“In the image of God”: Protest American Missionaries and the Mapping of Angolan Politics.

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My dissertation adds a new dimension to the history of United State foreign relations, arguing that American missionaries constitute an important and under-explored component of America’s interaction with the world. Set between 1910 and 1975, my project demonstrates how America’s direct engagement in African affairs did not begin in the 1960s, as many studies assume, but nearly eighty years earlier, in 1880, when Protestant missionaries first arrived in Angola intent on setting up schools and hospitals not only to spread religious beliefs, but to make direct political and social contacts with Africans. My research revises traditional histories of America’s interaction with Africa and challenges the historical narrative of United States foreign relations. Using research and interviews compiled in Angola, South Africa, Portugal, and the United States, my project is part of a growing discourse most recently exemplified in the scholarship of Erez Manela, Matthew Connelly, Greg Grandin, and Jeremi Suri. These works, as well as my own, “internationalize” United States history by using foreign and domestic sources as well as cultural and diplomatic indicators to interpret not only how the rest of the world has been reflected in American history, but also how the American experience has been reflected in the history of other nations.

Looking specifically at Congregational Church missionaries, the first half of my project considers the early years of Protestant missionary activity prior to the Second World War, when the Portuguese colonial presence in Angola was minimal. Using pedagogy initially developed to target African-American freedmen and women in the American South after the Civil War, Congregational missionaries built hospitals and schools throughout rural Angola aimed at educating (and converting) Angolans from the lowest rungs of the colonial hierarchy. Angolans’ decision to join the Protestant church and turn their backs on the state-sponsored Catholic Church was not only religious but also political, a potentially empowering—if dangerous—decision for a sector of the population that was otherwise barred from formal political processes. While the first few chapters demonstrate how Americans intervened in African social and political life, the subsequent chapters place both the U.S. and Angola into a broader, more global context. This section is devoted to the post-War period when various forces—the Cold War, the ascendency of the United States as a global superpower, the reassertion of Portuguese development in Angola, and the decolonization movements which swept Africa in the 1960s—were felt in Angola and, specifically, in Protestant missions. By the 1960s, Angolans had transformed Congregationalist mission schools, churches and mission stations into oppositional public spaces where dialogue about life after colonialism—otherwise denied under the Portuguese—was permitted and nurtured. The relationship between North American missionaries and black Angolans became a significant issue for the Portuguese government, who blamed missionaries for “Americanizing” Angolans and thus being both the seed and support of anti-colonial resistance. The leaders of all three of Angola’s political parties—including Jonas Savimbi who would later be an important player in America’s relations with the region—were educated in Protestant missions and these missions relationships would be reflected in the post-Independence (1975) political map of Angola.