

**CHRISTIAN MISSION, CAPITALISM AND EMPIRE: THE STATE OF THE DEBATE**

Outline

I owe a double apology to this audience. First you have often heard me say in seminars that I abominate literature reviews – yet this morning I am doing a literature review. Second I can never get it into my head that when this institution calls itself a Centre of Mission Studies it means by 'mission' something very up to date, holistic and non-imperialist. and by 'studies' such useful things as media and development and certainly not history. I keep on thinking that students at OCMS ought to be aware that old-fashioned Mission Studies – histories of Protestant missions – are enjoying a great boom. So because this is such a shifting audience I keep on giving lectures with titles like 'Magnetic Missionaries' in order to explain why missionaries are still, or even more, interesting to historians and anthropologists.

My excuse this time is the publication of Andrew Porter's book, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion 1700 – 1914*, which I have just reviewed for The International History Review. As you'll see if you look at the reading list I have handed out, Porter has been working away at this topic in edited collections, chapters and now this book.

In his splendid study of Christianity and the Yoruba, about which I have spoken here before, John Peel remarks that there are three main ways of writing about missions, or using missionary archives. One is to write a denominational history. Another is to explore the relationship of Christian mission to the more or less simultaneous spread of imperialism and capitalism. The third, which John Peel and I attempt, is to situate the impact of Christianity within the total flow of the religious history of an African, or other indigenous, people. It is clear that Andrew Porter is attempting the second of these. Particular denominations do not interest him; neither does internal African or Indian religious history. His topic, as his titles make clear, is mission and empire.

However, there are two different ways of posing this question about mission and empire. On is a cultural way. Isobel Hofmeyr, in her July 2004 review article, remarks 'the shifting historiographical tides in the study of missions and African Christianity more generally. Over the last decade, these tides have been rising'. One reason for the increased interest of anthropologists and historians, Hofmeyr says, is that 'the emphasis of understanding colonialism has shifted from questions of political economy to include themes of culture and identity.' A whole series of recent writers, most conspicuously John and Jean Comaroff, have 'underlined the centrality of mission studies to any serious engagement with colonial rule'. Reformed rituals, altered perceptions, changing material habits – all the results of Christian conversion – become crucial to discussions of the colonial project. Jean and John Comaroff put this strikingly when they argue that the London Missionary Society among the Tswana created through cultural interventions in the nineteenth century 'the state of colonialism' which preceded 'the colonial state'.

The other way of posing the question about mission and empire is a political one. Were missionaries direct allies of the colonial state? Did they lobby for the establishment of colonial rule and deceive Africans and Indians into making treaties and granting concessions? Did they represent capitalist interests, take capitalist attitudes, and engaged in capitalist projects? Did they repress African opposition to colonialism? Did they carry out tasks delegated to them by the colonial state? These are the questions with which Porter is concerned. In this book he takes us only up to 1914 – you could argue, of course, that many things were different after that date.

As the title of his book suggests, Porter makes a defence of the missionaries. *Religion versus Empire* is a strong statement. It suggests not only that missionaries were not usually conscious agents of colonialism but also that they were usually against it. By the end of the book the argument is a little modified. The Conclusion is called 'The anti-imperialism of Protestant Missions', but the final paragraph of the book runs:

Although missions could not avoid empire, they were determined to put it in its place. The extent of their determination, the universal sweep of their theology, the global extent of their contacts and their consciousness, deserve more acknowledgement than they have generally received. Missions also operated in a world where many different pressures – political, theological, economic and intellectual – combined to distance them from empire no less than to draw them together. These pressures too deserve serious recognition. Aggressive crusading was far from representing the only evangelical approach to the missionary task. The variety and nuance of missionary standpoints, their detachment from empire and the measure of anti-imperialism, all associated with Britain's Christian missionary enterprise, have an important place in the history both of empire and of missions. p.330

How are these conclusions reached? The mission outreach, argues Porter, was not simultaneous with the imperial. It had different motivations and a different periodisation. British Protestant missionaries often established themselves in areas which never, or only much later, became part of the British empire. Porter's

argument here is much helped by the global scale of his survey. This is not a book only about Africa but also about Asia, the Americas and the Pacific. There is a good deal about the missionary interest in China, for example, where in fact most missionaries actually managed to avoid empire. In other places British Protestant missionaries found themselves under imperial authority but not British imperial authority. In such situations they often denounced colonialism, as the Baptist missionaries in the Congo Free State did. Or they became the educators and protectors of anti-colonial activists – the Methodist missions in Mozambique are a good example of this.

Even in the British empire, though not directly critical of government in the same way, missionaries often felt themselves alienated and on the edges of the imperial state. In India or in northern Nigeria missionaries used to talk bitterly about the great British Islamic empire; their own activities were constrained and sometimes repressed. Porter quotes the missionary William McCullough writing in 1893 about his experience in India:

It goes against the grain of an orthodox Imperialist like me to do anything in the way of complaining to Parliament about the Indian Government [but] from European officials in India I have never received anything better than bare civility and very often worse ... I am a missionary first and an imperialist afterwards and I did not come out here to watch my work being stopped by 'judicial calmness'.

In no British colony was any Christian denomination the state church, as Anglicanism was in England itself. (In fact in a brilliant recent book Susan Thornes has shown how non-conformist churches, excluded from the establishment in England, made use of their mission record to present themselves as essential to national identity. 'The far away mission field was constantly recreated in the heart of Empire'.)

In colonial America, Porter shows, imperial authorities valued Protestant dissent which formed a bastion against French Catholic expansion – one Governor observed of Pennsylvania Germans dissenters that 'they fled from oppression, and having tasted the sweets of a British constitution, it does not seem probable to me that they will ever look back to their old masters.' No favouritism was shown to Anglicanism in the colonies. In the nineteenth century the Church of England did not even try to become the established imperial church. Its missionary societies, low and high, did not represent the Church as a whole. They were Anglican sects. One recent writer has gone so far as to suggest that the modern separation of church and state was pioneered in the mission field.

And if no missionary denomination became a colonial state church, Protestantism as a whole had much wider ambitions than merely to fit with empire. As Porter writes: 'In the divinely-driven world it was for the modern missionary to discern the means available for spreading true religion. In such a world national developments might have their place, empire might provide an arena for providential fireworks, but no necessary priority was to be attached to either. Empire in the form of British rule was never more than one among many such means to be employed or ignored as Providence thought fit ... Empire held limited potential when set within the global perspective of evangelical Christianity.'

So far as capitalism was concerned, Protestant missions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century came out of the rural continental pietistic tradition which was anti-urban and anti industrial. Even many Anglicans, appalled by their experiences in slum missions in Britain, were devoted to saving African Christians from the city experience. It was not the city but the village which was the Protestant missionary ideal. (The village usually had to be invented).

Porter shows that many evangelical missionaries believed that capitalism - 'civilisation and commerce' - did not necessarily advantage Christianity. Livingstone himself, who coined the slogan 'Christianity. Commerce and Civilisation', nevertheless noted that 'the nomadic life is very favourable to the spread of the Gospel, although it is opposed to the spread of civilisation'. Other evangelicals, believing that the last days were at hand, did not think that there was time to 'civilise' or to draw indigenous peoples into commerce and industry:

G.W.Brooke led a special Sudan Mission party supported by the CMS, propelled by an apocalyptic pre-millennial vision. 'I see no hope', he said in 1887, 'given in the Bible that wickedness in this world will be subdued by civilisation or preaching the Gospel – until the Messiah, the prince, comes. And to hasten that time is the function of foreign missions .... I should therefore be inclined to frame any missionary plans with a view to giving the simple gospel message to the greatest number possible of ignorant heathen in the shortest possible time.'

Porter is interested in what I have called the imperial political question rather than in the indigenous cultural one. But as I have shown, he is really interested in culture in a different sense – not in African or Indian cultures and their transformation, but in missionary cultures. Pietism, messianism, the Faith missions, Revivalism are all taken seriously in his book in a way which is unusual even in mission history.

There is nothing here about imperial culture, a topic which has recently been much written about. It is significant that David Cannadine, in his book, *Ornamentalism, How the British Saw Their Empire*

(London, Penguin, 2001) shows as little interest in missionary culture as Porter does in imperial. The two topics can obviously be totally disconnected. Cannadine writes about a British imperial aristocracy for whom Anglicanism was connected with Orders of Chivalry and who called St Paul's Cathedral 'the parish church of empire'. But in his index there is only one reference for 'mission' and that is to 'the mission of Empire'. Empire itself was a mission for romantic aristocrats – but one entirely different from the mission of Protestant evangelicals.

I am sure you will have been reacting against some of the missionary quotations I have been drawing from Porter's work Brooke's comment on the Sudan is full of the emphasis on wickedness and ignorance which we associate with Imperial racism. But it is important to realise that this is an evangelical emphasis rather than an Imperial one. It could be, and was, applied to the inhabitants of British slums as well as the inhabitants of African deserts.

But what about the state of the cultural colonial debate, largely directed of course to the work of the Comaroffs. They argue that missionaries prepared for empire by undermining indigenous cultural self-confidence. In Southern Africa, the Comaroffs say, Protestant missionaries generated new preferences – for literacy, clothing, square houses, villages, work discipline, etc, etc – which produced men prepared to work for colonial capitalism, women prepared to keep their homes, and a domestic market for industrial goods. A handful of missionaries, operating beyond the colonial border, among well-armed African societies and led by powerful chiefs – completely without political or military power – could nevertheless produce a 'state of colonialism'.

One of my own most brilliant doctoral students was Elizabeth Elbourne who wrote a huge thesis on the London Missionary Society among the Khoi pastoralists of southern Africa. She has now turned this into a prize winning book, *Blood Ground*, which has been hailed as the latest triumph of missionary historiography. *Blood Ground* is a must-read book but it also a very difficult book to extract any generalisations from. The whole point of it is to show how complicated everything was and how multiple the actors were. One generalisation that can be drawn from it is that on that bloody ground of the South African frontier one cannot really talk just about 'missionaries' and 'Africans' nor about a dialogue between them, as the Comaroffs do. Cultural agents and brokers were multiple.

More recently in her 'Word Made Flesh. Christianity, Modernity and Cultural Colonialism' Elbourne has directly confronted the Comaroffs. She summarises their argument:

The colonization of the Tswana began with the word ... the roots of colonization were in a set of knowledge claims and a set of hegemonic cultural discourses, which would bolster the later seizures of land and of labour.

The essential processes of colonial were 'material struggles over the remaking of everyday life'.

Then she bombards these propositions. The London Missionary Society among the Tswana was so weak. It was so variegated – LMS delegations included Africans, West Indians, Welsh. Even the Tswana were not simply 'the Tswana'; their 'tribes' were made up of many ethnicities; another African group, the Griqua, played a predominant role. So many different actors used all the available resources, among them Christianity. 'Christianity was so soon out of the hands of the missionaries and settlers who brought it'. And in any case even if one focusses on the missionaries themselves:

The earliest LMS agents in southern Africa were not particularly good or even very enthusiastic apostles of capitalist cultural practices.

They were themselves poor and socially unrespectable; many of them had African wives; they were messianic and pietistic. Some of them saw the Khoi as the oppressed chosen people and the Afrikaners as oppressive slave masters. They gave a powerful resistance ideology to the Khoi. And even later, says Elbourne, when LMS spokesmen did all they could to claim respectability and civilisation, 'it is not always wise to take missionaries at their word'.

In short, Elbourne is turning back the whole question of the relationship of missions and empire into what John Peel and I and Isobel Hofmeyr would think the most important of all questions – Christianity as part of the whole religious history of indigenous peoples. Porter allots one page to indigenous appropriations of Christianity, citing some articles of my own in a footnote. But their study is surely the best way of bringing together old-style mission history with what OCMS means by mission.

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