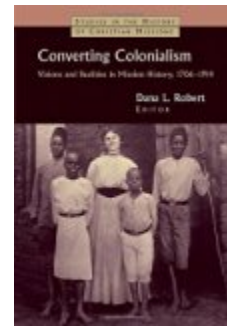


Dana Lee Robert, ed. *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914*. Studies in the History of Christian Missions Series. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008. x + 304 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-1763-1.

Reviewed by Markku Hokkanen (University of Jyväskylä)

Published on H-SAfrica (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Lindsay F. Braun



Converting Colonialism or Colonizing the Mission?

The relationship between Christian missions and Western colonialism has been a divisive topic for scholars since the 1960s. Put bluntly, the main question has been the extent Western missionaries in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere could be called “imperialists” or “colonialists”? The influential work of Jean and John Comaroff, particularly *Of Revelation and Revolution*, volumes 1 and 2 (1991, 1997), has provoked stimulating discussion of this issue. Unfortunately, this debate has too often been reduced to the all too familiar “heroes or villains” dichotomy.

In this light, Dana Lee Robert’s anthology is a welcome collection of carefully researched and well-argued case studies which explore different aspects of the complex relationships between missions and colonialism. The volume includes contributions relating to Africa, India, and China, along with more general accounts of British and American thought and practice. Robert additionally highlights the important links between the various studies in her invaluable introduction.

Andrew Porter and C. Peter Williams, well-known scholars of British mission history, both provide solid contributions. Porter skillfully dissects the complex and fluid evangelical missionary perceptions of Islam in the wider context of an expanding British Empire during the nineteenth century. Williams provides a fascinating account of the fate of Henry Venn’s vision of a self-governing indigenous church within the Church Mis-

sionary Society in the late nineteenth century.

Daniel Jeyaraj contributes a detailed and convincing account of the way in which mission reports from Tranquebar influenced Protestant mission circles and eighteenth-century intellectuals. However, the impact of these mission reports on general public opinion is far more difficult to assess, and in my mind Jeyaraj may have overemphasized their importance. The *Halle Reports* and the book by Conrad Kleinknecht published in 1749 certainly contain interesting and new perceptions of South Indian people and cultures, but how many readers did they have and how influential were they? I doubt that these publications could have had a “profound impact” on eighteenth-century European public opinion beyond the small circles of intellectuals and mission supporters (p. 41).

East and South Africa are excellently represented in the collection by two balanced and perceptive essays by Roy Bridges and Richard Elphick. Bridges analyzes the relationship between increasing British interest in East Africa and missionary exploration in the region. Geography and geographical societies provided common ground for explorers, scientists, politicians, businessmen, and missionaries. Based on a careful reading of British sources, Bridges’s account of British missionary involvement in the “unofficial empire” of the 1870s and 1880s provides many valuable insights (p. 44). He argues, generally convincingly, that during these decades the British

missionaries “tried to create an East Africa in the British mould without colonial rule” (p. 58). However, a reference to the Scottish missions in Malawi in the late 1870s and early 1880s (when attempts to create a true mission colony with judicial authority resulted in the infamous “Blantyre Scandal”) would have provided an interesting case in which the lines between official and unofficial empire were particularly blurred.

Elphick presents an excellent analysis of evangelical missions and race relations in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century South Africa. In it, he considers both black and white Christian critics of Anglo-Saxon missions at the turn of the century. White Protestants sympathetic to the Boer republics and independent African Christians agreed that the logic of Anglo-Saxon missions “tended toward the equalization of black and white” (p. 127). While black critics accused the Anglo-Saxons of betraying their principles, white critics (including Afrikaner minister J. D. du Toit) disputed the principles of Anglo-Saxons (particularly those of the Methodists), which du Toit saw as false and anti-Calvinist. Does this mean that British missionaries were, in principle, advocates of racial equality, however much they failed to live up to their principles in practice? Elphick presents a balanced view: the missionaries could have been “advocates of white rule, critics of African culture ... and still have been engaged in an enterprise whose deep logic favoured equalization of races” (p. 128). Although it becomes clear that the Anglo-Saxon missions provided more secondary education and ordained more

black clergy than other missions, British missionaries remained uneasy and evasive about the issue of black franchise both because they wished to ensure that they were not perceived as subversive and because many of them believed that Africans were not worthy of full citizenship. Elphick carefully illustrates the tensions and contradictions within the evangelical missions, and raises new important questions for further research in his conclusion.

Although the editor is undoubtedly right when she asserts “experiences were far more diverse than the theories about them,” the anthology as a whole perhaps fails to fully engage with theoretical approaches to colonialism and missions (p. 20). Some chapters might have benefited from, for example, engagement with the Comaroffs’ volume 2, or with such scholars as Valentin Mudimbe (*The Invention of Africa* [1988]) and Johannes Fabian (*Time and the Work of Anthropology* [1991]), who have discussed missionary language in important ways. Of course, it is always easy to criticize any work for what it is not, or to suggest what more could have been added.

This book is a brilliant collection of quality case studies, indispensable for all scholars with an interest in missions and colonialism. It will not, of course, end the debate over the relationships between the two, but the essays provide deeper analysis, new insights, and more balanced perspectives of what is, undeniably, a complex and important history. In particular, it is to be hoped that this book will inspire further similar studies within and beyond English-speaking missions and the British Empire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Markku Hokkanen. Review of Robert, Dana Lee, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25147>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.