

The long history of child sponsorship, c.1700–1950

Hillary Kaell

McGill University, Canada

Abstract

The invention of child sponsorship, a fundraising tool that raises billions of dollars a year for global projects, is widely credited to the Save the Children Fund in 1919. This article is the first to revise that history, as it follows sponsorship through multiple iterations across more than two centuries. Doing so, it uncovers sponsorship's roots in transatlantic Protestant missionary networks that combined new theologies of child saving with early capitalism's 'share holding' system. Turning to the early twentieth century, it then shows how sponsorship mobilized 'non-sectarian' Christianity to lend authority to humanitarian appeals while opening up broader markets.

Over the last seventy years, child sponsorship has become a staple fundraising technique in global projects. Donors send a predetermined amount on a monthly or yearly basis to benefit an individual abroad, to whom they are encouraged to send letters and photos. It is emblematic of the 'unstrangering' that historian Keith David Watenpaugh argues is central to modern humanitarian reasoning: the process of making faraway people 'knowable, similar, and deserving' so that their needs are reconfigured as 'a problem for humanity'.¹ Sponsorship has proven enormously successful at spreading such ideals among Western donors. Recent estimates put the number of sponsored children at nine to twelve million globally, with more than three billion U.S. dollars given in support each year. By that count, over the last two decades alone sponsorship plans may well have generated in excess of \$50 billion for overseas work.²

The genesis of this billion-dollar enterprise is often credited to the Save the Children Fund (S.C.F.), an English organization founded after World War I.³ More recent work has enlarged this assessment, describing its multiple origins as arising not only from S.C.F. and other wartime organizations but also from U.S. soldiers' 'apparently spontaneous act[s] of compassion' in 1917.⁴ These origin stories associate sponsorship with a new era of

¹ K. D. Watenpaugh, *Bread From Stones: the Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Berkeley, 2015), p. 18.

² B. Wydick, P. Glewwe and L. Rutledge, 'Does international child sponsorship work? A six-country study of impacts on adult life outcomes', *Journal of Political Economy*, cxxi (2013), 393–436, at pp. 394, 401; and B. Watson and M. Clarke, 'Introduction to key issues in child sponsorship', in *Child Sponsorship: Exploring Pathways to a Brighter Future*, ed. B. Watson and M. Clarke (London, 2014), pp. 1–17, at p. 1.

³ B. Watson, 'The origins of international child sponsorship', *Development in Practice*, xxv (2015), 867–79; Watson and Clarke, 'Introduction', pp. 18–19, 42; E. Baughan, "'Every citizen of empire implored to save the children!'" Empire, internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in inter-war Britain', *Historical Research*, lxxxvi (2013), 116–37, at p. 131; M. Maran, *The Road to Hell: the Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York, 1997), p. 139; and J. C. Clarke III, *Fifty Years of Begging: Dr J. Calvitt Clarke and Christian Children's Fund* (Bloomington, Ind., 2018), p. 82. Ellen Boucher correctly notes that S.C.F. did not invent sponsorship, but she looks for precedents in domestic child saving, not foreign missions. See E. Boucher, 'Cultivating internationalism: Save the Children Fund, public opinion, and the meaning of child relief, 1919–24', in *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain Between the Wars*, ed. L. Beers and G. Thomas (London, 2012), pp. 169–88, at p. 177 n. 33.

⁴ E. Baughan, 'International adoption and Anglo-American internationalism, c.1918–1925', *Past & Present*, ccxxxix (2018), 181–217, at pp. 186, 196.

twentieth-century humanitarianism, often defined in distinction to earlier Christian missions.⁵ A further implication is that newly formed Christian non-profits in the 1950s – such as World Vision, which is now the world’s largest sponsorship organization – achieved widespread fundraising success by copying techniques that (secular) humanitarians had invented a generation before.⁶

But child sponsorship has a longer history, which this article traces to Protestant missions and schools more than a century before World War I. The first viable sponsorship schemes in the early nineteenth century were, in turn, shaped by the previous century’s fundraising innovations and new evangelical ideas about child saving in Danish–German and English charities. This context almost certainly helps explain why Protestant populations have been the most receptive market for sponsorship. Every one of the two hundred most significant programmes in existence are based in Western Europe, North America or Australia, with more than half in the Protestant-majority societies of the United States and the United Kingdom. Of the ten largest sponsorship organizations today, five were founded in the United States, two in England, and one each in Denmark, Austria and Germany.⁷

By focusing on Protestant influences, this article redresses certain gaps in the history of sponsorship. It incorporates religion as one aspect of sociocultural contexts that include, for example, politics, science, economics or law.⁸ Thus when nineteenth-century Christians sponsored what they called a ‘heathen child’, they drew on and contributed to expanding colonial projects that imagined people who were uncivilized, even evolutionarily inferior, and usually ‘raced’.⁹ When they espoused ideas about a personal responsibility for faith and a universal responsibility for God’s ‘family’, they made theological claims that also engaged broader philosophical and political currents of the day.¹⁰

Along these lines, historians of humanitarianism are increasingly apt to note how Christianity has been humanitarianism’s ‘general orientation and background condition’, to quote David Forsythe on the nineteenth-century Red Cross.¹¹ This article contributes to this ongoing

⁵ See e.g., A. Iriye, *Global Community: the Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 17. Scholars have long promoted this distinction: see e.g., M. Parmelee, ‘The rise of modern humanitarianism’, *American Journal of Sociology*, xxi (1915), 345–59. On important new work revising this idea, see note 11.

⁶ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2011), p. 121; and Maran, *Road to Hell*, p. 139.

⁷ Wydick, Glewwe and Rutledge, ‘Does international child sponsorship work?’, pp. 394, 401. All were started by Protestants (or former Protestants) except S.O.S. Children’s Villages (Austria, 1949) and Unbound (U.S.A., 1981), which were founded by Catholics. The latter is the only organization in the top ten to promote itself as Catholic.

⁸ C. Calhoun, ‘The imperative to reduce suffering: charity, progress, and emergencies in the field of humanitarian action’, in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. M. Barnett and T. G. Weiss (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008), pp. 73–97, at p. 78.

⁹ See e.g., E. Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2015); K. G. Lum, ‘The historyless heathen and the stagnating pagan: history as non-native category?’, *Religion and American Culture*, xxviii (2018), 52–91; and K. Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2019).

¹⁰ See e.g., the analysis of liberalism and republicanism in M. Noll, *America’s God, From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2002). Below I note other intellectual trends, such as sentimentalism, that had broad cultural impact.

¹¹ D. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: the International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 2, 28; and S. Dromi, *Above the Fray: the Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector* (Chicago, 2020), esp. ch. 2. Other notable works include Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; H. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018); and S. Roddy, J.-M. Strange and B. Taithe, *The Charity Market and Humanitarianism in Britain, 1870–1912* (London, 2019). On collaborations between early twentieth-century religious and humanitarian actors, see D. Marshall, ‘Children’s rights in imperial political cultures: missionary and humanitarian contributions to the Conference on the African Child of 1931’, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, xii (2004), 273–318; and P. J. Houlihan, ‘Renovating Christian charity: global Catholicism, the Save the Children Fund, and humanitarianism during the First World War’, *Past & Present*, ccl (2021), 203–41.

conversation by following sponsorship from its Christian roots to its early twentieth-century expansion. Doing so, it also ‘add[s] some nuance to the idea that ... secularization was the dominant characteristic of humanitarian work in the 1920s’ and since.¹² I draw further inspiration from recent histories of early twentieth-century U.S. Protestantism that show how corporate and Christian spheres shaped each other to create new pan-evangelical organizations, some of which ran early humanitarian campaigns.¹³ Sponsorship’s history clarifies the interrelations between pan-Christian charity, corporate business models and modern fundraising.

In what follows I focus mainly on the people and organizations that promoted child sponsorship.¹⁴ To lend some specificity to this history, I anchor it in the United States, which is my area of speciality and the largest contemporary donor market for sponsorship – although, as will be evident, the fundraising tool arose through a cross-Atlantic dialogue. The discussion also emphasizes two key periods. First, I discuss North America’s inaugural sponsorship plans in the 1810s, which provides an opportunity to pull back and discuss the eighteenth-century roots of the phenomenon. This half of the article lays out theo-ideological motivations in Protestant schools and missions, followed by a consideration of the ‘subscription’ fundraising model. The second half of the article focuses on sponsorship’s transition into a broad-scale fundraising tactic during World War I. A short coda follows with a note about the rise of Christian international non-governmental organizations (I.N.G.O) in the 1950s, which is the era when most studies of sponsorship begin.¹⁵ These two sections explore links between Christianity and early humanitarianism by emphasizing one aspect of sponsorship’s development: how fundraisers used ‘non-sectarianism’ to grow their donor base in Protestant-majority countries beyond missionary supporters. The article ends by concluding that the long history of child sponsorship is a good example of how particular varieties of religion – in this case, Protestant Christianity with an evangelical orientation¹⁶ – have contributed to shaping particular forms of humanitarian action.

*

On 24 May 1815 Samuel Newell, Samuel Nott and Gordon Hall penned a letter to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (A.B.C.F.M.) Prudential Committee in Salem, Massachusetts, which was reprinted in its magazine, *The Panoplist*, the following January. The young men, who were in the first cohort of U.S. Protestant foreign missionaries, had settled in British-controlled Bombay in 1812. They

¹² B. Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 252. Recent studies still criticize how historians of twentieth-century humanitarianism exclude religious organizations: see e.g., Houlihan, ‘Renovating Christian charity’, p. 240 n. 120.

¹³ Notably, T. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: the Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2015); and Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians*.

¹⁴ For more on sponsors and sponsored children and their families, see H. Kaell, *Christian Globalism at Home: Child Sponsorship in the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 2020).

¹⁵ With the exception of studies of S.C.F., which usually begin in 1919, most others start after World War II. Recent examples include D. P. King, *God’s Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia, 2019); D. Freeman, *Tearfund and the Quest for Faith-Based Development* (London, 2019); P. Ove, *Change a Life, Change Your Own: Child Sponsorship, the Discourse of Development, and the Production of Ethical Subjects* (Winnipeg, 2018); and S. Fieldston, *Raising the World: Child Welfare in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015).

¹⁶ Today, scholars often define *evangelical* as an orientation or network rather than a set of doctrines. Some key points with respect to this orientation include an emphasis on experiential personal faith, ‘activism’ (linked to social reformism, including missions), and pan-Protestant organizing around a stripped-down set of Christian ideals. There has been a symbiotic relation between this last quality and humanitarian universalism, as shown in Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians*; and King, *God’s Internationalists*.

were in a precarious position. The British East India Company was ambivalent about Nonconformist missionaries in its territory and, to make matters worse, the inexperienced missionaries had little success in drawing Indian audiences to hear their preaching. In the letter, Newell, Nott and Hall suggested a possible solution: the ‘indirect dissemination’ of Christianity to children who would be supported by American donors while they lived in missionary homes and schools. The system would create a captive audience for missionary teaching, while serving the Company government’s effort to provide more English schools.

The young missionaries assured *Panoplist* readers that ‘heathen children might be obtained [in Bombay] in greater numbers, and with greater facility, than almost any other part of India’, since poor families streamed into the city during times of distress and the parents ‘not infrequently’ died. In fact, they had an example in mind. The year before, one Mr. M – a friend of theirs in Bombay – had happened upon such a child, nearly dead from exposure in the street, and kept him in his home for a year. Now Mr. M was leaving India and had given the child to the Americans, who estimated the boy’s age at between twelve and fourteen. By this point he spoke English and showed signs of conversion. ‘Here is a way in which *so great good* can be done at *so little expense*’, they enthused.¹⁷

The *Panoplist’s* readership responded immediately. Over the ensuing months the A.B.C.F.M. committee reminded the missionaries in nearly every letter that the plan was ‘very captivating’ and ‘contributions and communal subscriptions for this object exceed our most sanguine expectations’.¹⁸ A growing number of these donors supported an individual sponsorship, called ‘patronage’ or ‘adoption’ at the time. Female Societies were especially engaged. ‘The publick will not let your object fail. Moreover, the women will not’, Samuel Worcester, the A.B.C.F.M. secretary in Massachusetts, assured the missionaries. He had personally witnessed their excitement. At the monthly prayer meeting he attended in Salem, a letter from the missionaries was read aloud and ‘the effect was instantaneous’. The next morning the women organized a society whose members each contributed twenty-five cents a year ‘for the support of heathen children in Missionary families’. They requested to ‘adopt’ a child from Tillipally, Ceylon (Tellippalai, Sri Lanka). ‘This is a beginning’, Worcester wrote, ‘The spirit shall spread. Hundreds more may be supported’.¹⁹

Tug at the roots of these first American sponsorships and one finds an evangelical experiment in Germany more than a century earlier: August Hermann Francke’s famous Orphan House, established in Halle in 1695. Francke was a Pietist, a strand of Protestantism that had broken from Lutheran orthodoxy by emphasizing the experiential, personal nature of faith and the belief that each person had a role to play in their own salvation. As a result, Francke argued that even the youngest and poorest child must be given the religious education to prepare their soul.²⁰ Anglicans in sympathy with this evangelical orientation nurtured close ties with their German colleagues. Reverend Thomas Bray is notable, since in 1698 he co-founded the London-based Society for Promoting Christian

¹⁷ ‘Thoughts on various methods of advancing the cause of Christ by missionaries at Bombay’, *Panoplist*, January 1816, pp. 34–9, at pp. 38–9. Original italics.

¹⁸ Harvard University, Houghton Library, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives (hereafter A.B.C.F.M.), ABC 1.01, vol. 1, Worcester to Hall and Newell, 16 Oct. 1816 and ABC 1.01, vol. 2, Worcester to ‘My dear Brethren’, 18 Dec. 1816, and Jeremiah Evarts (in all likelihood) to Newell and Hall, 4 Jan. 1817.

¹⁹ A.B.C.F.M., ABC 1.01, vol. 1, Worcester to Warren, Richards, Meigs and Poor, 8 Dec. 1817.

²⁰ M. J. Bunge, ‘Education and the child in eighteenth century German Pietism perspectives from the work of A.H. Francke’, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. M. J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001), pp. 247–78, at p. 247.

Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), which established a system of charity schools across England with the Halle model in mind. Three years later, he secured a royal charter for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.). Through the S.P.G., and Francke's networks, word of Halle travelled across the Atlantic.²¹ What spread was not only the basic structure of an orphan school but the conviction that even young children should prepare for a 'heart conversion' to Christ.

This view of children's capacity to develop as Christian subjects dovetailed with another early modern concern: the search for more effective means by which emerging nation states could govern the lower classes at home and foreign people abroad. Humanistic thinker John Locke famously proposed that poor children be confined to workhouses, where they could be disciplined into moral citizens. Though humanistic and evangelical ideas about child development differed in many respects, they both asserted that the young, of any race or class, were less 'hardened' in sin and could therefore be taught an 'innate moral sense' if raised in what was considered to be the right environment.²² Along these lines, English Protestant reformers with imperial ambitions experimented with removing Irish Catholic children to schools far from their parents and priests, a plan that became more practicable after the crippling famine of 1741. Over the next century residential missionary schools were founded across England and its colonies.

It is unclear if the A.B.C.F.M. missionaries in Bombay had these experiments in mind, but within five years of announcing the sponsorship plan in their boarding schools, they too asserted a strong preference for children under twelve.²³ From Salem, Worcester also counselled them to hire very young domestics, 'whether Hindoos, Jews, Africans, or Portuguese, as are of suitable age & as you can have entirely under your own care & bring up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord'.²⁴ As with residential schools and workhouses, the purpose was to create sites 'where the plastic, susceptible mind of young [childhood] may be continually under [missionary] influence, sheltered from the antagonistic or neutralising contact of idolatry'.²⁵

The introduction of sponsorship as a method to fund these efforts spoke, in part, to evangelical Protestants' particular orientation. They believed that an individual could be reborn in Christ only after learning to read the Bible for themselves and developing a sufficient sense of personal conscience. Such conversions took time, which sponsorship supported, since it encouraged donors to think about charity as a long-term commitment to raise children in Christian settings. Sponsorship also approximated the Pauline biblical model that, for many Protestants, was an ideal of conversion: Paul had written letters to new Christians in faraway Galatia or Corinth to encourage them in their faith. Analogously, sponsors took on the role of 'mature' Christians who encouraged new (or potential) Christians abroad through their letters. However, whereas Paul encouraged

²¹ *Halle Pietism, Colonial North America, and the Young United States*, ed. H.-J. Grabbe (Stuttgart, 2008); *Pietism in Germany and North America 1680–1820*, ed. H. Lehmann, J. Van Horn Melton and J. Strom (Farnham, 2009); R. Wilson, 'Halle Pietism in colonial Georgia', *Lutheran Quarterly*, xii (1998), 271–301; E. Wheelock, *A Brief Narrative of the Indian Charity-School in Lebanon in Connecticut, New England* (2nd edn., London, 1767), p. 5; and F. Hatje, 'Revivalists abroad', in *Migration and Transfer From Germany to Britain, 1660–1914*, ed. S. Manz, J. Davis, and M. Schulte Beerbühl (Munich, 2007), pp. 65–80, at p. 73.

²² C. A. Brekus, 'Children of wrath, children of grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan culture of child rearing', in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, pp. 300–28, at pp. 302, 304.

²³ 'Appendix F: a view of the station at Tillipally, in Ceylon, drawn up by Mr. Poor, about the close of October, 1820', in *First Ten Annual Reports of the ABCFM* (Boston, Mass., 1834), pp. 176–97, at pp. 180–1, 197.

²⁴ A.B.C.F.M., ABC 8.1, vol. 4, Worcester to Hall, Bardwell and Graves, 6 March 1820.

²⁵ General Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Archives Center, 2604-3-7:06, 'Correspondence, 1869–1926', Peter Parker to Female Missionary Society (Baltimore), c.1858.

whole communities, early nineteenth-century evangelicals had more individualized goals. The first U.S. sponsors hailed from north-eastern churches swept up in revivalism that, among other goals, encouraged Christians to picture themselves as personally responsible to God for encouraging the faith of another soul. During the intense preaching and prayer events associated with revivals, individuals were often singled out and prayed for until they professed a renewed faith. Privately, Christians were also encouraged to pray for individuals in their family or among their friends by name to bring about spiritual benefits.²⁶ This context is almost certainly one reason why early sponsorship, which was promoted through these churches, sometimes in revival meetings, was conceived as mentorship of a single individual abroad.

The Protestant assumptions underlying the system become clearer if one compares it to equivalents among Roman Catholics, where, with a few exceptions related to emergency relief, sponsorship never caught on (at least until after World War II).²⁷ One reason was almost certainly a difference of opinion about the mechanism of salvation. Catholic laypeople created child-saving programmes in which they did ‘adopt’ babies, but only in order to baptize them, often just before death, which was understood as sufficient to save their souls.²⁸ There was no need for long-term teaching and a personal profession of faith at the age of maturity (though Catholics did accept such professions). Furthermore, Catholics did not hold the evangelical ideal of a layperson actively encouraging another individual to profess their faith. A regular Catholic layperson rarely, if ever, viewed themselves as a spiritual mentor for emerging Christians abroad; this role was associated with priests and religious sisters who settled in distant locations under the auspices of their orders.

Nineteenth-century sponsorship was also linked to another theo-ideological trend that is more familiar to historians of humanitarianism: the rise of detailed sentimental narratives about suffering subjects meant to motivate moral action.²⁹ By nurturing subjective feelings – joy, pity, compassion and so on – charitably minded Christians believed they could intuit what other humans felt (or should feel), which should then move them to act on others’ behalf. This logic rested on their belief in one creator who had made a single human nature that shared inherent regularities across the world. At the same time as sponsorship developed, sentimentalism was also becoming entwined with ideas about white middle-class women as guardians of societal virtue. Women’s most important role was viewed as nurturing their children in faith, while also observing childhood – its spontaneity, simplicity, responsiveness – to renew their own love for

²⁶ Sponsorship first spread in New England during a period of revivalism (1820s–1840s) that corresponded with similar trends in Europe, which inspired the Red Cross founders in Geneva (Dromi, *Above the Fray*, p. 40). Though the sociopolitical contexts differed, all revivalism was intended to revitalize personal faith and often encourage social reform projects such as missions, temperance and sabbatarian unions, etc. On praying for named individuals, see H. Kaell, ‘Renamed: the living, the dead, and the global in nineteenth-century U.S. Christianity’, *American Historical Review*, cxxxv (2020), 815–39, at pp. 827–8.

²⁷ Two exceptions in P. Kollman, *The Evangelization of Slaves and Catholic Origins in Eastern Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 2005), pp. 53–4; and B. Taithe, ‘Algerian orphans and colonial Christianity in Algeria, 1866–1939’, *French History*, xx (2006), 240–59.

²⁸ H. Kaell, ‘The Holy Childhood Association on earth and in heaven: Catholic globalism in nineteenth-century North America’, *American Quarterly*, lxxii (2020), 827–51.

²⁹ M. Poovey, *A History of Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998), pp. xv, 148–9; and T. W. Laqueur, ‘Bodies, details, and the humanitarian narrative’, in *The New Cultural History*, ed. L. Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 176–204.

God.³⁰ Sponsorship represented a logical leap for many Christian women: it expanded their role as feeling, loving, moral guardians to encompass children abroad.

The growing expectation was that this form of sentimental charity, shaped by enlightened ‘reason’ and systematic governance, could reform a whole society’s ills.³¹ Sponsorship was promoted in this way, promising to utterly transform the foreign societies upon which sponsors focused their efforts. But, as missionary periodicals continually noted, there was a problem of scale: a few Protestants abroad could never hope to preach directly to hundreds of millions of ‘heathens’. Sponsorship proposed a solution strongly reminiscent of how New England ministers were grappling with church disestablishment in their own backyards. Facing the loss of state financial support, they argued that a Christian society could still be sustained if enough individuals internalized the Spirit of God and acted accordingly.³² Similarly, U.S. sponsors expected that foreign children would internalize the spirit during their years of sponsorship and then transform their own societies from within, eventually eliminating the need for foreign missions.

To one degree, such hopes echo how historians describe self-sufficiency as a goal of charity in the early American Republic (‘teach the poor to help themselves’, in Benjamin Franklin’s classic phrase) – that is, they were based on the idea that the poor would become contributors rather than dependents.³³ But sponsors also understood self-sufficiency in light of a Christian view of the world as a monarchical kingdom; they conceived of their God as already the sovereign of the world, which he had bequeathed to his son, Jesus, as an ‘inheritance’. To make Indian or Sri Lankan or Chinese Christian communities self-sustaining, therefore, sponsors believed they needed merely to introduce God into a few hearts to spur a chain reaction as Jesus providentially claimed his right to rule. Missionary fundraisers expressed it thus: once donor money ‘flow[s], freely, into the treasury of Christ ... the Father’s promise to his Son will soon be accomplished, when [Jesus] shall receive the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession’.³⁴

*

Sponsorship’s appeal at a theo-ideological level is half of the story. Its form and structure also originate in models gleaned from emerging capitalism. Between the time that the Bombay missionaries first discussed supporting children in their May 1815 letter and the letter’s public circulation in January 1816, A.B.C.F.M. secretary Samuel Worcester twice recommended that they read Rev. Dr. John’s report in the *Missionary Register*, the organ of the London-based Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.). He even enclosed the piece in a letter to make sure they did so.³⁵ The man in question was Christoph Samuel John, a Halle-affiliated Lutheran in Tranquebar (Tharangambadi, Tamil Nadu), who died in 1813 and left his schools to the C.M.S. The article that so interested Worcester discussed

³⁰ H. Cunningham, *Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood Since the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1991), p. 48; and K. Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, N.C., 2018), p. 18. The link to global expansion owes much to A. Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 23–50.

³¹ R. A. Gross, ‘Giving in America: from charity to philanthropy’, in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, ed. L. J. Friedman and M. D. McGarvie (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 29–48, at p. 31.

³² U.S. churches were federally disestablished at independence, but not at the state level. Connecticut and Massachusetts, where sponsorship emerged, disestablished only in 1818 and 1833, respectively.

³³ Gross, ‘Giving in America’, p. 38.

³⁴ Rev. J. Lyman, ‘Foreign Mission Society of Northampton and neighboring towns’, *Panoplist*, Dec. 1816, p. 576.

³⁵ From the letters it is not clear whether the adoption plan itself was initiated in Boston or Bombay (A.B.C.F.M., ABC 1.01, vol. 1, Worcester to Newell, Hall and Nott, 12 Oct. 1815; Worcester to James Prichards, James Warren, Benjamin Meigs, Horatio Bardwell and Daniel Poor, 14 Oct. 1815; Worcester to Newell, Hall and Nott, 29 Dec. 1815).

how to run a missionary school on a budget. The Anglo-Danish war (1807–14) plunged the Lutheran mission into debt as donations from Germany and Copenhagen dried up, which led John to make ‘an experiment, trusting in God’.³⁶ In essence, he expanded the mission’s school system but reduced its costs by employing local, usually non-Christian, teachers.

This version of John’s report did not mention sponsorship or the costs per student, but Newell, Nott and Hall made it explicit as they commented on the report.³⁷ Based on their recent experience with Mr. M and their study of Tranquebar, they estimated that they could educate a heathen child in a boarding school for \$12 a month and in a missionary home for just \$2. The latter formed the basis of their proposed ‘adoption’ plan, and it remained remarkably consistent across U.S. missionary societies for a hundred years. Even at the century’s end, sponsorship cost from about \$25 per child per year in India to \$40 in China. Sponsorship promoters divided up these yearly costs into equal instalments of \$2 to \$3 a month. The amounts increased in the twentieth century – \$10 to \$12 a month in the 1950s and about \$40 today – but the principle remains.

This form of fundraising was one outcome of an extended revolution in charity over the long eighteenth century, and, more particularly, it reflected the marriage of two novel forms of fundraising: ‘subscription’ and ‘designated’ giving. These techniques emerged in new Protestant charitable corporations that developed in the late seventeenth century exclusively to raise and administer funds, often from living donors. The goal was to diversify sources of income and to lessen the dependence on wealthy patrons and bequests. It also freed charities from having to work through pre-existing religious institutions, such as hospitals, convents or state-supported churches.³⁸ Many of these new fundraisers looked to early capitalism for innovative strategies. At Halle, for example, Francke studied commercial enterprises in England and Holland and took the unprecedented step of investing his foundation’s capital funds to earn interest revenue.³⁹ More germane for sponsorship, however, was the framework that fundraisers adapted from ‘joint-stock’ or ‘associated’ capitalist corporations.

In these corporations dozens or even hundreds of financial speculators bought relatively inexpensive ‘shares’ as a method of ‘associating together for common action [which] insured larger sums for ambitious [capitalist] projects, beyond the scope of any single individual’. Profits were then split between the shareholders. In part based on this model, Protestant fundraisers developed what they called ‘subscription’, which was a small defined amount that donors paid on a monthly or yearly basis.⁴⁰ One could express the connection between corporate and charitable ‘shareholding’ as follows: in the financial sector individual speculators paid money to acquire a part (a share) in a larger endeavour (the corporation and its activities), through which they expected to reap personal rewards by way of profits. In the charitable sector individual donors paid money to acquire a part in a larger Christian endeavour (such as the missionary cause

³⁶ ‘The Rev. Dr. John on Indian civilization, being a report of a successful experiment, made during two years on that subject, in fifteen Tamul [*sic*] and five English native schools’, *Missionary Register*, November 1813, pp. 369–83, esp. at p. 374.

³⁷ ‘Thoughts on various methods’, p. 38.

³⁸ This aspect appealed to evangelicals who criticized state-run churches (even when they sometimes worked within them) and older Catholic charitable institutions (D.T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* [Princeton, 1989], pp. 46–9).

³⁹ R. Wilson, ‘Philanthropy in 18th-century Central Europe: Evangelical reform and commerce’, *Voluntas*, ix (1998), at p. 86.

⁴⁰ Quote from Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, p. 49. See also Gross, ‘Giving in America’, p. 37; and Wilson, ‘Philanthropy’, pp. 86–7.

and its activities), through which they expected to reap personal rewards by way of gaining God's favour. Both systems emphasized the importance of the individual who chose to commit their money in service of a collective effort. Child sponsors were often reminded that 'each of you has a part which is indispensable to the whole'.⁴¹

Christian subscription projects began locally, but soon, like capitalist corporations, they took on global proportions. For example, an early English subscription occurred in the S.P.C.K.'s charity schools, which, as noted, were inspired in part by Halle. Circulating a 'Form of Subscription' to Anglican parishes just after its founding in 1698, the S.P.C.K. asked donors for a modest payment at four set times a year, through which even small donors could contribute to establishing a local charity school.⁴² Shortly afterwards, in 1706, the S.P.C.K.'s foreign mission counterpart, the S.P.G., ran a similar campaign for the new Lutheran mission school founded by Francke's protégés in Tranquebar.⁴³ The school was short-lived, but the same mission gave rise to John's schools, which later inspired U.S. sponsorship plans. As this example implies, subscription charities usually named an immediate goal, such as building a school or, in sponsorship plans, supporting a child. However, at a larger level, the end goal was 'upbuilding God's kingdom' in the world.⁴⁴ (Capitalist corporations also had world-building goals, though they may have been stated less baldly or frequently than in Christian missionary work.)

Whether or not they used subscriptions, charities that fundraised among living donors faced a few major challenges: they had to retain donors' interest year after year and instil a sense of confidence that their money was being managed efficiently.⁴⁵ As a result, some charities introduced 'designated giving', whereby donors could earmark their funds by nominating particular individuals to benefit from their donations to schools or hospitals.⁴⁶ Donors often became more invested if they felt personally responsible for the fate of an individual or project and, as historians point out, this also provided a measure of control for English Christians who were suspicious of government interference and competing religious authorities.⁴⁷ Nineteenth-century American sponsors lived in different political circumstances, but they also wanted to know how their money was used in faraway mission stations. Designating their giving for one 'object' (that is, one child) gave them some financial control and accountability as they followed the foreign child's progress through his letters. The model also made theological sense to them, since it supported an individual's path to salvation, as discussed above.

Though these charitable models owed much to financial capitalism, there were also obvious differences. For example, as noted, charities often asked people to pay their 'share' on a monthly or quarterly basis, unlike a one-time purchase of a company's stock. For Christians, the main difference was associated with risk and reward: whereas buying corporate shares was a risky attempt to gain material profits, Christians described

⁴¹ 'Thoughts on educating heathen youth in India', *Panoplist*, July 1816, 316–19, at p. 319.

⁴² The Form of Subscription, repr. in W. O. B. Allen and E. McClure, *Two Hundred Years: the History of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698–1898* (London, 1898), at p. 27; and W. W. Kemp, *The Support of Schools in Colonial New York by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (New York, 1913), pp. 13, 18.

⁴³ P. Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698–1858* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 8, 10–11, 194, 212.

⁴⁴ 'Upbuilding' in this quote refers to converting people and also to buying 'shares' to fund mission buildings ('Home department', *Heathen Woman's Friend* [hereafter *H.W.F.*], April 1880, p. 232).

⁴⁵ Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, pp. 8, 19; and S. Lloyd, *Charity and poverty in England, c.1680–1820: Wild and Visionary Schemes* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 27–8.

⁴⁶ M. G. Jones, *Charity School Movement: a Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action* (Hamden, 1964), p. 46; and A. Moniz, personal communication, 27 May 2015.

⁴⁷ J. Simon, 'From charity school to workhouse in the 1720s: the SPCK and Mr Marriott's solution', *History of Education*, xvii (1988), 113–29.

charitable shares as guaranteed investments, since God never forgot those who gave. The ‘profits’ to be reaped were (often unspecified) earthly blessings and heavenly rewards. Donors were also expected to benefit spiritually from the regular process of voluntarily putting aside a coin each week as they came to feel a deeper sense of responsibility for Christian projects. Another notable difference concerns nineteenth-century sponsorship in particular. Only very wealthy donors could afford to buy a ‘share’ of God’s project alone – that is, to sponsor a child – so groups pooled their pennies each month to support an individual abroad.⁴⁸ This collective model arose in part because, unlike the financial world of middle-class male shareholders, sponsorship’s main donors were middle-class women and youth, who were insiders to emerging industrial capitalism but generally had only small amounts of ready cash. Indeed, from the start the A.B.C.F.M. developed sponsorship with groups of women and youth as the target donor market.⁴⁹

At a basic level, it was expected that sponsorship would appeal to women and youth because it was affordable and it concerned children. In the United States, promoters also claimed that sponsorship was especially suited to the young republic’s political climate as a supremely democratic form of giving (though, of course, women could not vote).⁵⁰ More often, it was tied to white Americans’ excitement about supporting a pan-Protestant, and European-led, movement to spread missions in colonized territory. Grassroots A.B.C.F.M. fundraising in the years right before the first sponsorship plans encouraged middling and even poor American women to donate because ‘the spread of the gospel among the idolatrous nations has become such an object in most protestant [*sic*] countries that those who do the most to forward it are generally considered the most worthy of respect by the citizens of Zion [Christian people]’.⁵¹ At a broader level, donors discussed their giving as part of a responsibility to redistribute part of their spiritual and material ‘abundance’ to other parts of God’s creation.⁵² This view was coloured by most donors’ positions as part of a rising middle class that benefitted directly or indirectly from industrialization and colonization. Their wealth grew alongside their access to new missionary reports about ‘heathen’ countries, always portrayed as places in dire spiritual and material need. This ‘prosperity-morality paradox’ helped spur donations.⁵³

The exigencies of colonialism also created the conditions through which local people agreed to have their children participate. The earliest U.S. plans were most elaborated in India and Sri Lanka, where A.B.C.F.M. boarding schools attracted upwardly mobile Hindu and Muslim parents willing to pay for a Western education to improve job prospects for their sons in the colonial bureaucracy. A few families also enrolled their daughters to improve their marriage prospects. These children were in regular contact

⁴⁸ This model also differed from the ‘one-to-one’ model promoted by mid-twentieth-century sponsorship organizations, whereby one individual (or family) supported one child abroad (though field operations were always more complex). Donor groups continued after the 1950s, but mainly among primary school children.

⁴⁹ ‘Naming and education heathen children’, *Missionary Herald*, February 1839, p. 74. Tracing the link between bourgeois capitalism and humanitarianism has long been, to quote Thomas Haskell, ‘a major preoccupation’ of historians (T. L. Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility, part 1’, *American Historical Review*, xc (1985), 339–61, at p. 339). Newer histories also take up this theme, as noted in M. Hilton and others, ‘History and humanitarianism: a conversation’, *Past & Present*, ccxli (2018), e1–e38, at p. e21.

⁵⁰ S. Worcester, ‘Report of the Prudential Committee’, *Missionary Herald*, January 1821, p. 11. Though I have not seen specific evidence of such, it is not unthinkable that such claims appealed to the majority of donors, who, as women or children, could not actually participate democratically through the vote.

⁵¹ A.B.C.F.M., ABC 8.5, E. Rich, Speech and subscription report, 20 June 1811.

⁵² I discuss this factor in more depth in Kaell, *Christian Globalism at Home*, pp. 34–9, 85–7, 129–32.

⁵³ L. A. Ratner, P. T. Kaufman and D. L. Teeter Jr., *Paradoxes of Prosperity: Wealth-Seeking Versus Christian Values in Pre-Civil War America* (Urbana, Ill., 2009), p. 1.

with their families and even brought letters from their U.S. patrons back home to show around, as sponsors were sometimes informed.⁵⁴ Other parents gave their children to the foreigners. Widowed parents who remarried sometimes gave older children to the mission if the new spouse rejected them. Poverty-stricken parents left the children they could not feed. Some missionaries took in ‘foundlings’ they judged to be abandoned, whether or not they had living relatives. Not surprisingly, locals often strongly objected to the practice and pressured colonial officials to intervene.⁵⁵

Such cases had to be treated with some delicacy, but in general, periods of famine and war were very productive for sponsorship plans. By the last decades of the nineteenth century a pattern had emerged in which foreign missionaries used sponsorship to drum up money for expansion, often when they opened a new station or a disaster left many children orphaned. A child’s immediate need prompted a quick influx of money, while the subscription model encouraged support over a longer term. Yet missionaries sometimes worried that the plans required them to send too much information about specific individuals to U.S. donors, revealing the dispiriting reality that most children returned to ‘heathendom’ or died. Moreover, it greatly taxed them to write regular updates about each child. Finally, though sponsorship drew donors with promises of more control and accountability, as early as the 1830s A.B.C.F.M. executives complained that it gave people at home, and women in particular, altogether too much power, since designated funds had to be used as specified, even if needs changed in the field.⁵⁶ Throughout the nineteenth century foreign missionary boards repeatedly promoted sponsorship plans when expedient and then tried to curb them when they became too onerous.

*

The First World War propelled sponsorship into its next phase. S.C.F., founded in England in 1919, is the best-known plan to have emerged from this period, when many organizations introduced short-term sponsorship for emergency relief. To one degree, sponsorship’s expansion is not surprising; the first decades of the twentieth century were a golden age for early humanitarianism. But that fact does not explain *how* sponsorship transitioned beyond Protestant missions. This section focuses on fundraising strategies in donor countries and, more specifically, ‘non-sectarianism’ as an important and overlooked aspect of this shift. To illustrate this trend in the United States, I focus on two of the period’s most successful sponsorship campaigns through the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, later called Near East Relief (N.E.R.), and the Fatherless Children of France (F.C.F.). N.E.R. had a popular and long-lasting programme, while F.C.F. managed the largest number of wartime sponsorships.

N.E.R. was founded by a group of Americans in 1915. Its inner circle included many A.B.C.F.M.-affiliated former missionaries and laypeople who undoubtedly knew sponsorship from the missions. Focused on the Turkish persecution of Armenians, N.E.R. ran the largest humanitarian relief effort up to that time, raising what today would be a billion dollars in a few years.⁵⁷ Starting in 1917, it promoted ‘orphan adoption’ for \$60 a year. The programme continued in various permutations until the late 1920s. S.C.F.’s founders knew of N.E.R.; they collaborated with it and were inspired by it

⁵⁴ ‘Appendix F’, pp. 183, 197.

⁵⁵ Mrs. M. E. Gill, ‘The famine and Paori Orphanage’, *H.W.F.*, October 1878, pp. 74–6, at p. 74; and Rev. J. D. Brown, ‘God or the governor’, *H.W.F.*, April 1878, p. 221.

⁵⁶ A.B.C.F.M., ABC I.O., vol. 14, Anderson to David Abeel, 1835, cited in L. J. Pruitt, *A Looking-Glass for Ladies: American Protestant Women and the Orient in the Nineteenth Century* (Macon, Ga., 2005), p. 215 n. 12.

⁵⁷ D. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton, 2017), pp. 107–8, 119.

when they expanded their own sponsorship plans beyond their early Quaker networks in Vienna.⁵⁸

F.C.F. did not have missionary ties. Looking to supplement the meagre government allowance for French war widows, a Jewish industrialist in Paris sent two English women to the U.S. in 1915 to promote sponsorships of \$36.50 a year to support fatherless ‘half orphans’ living at home. Partnering with well-connected American socialites, the two emissaries grew the programme into the largest of its day. When its appeals ended in 1920, F.C.F. had raised over \$10 million and supported more than 286,000 children, of whom two-thirds had individual sponsors in the United States.⁵⁹

Sponsorship’s success in appealing to a wide range of givers was not due to a transition from a ‘religious’ missionary model to a ‘secular’ humanitarian one. Rather, it hinged on fundraisers’ capacity to transcend specific donor markets in Protestant-majority countries by appealing to churchgoers along with unchurched people, nearly all of whom had broadly Christian backgrounds. Sponsorship proved an ideal tool for linking these markets by promoting non-specific Christian ideals. In this respect, historian David Hollinger offers a good characterization of liberal Protestants at the time, such as many of the organizers in N.E.R., S.C.F. and the American side of F.C.F.: ‘The missionary project, and its ecumenical follow-up endeavors, adopted a thinner and thinner conception of Christianity while using Christianity as a container for a vision of what it meant to be human’.⁶⁰ Sponsorship, like many humanitarian activities at the time, was shaped through a Christianity made ‘thin’ enough to seem like common-sense morality to people in the majority. N.E.R., for example, attributed its success to what it viewed as an inherent American quality, but which was really a widespread Protestant sensibility: the impetus to combine ‘practical idealism’ with ‘spiritual significance’ to fuel societal interventions abroad.⁶¹

Yet wartime sponsorship organizations, including N.E.R., did not self-identify as ‘religious’. This refusal accomplished a few important ends. First, it signalled to donors that these organizations did not directly evangelize recipients of aid. Just as importantly, it signalled that they were ‘non-sectarian’, referring to how they transcended any specific church or denomination.⁶² In the history of Christian fundraising, this point is significant. Protestants had long organized themselves into agglomerations of like-minded churches, which in nineteenth-century North America were called denominations. As Americans’ passion for foreign missions grew, most denominations created boards to raise funds only from their own member churches and they avoided other boards’ turf. Even the A.B.C.F.M., which grouped a few types of churches, adhered to this basic system. In effect, early twentieth-century wartime organizations adopted the missionary sponsorship model and bucked the denominational turf system. They advertised widely and wherever they could. They also fostered new modes of corporate accountability through diverse

⁵⁸ Watson, ‘Origins’, p. 872.

⁵⁹ Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Mrs. Leland E. Cofer Papers (hereafter ‘Cofer Papers’), Box 1, Folder 2, pp. 14–15; L. A. Leland, ‘Report’, in *Report of the Operations of the Fatherless Children of France, 1915–1916*; Cofer Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, p. 2; ‘Fatherless Children of France, annual report, 31 December 1918’; and Cofer Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, p. 6; ‘Report of the operations of the Fatherless Children of France, 1920–21’.

⁶⁰ Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad*, p. 92.

⁶¹ New York, Columbia University Libraries, The Burke Library Archives, Near East Relief Committee Records (hereafter N.E.R.), Series II, Box 7, Folder 1, p. 8; ‘Significance of International Golden Rule Sunday’, *Team Work*, January 1924. While often associated with mainline Protestants, this focus on ‘practical’ religion also resonated among some Protestant fundamentalists, as shown in Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*.

⁶² This orientation was also sometimes called ‘ecumenical’. While there were Christian humanitarian precursors (Dromi, *Above the Fray*, p. 41; and Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians*), this orientation was novel at the time (see Houlihan, ‘Renovating Christian charity’).

boards of directors that included childcare professionals, philanthropists, a wide range of Protestant pastors, and sometimes a (token) Jewish rabbi or Catholic priest.

Being ‘non-sectarian’ also implied a neutral politics. The ideal of neutrality is often traced to the Red Cross, which promoted a humanitarian vision in the latter half of the nineteenth century that united constituencies beyond the evangelical Christianity from which it had first emerged.⁶³ At a practical level, non-sectarian neutrality assuaged donor or government concerns that organizations harboured biases based on the religious proclivities of their founders, such as the Quaker politics associated with S.C.F.’s early administration.⁶⁴ More broadly, being non-sectarian was a building block in the myth of humanitarianism as an ‘anti-politics machine’, in anthropologist James Ferguson’s well-known phrase.⁶⁵ Portraying their aid as ideologically unencumbered, humanitarian organizations, including those that used sponsorship, assured donors that their approach could solve even the most intractable political problems by transmitting a moral sensibility they believed was universal.

As a result, organizations sometimes made conceptual leaps that seem naïve, even bizarre, today. In August 1924 N.E.R. was so convinced that its American-inflected ‘practical’ Christianity was neutral – and therefore a universal solution to violence – that it organized a tea party in Jerusalem for local representatives of Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. It called the gathering the Golden Rule Tea, after a passage in the Christian gospel – ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Matthew VII:12) – which N.E.R. called ‘a common denominator of all religions ... eternal and universal and an abiding constructive principle leading all people and nations forward’. The caption from a popular photograph of the event declared that the representatives ‘all united in the universal creed of the Golden Rule’ and agreed that it was the only solution to their strife in Jerusalem.⁶⁶ No mention was made of the political realities of the explosive British mandate in Palestine. Instead, N.E.R. blamed Middle East people’s ‘ancient’ parochial divisions; the solution was the neutral, universal gospel that Americans brought to the world’s people.

The best-known outcome of this neutralizing politics concerned children themselves. Eighteenth-century evangelical ideas that first undergirded sponsorship emphasized children’s plasticity; it was believed any young person, regardless of their own biography or social ties, could be remade into a Christian. Missionaries took this idea and positioned sponsored children as key to rupturing cycles of ‘heathendom’. Using similar logic, wartime organizations positioned them as key to rupturing cycles of violence. They portrayed children as inherently – even particularly – worth saving because they were assumed to be without politics and therefore open to becoming the kind of subject Western donors deemed moral.⁶⁷ As many scholars have noted, this view abstracted real

⁶³ D. Warner, ‘Henry Dunant’s imagined community: humanitarianism and the tragic’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, xxxviii (2013), 3–28; and Dromi, *Above the Fray*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ E. Baughan and J. Fiori, ‘Save the Children, the humanitarian project, and the politics of solidarity: reviving Dorothy Buxton’s vision’, *Disasters*, xxxix (2015), S129–S145, at pp. S135, S139.

⁶⁵ J. Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: ‘Development’, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, 1994).

⁶⁶ N.E.R., Series II, Box 7, Folder 14, p. 46, ‘International Golden Rule observance’, in *Cooperation of Organizations in Near East Relief, c.1926–7*. See also Cabanes, *The Great War*, pp. 308–12.

⁶⁷ Among many pertinent studies that contextualize such ideas in this period of late-stage imperialism and political ‘internationalism’, see Baughan, ‘International adoption’; Fieldston, *Raising the World*; and D. Marshall, ‘The formation of childhood as an object of international relations: the Child Welfare Committee and the Declaration of Children’s Rights of the League of Nations’, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, vii (1999), 103–47.

children into symbols of a generic human family. ‘The world’s wards’, wrote N.E.R. of Armenian children, must be supported by ‘the world’s charity’.⁶⁸

Importantly, the non-sectarian N.E.R. and F.C.F. were still positioned as *Christian entities* in their appeals to donors. This helped fledgling humanitarian organizations seem like authoritative vehicles for transmitting moral values across the world. N.E.R. did so by adopting pre-existing donor networks associated with foreign missions. It did much of its fundraising in these churches, since, as its executive noted, ‘those who give to [foreign] missions will be those who will feel responsibility for relief of Oriental sufferers’.⁶⁹ Its messages were peppered with biblical allusions, and it prepared thousands of sermon helps, prayer sheets and Christian educational supplements. Even the mainstream press regularly promoted such links. Sponsoring N.E.R. children was a chance to save ‘Bible Land Martyrs’, wrote the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News and Observer*. The *New York Tribune* commended its ‘practical religion’, while the *Literary Digest* stated that U.S. sponsors were laying up treasure in heaven to inherit the Kingdom of God.⁷⁰

F.C.F. offers a good contrast, since it did not explicitly piggyback on missionary networks. Yet here, too, its fundraising tactics made distinctions from Christian work vague. Many of F.C.F.’s chief volunteer spokespeople served in a similar capacity in the Young Men’s Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) and promoted both organizations simultaneously. Women’s church circles were among F.C.F.’s most avid supporters and held fundraisers, formed sewing circles and created Christmas boxes, just as they did for foreign missions (often at the same time).⁷¹ Promotional materials waxed poetic: ‘[F.C.F. sponsorships] will give us faith to believe in the high destiny of humanity ... It will again be true, as has happened all through the ages, that a little child shall lead us.’⁷² The allusion to Isaiah XI:6 (a ‘little child shall lead’) was familiar Christian imagery; donors would have thought of F.C.F. children, but also of the Christ child. All major sponsorship organizations, including S.C.F., made significant use of Christ child imagery, especially around Christmas, which they elevated to the main fundraising season of the year.

*

Pitched as emergency relief, wartime sponsorship plans ended within a few years. S.C.F. was an exception. Although it also seems to have been conceived initially as short-term relief (its earliest descriptor was ‘to help children throughout famine- and war-stricken areas’), over the next decade S.C.F. repositioned sponsorship as a permanent fundraising system to address chronic poverty. This shift inspired other post-war

⁶⁸ N.E.R., Series II, Box 18, Folder 2, ‘Special Golden Rule docket’, unpublished minutes, 1924. Among the many scholars who have made this point, see L. Malkki, ‘Children, humanity, and the infantilization of peace’, in *The Name of Humanity: the Government of Threat and Care*, ed. I. Feldman and M. Ticktin (Durham, N.C., 2010), pp. 58–85, at p. 72.

⁶⁹ N.E.R., Series I, Box 1, Folder 1, ‘Notes on a conversation with Dr. Talcott Parsons, 29 January 1916, concerning the work of the publicity campaign’.

⁷⁰ N.E.R., Series II, Box 7, Folder 4, p. 1, ‘Near East Relief campaign launched in North Carolina asks \$200,00 to feed and clothe Bible land martyrs’, *News and Observer*, 12 Feb. 1922; R. F. Soule, ‘It has happened—is happening’, *Hardware Age*, 17 Jan. 1918; N.E.R., Series I, Box 4, Folder 13, ‘For Christ’s sweet sake and charity’, *Literary Digest*, 23 Feb. 1918; and Series I, Box 5, Folder 2, n.p. (clipping), W. T. Ellis, ‘Agonized Remnant of Armenians and Syrians saved from Turk brutality by American relief’, *New York Tribune*, 18 Jan. 1918.

⁷¹ On the Y.M.C.A., e.g., Joseph and Corinna Lindon Smith. On church groups, see Harvard University Archives, Schlesinger Library, Constance H. Hall Papers, A/H174, Caroline Hill to Constance Hall, 3 May 1916; Caroline Hill to president of Shepard Memorial Church Relief Committee, Cambridge, Mass., 3 May 1916.

⁷² E. Wallace, ‘Introduction’, in *Letters Written by the Fatherless Children of French to Their American Godparents* (Chicago, 1917), p. 5.

I.N.G.O.s. While S.C.F. downplayed its ties to Christianity, however, the most important new U.S. sponsorship plans self-identified as Christian. This brief coda suggests that we might view the U.S. model as a merger of non-sectarianism with the earlier missionary emphasis on long-term support for a child in Christian care.

Two notable examples of this trend are the Christian Children's Fund (C.C.F.) and World Vision. C.C.F. was founded in Virginia in 1938 by a Presbyterian pastor who had encountered sponsorship when he had worked for N.E.R. and S.C.F. A highly influential sponsorship organization in the post-war period, C.C.F. claimed to be the world's largest plan in 1960, when it supported 36,000 children.⁷³ Its sponsorship plan inspired the evangelical pastor who started World Vision in 1950.⁷⁴ It, too, became highly influential and today runs the world's largest sponsorship plan with 3.8 million children.⁷⁵

Being non-sectarian – or 'interdenominational', as these organizations often put it – provided two great benefits in the 1950s. First, it allowed faith-based I.N.G.O.s to scale up to support tens of thousands of children within just a few years by partnering with nearly any church-affiliated missionary based in areas where they wanted to expand (though they did draw the line at Roman Catholics).⁷⁶ Once a partner was found, they could immediately funnel donations into pre-existing missionary infrastructure, such as schools or orphanages. The second benefit was that, like their wartime predecessors, they could access a much larger potential donor market. Protestant church women were still sponsorship's core supporters.⁷⁷ These new I.N.G.O.s reached them by advertising across multiple church magazines and purchasing mailing lists of 'leading church laymen and laywomen'. C.C.F. paid three cents a name in the late 1940s.⁷⁸ Even sponsorship organizations that did not self-define as Christian found such lists highly valuable; S.C.F. tried to buy some from C.C.F. but was curtly rebuffed.⁷⁹

For naysayers in the denominations, wartime relief was one thing; permanent non-sectarian fundraising was quite another. While the denominations benefitted from sponsorship money sent to their missionaries, they nevertheless condemned these I.N.G.O.s as, in the words of a Southern Baptist pastor who refused to sit on C.C.F.'s board, a 'free-lance movement'.⁸⁰ In 1958 the Presbyterian *Yearbook and Annual Report* made its stance very clear as it urged 'church people' to cease supporting 'agencies which are not worthy, have no connection with any Church group and over which no control is possible'. Under 'secular' organizations in this category, it listed S.C.F. alongside those

⁷³ Clarke, *Fifty Years of Begging*, p. 230. By 1960 many U.S. I.N.G.O.s used sponsorship, but the major ones were S.C.F., World Vision, C.C.F., and Foster Children's Plan (an English organization founded in 1937). On the top four organizations' budgets, see Virginia, Richmond, Child Fund Archives (hereafter C.F.A.), Box IB18, pp. 1–2, Department of State Agency for International Development, *Voluntary Foreign Aid Programs: Reports of the American Voluntary Agencies Registered With the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, January 1–December 31, 1963* (Washington, D.C.).

⁷⁴ D. P. King, 'World vision: religious identity in the discourse and practice of global relief and development', *Review of Faith & International Affairs*, ix (2011), 21–8, at p. 27 n. 12.

⁷⁵ L. Fisher (World Vision U.S.), personal communication, 18 September 2020.

⁷⁶ C.F.A., Box IIA3, Folder 2, Verbon Kemp to members of the board of directors of Christian Children's Fund, 3 March 1969.

⁷⁷ C.F.A., Box IB22, Folder 2, J. Calvitt Clarke to Daniel A. Poling, 7 Apr. 1960.

⁷⁸ C.F.A., Box IB25, Folder 8, Clarke to Maude Elizabeth Smith, 8 May 1947.

⁷⁹ C.C.F.'s founder told S.C.F. he never sold his lists, though he was in fact buying and selling names with Mosely Select Service. See C.F.A., Box IB24, Folder 6, Clarke to Ida Markert (S.C.F.), 23 May 1950; and Box IB25, Folder 8, Maxwell Miller (Mosely) to Clarke, 5 Oct. 1949.

⁸⁰ Clarke, *Fifty Years of Begging*, p. 198. See also C.F.A., Box IB22, Folder 2, M. Theron Rankin to S. H. Jones (*Baptist Courier*), 18 March 1950; and Box IB22, Folder 8 Clarke to F. H. Faber, 15 March 1956; Warren P. Clark (*Advocate/Together Magazine*) to Clarke, 16 Aug. 1956; Clarke to Clark, 25 Aug. 1956.

headed by pastors, including C.C.F. and World Vision.⁸¹ By these lights, an organization was ‘Christian’ only if a denomination controlled it. Yet such objections ultimately failed to stem the tide. Sponsorship became a permanent fundraising fixture, in no small part due to faith-based I.N.G.O.s that combined what they had learned from their missionary and ‘non-sectarian’ predecessors.

*

It is often remarked that child sponsorship shares an affinity with Christianity. Scholars note that most sponsors in North America and the U.K. self-define as Christians and over half the current I.N.G.O.s with sponsorship plans affiliate with Christianity. Historians also note that ‘the majority of early CS [child sponsorship] INGOs began their work in an era when many Northern countries were still classified as Christian’.⁸² The analysis tends to end there, with even Christian commentators focusing on more general explanations for its success.⁸³ But affinity is not something to brush aside: it reveals important aspects of sponsorship’s origins and its evolution.

This article offers the first extended history of this lucrative fundraising tool, tracing its initial expression to nineteenth-century Protestant missions. It grew out of a shared evangelical and humanistic emphasis on the capacity of all people – but especially ‘malleable’ children – to become moral subjects. Evangelical Christians viewed this process as usually requiring a lengthy period in which an individual learned to read the Bible and develop a personal conscience. This period was especially necessary, it was thought, for people construed as ‘heathens’ – a whole world of potential converts made accessible to Protestant missionaries as colonial empires spread. Informed by these ideas, sponsorship fostered long-term commitments for a foreign child’s material support and spiritual encouragement. Among English-speaking Protestants, at least, these ideas were entwined with gendered sentimentalism that viewed white middle-class women as the best conduits for nurturing Christian feeling in their families, and thus society at large. From the start, sponsorship was marketed primarily to women as a way to expand their Christian sphere of influence to children abroad.

Sponsorship’s history was also shaped by how eighteenth-century Christian fundraisers drew inspiration from joint-stock corporations. Their new ‘subscription’ model appealed to small-scale donors, who could give set amounts on a regular schedule to gain a share in God’s work. To give donors more control over how their funds were spent, some subscription charities allowed them to ‘designate’ their funds for a particular ‘object’, such as a student or orphan. It is the merger of subscription with designated giving that gave child sponsorship its signature structure of providing individual support through regular donations over an extended term.

The second half of this article explains sponsorship’s successful transition in the twentieth century as due, in part, to the mutual reinforcement of Christianity and humanitarianism. While this is not a new argument, it bears repeating since, perhaps inadvertently, some

⁸¹ C.F.A., Box IB22, Folder 10, p. 126, ‘Do relief work through your church’, in Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Board of World Missions, *Yearbook and Annual Report, 1958* (1959).

⁸² Watson and Clarke, ‘Introduction’, p. 12. On Christianity among sponsors, see Ove, *Change a Life*, p. 137. On organizational affiliation with Christianity, see F. Rabbitt, ‘Give and take? Child sponsors and the ethics of giving’, in Watson and Clarke, *Child Sponsorship*, pp. 280–96, at p. 284; and Wydick, Glewwe and Rutledge, ‘Does International child sponsorship work?’, p. 401.

⁸³ K. Waters, ‘The art & ethics of fundraising’, *Christianity Today*, 3 Dec. 2001 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/december3/5.50.html>> [accessed 2 Sept. 2021].

influential studies still draw a line between sacred and secular by defining what was ‘new’ about World War I-era humanitarianism in contrast to the ‘missionary-based charity’ it supposedly ‘supplanted’.⁸⁴ Historians of Christianity have sometimes contributed to this narrative by narrowly defining missions in terms of institutional denominations. If defined in such terms, the 1920s were indeed the end of a missionary era: powerful denominational boards were curtailed, separate women’s boards were closed, and the first major evangelical humanitarian campaigns ended.⁸⁵

Recent histories are rapidly complicating this picture, not least by building a clearer picture of how universalist ideals persisted between Christian and humanitarian work.⁸⁶ Contributing to the task, this article traces a concrete link, in the form of a particular fundraising tool that travelled from missions into humanitarianism at its inception. Wartime organizations adapted what was already in circulation in missions and reformulated it as ‘non-sectarian’. Thus they claimed moral authority in their appeals to a largely Protestant base, while skirting the denominational system of raising money in separate turfs; they pictured their donor markets, and eventually their field sites, as potentially limitless in scope. By redefining Christian work abroad to include such activities, beyond denominational mission work per se, we can see how the inter-war period was actually a highly fruitful time for Christian organizing, which laid the foundation for a generation of I.N.G.O.s to come.

None of this is to suggest that humanitarianism is covertly Christian or that its genesis is due solely to Christianity. Rather, in following the trajectory of a single fundraising tool, we can better see ‘the relationship between different religions and different kinds of humanitarian action’, where the religious context leads to particular ideological assumptions and organizational structures.⁸⁷ Sponsorship’s historically specific roots help explain why it has been so immensely successful – among a *particular demographic*. Despite promoters’ sanguine hopes, child sponsorship has largely failed to attract donors outside Europe, North America and Australia, apart from a small number of middle-class (often evangelical) Christians who have come to share some attitudes with their Western counterparts.⁸⁸ Retelling the history of sponsorship clarifies why this may be the case: it is not a neutral or universal form of giving, but one that rests in a specific matrix of collaboration and negotiation between charitable fundraisers in one corner of the world.

⁸⁴ Watenpugh, *Bread From Stones*, p. 32 (see also pp. 2, 5, 18, 59, 86, 98, 117); and R. Gill, ‘The rational administration of compassion: the origins of British relief in war’, *Le Mouvement social*, ccxxvii (2009), 9–26, at pp. 19, 22.

⁸⁵ See e.g., D. Robert, *American Women in Mission: a Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Ga., 1997), pp. 315–16. See also Curtis’s history, which ends in the 1920s with the Red Cross’s ‘secularization of charity’ (Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians*, p. 274).

⁸⁶ See notes 8 and 11. Even the scholars I just cited do at times acknowledge the missionary/humanitarian overlap: e.g., Watenpugh, *Bread From Stones*, p. 59; and D. L. Robert, ‘The first globalization: the internationalization of the Protestant missionary movement between the world wars’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, xxvi (2002), 50–66.

⁸⁷ M. Barnett, ‘Humanitarianism as a scholarly vocation’, in Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, pp. 234–63, at p. 249.

⁸⁸ In the latter half of the twentieth century, some Western-based Muslim N.G.O.s (notably Islamic Relief) have launched sponsorship plans, and sponsors are of various faiths in Europe, Australia and North America. Without downplaying this diversity, it does occur within the rubric of sociocultural patterns set in Christian-majority contexts.