



Book Reviews

Ballard, Martin, *White Men's God: The Extraordinary Story of Missionaries in Africa*, Oxford, Greenwood World Publishing, 2008, 318 pp., 978 1 84645 032 7, \$49.95.

The study of Christianity in Africa is a growing field that has attracted scholars interested in topics as varied as Coptic Christianity in Ethiopia, AICs (African Independent/Initiated Churches) in Nigeria, and more recently, the proliferation of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and movements all over the African continent. In *White Men's God: The Extraordinary Story of Missionaries in Africa* (2008), Martin Ballard seeks to write what his editors describe as "the first general history of the modern missionary movement to Africa, set within the wider social and political context" (inner dust jacket), focusing in particular on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A tall order for any scholar, such a goal would seek to place this work alongside other well-received histories of the development of Christianity in Africa that also cover several centuries, such as that of Adrian Hastings (1979, 1994) or Elizabeth Isichei (1995).

Ballard writes in a largely accessible, narrative style that seeks to bring life to the historic documents on which he relies as his sources. He uses some primary sources, including published letters, diaries and biographies of different missionaries, as well as material collected from missionary archives in both the United States and Great Britain. He also utilizes many secondary sources such as published studies of particular countries and encounters, as well as texts that provide general histories of different regions. Unlike most historical texts, *White Men's God* is not replete with extensive footnotes and endnotes citing numerous sources. While this makes for easier reading, it also proves to be a problem for readers who seek more information about particular topics covered in the study, or want further biographical information about particular missionaries or missionary societies and influential colonial authorities and African leaders.

The book is divided into thirteen relatively short chapters, with each chapter addressing missionary activity in several African countries within the same time period. The first chapter lays out the historical origins and socio-political context that spurred the development of the modern missionary movement in Europe in the eighteenth century, highlighting the active involvement of missionaries in both pro- and anti-slavery movements and the impact of the religious Great Awakening. In the chapters that follow, Ballard examines the social positioning, actions and individual biographies of missionaries from a number of religious backgrounds (Baptists, Anglicans, Jesuits, Pietists, to name a few) in numerous African countries, from Algeria, Ethiopia and Kenya in the North and East, to Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia in the West, and on to D.R. Congo, Zimbabwe, and South Africa in the Central and Southern regions.

One of the major points that Ballard seems to be making with this work is that missionaries were involved in a large number of activities on the African continent outside of evangelizing and preaching. Throughout the book, the role of missionaries as explorers, traders, teachers, magistrates, politicians and soldiers complicates traditional understandings of the roles of "men and women of the cloth." Involvement in such activities also leads to the second point that Ballard convincingly demonstrates: missionaries, regardless of their intentions, were fallible beings. What emerges clearly from the text are the many failures and mistakes that missionaries made over and over again, from becoming involved in the slave trade themselves (17), to promoting racial discrimination in church leadership (56), to purposely deceiving local African leaders into signing over land and sovereignty to invading colonial powers (167). A recurring theme in the text is the collusion of European missionaries with colonial authorities, with numerous examples validating the words of nineteenth-century Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros: 'First they send the missionary, then the consul, then the soldier' (158). While there were some cases of missionaries who spoke out against injustices perpetrated against Africans in the name of European colonial expansion, the picture that Ballard largely paints is one of missionaries who, if not directly collaborating with colonial administrations, were at least indifferent to happenings outside of the realm of religion.

One of the overall contributions that Ballard makes is to show that, like colonialism, missionary work in Africa was a very uneven process. Some of the examples he uses are conflicts between missionaries (even to the point of violence), huge variances in rates of conversion, and the lack of unity among missionaries, both in their competing philosophies and plans of action for converting the African masses to Christianity. While this is not a completely unique contribution, the benefit of the comparative analysis that he employs across regions, countries, and time periods is that it shows how the same missionary society could have vastly different approaches and successes depending on the context. Ballard also illustrates that, for the most part, Christian missionaries were largely unsuccessful in converting large numbers of Africans before European powers began to explore, partition and eventually subjugate African populations and lands in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

While Ballard sets the bar high in trying to create a general history of European missionaries in Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the book as a whole misses its stated mark. Because there are so many areas, movements and events to cover, there are also many opportunities for error, such as attributing the actions of one pre-colonial Kongo King to another who emerged several decades later (ix) or making unverified generalizations in other places in the book. This is understandable because it is very difficult to be an expert on the entire African continent, but such mistakes make the reader question the veracity of the rest of the text. Another limitation of this study that undermines its goal is an overemphasis on British Protestant materials; missionary societies such as the London Missionary Society are overrepresented in the text, while Catholic missions in Lusophone or Francophone areas receive decidedly less attention. Associated with this is a privileging of the thoughts, actions and contributions of missionaries of European descent, while Christian missionaries of African descent (with the exception of Samuel Crowther) are largely ignored, although the source material exists. Moreover, the organization of the book, with the narrative moving quickly from place to place and from one era to another, makes the overall text disjointed.

Because this book lacks a glossary and the footnotes are not extensive, it is likely not for the lay reader unfamiliar with African and/or European religious history. Nonetheless, this text will prove a handy companion to Africanists and religious scholars who desire a general text that can be used to situate their own topics of study within contemporaneous periods with missionary activity taking place in other parts of the African continent.

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