

Article

Making Sense of the Missionary Life of Adele Fielde, Woman of Religious Belief, Science, and Activism

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Abstract: This paper proposes a new narrative of the life of nineteenth-century American Baptist missionary, activist, and scientist Adele Fielde. In the common historical narrative, her separation from the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU) after over twenty years of mission service in Siam and China marks her shift towards careers devoid of religious beliefs, in suffrage, activism, and science. Rather than perpetuating this deconversion narrative, I propose that she demonstrated continuity in her beliefs and interests, exercised through diverse careers and starting as a missionary. By looking to biographical accounts by her friends, colleagues, and later historians alongside her writing and life, I highlight her unorthodox Christian beliefs that motivated not only her missionary life but her later careers in science and activism in the US. Reframing Fielde's life in this way offers a more realistic model of the intertwined beliefs and motivations of female missionaries, activists, and scientists in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: women; history of mission; American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU); Bible women; women in science; lived religion



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1. Introduction

The primary biographical sources on Adele Fielde remember her as almost two distinct women: Adele Fielde, the American Baptist Missionary and Adele Fielde, the secular Scientist, Political Activist, and Humanitarian (Stevens 1918; Warren 2002; Hoyt 1982; Nie 2018). In most accounts, her story is told chronologically, highlighting how she progresses from a repressive, patriarchal missionary environment to the secularly enlightened, liberative fields of science and social politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her missionary life is described as restrictive, clashing with her theology and curbing her intellect and interests. Knowing her acceptance and wider acclaim in the later part of her life makes the earlier missionary phase puzzling to her colleagues and challenging for her biographers to interpret. Why would such a woman of unorthodox beliefs and active intellect be a Baptist missionary? The dissonance results in her divided narrative in science and activist histories and an incomplete memory in mission history.

In this article, I argue that contrary to the prevailing deconversion narratives of her life, Adele Fielde maintained continuity with her unorthodox religious beliefs and active intellect and interests throughout her life, starting as a missionary and later contributing to her careers in science and activism. Though her title and affiliations changed once she separated from the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU), she remained committed to the same values fusing unorthodox Christian beliefs with scientific interpretation and activist causes. Interpreting Adele Fielde based on her motivations rather than roles offers a more robust understanding of why she engaged in missions and how the experience informed her later careers. She stands as a model of the intertwined religious and secular lives of women who are missionaries, scientists and activists. Rather than a solely sacrosanct experience, religion functions through lived experience that rarely maintains such tidy divisions between sacred and secular.

2. The Existing Narrative

The most extensive narratives of Adele Fielde's life are written by those connected and interested in her post-mission life working in activism and science in America. Helen Norton Stevens' *Memorial Biography of Adele M. Fields, Humanitarian* was published two years after Fielde's death by the Fielde Memorial Committee, an organization of Fielde's "personal friends, chosen companions and admirers," mostly in Seattle (7). They declared her greatest renown was her writing, and her fame would be attached to her scientific discoveries (250). Her second biography by Leonard Warren—*Adele Marion Fielde: Feminist, Social Activist, Scientist*—is part of a series on Women in Science published almost a century later. In the preface, Warren noted how little has been written on Fielde and that he discovered her tangentially through researching the life of another nineteenth-century American scientist. Both sources survey Fielde's entire life, but as their titles conclude, define her legacy by her roles in the later part of her life. Religious biographers interested in mission history, in comparison, seem to have forgotten Fielde. The ABMU condensed her 23 years of contribution to a couple pages largely defining her as "The Mother of Bible Training Schools" for women in China (Sanderson 1925; Merriam 1900). More recent narratives claim her story as an example of the contentious navigation of gender norms and male dominance in Protestant missions (Hoyt 1982; Nie 2018). Her memory in these narratives is much more limited in scope, leaving her fullest legacy as recorded in biographies to those outside of mission history.

In the first part of these prevailing narratives, Adele Fielde was a missionary. For 23 years, she served with the ABMU in Siam and South China until 1889, when she cut off all ties to the ABMU—including the title and duties of "returned missionary"—and moved back to the US. From the beginning of her missionary career, her experience was marked by conflict with the ABMU leadership and fellow missionaries leading to questions of her suitability as a Baptist missionary. Her un-ladylike diversions, notably dancing, playing cards, and befriending expats beyond Baptist missionary circles drew the most criticism from her colleagues in Siam. As a result, she was subjected to a formal inquiry by ABMU leadership in 1872, where she skillfully defended her lifestyle and secured vindication to return to a new posting in South China. The ABMU inquiry committee found her "a true woman though with convictions and tastes of her own differing in some respects from those cherished by others" (Hoyt 1982, p. 324). Her perseverance, self-advocacy, and cultivation of supporters secured her a continued place as a missionary.

Her work training Chinese Bible women—local women evangelists—stands as the enduring positive result of her mission efforts. Despite the ABMU's disagreements with Fielde about doctrine and appropriate female missionary lifestyle, they continued to claim her as their missionary because she was an engaging writer and relatedly, an effective fundraiser, and her Bible women fit the emerging, explicitly gendered missiology that connected women around the world (Robert 1997, pp. 130–37). In missionary memory, this is the bulk of her existence, and her contribution and skills are tied to her work with Bible women (Merriam 1900, p. 164). Her other projects, such as an extensive dictionary of the local Swatow dialect, training in obstetrics, and scientific research were acknowledged with annoyance or disinterest by most of her missionary colleagues who prioritized evangelism and Bible teaching. Rather than correct her eccentricities and mediate conflicts, the ABMU allowed her to function independently in Swatow without daily oversight from male leadership. Officially, her separation from the ABMU in 1889 was due to her failing health which had been deteriorating since her return from her furlough in 1872. Her later colleagues supposed that the more important reason for her separation, however, was a demonstration of her changing religious opinion and "conscientious scruples" that could no longer justify being affiliated with the rigid Baptist creed of the ABMU (Stevens 1918, p. 181).

In most accounts, this act of divorce ushered her into the second half of her life as a scientist and political activist. Her later colleagues praised these next thirty years as the true fit for Adele. Conversely, this section of her life is omitted in missionary memory.

In the prevailing narrative, this phase starts with her fully embracing her autonomy and indulging the interests that were stifled in her missionary life. She spent two years travelling through India and Europe sightseeing, studying, and writing. Among her diversions, she attended public lectures and galleries in France, took language and civics classes in Germany and Switzerland, and started using her writing for political causes reporting on Jewish persecution in Russia for the *New York Times*.

Once back in the US and settling into life in New York, Fielde was shocked by widespread political illiteracy, especially among women. Thus, in 1894 along with six women, she founded the League for Political Education of New York City. Their objective, Fielde reported to the *New York World*, was “to arouse among women practical interest in public affairs, in civic institutions and in good government by means of a broad and systematic study of the same” (Stevens 1918, p. 240). She became active in the suffrage movement in New York and then in Washington state, along with other activist causes such as prohibition, child welfare, and opposing government corruption and human trafficking.

In addition to her activist career, she maintained an engaged presence in the scientific community. Charles Darwin’s work on evolution, which her missionary colleagues found to be an alarming, anti-Christian distraction, fascinated her. At the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, she studied with the finest American biologists of the time, focusing on the study of ants (Warren 2002, p. 137). As an established scientist, she was elected as a Fellow of the American Society for the Advancement of Science, an honor only bestowed on 73 women in its 70-year history. Until the end of her life, she pursued what she loved the most: researching, writing, and teaching, writing to a friend shortly before her death that she was just as happy in the last quarter century of her life as she was in the first quarter (Stevens 1918, p. 386). Her life is remembered as a triumph to those who knew her primarily as a scientist and activist and her missionary phase is portrayed as an odd fit for such a remarkable woman.

3. An Alternative Narrative

The existing narrative of Adele Fielde’s life narrowly understands her motivations to engage in missions and inaccurately assumes there was no overlap in her beliefs and experiences between careers. Piety was not the sole motivator for missions, nor did it require untransferable skills to secular careers. Rather, Adele Fielde treated missions as the first of many contexts to exercise her beliefs, stretch her intellect, and spur her interests.

3.1. A Promoter of Human Dignity, Truth, and Happiness

The beliefs that characterized Fielde’s missionary life were the promotion of human dignity, truth, and happiness. These values naturally fit in her later activism in the US, exemplified in her 1918 biography memorializing her as a “humanitarian” (Stevens 1918). For Fielde, these values were first introduced through religious channels. Her parents were Baptists, but she embraced her own Universalist affiliation, with their approval. Her father modeled “deeply rooted convictions, great self-reliance and broad charity” and her mother, an appetite for learning and merriment, “quiet self-possession”, and “graceful manners” (Stevens 1918, pp. 24–25). Like her parents, her childhood village of South Rutland, New York was open to more ecumenical mixing exemplified in Baptist, Methodist, and Universalist congregations sharing the same building, where she was likely exposed to diverse doctrine and a less divisive approach to religion (Stevens 1918, p. 27).

Fielde’s initial motivation for becoming a missionary was her own happiness: she was following the pursuits of her Baptist fiancé who was to be a ABMU missionary in Siam. In alignment with the civilizing missions of nineteenth-century Protestantism, she was to accompany him as a dutiful wife and teacher to improve the lives of the “heathen.” Though she held religious beliefs, they had not compelled her into missionary service prior to her engagement; even her baptism was a result of Baptist requirements for the mission field (Hoyt 1982, p. 315). Her hopes of becoming a wife and mother, however, never came to pass as her fiancé died before she arrived in Siam to join him. Still, she decided to continue

on, “engaged in the work for which he freely gave his life,” certain she had “something to do” in Siam (Fielde quoted in Warren 2002, p. 23). Her choice is puzzling and hints at other motives she might have seen in the life of a missionary.

She described herself to a friend later in life as “utterly unorthodox” by refusing any church creed, yet she could have described herself in those terms from her youth (Stevens 1918, p. 187). She did not become increasingly secular or unorthodox as a result of her increasing scientific study later, as the prevailing narrative suggests. Fielde herself declared that “on the whole my religious vision was greatly extended by my scientific studies” (Stevens 1918, p. 12). Rather, her early disagreements with missionary colleagues most explicitly reveal that she always held unorthodox religious beliefs but learned to adapt them according to her context while always in service of her highest values of human dignity, truth, and happiness.

She wrote to the AMBU leadership that “I desire to be good, but I do not wish to be Pious” and bluntly stated that Baptist prohibitions of innocent diversions, such as dancing, were wrong; such restrictions were “Puritanism, not religion,” she wrote (Warren 2002, pp. 39–40). She remained, instead, committed to Jesus, the “Man of Nazareth” who was the fullest, truest model of how to live and treat others. She viewed “honest truth-seekers,” no matter what their religion, to be in fellowship with Jesus “because they were like Him without knowing it” (Stevens 1918, p. 276). Because her belief of truth was tied to a person rather than doctrine, she willingly used any doctrine or beliefs that aligned with him, including Baptist orthodox beliefs. Connected to the model of Jesus was her belief in God, the Creator. She viewed humanity as a sacred creation made in God’s image who deserved to be treated with dignity. Her later colleagues recorded how human dignity was a source of genuine pride for Adele and “the dominant moral influence upon her whole career” (Stevens 1918, p. 60). In her view, actions spoke louder than words so the only true culture and way to measure others was their consideration for others (Stevens 1918, p. 170). She regarded charity and happiness as inseparable since hearts of kind, loving thoughts towards all would translate into happy lives expressed towards the lives of others (Hoyt 1982, p. 321).

At her memorial service, Fielde’s missionary colleague William K. McKibben helped articulate how her unique religious beliefs functioned in her missionary context (Stevens 1918, pp. 282–83). She was a thinker who found goodness not in traditions but in truth. Her nature compelled intense inquiry and testing of theology, biblical interpretations, and church procedures that so often, McKibben observed, “when examined under the white light of truth are found to be accretions upon Christianity, and not an original part.” Unlike many Christians, she energetically tackled questions and came to greater “intensity of conviction” and “more radical conclusions” than considered by others. He admired her loyalty to “old faith lived on even when its externalities were rejected.” She “was too wise to say she knew, but was also wise and strong enough to say she believed, and she trusted.”

3.2. *An Advocate for Women*

Consideration of others and promoting their dignity and happiness directly informed Fielde’s earliest advocacy efforts on behalf of missionary and Chinese women. Two of her lasting battles with the mission board surrounded living arrangements and equal compensation for herself as a single woman missionary. She gained pioneering advocacy experience as the first and only single ABMU woman missionary in Siam, arriving six years before the ABMU approved sending single women through the newly formed Women’s Missionary Society auxiliary (Warren 2002, p. 29; Mild 1993; Hoyt 1982, p. 322). Fielde discovered in her earliest years on the mission field that single women were a subject of concern, treated as less than the ideal of woman missionaries as wives and mothers and expected to conform to familial roles as much as possible. This included living with other missionaries. The home life of missionaries was considered a prime mode of evangelism. To Fielde, however, her home could serve evangelistic purposes by being a place for rest and creativity. Her own living space afforded her time and space to think, read, write, and

correspond with friends which were considered primarily male pursuits (Warren 2002, p. 36). She connected a home with individual happiness which confounded the prevailing beliefs about gender roles and the Christian home.

Radical for missionary thinking of the time, she believed personal happiness—rather than self-denial and exhaustive effort—contributed to long-term effectiveness of missionaries. She criticized the existing model that “deliberately asked that a few young men come out and kill themselves by low diet and overwork, that the home churches might thus have their blunted emotions roused about the work of missions” (Warren 2002, p. 77). Her priorities of happiness and dignity also contributed to her advocacy for equal compensation. Her salary in her previous teaching career led her to believe that “the laborer is worthy of his hire,” yet on the mission field, compensation for work was controlled by the ABMU according to sex and economical standard of living (Stevens 1918, p. 34). Women missionaries’ salaries were half the amount of men’s and significantly less than other jobs in the US, despite requiring more hours (Nie 2018, p. 44). Fielde found the sexist and expected frugal lifestyle of a missionary to be unacceptable and unhealthy. She expressed her concern to her ABMU superior that “missionaries show neither manful nor womanly respect for themselves nor just regard for others” by such a lifestyle (Nie 2018, p. 45).

Her ethic of dignity also shaped her mission to Chinese women. In alignment with Protestant missiology of the day, she viewed missions to “heathen” women as dually addressing their spiritual needs and social issues. Missions to women by women was especially vital because men did not have the same access as women to women and households—who were assumed to shape the religious life of a community. Fielde skillfully harnessed these American sentiments to advocate for missions to Chinese women, while following her ethic of dignity to understand their real need. In her popular book *Pagoda Shadows*, dedicated to American women, she explained her approach to helping Chinese women. “Not till we comprehend their mode of thought, understand their peculiar temptations, gauge the pressure of their surroundings upon them, and apprehend their actual sorrows and sins, can we guide, console, or strengthen them. We must know just where the wound is if we would apply aright the balm” (Fielde 1886, p. 28).

Through her detailed observations of Chinese life and testimonies of Bible women, Fielde grew to understand the wounds of Chinese women and shaped her ministry accordingly. Her accounts in *Pagoda Shadows* and *Baptist Missionary Magazine* highlighted the “evils” of foot binding, slavery, opium, repressive marriage and inheritance practices, and false wisdom of spirit mediums (Fielde 1880, 1875, 1877, 1886). To counter those evils, Fielde trained Chinese women to know and teach the Bible, especially the life of Jesus, without teaching them English or other domestic skills commonly taught to women. Just as Jesus called unlearned disciples and gave them “the kind of education they needed for their work,” Fielde determined that Bible-women were “to have that sort of education which fits her for her place” which entailed using their native language to communicate “truth” of “a sole and true God,” “the uselessness of idols,” and “removing the fear and dread of demons from ignorant and superstitious minds” (Fielde 1878, p. 400).

According to Fielde, Jesus offered the solution to women’s earthly struggles because he gave a woman “security in her rights as a human being without regard to her personal power to maintain them” (Fielde 1886, p. 139). Fielde believed that Jesus was uniquely appealing to women because “in this world the benefits of His salvation are experienced more fully by woman, who, where brute force dominates, is always in unjust subjection” (Fielde 1886, p. 138). According to the Chinese Bible women recorded in *Pagoda Shadows*, the benefits of His salvation included freedom from abusive or costly spirits, a reason to live and reject suicide, models for better treatment of daughters, and a refuge from domestic violence and family rejection. The Bible women training appeared to be meeting the professed needs of Chinese women. Earlier in her career, she elevated Chinese women’s religious power aided by the Bible; later, she asserted American women’s political power through voting rights. The issues and methods changed but her promotion of the dignity

and well-being of women remained steadfast, though undeniably marked by colonial attitudes distinguishing the needs and rights of foreign missionaries from local women.

3.3. *A Public Figure and Influential Authority*

The life of a single woman missionary also afforded opportunities for a woman like Fielde to exercise authority and live as a public figure. Her later work in politics especially benefited from her missionary experience in writing, fundraising, networking, and mobilizing for a cause. In addition to training Bible women, her role required effectively communicating the life she lived in China to an American audience. Like all missionaries, she needed to cultivate investment in missions through missionary magazines and speaking engagements, which she excelled in as a prolific and witty writer and engaging public speaker. The ABMU recognized her talent and sent her on grueling tours during furloughs. Her high demand, for example, assigned her to a five-month, 150 lecture circuit around the US in 1883 (Warren 2002, p. 83). One of her earliest Baptist supporters, Mrs. Cauldwell, became Fielde's lifelong champion and later, business partner, starting a lecture circuit that funded Fielde's successful post-missions careers in the US for 13 years (Stevens 1918, p. 233). They borrowed the missionary model, substituting private drawing rooms for churches and charging admission instead of requesting donations for Fielde's lectures on Chinese civilization and related topics. Her many years as a missionary gave her credibility to speak authoritatively as an Asian scholar to a variety of American audiences without indication that she found the content of messages at odds with the other.

Her methods of communicating the missionary task utilized religious and scientific strategies from the beginning, melding observation and statistics with biblical mandates. Rather than rejoice over single conversions like other missionaries' accounts, she exposed the massive scale and shortcomings of their endeavor: seeking to reach 4 million people in China and Siam with only 200 missionaries (Warren 2002, pp. 34–35). She was willing to continue on in the momentous challenge in obedience to Jesus' command to "go and teach," in faith that he did not send "His servants on useless errands" (Warren 2002, p. 35). She used her missionary platform to articulate a problem and propose a solution: recruit more missionaries and train local people, like Bible women, to be evangelists. Her approach was not always welcome by missionary colleagues embarrassed at her blunt exposure of their ineffectiveness according to convert counting, but her frank appraisal drew in eager missionary recruits and continued funding for the ABMU.

She maneuvered the power structures to achieve her goals and challenge authority, experience that proved useful in later political and social advocacy. She fought most of her battles through letters and maintained an active correspondence with a variety of allies within and outside the ABMU. By cultivating a relationship with Josiah Warren, for example, the Corresponding Secretary for the ABMU Executive Committee in Boston, she gained closer ties to the Committee and circumvented the local authority of the lead Siam missionary, William Dean, who was one of her earliest critics. She also established relationships with missionaries of other denominations and expats such as the American Consul (Warren 2002, p. 43). These diverse and powerful allies were critical to refute the early accusations Fielde faced from male ABMU colleagues who disagreed with her way of being a missionary. Perhaps her success in defending herself early on in her missionary career boosted her confidence in facing opposition with strategic alliances and persuasive writing. As she continued to struggle with the male leadership about her lifestyle and vocal opinions on mission methods, she learned to express herself "clearly, firmly, and politely, the embodiment of reason, rarely rising to passionate polemic" that might discredit her advocacy as a woman (Warren 2002, p. 36). Her later work in suffrage and civic education likewise taught her that women faced unique challenges in participating in and challenging male-created systems.

Foreign missions offered a rare opportunity for missionary women like Fielde to exercise authority, often over other women. Like many other missionary women, Fielde struggled under male authority that restricted her work as a woman while simultaneously

exercising restrictive authority over other foreign missionary and local Chinese women. Her transfer to Swatow to begin her “special work” of the Bible women mitigated her conflict with ABMU leadership; the transfer is described as “a kind of banishment to neutralize a troublemaker” (Warren 2002, p. 44). She was the senior woman missionary and in her new domain in Swatow, she grew to resent interference from other missionary women, arguing with the ABMU and the women they sent to assist her (Hoyt 1982, p. 331). She preferred to spend her time with her Chinese Bible women. The Bible women called her “The Love Woman” and she spoke of them with affection, citing “the wrinkled faces of the dear Chinese women” as the only compelling reason to continue in missions and turn down other esteemed job offers—such as the presidency of Vassar College—during her 1883–1885 furlough (Stevens 1918, pp. 10, 171). While their relationships appeared affectionate, she wielded tremendous authority over their training and lives. There is no indication that she encouraged or taught Bible women the same self-advocacy skills towards other missionaries she cultivated as a fellow missionary. Fielde’s blind spot in this matter is glaring and points to the unequal power dynamics foreign missionary women harnessed in their treatment of local women. Therefore, while she might be someone we think of as “ahead of her time,” she was still influenced by and participated in that Western empiricism or colonial mindset.

4. Conclusions

Adele Fielde lived many lives. Side-by-side, her variety of careers is puzzling. She did not fit the rigid models of piously motivated missionary nor of secular scientist or activist, yet she chose to adopt and adapt those vocations. Her nonconformity invited diverse interpretations. To some, she was an inspiration and delight. Her later colleagues in the US esteemed her as a “truly exceptional woman,” “a great character, strong, wise, courageous, progressive,” an unusually “balanced human being” (Stevens 1918, pp. 9, 46, 48). In many ways, it seemed her role as scientist and activist afforded her the greatest freedom to exercise her intellect and pursue interests surrounded by supportive colleagues. Yet, for 23 years as a missionary, she submitted herself to a context of conflict where she consistently clashed with sexism, rigid belief systems, and differing values. Most of her missionary colleagues viewed her as dangerous and her independence threatened their mission work “like a wheel out of gear,” as her ABMU missionary colleague Sylvester B. Partridge described (Warren 2002, p. 39). She did have the choice, however, to avoid the struggle and simply move on to more accepting or prestigious careers much earlier than she did. Before she even officially started in her first posting in Siam, she had the opportunity to leave the missionary life. With each letter of objection to her unorthodox beliefs from colleagues or disparaging comment about her behavior from male superiors, she could have resigned. Clearly, missionary life offered Adele Fielde compelling opportunities beyond the normally assumed pious conviction. Her intertwined motives and adaptive outlook translated into a full life consistently marked by her unorthodox beliefs and interests.

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