

# Heavenly Harvests: Rockefeller Philanthropy, Agricultural Missions, and the Religious Roots of Development

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## Abstract

This report examines the relationship between Rockefeller-related organizations and American missionaries who engaged in international agricultural development work during the twentieth century. From the early 1900s forward, Christian missionaries increasingly incorporated agricultural education and improvement projects into their foreign missions programs. Their participation in transnational exchanges—of scientific and agricultural knowledge, farm equipment and livestock, and raw materials, like seeds and fertilizers—prefigured the international development programs that governments and private agencies would begin to undertake, starting in the mid-twentieth century. Materials in the collections of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) reveal the close relationships that agricultural missionaries cultivated with philanthropies and non-profit organizations that prioritized rural development. Missionaries relied on funding from these organizations to carry out their work, and yet they also served as sources of local knowledge and expertise for those very organizations when they entered the development field themselves. Based on research conducted during the spring of 2018, this report details findings about the nature of the relationship between development-oriented philanthropies and agricultural missionaries. It draws from several RAC collections—especially those of the International Education Board (IEB), the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), the American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA), and the Agricultural Development Council (ADC).

## Report

In June 1925, Presbyterian missionary John Reisner wrote to Albert Mann, then Director of Agriculture for the International Education Board (IEB). Reisner thanked him for his role in bringing Professor Harry Love of Cornell University to Reisner's own college in Nanking, China for the summer. Love, a plant breeding specialist, had spent the previous few months developing a crop improvement program for the University of Nanking's College of Agriculture and Forestry while supported by a grant from the IEB. "We are hoping that his being here this year will lead to...closer relations between Cornell and the University of Nanking," wrote Reisner. He hoped as well that it might bring about closer relations with the IEB, and invited Mann to visit his school in Nanking. "China needs very, very much the help which the International Education Board can give," Reisner entreated. "I am hoping and trusting that before the International Education Board decides on its Asiatic policy, you will have an opportunity of coming out and studying the situation."<sup>1</sup>

Love's visit to Nanking in 1925 did indeed lead to lasting relations for the University of Nanking with both Cornell and the IEB. Though Mann did not take Reisner up on his offer to visit China personally, he sent agricultural scientist H.L. Russell on a tour of Asia to investigate possibilities for future IEB funding. Russell came away impressed by Reisner's work at Nanking, and he recommended that the Board support a larger project there. In 1926, the Cornell-Nanking Project was born. From then until the economic hardships of the Great Depression stymied the initiative in 1931, Cornell professors, supported by IEB funds, traveled to Nanking to train Chinese agronomists and help Reisner's College of Agriculture and Forestry develop its plant breeding program. In all, the IEB supplied fourteen thousand dollars for the exchange program.<sup>2</sup>

The Cornell-Nanking Project—the IEB's only major undertaking in Asia and a pioneering program in religiously affiliated international development work—marked the beginning of a long reciprocal relationship between Rockefeller-

funded philanthropies and religious agricultural missions. Rockefeller financing continued to provide crucial support for agricultural missionaries' development-oriented projects throughout the world into the late twentieth century. And as Rockefeller-affiliated organizations, including the Agricultural Development Council and the Rockefeller Foundation, became leaders in international development, their operatives, representatives of religious development agencies, and agricultural missionaries in the field shared their experiences, expertise, and even personnel with one another. This report and my larger dissertation project seek to tell the story of how these partnerships between Christian missionaries and other private groups, such as those established by various members of the Rockefeller family, shaped the course of international development during the twentieth century.

Evidence of these relationships abounds in the collections of the Rockefeller Archive Center. It is particularly noteworthy that several key figures who went on to direct development programs for Rockefeller-related organizations got their start as agricultural missionaries. John B. Griffing, for example—who headed Nelson Rockefeller's American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) in Brazil—had worked with John Reisner in Nanking during the early 1920s, when he directed a cotton improvement project for the College of Agriculture and Forestry.<sup>3</sup> While with the AIA, Griffing drew from his experiences as a former missionary as he studied and wrote articles pertaining to issues of agricultural development. Nelson Rockefeller's personal papers hold some of Griffing's writings, which reveal that religion continued to play a large role in his approach to development during his tenure with the AIA. In Brazil, for instance, Griffing worked to maintain relationships between the AIA and local missionary-run agricultural schools and rural church leaders, while extolling the work that agricultural missionaries had done to foster rural development.<sup>4</sup>

Arthur Mosher also began his career in international agricultural work at a missionary institution: the Presbyterian-run Allahabad Agricultural Institute in India. His work there was briefly supported by the Davison Fund in the late 1930s.<sup>5</sup> In the 1950s, following a two-decades-long missionary career, Mosher went to work for the National Planning Association surveying technical assistance

programs in Latin America, where he made a case study of the AIA's agricultural credit program (known as ACAR) in Brazil. With decades of development experience under his belt, Mosher would then go on to lead the Agricultural Development Council (ADC) from 1957 to 1973.<sup>6</sup> One of his chief tasks at the ADC involved producing training manuals for individuals and organizations working in agricultural development. Mosher's book *Getting Agriculture Moving: Essentials for Development and Modernization*, published in 1966, circulated widely and had substantial influence in development circles.

While Rockefeller-funded development organizations drew leaders like Mosher and Griffing from the ranks of agricultural missionaries, they also continued to fund missionaries' own development-oriented projects. Agricultural Missions, Inc. (AMI), an ecumenical Protestant organization that John Reisner helped establish and direct upon his return from China to the United States in the early 1930s, was one such beneficiary of Rockefeller funds.<sup>7</sup> AMI first received support in 1934 from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. himself, and continued to receive annual contributions throughout the mid-1940s from both JDR Jr. and the Davison Fund, which served as the organization's single largest donors during that period. Thomas Jesse Jones of AMI described the Rockefeller aid as "a major factor in placing the organization on a sound, financial basis for continuing service for the rural peoples both at home and abroad."<sup>8</sup> At the end of 1946, JDR Jr. gave a final gift to AMI in the form of fifty-four thousand dollars' worth of Standard Oil stock.<sup>9</sup> During the time that it received Rockefeller funding, AMI expressed openness to "guidance or directions" from its benefactors, while Rockefeller affiliates, in turn, profited from their association with AMI. John Reisner, for example, provided letters of introduction for Arthur W. Packard—aide to both JDR Jr. and JDR 3rd—when he traveled to China on official business.<sup>10</sup> This reciprocal relationship between agricultural missionaries and organizations associated with the Rockefeller family would continue to grow during the 1950s and 1960s as both entities expanded their work in rural and agricultural development.

By the 1950s, the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) had gained an international reputation in agricultural development, particularly within Latin America, where it had implemented its own wide-reaching initiatives such as the Mexican and

Colombian Agricultural Programs. Yet, as the records of the RF show, it continued to support the initiatives of others working in the field of agricultural improvement—including religious organizations. In 1953, the RF became involved in assisting an agricultural school in Lavras, Brazil that was run by Presbyterian missionaries from the United States. Records pertaining to this funding have proven particularly helpful for my research, as they shed light into the workings of one agricultural mission project that figures prominently in my dissertation: the Lavras Agricultural College. The RF first funded a small travel grant for an American agricultural missionary at the school, who wished to visit the RF's agricultural program in Colombia. School officials believed that observing and learning from the RF's work there would prove "highly beneficial" as they continued to develop their own agricultural program, which had been in operation since 1908. The RF's J.G. Harrar, then deputy director for agriculture, who had visited the school earlier in 1953 during a trip to Brazil, agreed with them and put in a good word for the missionary, who thanked Harrar upon his receipt of the travel grant: "I am very grateful to God and to you and to the Foundation," the young man wrote.<sup>11</sup>

The missionary and his institution soon found more reason to give thanks for Harrar and the Rockefeller Foundation when they received an additional, much larger grant shortly thereafter. When Harrar had visited the school, he had recommended it "for some RF assistance," citing its favorable reputation throughout Brazil and its capacity to aid agricultural production in the region. The school's president estimated that it would need a total of fifteen thousand dollars over a three-year period to build up its demonstration farm and educational programs, but Harrar himself raised the request to twenty-one thousand dollars so as to ensure that the RF's support would have "maximum effectiveness." The request was granted.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of the next three years, school officials remained in regular contact with Harrar and the RF to keep them apprised of how they were using the funds and of the results of the projects that they were implementing. Building better facilities and infrastructure around the farm, purchasing improved machinery and breeding stock, implementing irrigation and drainage projects, testing and fertilizing soil, and planting new seeds—some of

which they obtained from the RF—were all activities that the school’s agricultural missionaries undertook with the Foundation’s contribution.<sup>13</sup>

Many of these projects were carried out with the advice of the RF, which missionaries deliberately sought out. In one letter, the director of the school wrote to ask if the RF might “point out to us the chief defects of our work and equipment here,” emphasizing that he and his colleagues were “open to” suggestions and criticism.<sup>14</sup> J.G. Harrar appears to have been open to providing the requested suggestions. “[I]f you plan, as I know you do, to put this farm in the best possible condition for the purposes of production, demonstration, education, and experimentation,” Harrar wrote to the school’s administrators, “I think you are going to have to do some other things [than you had initially planned].” Irrigation and drainage systems, an “up-grade” of livestock and poultry flocks, and “an intensive campaign of ant control” all made Harrar’s initial list of recommendations, and the school’s missionaries worked to implement such projects during the term of the grant.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the grant period, the Rockefeller Foundation chose to continue—and, in fact, strengthen—its relationship with the Lavras Agricultural College. In 1955, the RF’s John McKelvey, Jr. visited the school and recommended it for another grant. After some discussion among McKelvey, J.G. Harrar, and the school’s administrators, the Rockefeller Foundation bestowed the college with a second grant of sixty thousand dollars over a period of five years.<sup>16</sup> Once again, RF officers remained in touch with school officials regarding suggestions for how the funds might be used—and missionaries at the school, in turn, kept the RF informed of their projects. Farm vehicles, improved hog stock, and research and laboratory equipment were all acquired with the use of RF funds, and a new sawmill and fruit orchard were established on the grounds, thanks to assistance from the second grant-in-aid.

When they had first begun supporting the Lavras Agricultural College financially, Harrar and others at the Rockefeller Foundation had expressed hopes of turning the school into a more robust institution that “would serve important needs” in the region, from food production to farmer education through agricultural extension.<sup>17</sup>

Within a few years, it was serving those needs—including for Rockefeller-affiliated programs. The AIA’s 1957-1958 annual report for its ACAR (rural credit) program notes that the agricultural school in Lavras had established an extension department and “included the teaching of extension work in the curriculum of agronomy.” Moreover, it served as a host institution for training courses for ACAR technicians.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the story of the Lavras Agricultural College, there is more information found in the records of the RF about collaboration between Rockefeller-affiliated organizations and agricultural missionaries. Other missionary-agriculturists from around the world traveled to observe and train with the RF’s agricultural programs—experiences that expanded their knowledge of techniques being applied in the field of agricultural development and provided them with important contacts in that field. One example is Mennonite agricultural missionary Harold Voth, who served in Chihuahua, Mexico and attended a training program with the RF’s Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) during the 1950s. There, he built relationships with specialists such as Edwin Wellhausen, John Niederhauser, and Norman Borlaug. After his return to Chihuahua, Voth maintained communication with his contacts at MAP, requesting both their advice and specimens of seeds for a variety of new crops that he hoped to cultivate at his mission.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to agricultural materials and practical advice, the Rockefeller Foundation continued to provide financial backing to missionaries from the 1950s well into the 1980s. Archival collections of the RF—and of the Ford Foundation, whose materials proved valuable for my research as well—contain materials related to numerous grants that both foundations issued to religious organizations that performed development work. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) and Agricultural Missions, Inc.—the organization of John Reisner, who had first forged connections between Rockefeller philanthropies and agricultural missionaries back in 1925—emerge as two frequent recipients of grants from these foundations.

The NCRLC was founded by U.S. Catholic leaders in the early 1920s to address the growing trend of rural depopulation, by strengthening agriculture and rural



communities. During the 1950s, its director, Luigi Ligutti, shifted the organization in an international direction, as he urged the U.S. Catholic Church to work toward solving the problems of poverty and hunger in the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> To that end, Ligutti organized a series of international conferences on rural life that took place throughout the 1950s, hosted primarily in Latin America. The conferences included talks by agricultural technicians and experts on rural issues, meetings of commissions charged with working toward solutions of rural problems in specific regions, and publications prepared with recommendations based on the proceedings of the conferences. Several of the NCRLC's international conferences received funding from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, whose officials considered them in line with their own efforts to foster rural development around the world.

In discussions regarding a joint grant proposal submitted by the NCRLC and AMI in 1953, Raymond Moyer of the Ford Foundation noted that U.S. foreign aid programs were “increasingly emphasiz[ing] the great importance of local understanding”—a strength “possessed to a unique degree by missionaries who have lived and worked under local conditions for a long time.” Missionaries’ unmatched expertise in this regard, Moyer suggested, could be a great benefit to government-run programs and other agencies involved in development work.<sup>21</sup> Moyer’s observation speaks to the importance that development-oriented philanthropies like Ford and the RF placed on missionaries’ work, and a reason behind their continued willingness to fund missionary projects. From the 1920s forward, agricultural missionaries received considerable assistance from such philanthropies, without which the scope and impact of their work would certainly have been diminished.

But the line of aid moved in the other direction as well. Missionaries compensated their grantors in the form of visible support for their institutions. In the wake of “considerable public criticism” of the Ford Foundation in the early 1950s, for instance, Luigi Ligutti offered to write an editorial in the Catholic press “crediting” the Foundation for its backing of his own activities and those of other Catholic organizations.<sup>22</sup> Missionaries also lent their own agricultural knowledge to Rockefeller developmentalists, who in some cases had helped train them. Harold

Voth, the Mennonite missionary who had worked with MAP in Mexico, corresponded regularly with MAP scientists to inform them of the results of experimental plantings he did with seeds obtained from MAP and other sources.<sup>23</sup> And at the request of Horace Holmes, a specialist at the ADC, John Reisner—who still kept in contact with Rockefeller-affiliated organizations in the 1960s, decades after his first interactions with the IEB—shared his expertise with ADC executives as they drew up training manuals for agricultural development workers.<sup>24</sup>

Missionaries remain key actors in the history of international development, and yet their role in pioneering agricultural improvement programs has been largely overlooked by scholars. This is the story that I seek to tell in my dissertation—a story for which the RAC’s archival collections form a crucial source basis. Rockefeller-funded agencies provided agricultural missionaries with financial assistance as well as technical advice and training, and likewise, missionaries advised and even at times led the efforts of Rockefeller-affiliated development organizations. Both of these groups have comprised a consistent thread in each other’s histories—and in the larger history of international development.

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Reisner to Dean A.R. Mann, June 3, 1925, Records of the International Education Board (IEB), Series 1, Subseries 2, Box 27, Folder 386, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, New York; Harry Houser Love and John Henry Reisner, *The Cornell-Nanking Story: The First International Technical Cooperation Program in Agriculture by Cornell University* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2012). The University of Nanking was run by missionaries from the United States, and Reisner served as Dean of its College of Agriculture and Forestry from approximately 1917 to 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturists on Chinese Soil, 1898-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 145-160; Love and Reisner, *The Cornell-Nanking Story*, 2, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Stross, 123-133.

<sup>4</sup> J.B. “Dad” Griffing to Nelson Rockefeller, March 26, 1956, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers (NAR), Record Group 4, Series H, Box 9, Folder 99, RAC; John B. Griffing, “Air View of the Forest,” NAR, Record Group 4, Series B, Box 1, Folder 7A.

<sup>5</sup> Lee A. Daniels, “Arthur Mosher, 82, International Expert on Agricultural Aid,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1992; Arthur W. Packard to Thomas Jesse Jones, December 30, 1938, Davison Fund, Inc. Records (DF), Series 2, Box 8, Folder 50, RAC.

<sup>6</sup> Mosher’s predecessor at the ADC, J. Lossing Buck, had also been an agricultural missionary (at the University of Nanking’s College of Agriculture and Forestry).

<sup>7</sup> Agricultural Missions, Inc. was initially founded as the Agricultural Missions Foundation and later changed its name.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Reisner to Arthur W. Packard, October 3, 1934, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Record Group 2, Series N, Box 47, Folder 368, RAC; Agricultural Missions, Inc., Project Appropriation Report for John D. Rockefeller, Jr., September 10, 1943, OMR, Record Group 2,

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Series N, Box 47, Folder 368; Thomas Jesse Jones to Arthur W. Packard, July 17, 1941, DF, Series 2, Box 8, Folder 50.

<sup>9</sup> I.W. Moomaw to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., December 6, 1946, OMR, Record Group 2, Series N, Box 47, Folder 368.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jesse Jones to Arthur W. Packard, March 5, 1934, OMR, Record Group 2, Series N, Box 47, Folder 368; Arthur W. Packard, memo to John D. Rockefeller III, March 22, 1950, OMR, Record Group 2, Series N, Box 47, Folder 369.

<sup>11</sup> Travel Grant for Albert B. Coit, Jr., June 8, 1953, Rockefeller Foundation Records (RF), Record Group 1.1, Series 305D, Box 8, Folder 59, RAC; J.G. Harrar to L.M. Roberts, May 28, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.1, Series 305D, Box 8, Folder 59; A.B. Coit Jr. to J.G. Harrar, June 16, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.1, Series 305D, Box 8, Folder 59.

<sup>12</sup> J.G. Harrar and Kenneth Wernimont, interviews, May 8, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 177; J.G. Harrar to Frank F. Baker, May 29, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 177; Flora M. Rhind to Frank F. Baker, June 19, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 177.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Wernimont to L.M. Roberts, November 25, 1953, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 177.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Wheelock, undated letter, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 177.

<sup>15</sup> Harrar to Baker, May 29, 1953.

<sup>16</sup> John J. McKelvey, Jr. to John H. Wheelock, August 10, 1955, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 178; Flora M. Rhind to Lawrence Calhoun, October 31, 1955, RF, Record Group 1.2, Series 305D, Box 19, Folder 178.

<sup>17</sup> Harrar and Wernimont, interviews, May 8, 1953.

<sup>18</sup> ACAR Relatório 1957/58, Rockefeller Family Public Relations Department Papers (RFPRD), Series 1, Box 4, Folder 38, RAC.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Harold W. Voth to Norman E. Borlaug, April 19, 1956, RF, Record Group 6.13, Series 1, Box 35, Folder 394.

<sup>20</sup> David S. Bovée, *The Church & the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923-2007* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 176-178.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond T. Moyer, "Memorandum on the Proposed Grant to Agricultural Missions, Inc., and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference," June 8, 1953, Ford Foundation Records (FF), Grants L-N, National Catholic Rural Life Conference (FA732E), Microform Reel 0650, Grant 54-174, RAC.

<sup>22</sup> L.G. Ligutti to Kenneth Iverson, July 23, 1953, FF, Grants L-N, National Catholic Rural Life Conference (FA732E), Microform Reel 0650, Grant 54-174.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Harold W. Voth to Norman E. Borlaug, July 28, 1956, RF, Record Group 6.13, Series 1.1, Box 35, Folder 394.

<sup>24</sup> Horace C. Holmes to John Reisner, January 15, 1964, Agricultural Development Council Records (ADC), Record Group 1, Series 4, Box 5, Folder 42, RAC.