionaries, (3) the exigencies of the Hawaiian government and people at that time, (4) genuine connections formed between the missionaries and the monarchy, and (5) the diplomatic skills of individual missionaries. In addition to analyzing these factors, this paper will examine several examples of laws and policies resulting from missionary influence.

Changes Before Missionary Arrival

Prior to the missionary arrival in 1820, the islands of Hawaii were already undergoing significant changes that paved the way for missionary involvement soon afterward. Religious tensions began when Captain Cook and the first Westerners arrived in Hawai'i in 1778. During this time, Hawaiian religious traditions were tied to the *Kapu* System, which was a combination of taboos and strict restrictions. For example, one *Kapu* prohibited women from eating meals with men. Men traditionally prepared food, while women wove mats, twisted cords for nets, and performed other tasks. Men were often given the highest quality and most desirable foods. Breaking a *Kapu* was believed to enrage the Gods, and the ruling monarchs were seen as divinely appointed to enforce these regulations.[4] The link between governance and religiosity was central to Hawaiian tradition and culture. Hawai'i's traditional religious practices were so closely connected to its social and political customs that it was often impossible to distinguish them into distinct parts. Religion was not merely a personal practice for Hawaiians but was a deeply integrated aspect of their public life and culture for many years. This contrasted sharply with the Western concept of religion, which was often viewed as an individual feature of a person's life, rather than an integral part of a nation's customs and laws. Referring to the Maka'āinana, historian Norman Meller said, "Hawaiians so long had been used to a theocratic state that the religion of their chiefs had a powerful effect on their actions."[5] In other words, the religious practices of Hawaii's rulers, or *Ali'i,* were also followed by nearly all of the Maka'āinana. While these people may have avoided breaking taboos, the Westerners who arrived in Hawai'i did not. Historian Jennifer Fish Kashay called it a "foreign disregard," which "undermined the fabric of Sandwich Island society."[6] Hawaiians saw

[4] Sheldon Dibble, *History of the Sandwich Islands' Mission* (Taylor and Dodd, 1839), p. 65; Belle M. Brain, *The Transformation of Hawaii: How Fifty Years of Mission Work Gave a Christian Nation to the World* (Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), p. 45.

[5] Norman Meller, "Missionaries to Hawaii," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 11:4 (1958): p. 789; see also James J. Jarves, *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands* (Edward Moxon, 1843), p. 228.

[6] Jennifer Fish Kashay, "From Kapus to Christianity: The Disestablishment of the Hawaiian Religion and Chiefly Appropriation of Calvinist Christianity," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 39:1 (2008): p. 18.

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that *Kapu* could be broken with seemingly no negative consequences, leading to a period of confusion as Hawai'i's leaders sought new justifications for adhering to the traditional system. In his book *History of the Sandwich Islands' Mission,* missionary Sheldon Dibble noted that Hawaiians watched "foreigners living with impunity."[7] Due to the correlation between the government and religion, the hegemony of the monarchy was greatly threatened.[8]

In addition to the chaos caused by contact with the Western world, internal forces contributed to the downfall of the *Kapu* system during this time. Penalties for breaking taboos were extremely harsh, with many violators being sentenced to death. This eventually led to a growing resentment among the Maka'āinana, or commoners. King Kamehameha I, who reigned as Hawaii's monarch between 1810 and 1819, staunchly enforced the System and did not seek to change it. Many women, in particular, felt the burden of the *Kapu.* Ka'ahumanu, the favorite wife of King Kamehameha I, was a key player in the dissolution of the system.[9] As King Kamehameha I grew older, he worried that his son Liholiho would not be a strong enough leader on his own. To prepare for his death, Kamehameha I announced that Ka'ahumanu would become *Kuhina Nui,* or principal adviser, to Liholiho when he eventually took over as Hawai'i's reigning monarch.[10] King Kamehameha died in May of 1819, mere months before the first Protestant missionaries set foot in the Hawaiian Islands.[11] After the death of King Kamehameha I, Ka'ahumanu exerted influence over Liholiho, encouraging him to abolish the *Kapu*. Historian James L. Haley wrote in his 2014 book titled *Captive Paradise: A History of Hawaii* that Ka'ahumanu "realized there was only one way to maintain her power, and that was to destroy the *Kapu* System."[12] According to Haley, Ka'ahumanu believed that, as a woman, she needed to free herself from the restrictions of the *Kapu* in order to effectively rule alongside a man, Liholiho. He says that she skillfully pressured the new King into breaking the System by refusing to participate in it herself.[13] While all of the motivations for Ka'ahumanu's choices are not known, it is possible that she was trying to increase her own power, as Haley said. It is also possible that she saw a different future for Hawai'i that she thought was better and took steps to reach it. When Ka'ahumanu discussed this with Liholiho, he hesitated briefly. But he eventually made a public display of breaking the *Kapu* by eating with

[7] Dibble, *History of the Sandwich Islands' Mission*, p. 65.
[8] Kashay, "From Kapus to Christianity," pp. 18-19.
[9] Stephenie Seto Levin, "The Overthrow of the Kapu System in Hawaii," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 77: 4 (1968): p. 425, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20704579.
[10] James L. Haley, *Captive Paradise: A History of Hawaii* (St. Martin's Press, 2014), p. 16.
[11] Albertine Loomis, *Grapes of Canaan* (Vail-Ballou Press, 1966), pp. 26-27.
[12] Haley, *Captive Paradise*, p. 14.
[13] Haley, *Captive Paradise*, p. 18.

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women.[14] Thus, with the death of King Kamehameha I and the accession of his heir, Liholiho, came the disestablishment of Hawaii's traditional religion and a period of unexpected transition and flux.

As they landed in Hawai'i, Protestant missionaries learned about the timeliness of Kamehameha's death and interpreted it as a sign that God was preparing the way for them to convert the Hawaiian people. Bingham, who was one of the first and most influential missionaries in Hawai'i, said this in his book *A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands*:

> How were our hearts surprised, agitated, beyond every expectation, to hear the report – "Kamehameha is dead – His son Liholiho is king – the tabus are abolished – the images are destroyed, - the heiaus of idolatrous worship are burned, and the party that attempted to restore them by force of arms has recently been vanquished!" The hand of God! How visible in thus beginning to answer the prayer of his people, for the Hawaiian race![15]

The abolition of the *Kapu* system was crucial for the missionaries, as it created space for a new religion to replace the previous one. Without the removal of this system, it is highly unlikely that the Protestant missionaries would have been able to influence the Hawaiian government so quickly.[16]

Missionary Intentions

Understanding the missionaries' intentions is key to understanding how they interacted with Hawai'i's *Ali'i*. In some sense, the missionaries' intentions were very clear: they wanted to establish Christianity in the Hawaiian Islands. The extent of their intentions, however, was more complicated than one might expect. The missionaries had been advised by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to stay out of the political affairs of the people. Bingham agreed with this, stating that "it was not our intention to interfere with the Government or trade of the islands".[17] In a seemingly contradictory fashion, however, the missionaries believed that involvement *was* justified if it was a means towards bringing people Christianity. In the eyes of the ABCFM, the key distinction was in *how* the missionaries worked with Hawai'i's leaders, rather than *if* they did.[18] The ABCFM's direction was not intended to keep the missionaries from working with or advising government

[14] Harold Whitman Bradley, *The American Frontier in Hawaii: The Pioneers 1789–1843* (Stanford University Press, 1942), p. 125.
[15] Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands; or, The Civil, Religious, and Political History of Those Islands* (Sherman Converse, 1847), p. 70.
[16] Meller, "Missionaries to Hawaii," pp. 788–799.
[17] Bingham, *Residence*, p. 88.
[18] American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, Instruction of the Prudential Committee*, p.41.

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leaders.[19] Rather, it was intended to keep them away from seeking formal or personal political power for themselves. Missionary William Richards, for example, was released from missionary service with the ABCFM when he took up a formal government position. This occurred after he had worked as an advisor to King Kamehameha III for many years before that.[20] The missionaries never intended to avoid the rulers of Hawaii, knowing they would need their approval to accomplish their mission. Bingham said:

> Thus, by a careful, persevering, and thorough consultation with the highest authorities, and their deliberate action after twelve days' intercourse, did our mission acquire the right to enter that field, and begin their work, with the formal and express approbation of the sovereign of the country, who himself designed to receive instruction from the missionaries, and commenced without delay.[21]

In addition to converting to Christianity, the missionaries wanted to help build a new society. In 1860, American lawyer Richard Henry Dana wrote a letter to the New York Tribune, stating, "A people must be civilized before it can be Christianized."[22] Many non-clergymen had been sent over by the ABCFM in addition to the missionaries, including teachers, nurses, doctors, farmers, builders, carpenters, businessmen, merchants, and others.[23] They were to create a society similar to that of New England in the United States, with comparable religious, moral, and social traditions. The missionaries knew that such a radical change in Hawaiian society would require government cooperation and support, which incentivized them to build favorable relations with the monarchy.

The Choices of the Monarchy

The Hawaiian monarchy had many motives for allowing the missionaries to remain in Hawaii and gain political and social influence there. Liholiho could have easily pushed these Protestant missionaries out of his kingdom, yet he did not. This was also true of King Kamehameha III, Liholiho's successor to the throne. Yet the Protestant missionaries offered several benefits to the monarchy that other religious groups might not have. First, the missionaries desired to build schools, teach literacy, and otherwise

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[19] Norman Meller, "Missionaries to Hawaii: Shapers of the Islands' Government," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 11:4 (1958): pp. 791-2.

[20] Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 78.

[21] Bingham, *Residence,* p. 91.

[22] Richard Henry Dana, "Letter to the New York Tribune," 26 May, 1860.

[23] "American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives," Harvard Library, accessed 17 March 2025 https://library.harvard.edu/collections/american-board-commissioners-foreign-missions-archives.

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establish an educational foundation in the islands. Hawai'i's leaders had wanted literacy and written language in their nation for some time, so that they could better communicate with the growing number of Westerners in their lands.[24] The monarchy likely realized that it would be viewed more legitimately by other world leaders if it adopted written communication. They also saw other advantages that adopting a written language could provide for their nation, such as preserving their stories, traditions, and heritage. The Hawaiian language, traditions, and culture had been passed down orally for centuries. Before the missionaries came, there were practically no literate native Hawaiians. The missionaries were eager to help Hawaiians become literate and began teaching Liholiho and others in their first classroom almost immediately after their arrival in the islands. In one of the few letters he created before his young death, which has been translated from its original Hawaiian, Liholiho expressed appreciation to the missionaries for their efforts in teaching:

> We have recently learned literacy, we have seen and heard the good word of Jehovah ... We were shown compassion by Jehovah, who sent Mr. Bingham, Mr. Thurston, and all the teachers. And they dwelled with us here, and our lands have become enlightened. Our hearts rejoice in their good teaching to us.[25]

Missionary-run schools were highly successful. William Richards said in 1830, that "There are now more than 1000 readers in Lahaina."[26] These schools helped establish trust between the missionaries and the monarchy and gave the missionaries an easy way to teach their philosophies, morals, and religion.[27] Hawai'i adopted written language at an astonishing rate and soon became one of the most literate nations in the world. Within twelve years, a greater percentage of Hawaiians were literate than Americans, at an impressive rate of 91%.[28]

Another reason the *Ali'i* may have allowed the missionaries to influence them was their need to find a religious replacement to the *Kapu* System. This system was a major part of life for everyone living in Hawai'i, being present in everyday activities and interactions. Without the *Kapu* System, a large void

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[24] Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 32–33; see also Dibble, *History of the Sandwich Islands' Mission*, pp. 80–81.

[25] Liholiho, "Ali'i Letters," March 18, 1823, to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Hawaiian Mission Houses Digital Archive, accessed 4 March 2025, https://hmha.missionhouses.org/items/show/2705 .

[26] Williston, *William Richards*, 48; Richards, "letter of William Richards," 2 October, 1830.

[27] Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, p. 32.

[28] John Kalei Laimana, "Hawaiians' Phenomenal Rise to Literacy in the Early 19th Century: A Historical Elision," in *Exploring and Expanding Literacy Histories of the United States*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2024).

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was left in Hawaiian life. Christianity came along at a convenient time to fill this void. Christianity could offer several benefits to Hawai'i, including aligning its leaders more closely with divinity, as they had previously been. This would provide the government with stability, as it continued to justify its rule through a divine right. Additionally, the Hawaiian people were already familiar with a spiritual system, and Christianity included many spiritual principles and rituals. As a nation that had long practiced spirituality, a Christian approach to life likely felt more comfortable and agreeable than a more secular or non-spiritual way of living.[29] Christianity also included a high standard of morality. The missionaries seemingly practiced a more morally upright life than the Westerners that Hawaiians had been accustomed to. For many years prior to the missionaries' arrival, merchants and businessmen had come to Hawaii for trade. The sailors often stirred up trouble in the Islands by sharing their undesirable habits with the Maka'āinana. This included their frequent smoking, drinking, and sexual pursuits. To Hawai'i's leaders, the cleaner lifestyle that Christianity offered likely seemed more appealing.[30] Christianity was also the predominant religion of the nations that were coming into closer contact with Hawai'i, and adopting it might have been seen as a way for those nations to better understand one another.

Missionary and *Ali'i* Connection

Another factor that allowed the missionaries to influence Hawaiian politics was the genuine connections they made between their faith and the *Ali'i.* People like William Richards, who labored hard in the mission field, were popular among Hawai'i's leaders and Maka'āinana alike. One oft-repeated story is about a young Hawaiian father who named his son "Mr. Richards" to honor the missionary. King Liholiho expressed gratitude that he had abandoned the *Kapu* tradition of his father in the 1823 letter quoted earlier:

> We had wooden deities before, during my father's time. In my time, I have abandoned wooden deities. It turns out my abandoning them beforehand was appropriate, for Mr. Bingham, Mr. Thurston, and all the teachers were arriving. It is through our father that I may greet all of you. Jesus Christ was good in speaking to you, saying to you all, "Go and teach throughout the islands, and preach the good word of salvation." The ministers sailed here to do good things for us, we were overjoyed ... Thankfully you sent teachers or our lands would be completely ignorant. But no, you showed us

[29] Kashay, "From Kapus to Christianity," pp. 25-27.

[30] Jennifer Fish Kashay, "Agents of Imperialism: Missionaries and Merchants in Early-Nineteenth-Century Hawaii," *The New England Quarterly*, 80: 2 (2007): p. 281.

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> compassion. Our lands have become enlightened. Deep regards to all of you. May we have salvation through Jehovah and Jesus Christ our Lord.[31]

This letter appears to express sincere appreciation for the missionaries and their work. Along with Bingham, Liholiho said that the timing of the missionary arrival could not have been better. Other leaders in the government, including Kaʻahumanu and King Kamehameha III, also expressed similar sentiments of gratitude for the work the missionaries had done in their lands.[32] In an 1831 letter, Kaʻahumanu said, "I praise the kinship of our Lord Jesus Christ in aiding us... Praise to our common Lord for preserving them on the ocean until they arrived here in Hawaiʻi."[33] Very few letters were written by Hawaiʻi's monarchs during this time. Because of this, these letter excerpts are very important, as they provide rare insight into the thoughts and feelings of King Liholiho and others. It is important to note that while some of Hawaiʻi's monarchs may have experienced genuine Christian conversion, there were many motives for their acceptance of Christianity and the missionaries, as mentioned previously. In all likelihood, their conversions were fueled by mixed motives, combining both political and personal motives. For example, it is possible that there were aspects of Christianity that genuinely appealed to Liholiho, but that his main motivation for accepting Christianity was to bolster his popularity among other Christian nations. It is impossible to know this for certain, but again, it is likely that there were multiple motivations for his conversion.

Missionary Skill and Diplomacy

The work the missionaries performed themselves should not be underestimated in explaining why they were able to influence the government of Hawaiʻi so successfully. Although many of the ideal circumstances the missionaries experienced were outside of their control, they also skillfully worked with the monarchy to establish laws and government policies that were agreeable to them. The missionaries and the Aliʻi often worked side by side. One good example of how the missionaries worked with the monarchy can be found in a 1836 letter between King Kamehameha III and the missionaries. The missionaries had asked the King to ban liquor, and he responded to this request:

> I am directly telling you my thoughts, having just seen your request to ban liquor ... Do not assume that I do not drink. I do drink, but not to excess, just personal drinking. So,

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[31] Liholiho, "Aliʻi Letters," 18 March, 1823.

[32] Kauikeaouli, "Aliʻi Letters," 23 November, 1849, Hawaiian Mission Houses Digital Archive, accessed March 4, 2025, https://hmha.missionhouses.org/items/show/3050.

[33] Elizabeth Kaʻahumanu, "Aliʻi Letters," 11 September, 1831, to Jeremiah Evarts, Hawaiian Mission Houses Digital Archive, accessed 4 March, 2025, https://hmha.missionhouses.org/items/show/3021.

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