

Policy and Politics of British Mission Organisations

Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*

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This is an ambitious book. Andrew Porter's sweeping history of British Protestant missions between 1700 and 1914 weaves together the vast scholarship and known history of mission policy while weighing in on the debate about the relationship between missions and empire. Those familiar with Porter's work will not find a new interpretation of mission history in this volume. However, because of the broad scope of information addressed, and in light of its discussion of "mission networks", this book should prove indispensable to those wanting a clear understanding of the policy and politics of British mission organisations before 1914.

The book is organised chronologically. Starting in the North American colonies in the 1700s, the chapters explain what mission organisations in Britain were thinking, how they were enacting their policy and what their relationship to British Christianity and British imperialism was. Within his narrative, Porter reminds us of the importance of theological ideas in the shaping of mission policy. He

argues that the relationship between missions and empire had moments of “entanglement” (p 1), but on the whole was “nuance[d]” (p 330) and ambiguous. The introduction and conclusion deal quickly with recent scholarship on missions and outline the main argument of the book. The focus throughout is on the making and enacting of policy, and not on how that policy was reshaped and used by indigenous populations.

Porter’s study, like his recent articles and chapters on missions, argues that imperialism was used “selectively” by mission policy-makers. Although previous works on missions, like Brian Stanley’s *Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1990), present a sound argument for the separation between mission and empire, Porter’s study delves deep into the mission archive to give the clearest pronouncements to date on this complex relationship.¹ Not all will agree with his conclusions, however, especially given the lack of attention Porter gives to the on-the-ground mission encounter. Less historiographically significant is the book’s argument that theology influenced mission policy. Andrew Walls,² Brian Stanley and even “non-devotional” historians like Paul Landau³ and Elizabeth Elbourne⁴ have argued that theology influenced mission policy and the way missions operated in the empire and amongst indigenous communities. Porter notes these contributions, but offers little to suggest how or where his interpretation of theological factors differs.

The most novel contribution of the study is Porter’s discussion of “mission networks.” In Chapter 5, Porter explains how William Ellis, Foreign Secretary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), and Rufus Anderson of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) corresponded throughout the 1820s and 1830s about the theory and practice of mission strategy. A few chapters later, Porter discusses Anderson again, this time noting his correspondence with Henry Venn (Secretary of the Church Missionary Society – CMS) about educating converts in India. Referring to these kinds of incidents, Porter argues that there existed “international mission networks” connecting

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1. B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Apollos, Leicester, 1990).
 2. A. Walls, *Missionary Movements in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996).
 3. P. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Heinmann, Portsmouth – NH, 1995).
 4. E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (McGill-Queen’s Press, Montreal, 2002).

British and American mission societies (p 117). Porter explains that “A prime object of these exchanges was not only to share information but also to maintain a common front” (p 121) and enable “mutual assistance with publications” (p 122). While “mission networks” are mentioned by some historians of missions, including Isabel Hofmeyr and Elizabeth Elbourne,⁵ there are few concrete instances in existing scholarship of how these networks functioned and what they meant. Revealing these networks is where Porter’s focus on the policy-side of mission history and his experience with mission archives, come to the fore. Porter uses letters, examples of cross-mission society marriages, and descriptions of inter-denominational mission conferences to explain how these networks were created and used. Breaking down the historiographical barriers that have separated the study of different mission societies, Porter’s discussion of mission networks reveals a kind of “cross-institutional” (p 135) history connecting, for example, the LMS and the ABCFM, and the CMS with both. Unfortunately indigenous people, especially indigenous missionaries working for the LMS, CMS and ABCFM, are not included in these discussions of networks. Many indigenous people, especially those corresponding with offices in Britain, were certainly aware that they were connected to a world-wide mission movement. Also lacking is a discussion of how these networks might have enabled a so-called “missionary discourse” to spread throughout the Protestant world. Porter states that the “ramifications” of these networks “are not easily recaptured” (p 135). I would argue that scholarship in favour of exposing a hegemonic civilising/mission discourse sees very clear outcomes of these global connections.⁶ Porter’s failure to engage the question of “ramifications” is unfortunate, but his cross-institutional approach and discussion of mission networks indeed offer a model for future studies.

Much of Porter’s book, especially his discussion of mission networks, is grounded in his impressive use of mission society archives. Because of this original research, the tensions between missionary in the field and mission society secretary are visible, as are the tensions between mission society and colonial and British governments. Although there

5. I. Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004); E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground*.

6. See, for example, J. & J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa I* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1991); L. de Kock, *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narratives and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1996).

are weaknesses in focusing almost exclusively on the “British” side of the archives, namely the near silence of indigenous perspectives, Porter’s is really a policy history and not about the on-the-ground interaction. Indigenous voices would have added to our understanding of the dynamics of the policy-creation, but are not essential to the coherence of this monograph. Porter’s selective use of secondary literature is more problematic. The work of area specialists, like that of Jean and John Comaroff,⁷ although noted in introduction and conclusion, are not dealt with in the body of the work. It would be interesting if Porter’s discussion of mission networks had reflected on the Comaroffs’ understanding of the relationship between missions, power and global imperialism.

More minor criticisms of the monograph are the exclusion of Canada, South America, and for the most part, New Zealand and Australia from the narrative. It is probably a result of the last thirty years of scholarship on missions that the Caribbean, Africa, India, and the Pacific receive the most attention in the book. Historians familiar with South Africa will note that Porter overlooks the bitter debate between William Govan and James Stewart regarding the purpose of the Lovedale Institute, although the way Porter places Lovedale’s establishment as part of a global trend in mission policy is refreshing. These kinds of omissions are inevitable in a study as ambitious in scope as this one.

This study will be a key text on the policy and politics of British Protestant mission societies for some time to come. Despite its privileging of British perspectives, the book’s integration of the vast archive of a number of different mission societies offers a useful overview of the fluctuating relationship between missions and empire and, more interestingly, the cross-institutional nature of this history. The bibliography and clear maps complement the text, offering a broad range of readers a valuable resource on British Protestant missions.

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7. J. & J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.