H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth E. Prevost. *The Communion of Women: Missions and Gender in Colonial Africa and the British Metropole.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 312 S. $120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-957074-4.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Elbourne

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2014)

E. Prevost: The Communion of Women

Elizabeth Prevostâs *The Communion of Women: Missions and Gender in Colonial Africa and the British Metropole* makes an extended and convincing argument for the importance of what Prevost terms âmissionary feminismâ. The book examines gender and Anglican missions to women in Uganda and Madagascar, as well as Anglican womenâs organizations in Africa and womenâs activity in support of missions in Britain itself. Throughout the author asks what it means to look at missionary activity through a gendered lens, and what it means to take spirituality seriously as a subject for historical analysis. She claims that both African and British women were changed by their interactions. âThe mutually transformative potential of womenâs evangelistic encountersâ, she argues, âsuggests that the mission field should not be studied only as an extension of metropole to periphery, but rather as a site of religious, ideological, and cultural formationâ (p. 5). At the same time, she is also making some important arguments about feminism: she suggests that missionary women made a significant contribution to âfeminismâ and to thought about womenâs public roles, even as many of the British women she studies would not have identified with feminism *per se* and, in particular, came late to the suffrage campaign.

Ranging from the 1860s to the decade in the aftermath of the First World War during which many Victorian certainties were rethought, the book covers the years in which British Protestant missions became âfeminizedâ. Despite the often-unheralded centrality of missionary wives and of female converts to the Protestant missionary enterprise throughout the nineteenth century, it was in the late Victorian period that the last barriers fell and women themselves came to constitute the majority of professional missionaries. These women were particularly frequently single women, finding professional and leadership opportunities in the mission field that were often closed to them in Britain. Throughout this period, many Anglican women mobilized a language about female virtue and female solidarity in pursuit of global mission, drawing on the idea of a particular female nature shared across cultures. Despite the different ideological starting points of the diverse groups and individuals studied by Prevost, many ultimately argued for the importance of a greater role for women within church structures, and indeed often in the public sphere more broadly. In the process of trying to missionize African women, Prevost argues, British women sought to feminize Anglican Christianity and at times to challenge masculine power structures. Despite vastly uneven power structures, African women also shaped and contributed to global womenâs networks and the idea of transnational female solidarity.

The book is based on the records of four organizations with diverse perspectives: the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, a High Church missionary society; the more evangelical Church Missionary Society, which opened more doors to female professionals than the high Anglican society; the socially conservative Motherâs Union, founded in 1876, which grew to become one of the largest transnational Christian womenâs or-

ganizations in the world by the 1930s; and, finally, the more politically progressive League of the Church Militant, founded in 1909 as the Church League for Womenâs Suffrage and renamed in 1918. Prevost looks at the work of female missionaries, Christian schools for girls, and Christian womenâs organizations in the very different environments of Madagascar and Uganda, before returning to Britain to examine debates over womenâs ordination and the role of women in the church. The case studies of womenâs education and missions in Madagascar and Uganda, including analysis of debates around gender and Christianity, are detailed and important. The book makes it clear that the meaning and importance of Christian womenâs groups varied according to context. For example, if the Mothersâ Union was scarcely a bastion of feminist activism in Britain, where it drew in more conservative women, the group was used in Uganda by African women to make important claims for womenâs space and it was perceived as threatening to patriarchal hegemony. At the same time, the Mothersâ Unionâs culturally specific views of marriage and gender relations posed problems for African women, not least the MUâs strictures against polygamy and divorce. If in Uganda the Anglican church bolstered the political power of elites, in Madagascar Anglican schools and missions were threatened by the advent of a secularising French colonial regime. The scope and political weight of womenâs missions was therefore different in both places. In both contexts, however, British women tended to argue that they had a divine mission to extend a peculiarly female form of protection of other women.

Prevost is arguably an optimist. She acknowledges the mutual entwining of empire and mission Christianity. Nonetheless, she clearly thinks this is far from the most interesting thing about the history of womenâs missions in Africa. She modifies the traditional view of missions as an arm of imperialism in a couple of key ways. First of all, she argues that after World War One many women involved in Christian missions were critical of missionary imperialism and tried to decolonize mission Christianity. More generally, she suggests that at least some women were able to form cross-cultural links despite colonialism, particularly by the early twentieth century; spirituality and gender provided alternative terrains of encounter. Although Prevost is careful to hedge her arguments and to acknowledge the colonial context throughout her study, some may still find her too sanguine. Certainly she might reflect even further than she does on the limitations of sources, given that her source base comes mostly from letters written by white women in English. This is not at all to deny the great richness of the many materials cited by Prevost. Nonetheless it might be worth underscoring more thoroughly throughout that these are partisan and partial views and that one can imagine different perspectives emerging had it been possible to hear, say, the voices of local women who chose not to become involved in mission churches. At the same time, Prevost is very conscious of this issue. On the one hand she is interested in global womenâs movements, which used English as a lingua franca; on the other hand, her focus is explicitly largely on British women and on how they were changed by Africa, rather than vice versa. Less explicitly, I think it is also the case that Prevost is genuinely interested in Christian communities, both global and local, and how they worked. Prevost is thus very careful to limit the terms of her study. African historians may well want more on the wider African context. Nonetheless, Prevost offers valuable scholarship on British perceptions of very complex environments and their impact on the British themselves, and this is an important part of a history that can probably only fully be told through deploying multiple perspectives.

Finally, not the least of the strengths of *The Communion of Women* is the light it sheds on particular strands of British feminism (again to use a term that was anachronistic for the start of this study and not embraced by many of the women Prevost studies). Prevost frequently shows women using a language about common female characteristics, shared female virtue and the danger of patriarchal cruelty. This would be a central strand of British suffragist thinking, exemplified by the Pankhurst wing. The language is also part of a complicated feminist heritage, arguably influencing more recent debates about nature and nurture, and diverse splits within feminism, including the divisions between liberal, radical and socialist feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. Prevostâs âmissionary feminismâ might be antithetical to later socialist feminist and black feminist thought alike, given the stress of missionary women on the continuities of gender rather than the discontinuities of race and class. It is, however, important, and Prevost does a superb job here of excavating this unexpected and understudied aspect of the history of feminism.

This is a careful and illuminating study that is enormously respectful of the voices of women. Prevost delivers a humanist and thought-provoking reading of her subject that may not excite universal consent but will surely prove influential and demands to be taken seriously. The book is deeply researched and beautifully written, and constitutes an important contribution to the scholarly literature.

Citation: Elizabeth Elbourne. Review of Prevost, Elizabeth E., *The Communion of Women: Missions and Gender in Colonial Africa and the British Metropole.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41985