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# The communion of women. Missions and gender in colonial Africa and the British metropole

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***The communion of women. Missions and gender in colonial Africa and the British metropole.* By Elizabeth E. Prevost. Pp. xii+312 incl. 3 maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. £65. 978 0 19 957074 4**

Brian Stanley

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and foreign-based mission societies crowd out indigenous counterparts. And even though 'conversion' is constantly referred to, no attempt whatsoever is made to reflect, theoretically, on the kind of process that it might be. Contributors disagree over whether or not 'conversion' entails a rupture with the past; over all of this there also hovers an unwillingness to reflect on the category 'syncretism', much invoked, sometimes pejoratively (theologically), sometimes neutrally (phenomenologically). Without a proper introduction that would address such issues, and a conclusion that might tie them up, the editors have given us an unfinished book, despite its size. Lastly, a thousand-page book needs a better index, one with more than proper names; and while I would like to think that I know where Sulawesi is, a map would really help.

John Blanco's *Frontier constitutions* also talks about an archipelago, the Philippine islands; that, however, is where the similarities stop. Here, 'frontier' refers to an area of hybridity between cultures, Spanish and indigenous. As he constructs an argument about 'race,' 'identity' and the 'state' in the final century of Spain's colonial rule before its ouster in the Spanish-American War, Blanco explores the role of the Catholic Church in those processes by which such things were constituted (obscurely, such processes are called 'constitutions'). An engaging writer, Blanco displays a flair for theory; from Kant to Gramsci and with a deferential bow to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and even the Apostle Paul, he is a master of the deft segue. By the end, however, Blanco's interest in Christianity fades and he moves on to novels (José Rizal's masterpiece of 1886, *Noli me tangere*), art and other things of interest to scholars of comparative literature. On the way, Blanco reflects, episodically but helpfully, on 'Christianisation,' 'Hispanisation' and 'Philippinisation', processes comparable to ones that are found in *A history of Christianity in Indonesia* but skipped over lightly. Blanco's book, a quarter of the other in size, comes with a properly thematic index. Still, one goes to a book like this less for its ostensible subject matter, the Philippines, than for the theoretical model upon which it rests; for that reason, the over-weight, clunkier volume on Indonesia, chock full of unembellished historiographical standbys (names, dates, etc.), may prove the more useful resource in the long run.

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,  
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RICHARD FOX YOUNG

*The communion of women. Missions and gender in colonial Africa and the British metropole.*

By Elizabeth E. Prevost. Pp. xii + 312 incl. 3 maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. £65. 978 0 19 957074 4

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The conventional image of women missionaries in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras is of prim and proper ladies who attempted to disseminate highly conventional, not to say repressive, views of the role of women to non-western societies. Elizabeth Prevost's thoroughly researched study of Anglican women in Madagascar and Uganda supplies plentiful evidence that the reality was frequently at odds with this stereotype. The cultural encounters experienced by the women sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (in Madagascar) and by the Church Missionary

Society (in Uganda) led to profound questioning of restricted Victorian paradigms of femininity and to the forging of transracial bonds of Christian women's identity that ultimately created an international network of Christian sisterhood which may even be denominated, Prevost argues, as 'feminist' in character. The strengthening bonds of fellowship between missionary and African women threatened male hierarchy, both in indigenous society and within the missionary societies. They also had the potential, increasingly realised in the inter-war period, to subvert western preconceptions of racial superiority, and hence effect a widening dissociation between missions and the objectives of British imperial control. Crucial in this respect was the role of the Mothers' Union in propagating an ideal of Christian motherhood that identified the Christian family as the source, not simply of moral instruction, but also of impulses of social transformation and religious reform that had an effect far beyond the home itself. In both Madagascar and Uganda, branches of the Mothers' Union spread with rapidity from their inception in 1901 and 1903 respectively and soon passed into the hands of African women leaders. Mothers' Union meetings expanded the scope of women's participation in church life, enabling them to expound the Scriptures, lead in prayer and exercise a quasi-ministerial role, with the notable exception of sacramental functions, which remained closed to them. Exposure to such evidence of female leadership capacity made women missionaries and their supporters into some of the earliest advocates of women's ordination. In the final section of the book, Prevost turns her attention to an organisation which, though not a missionary body, was supported by leading women internationalists such as Maude Royden: after the passing of the Representation of the People Act of 1918, the League of the Church Militant (formerly the Church League for Women's Suffrage) redirected the energies of Anglican suffragists towards the goal of securing the ordination of women in the Church of England. Although this goal would not, of course, be reached until 1994, Prevost's fine book adds to the accumulating weight of evidence that the impact of the missionary movement on British society may have been scarcely less significant than its role in fashioning religious and social transformation in the non-European world. Whilst it must be said that only a minority of women missionaries consciously espoused feminist ideals, the broadening overseas experience afforded by the missionary movement was undoubtedly one of the solvents subverting the legacy of Victorian notions of the proper sphere of women.

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BRIAN STANLEY

*The problem of pleasure. Sport, recreation and the crisis of Victorian religion.* By Dominic Erdozain. (Studies in Modern British Religious History, 22.) Pp. x + 303 + 8 ills. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010. £60. 978 1 84383 528 8

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The illustrations skilfully selected by Dominic Erdozain to accompany his text exquisitely encapsulate the theme that he pursues with penetrating pungency. We move from fairs and cockpits and gin-shops to dancing-rooms and the state-of-the-art gymnasia available in Central London and Manchester, courtesy of the YMCA. However, this is far more than a narrative guide to shifting Victorian attractions. The author presents his book as an argument centred on soteriology. He sets out