**The Communion of Women: missions and gender in colonial Africa and the British metropole**

ELIZABETH PREVOST, 2010

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Academics are not usually generous in their assessments of European missionary endeavour in Africa. *The Communion of Women* attempts to provide a fair hearing to the British women who worked in Madagascar and Uganda as professional Anglican missionaries between 1867 and 1930. As Prevost notes, recent scholarship on missionaries and the empire has been less concerned with whether missionaries paved the way for formal colonisation, and more with ‘how mission work contributed to a larger phenomenon of constructing power and scripting difference’ (p.5). Prevost is particularly concerned with the argument that, in staking out their own escape routes from Victorian ideology of the separate spheres, professional missionaries and imperial feminists relied upon the construction of a racialized female ‘other’ as an object of reform. Their own emancipation, in the words of Susan Thorpe, ‘actively depended on the subordination of their heathen sisters’ (cited on p. 8).

*The Communion of Women* seeks to qualify this argument in two ways. The first four chapters aim to reveal the contingency of evangelistic practice on the periphery, and to show how these contingencies could detach the missionary project from either former colonial policy or informal ideology, and give rise to negotiated collaborations between female missionaries and African evangelists. The second aim, pursued in chapters 5-7, is to demonstrate that missionary endeavour did not only ‘transplant metropolitan norms’ (p.7) of gender and authority but could also challenge or reconfigure them. Just as Africans could appropriate Christianity and use it to challenge authority, so too could women missionaries, whose experiences in Africa provided a platform from which to argue about the regeneration and globalisation of Anglicanism after the First World War. In other words, the book argues for the ‘mutually transformative potential of women’s evangelistic encounters’ (p.5) and indicates that the British end of these transformations requires further investigation.

The project hinges on a comparison of Uganda and Madagascar. In Uganda, the Church Mission Society was evangelical, emphasising literacy, bible reading and the individual’s relationship with God, whilst also benefitting from ‘the formalization of British rule in 1894 [which] bound together the interests of the colonial state, the Anglican church and the Ganda ruling elite’ (p. 19). In Madagascar, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was high church, placing greater emphasis on ritual and sacrament. Here, however, the ‘shift from the indigenous Merina state to French rule in 1895’ (p.19) was threatening to Anglican interests due to the secular ethos of the new colonial administration and its insistence on French language in schools. There were, nonetheless, important commonalities between the two mission fields: in neither case had the wives of male missionaries paved the way for ‘women’s work’; nor was the number of female recruits sufficient to permit extensive institutionalisation. This meant that ‘the gendered terms of women’s spiritual and professional authority had to be reinvented’ (p. 14) and the new crop of single professional missionary women enjoyed relatively high degrees of autonomy.

From the outset, Prevost issues a warning about the focus of her book: ‘this story is first and foremost about the impact of the mission encounter on British women, and about the role of missionaries and mission Christianity in forging a global feminist movement.’ (p. 22) Similarly, the conclusion sums up her investigation into ‘the contested and malleable character of Anglican mission Christianity and its multivalent impact on *British* women’s understandings of conversion, womanhood, and religious authority, in two localized African contexts and in the British metropole’ (p. 290, my emphasis). Readers who accept the book on these terms are likely to find it very satisfying, and Prevost certainly waves a flag for women missionaries on a hostile academic terrain.

Historians of Africa would doubtless agree that missionary endeavour was a mutually transformative encounter, but if we are really to understand this – or indeed the ‘feminized and collaborative framework of Christianity’ (back cover) that Prevost suggests was forged by female missionaries and converts - we need to see Uganda and Madagascar not just a backdrops for missionary endeavour, but also as specific contexts in which African women lived their lives. This becomes particularly pertinent in Prevost’s sections on polygamy and divorce, for these were major issues for missionaries of various denominations across sub-Saharan Africa, and one of the key elements of African life that missionaries sought to reform. In order to understand how exactly missionaries’ ideas were challenged by the specific circumstances of polygamy and divorce which they encountered in Uganda or Madagascar, then, we also need to understand the changing nature of African women’s livelihoods and the domestic economy.

Some of this level of detail comes through in *The Communion of Women*, particularly in chapter 4 on the Mothers’ Union in Uganda, which suggests how missionaries’ growing awareness of the specific obstacles to monogamy influenced their positions in the wider debate in the Anglican church. The sections on Madagascar, on the other hand, might have been enriched by further information about the structure of households, control of domestic resources, ownership of property, and whether the children of a marriage became part of their mother’s or father’s lineage. This would help readers to understand how and why particular types of African women came to be influential evangelists, and thus to evaluate Prevost’s argument that female missionaries did not simply construct a subjugated female ‘other’ as an object of reform but created new hybridized spaces of Christianity.

The *Communion of Women* clearly makes a very valuable contribution to the literature on missionary and imperial feminism, as well as on the changing role of the Anglican church in British society and politics. It is therefore to be hoped that it will provide a welcome stimulus to those who want to know more about gender history in African societies.