

Rethinking Gold, Glory, and Gospel: An Interconnected Model of Colonial Power in Missionary Activity in North Sumatra, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study reexamines the concepts of Gold, Glory, and Gospel by proposing an interconnected model of colonial power relations. While these concepts are commonly treated as separate motives of European expansion, this study argues that they operated simultaneously through the alignment of economic restructuring, political authority, and religious institutions. The analysis is grounded in a qualitative approach based on historical sociology, using a critical reading of historiographical sources related to the activities of the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) in Batak regions of North Sumatra between 1860 and 1910. The findings indicate that missionary institutions were embedded within broader colonial structures. Educational initiatives contributed to the formation of a local administrative workforce, missionary knowledge production supported colonial governance, and religious practices facilitated cultural adaptation that reshaped local belief systems. These processes were interconnected and functioned within a broader configuration of power that extended beyond military and economic control. The study further shows that the interaction between economic, political, and religious processes formed a structured and mutually reinforcing system. This configuration shows how colonial expansion operated through institutional and cultural mechanisms that were sustained over time.

Keywords: *Gold; Glory; Gospel; Colonialism; Missionary Activity; Batak Regions*

A. Introduction

Studies of modern colonialism have long been associated with three core motives commonly referred to as Gold, Glory, and Gospel. These concepts capture the economic drive, the pursuit of political power, and the religious agenda that shaped European expansion from the fifteenth century onward. Recent historiography has emphasized that colonial domination did not operate solely through military conquest or economic policy, but also through religious institutions that helped construct moral justification for imperial expansion (Porter 2004; Susanto 2003). Missionaries, acting as educators, healers, and carriers of Western moral discourse, often functioned as a form of soft power that facilitated the extension of colonial influence.

Historically, the formulation of Gold, Glory, and Gospel can be traced to earlier encounters between European Christianity and the Islamic world during the Crusades, which spanned several major phases between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (Hitti 2002). Although military campaigns eventually subsided, these encounters opened pathways for intellectual exchange and diplomatic engagement. Agreements such as the Treaty of Jaffa ensured access for Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, while also exposing European societies to the scientific and intellectual traditions of the Muslim world. This exposure contributed to a growing interest in studying the East, particularly through the development of Orientalist scholarship.

This scholarly engagement, however, was not neutral. Orientalist knowledge often developed alongside political interests. While a small number of scholars approached the study of the East with intellectual openness, dominant figures such as Ernest Renan produced narratives that portrayed Islam as an obstacle to progress. In the Dutch colonial context, figures like Snouck Hurgronje studied Islam not only for academic purposes but also to support colonial governance by identifying social and political vulnerabilities within Muslim communities (Hurgronje 1893). As Edward Said (1978) argues, Orientalist discourse constructed the East as backward and irrational, providing a framework that justified intervention and control. Such knowledge production later informed the organization of missionary movements that became increasingly systematic and aligned with imperial expansion. European maritime expeditions thus served economic recovery, political consolidation, and religious outreach at the same time (Vlekke 2008).

Within postcolonial theological scholarship, Christian missions are often understood as complex and ambivalent. Several studies highlight their contributions in education, healthcare, and literacy. At the same time, recent research shows that missionary activity also contributed to the construction of hierarchical cultural narratives that reinforced Western superiority (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Rieger 2007). In many parts of Asia and Africa, missionaries engaged closely with local communities, collected ethnographic information, introduced new linguistic systems, and documented social structures. These activities generated forms of knowledge that later supported colonial administration in managing and governing local populations (Said 1978; Gouda 1995). Missionary work, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a spiritual endeavor, but as part of a broader configuration of knowledge and power.

Contemporary scholarship also draws attention to the enduring cultural effects of colonialism. Colonial institutions and value systems continue to shape religious practices, educational structures, and historical narratives in many postcolonial societies. This persistence calls for a critical reexamination of missionary activity beyond its historical setting. Language, symbols, and

institutional practices often carry traces of earlier colonial frameworks, even when they appear in transformed forms. Examining these continuities makes it possible to understand how religion contributes to the formation of social relations and cultural authority across different historical periods (Keane 2007; Singgih 2000).

Recent literature further demonstrates a growing interest in the role of religion in sustaining, contesting, or reshaping colonial structures. Postcolonial theological studies indicate that colonial legacies remain embedded in religious institutions, particularly through mission practices that still reflect elements of Eurocentrism and cultural hierarchy (Brazal 2024). In the Southeast Asian context, scholarship shows that Christian missions have played a significant role in shaping local identities and community structures. This is evident in the transformation of Batak society, where religious change intersected with broader social and political processes (Kipp 1990; Kozok 2010). Other studies highlight how colonial influence extended into cultural orientation through education and symbolic systems introduced by missionaries (Goh 2005). Religion thus operated as a cultural mediator that enabled deeper and more durable forms of colonial penetration.

Despite these developments, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature treats Gold, Glory, and Gospel as separate explanatory categories, rather than examining how they operate simultaneously within a unified structure of power relations. In addition, historical and theological analyses are often conducted independently, without integrating them through a postcolonial framework. Studies of Christian missions in Southeast Asia also tend to focus on localized cases, with limited attention to their connection to broader global configurations of power. The role of missionary activity in producing colonial knowledge has received less attention, even though postcolonial scholarship has consistently emphasized the epistemic dimension of colonialism (Porter 2004).

This article addresses these gaps by proposing a reinterpretation of Gold, Glory, and Gospel as an interconnected model of colonial power relations. Rather than treating them as separate motives, this study conceptualizes them as mutually reinforcing elements within a single analytical framework. The analysis draws on postcolonial theory to examine how economic interests, political authority, and religious institutions operated together. While the discussion engages with the broader Southeast Asian context, it focuses empirically on the dynamics of missionary activity in North Sumatra, particularly in Batak regions associated with the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG). This case is selected due to the availability of historiographical sources and the intensity of interaction between missionaries, colonial administration, and local communities. Such a focus allows for a closer examination of how religious institutions functioned as socio-political actors within colonial structures (Harmakaputra and The 2021).

This approach also aligns with broader postcolonial efforts to revisit colonial memory and to reconsider the role of Christian missions as part of imperial formations (Brazal 2024). By situating the Batak experience within a wider analytical framework, this study offers a critical reading of missionary activity and contributes to ongoing discussions on the relationship between religion, power, and colonial history.

B. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in historical sociology, using a critical literature-based design to reexamine colonial narratives and missionary activity in North Sumatra. Rather than reconstructing a chronological account from primary archival materials, the analysis focuses on reinterpretation through existing historiographical works. The empirical focus is placed on the activities of the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) in Batak regions between 1860 and 1910, with particular attention to social interactions, institutional policies in education and healthcare, and the administrative relationships between missionaries, colonial authorities, and local communities. This design allows the study to connect historical evidence with broader analytical questions concerning the interplay of economic interests, political authority, and religious institutions as outlined in the conceptual framework of interconnected colonial power relations.

The primary corpus consists of five authoritative historiographical sources that provide detailed documentation of missionary activities and colonial dynamics (Aritonang and Steenbrink 2008; Kipp 1990; Kozok 2010; Siahaan et al. 2025; Van den End 1999). These works include transcriptions of missionary reports, institutional records, and correspondence that capture the interaction between mission institutions and colonial administration. In addition, thirty-two supporting sources were selected from academic books and journal articles that address colonialism, comparative missionary practices, postcolonial theory, and Islamic sociology. The selection of these sources is based on their relevance to the research focus, their contribution to debates on colonial knowledge production, and their capacity to support a theoretically informed interpretation of missionary activity. This combination of sources enables a critical engagement with both empirical accounts and conceptual frameworks.

Data analysis follows a thematic procedure adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006), organized into three interconnected stages. The first stage identifies historical patterns that reflect the interaction between economic restructuring, political expansion, and religious intervention within the selected literature. The second stage applies theoretical coding using postcolonial frameworks, including Foucault's (1980; 1991) concept of power relations to examine institutional practices, Said's Orientalism to analyze the production of

knowledge, and Bhabha's notion of hybridity to interpret local responses and cultural adaptation. The final stage synthesizes these analytical categories to formulate the Model of Interconnected Colonial Power Relations, which serves as the central conceptual contribution of this study. This process ensures that empirical observations are systematically linked to theoretical interpretation, allowing the analysis to move beyond descriptive historiography toward a more integrated understanding of colonial structures.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

The analysis indicates that Gold, Glory, and Gospel are best understood as an interconnected structure of power relations rather than as separate historical motives. At the same time, this study maintains a clear analytical boundary. First, missionary institutions cannot be reduced entirely to colonial state apparatuses, as many missionaries were driven by religious commitments that were not directly aligned with imperial interests (Van den End 1999). Second, historical evidence shows that tensions often emerged between church authorities and colonial administrations, particularly when military policies conflicted with religious or humanitarian considerations (Rieger 2007). While these distinctions are important, the analysis presented here focuses on structural dynamics. It examines how religious institutions were positioned within broader colonial systems and how their presence contributed, intentionally or not, to the expansion and consolidation of imperial power.

1) Gold: Economic Motives and Colonial Capitalist Penetration

Historical accounts indicate that the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG), under the leadership of I. L. Nommensen, established a network of schools in the Silindung and Toba regions that provided instruction in literacy, basic arithmetic, and administrative skills. This educational expansion was materially supported by the Dutch colonial government, particularly during periods when economic policies shifted toward more structured forms of resource extraction (Kipp 1990; Kozok 2010). These developments point to a convergence of interests. State subsidies for mission schools functioned as investments aimed at producing a local administrative workforce capable of supporting plantation economies in East Sumatra. Through these institutions, Batak communities were gradually introduced to monetary systems and bureaucratic practices that differed from earlier communal economic arrangements.

Beyond education, missionary activity also played a role in the production of geographical and demographic knowledge. Missionaries were often among the first to document local populations, map inland territories, and record information about regional resources in areas not yet fully controlled by colonial

authorities (Gouda 1995). These forms of knowledge later informed colonial administrative strategies, including land management, taxation, and resource allocation. In this context, the relationship between knowledge and power becomes evident. Missionary documentation functioned as a means of organizing and classifying local realities in ways that facilitated economic integration into imperial systems. This process reflects a broader pattern in which religious institutions contributed to the transformation of local economies while simultaneously supporting the expansion of colonial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997).

2) Glory: Political Legitimacy and Territorial Control

The relationship between missionary activity and political authority is particularly visible in the context of the Batak wars. As RMG expanded its presence in Toba under Nommensen, resistance emerged from Sisingamangaraja XII, who perceived the growing foreign presence as a threat to regional autonomy. In response, Nommensen requested military assistance from the Dutch colonial government, citing the need to protect Christian communities (Siahaan et al. 2025). Historical records indicate that missionaries were not passive actors in this process. Their linguistic skills and familiarity with local geography positioned them as intermediaries who could assist colonial forces as translators, informants, and guides during military operations (Kozok 2010).

These developments challenge the assumption that missionary work operated independently of colonial coercion. Requests for military intervention provided colonial authorities with political justification for territorial expansion into previously autonomous regions such as Tapanuli (Ricklefs 2008). Religious presence and military penetration thus unfolded in parallel. Mission networks facilitated communication, reduced local resistance, and contributed to the extension of colonial administration in North Sumatra.

From a discursive standpoint, these processes were reinforced through narratives that framed local resistance as disorder or backwardness. Such representations aligned with broader colonial imaginaries that positioned European intervention as necessary for restoring stability and progress (Said 1978). Within this framework, military expansion could be presented as a civilizing effort rather than an act of domination (Fanon 1963; Rieger 2007). This form of narrative construction played a role in legitimizing colonial authority both locally and in European public discourse.

3) Gospel: Ideological Mediation and Cultural Hybridity

The ideological dimension of missionary activity in Batak regions developed through strategies of cultural accommodation rather than direct confrontation. Nommensen and other missionaries engaged with local language and customs by translating biblical texts into Batak Toba and incorporating

selected elements of customary law into church practices (Aritonang and Steenbrink 2008; Kipp 1990). These strategies enabled religious teachings to be presented in forms that resonated with existing cultural frameworks, reducing the likelihood of open resistance.

From a sociological perspective, such forms of accommodation can be understood as mechanisms that facilitated gradual transformation. Rather than displacing local belief systems abruptly, missionary activity introduced alternative structures of meaning that interacted with existing practices (Asad 1993; Sugirtharajah 2001). This process reshaped cultural orientations over time and contributed to the formation of new social identities that aligned more closely with institutional Christianity.

Postcolonial analysis interprets these dynamics through the concept of hybridity, where cultural interaction produces new forms that are neither fully indigenous nor entirely external (Bhabha 1994). In this context, hybridity functioned as a medium through which external values were embedded within local settings. The resulting transformations extended beyond religious belief and influenced broader patterns of social organization. As these changes took place, elements of local epistemology were gradually marginalized, while new hierarchies of knowledge and authority became established (Fanon 1963; Smith 1999). Missionary activity thus operated as a key channel through which ideological dimensions of colonial power were articulated.

4) Interconnection of Gold, Glory, and Gospel as a Model of Colonial Power Relations

The reinterpretation developed in this study leads to the formulation of the Model of Interconnected Colonial Power Relations. This model rejects the view that Gold, Glory, and Gospel function as independent explanatory categories. Instead, it conceptualizes them as interrelated components that operate simultaneously within a structured system of power.

Gold represents the material dimension, where economic restructuring introduces new forms of labor organization, administrative practice, and market integration. Glory corresponds to the political and military dimension, where territorial control and governance are established and maintained. Gospel constitutes the ideological dimension, where cultural and religious frameworks provide meaning and justification for broader structural changes. These three elements interact in ways that reinforce one another, shaping both institutional arrangements and social transformations.

Comparative studies suggest that similar patterns can be observed in other colonial contexts. In parts of Africa, missionary activity preceded formal colonial administration and contributed to shifts in spatial organization and social hierarchy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Hastings 1994). In Southeast Asia, religious institutions often played a role in mediating interactions between local

communities and colonial authorities (Roxborough 2010; Harmakaputra and The 2021). These parallels indicate that the interconnection of economic, political, and religious processes was not unique to the Batak case but reflects a broader configuration of colonial expansion.

5) Critical Reflection from Islamic Sociology

A critical reading informed by Islamic sociology offers an additional analytical layer for examining these dynamics. Within the framework of *maqashid al-shari'ah*, the processes described above raise questions concerning justice and the protection of essential human values. Economic restructuring can be linked to disruptions in the protection of property, while military expansion relates to issues of security and dignity. Cultural transformation through religious intervention may also affect intellectual and spiritual autonomy.

Historical experiences in Indonesia illustrate that resistance to colonial structures often drew upon religious narratives, as seen in movements such as the Diponegoro War and the Aceh War. These forms of resistance can be understood as attempts to challenge systems of domination that combined material, political, and cultural dimensions. In this context, religious thought functioned as a resource for articulating alternative social visions.

The perspective of prophetic social science, as developed by Kuntowijoyo (2006), emphasizes the role of religion in promoting human dignity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. This framework provides a basis for critically examining the use of religious discourse within structures of power. It also highlights the importance of reinterpreting historical experiences in ways that support emancipatory forms of knowledge and social transformation.

2. Discussion

The findings presented in this study point to a pattern in which missionary institutions operated within broader colonial structures while maintaining a degree of internal variation. Historical evidence indicates that missionary activity cannot be understood as a uniform practice. In some cases, individual missionaries expressed concern over colonial policies, criticized forced labor, and sought to protect local communities from excessive state intervention (Van den End 1999). These instances suggest that missionary engagement included ethical tensions and internal disagreements that complicate any single interpretation of their role.

At the same time, these variations at the individual level do not substantially alter the structural dynamics identified in the analysis. Institutional forms such as mission schools, healthcare services, and communication networks were integrated into colonial systems of governance. These institutions contributed to the organization of local society in ways that aligned with administrative and economic interests. Comparative research shows that

missionary institutions often adapted to existing political conditions, even when internal tensions were present (Robert 2000; Rieger 2007). This indicates that the relationship between religion and colonial authority was shaped not only by individual intentions but also by broader institutional arrangements.

When placed in a wider comparative context, the Batak case reflects patterns that have been observed in other colonial settings. In southern Africa, missionary activity preceded formal colonial administration and played a role in reshaping spatial organization, labor systems, and social hierarchy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). In Malawi, missionaries acted as intermediaries between local authority structures and colonial governance (Ross 2023). These parallels suggest that the interaction between economic, political, and religious processes formed a recurring configuration in colonial expansion. At the same time, regional variations remain significant. In Latin America, missionary expansion often coincided with direct military intervention, making the connection between religious activity and coercion more explicit (Goh 2005). In Southeast Asia, including the Batak region, missionary presence frequently preceded formal administrative control. This sequence allowed religious institutions to establish cultural influence before the consolidation of political authority. The Batak case therefore contributes to a more differentiated understanding of colonial processes, showing that long-term forms of control often emerged through gradual cultural and epistemic transformation rather than immediate military domination.

The analytical framework developed in this study also invites reflection within the field of Islamic sociology. The interaction between economic restructuring, political authority, and cultural transformation raises broader questions about the role of religion within systems of power. Historical experiences in Indonesia demonstrate that religious narratives have functioned both as instruments of accommodation and as resources for resistance, as seen in movements such as the Diponegoro War and the Aceh War. These examples indicate that religion operates within shifting contexts and cannot be reduced to a single function.

The concept of prophetic social science proposed by Kuntowijoyo (2006) provides a useful framework for engaging with these dynamics. It emphasizes the role of religion in supporting ethical reflection, social responsibility, and human dignity, while also encouraging critical engagement with historical forms of domination. Reexamining missionary activity within this framework does not aim to assign a fixed moral position, but rather to understand how religious institutions have interacted with structures of power across different historical contexts.

This discussion also points to the relevance of revisiting colonial histories in order to better understand contemporary configurations of knowledge,

authority, and belief. The patterns identified in this study suggest that the relationship between religion and power continues to evolve, shaped by both historical legacies and present conditions. Further research may extend this analysis by examining how similar dynamics operate in different regional or institutional settings.

D. Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes Gold, Glory, and Gospel as an interconnected model of colonial power relations, rather than as separate historical motives. The analysis shows that colonial expansion operated through the alignment of economic restructuring, political authority, and religious institutions, forming a system in which material, administrative, and ideological processes reinforced one another. Within this configuration, missionary activity played a significant role in shaping social organization, facilitating knowledge production, and contributing to the consolidation of colonial governance.

The case of the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) in Batak regions illustrates how these processes unfolded in a specific historical context. Educational initiatives, territorial mediation, and cultural adaptation did not function in isolation, but were linked to broader transformations that restructured local economies, redefined political relations, and introduced new frameworks of meaning. These findings support the argument that colonial power extended beyond coercive control and relied on institutional and cultural mechanisms that operated over longer periods of time.

The implications of this study extend to contemporary discussions on religion and power. Revisiting missionary activity through a postcolonial and sociological lens makes it possible to examine how historical patterns continue to shape present configurations of knowledge and authority. In this regard, the framework of prophetic social science offers a basis for engaging critically with these legacies, while emphasizing the importance of ethical reflection and human dignity in the study of religion.

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