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The influence of British Protestantism in early post-independence new Granada: diplomacy, commerce, and unintended religious transformation

Abstract

While the participation of the British and Irish Legions in the Neogranadian War of Independence has been widely documented, the religious consequences of British involvement remain underexplored. This article examines how British Protestantism—introduced through foreign soldiers, Bible societies, and the Lancasterian educational system—became embedded in early republican New Granada. Drawing on newspapers, official treaties, constitutional texts, and missionary correspondence, the study reads sources against the grain to identify how religious change emerged as an unintended by-product of diplomatic and commercial reform. Moving beyond missionary-centered narratives, the article argues that Protestant growth was facilitated less by coordinated evangelization than by trade agreements, educational modernization, and shifting church–state relations. By situating Protestant expansion within debates on secularization, informal empire, and nation formation, the study demonstrates that early Colombian religious pluralization was structurally linked to state-building processes rather than doctrinal conversion alone.

Keywords: religious toleration, Colombia, Protestantism, secularization, nation-building, informal empire

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Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Catholicism held near-monopolistic religious authority in the territory that would become the Republic of New Granada. Despite political instability following independence (1810–1819), Catholic hegemony remained constitutionally protected in the early republic. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, a small but institutionally visible Protestant presence had emerged. Existing scholarship has examined British military participation in independence[1,2] and later Protestant missions.[3,4] However, the mechanisms through which Protestantism gained a foothold during the formative decades of the republic remain insufficiently analyzed.

This article asks:

How did British diplomatic, commercial, and educational initiatives unintentionally facilitate the early institutional and cultural presence of Protestantism in post-independence New Granada?

Rather than framing Protestantism as the result of missionary success, this study argues that its growth was structurally embedded in three processes:

I. Commercial diplomacy and trade treaties

II. Educational reform (Lancasterian system)

III. Constitutional reconfiguration of church–state relations

Using Talal Asad's[5] distinction between quantitative and qualitative secularization and John Bossy's[6] concept of the "migration of the holy," the article demonstrates that apparent secular modernization did not eliminate religion but redistributed its authority in new ways.

Stellar history, secularization, and religious reconfiguration

One of the distinctive methodological contributions of this article lies in its use of Stellar History, as developed by Ojeda Pérez and Zapata.[7] Rather than adopting a strictly linear narrative of cause and effect, Stellar History proposes a multidirectional approach to historical interpretation. Drawing from Paul Ricoeur's reflections on narrative time and Walter Benjamin's critique of homogeneous historicism, this model emphasizes constellations of events whose meanings emerge retrospectively through layered interaction. In the case of early Colombian Protestantism, such an approach proves especially fruitful. The emergence of Protestantism cannot be explained solely through missionary chronology or diplomatic sequencing. Instead, it must be understood as a constellation of:

I. British military participation

II. Commercial treaties

III. Educational reform

IV. Bible circulation

V. Constitutional experimentation

VI. Cultural admiration and resistance

These elements interacted across time rather than unfolding in simple succession.

Stellar History thus allows us to interpret Protestant expansion not as linear missionary success, but as a series of intersecting trajectories—political, commercial, religious, and intellectual—whose cumulative effect reshaped church–state relations in New Granada.[7] This

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approach complements Talal Asad's[5] distinction between quantitative secularization (decline of religion) and qualitative secularization (redefinition of religion's social role). In New Granada, religion did not disappear; rather, its institutional monopoly fractured and migrated across new domains of civil society—what Bossy[6] famously described as "migrations of the holy."

Early protestant currents and british military presence

British involvement in independence preceded the Battle of Boyacá (1819). Archival records from the Archivo General de la Nación demonstrate that thousands of British and Irish soldiers served in liberationist forces.[4] These soldiers were religiously diverse—Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, and Lutheran. However, there is no evidence of coordinated missionary strategy among them. Their influence was incidental rather than programmatic. Some veterans, including James R. Fraser, later supported Bible distribution initiatives. The early Protestant presence therefore originated less in evangelization than in expatriate settlement patterns. This finding challenges narratives that attribute early Protestantism primarily to missionary zeal.[8] Instead, the archival record suggests religious diffusion through social proximity and commercial integration.

British soldiers as cultural-religious vectors

Although the British and Irish Legions were not organized missionary forces, their presence carried cultural and religious implications. Scholars such as Brown[1] and Rodríguez[2] have examined their military contributions; however, their role as cultural transmitters has received less attention. Archival pension records from the Archivo General de la Nación demonstrate the demographic diversity of British participants. Many were Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, or Lutherans. Their religious identities were neither uniform nor coordinated, yet they introduced alternative Christian practices into a predominantly Catholic society. Unlike later missionaries, these soldiers did not initially seek to convert. Instead, their influence operated through:

I. Social proximity

II. Marriage and settlement

III. Commercial integration

IV. Informal devotional gatherings

The fact that some remained after 1819—such as Colonel James R. Fraser—suggests that Protestant influence was not purely transient. Fraser later facilitated communication with Presbyterian authorities abroad, indirectly encouraging missionary dispatch. From a Stellar History perspective, the soldiers' presence becomes one luminous node within a broader constellation. Their military service enabled diplomatic ties; diplomatic ties enabled treaties; treaties created legal toleration; toleration allowed missionary settlement. Thus, Protestant growth was structurally enabled by the afterlives of military collaboration rather than by organized evangelization at the outset.

Commercial Treaties and Selective Religious Toleration

The decisive structural shift occurred through diplomatic treaties:

I. The Anderson–Gual Treaty (1824) with the United States

II. The Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation with Great Britain (1825)

III. The Treaty with the Netherlands (1829)

IV. The Bidlack–Mallarino Treaty (1846)

These agreements guaranteed freedom of conscience for foreign residents, though initially restricted to private worship. Importantly, religious toleration was not introduced as a theological principle but as a commercial necessity. As Cortés Guerrero[9] notes, treaty protections functioned as de facto legal precedents for religious liberty. The American treaty of 1846 marked a shift by permitting public worship under regulated conditions. This progression illustrates pragmatic expansion rather than ideological commitment. Thus, Protestant institutional presence developed within the legal shelter of commercial modernization—an example of what scholars describe as "informal empire".[10]

Education and the Lancasterian System

James (Diego) Thomson's promotion of the Lancasterian method represents another critical mechanism. Supported by Santander, this system emphasized literacy, discipline, and competition.[11,12] Bible reading formed part of its pedagogical core. Although not explicitly evangelical, it weakened exclusive Catholic control over scriptural interpretation. Opposition from Catholic authorities, especially following Pope Leo XII's encyclical *Ubi Primum*,[13] limited the Colombian Bible Society's early success. The Society dissolved in 1834 amid political instability and ecclesiastical resistance. Santander's withdrawal of support after Vatican recognition (1835) demonstrates that Protestant initiatives were tolerated only insofar as they aligned with modernization goals. This confirms that state support was instrumental, not confessional.

The colombian bible society and scriptural nationalism

The establishment of the Colombian Bible Society in 1825 marked the first explicit attempt to institutionalize Protestant presence. James (Diego) Thomson, representing both the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) and the Lancasterian educational movement, sought to distribute vernacular Bibles using approved Catholic translations.[14] Contrary to simplified missionary narratives, Thomson did not initially promote doctrinal rupture. His stated objective was to "facilitate for all Colombians the reading of the divine Word, in their own mother tongue," explicitly referencing the Scío and Torres Amat translations. Yet this initiative carried profound symbolic implications. The vernacular Bible resonated with an earlier revolutionary act: Antonio Nariño's 1794 translation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (Rozo, 2012). Both acts involved translation as a vehicle of emancipation.

Through a Stellar History lens, we observe a powerful parallel:

I. Nariño translated political sovereignty.

II. Thomson translated scriptural sovereignty.

Both challenged monopolies of interpretation—one political, one ecclesiastical.

The encyclical *Ubi Primum*[13] condemned Bible societies worldwide, framing them as threats to ecclesiastical authority. This papal intervention illustrates that Protestant expansion was perceived not merely as theological deviation but as epistemological disruption. The Bible Society's eventual dissolution in 1834 does not signal failure. Rather, it reveals the fragility of early pluralization amid political instability. Its existence nonetheless normalized the idea that scripture could circulate beyond clerical mediation.

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Constitutional instability and religious pluralization

Between 1830 and 1858, constitutional changes gradually redefined church–state relations. Although early constitutions reaffirmed Catholic primacy, later texts (e.g., Constitution of 1858) recognized broader religious freedoms. These shifts were inconsistent and politically contested. Protestant activity remained concentrated in urban centers such as Bogotá and Cartagena. Reverend Henry Barrington Pratt (arriving 1856) established the first organized evangelical church, but his success depended on liberal political climates rather than mass conversion. Beltrán Cely[15] situates pluralization primarily in the twentieth century. This article extends the timeline, arguing that pluralization began structurally in the early republic through legal-commercial channels.

Discussion

Protestantism, informal empire, and nation formation

The evidence suggests three interrelated dynamics:

I. Commercial Modernization as Religious Catalyst

Trade treaties introduced legal toleration not for pluralism's sake but to attract foreign capital.

II. Educational Reform as Cultural Transmission

Lancasterian schooling facilitated literacy and scriptural access, subtly redistributing religious authority.

III. Pragmatic Secularization

Applying Asad's (1993) framework, secularization in New Granada represented a qualitative reconfiguration of church–state boundaries rather than decline in religiosity. Protestantism therefore became embedded not through doctrinal triumph but through structural alignment with state-building.

Protestantism and the reconfiguration of church–state authority

When analyzed through Stellar History, Protestant expansion appears neither accidental nor inevitable, but emergent.

Three structural dynamics converged:

I. Military Collaboration

British soldiers created early interpersonal and diplomatic networks.

II. Commercial Diplomacy

Trade treaties institutionalized selective toleration.

III. Educational Reform

Lancasterian pedagogy weakened exclusive Catholic mediation of literacy.

These processes collectively redefined the boundaries between sacred and secular authority. Applying Asad's (1993) framework, New Granada experienced qualitative secularization: religion remained central but lost institutional exclusivity. Protestantism thus became embedded within the formation of national identity. It challenged Catholic hegemony while simultaneously reinforcing Christianity as a civilizational framework distinct from Spanish colonialism. British influence extended beyond religion into education, commerce, and political philosophy. The Lancasterian system, supported by Santander, introduced pedagogical methods grounded in Protestant notions of literacy and individual scriptural engagement.[11,12] At the same time, British commercial treaties encoded selective religious freedom. As Cortés Guerrero[9] notes, treaty-based toleration functioned as "higher law," predating domestic constitutional guarantees. This dynamic aligns with Paquette's (2004) thesis regarding the intellectual context of British diplomatic recognition. Britain's involvement combined liberal rhetoric with economic pragmatism—what historians describe as informal empire.

In this framework, Protestantism becomes intertwined with modernization:

I. Railways (Primmer, 2018)

II. Financial loans

III. Educational reform

IV. Bible distribution

British Protestant culture thus entered New Granada not as aggressive proselytism but as part of a broader package of Christian modernity.[16–21]

Conclusion

British Protestantism in early post-independence New Granada did not expand through coordinated missionary strategy or sustained domestic endorsement. Rather, it developed as an unintended consequence of commercial diplomacy, educational reform, and constitutional experimentation. Trade treaties designed to stimulate economic modernization simultaneously created legal protections for foreign religious practice. Educational reforms weakened exclusive Catholic authority over literacy and instruction. Constitutional changes gradually expanded the scope of toleration. Protestantism thus became woven into the broader processes of nation formation. Religious pluralization emerged pragmatically rather than ideologically, embedded within the evolving relationship between commerce, governance, and ecclesiastical authority. This reframing situates early Colombian Protestantism within the structural dynamics of state-building and informal empire rather than within missionary history alone. British Protestantism in early post-independence New Granada did not expand through coordinated missionary conquest nor sustained domestic endorsement. Instead, it emerged through intersecting constellations of military collaboration, commercial diplomacy, educational reform, and scriptural circulation.

The British and Irish Legions introduced alternative Christian practices through social presence. Trade treaties provided legal toleration for foreign worship. The Lancasterian system promoted literacy rooted in scriptural engagement. The Colombian Bible Society normalized vernacular access to sacred texts, echoing earlier revolutionary acts of translation. Using Stellar History as a methodological lens, this article demonstrates that Protestant growth formed part of a broader reconfiguration of church–state authority during nation formation. Rather than representing simple religious importation, British Protestantism became woven into Colombia's evolving constitutional, educational, and cultural frameworks. Religious pluralization in Colombia thus began not as doctrinal triumph but as structural transformation embedded within modernization and informal empire.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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