

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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### Book Review

Porter, Andrew N. *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2004, xviii + 362 pp.

Central to *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914* is Andrew Porter's argument that British Protestant missionaries' incentives for their work were based on reasons of faith and theological reasoning. He argues that contrary to popular belief, missionaries' imperial or colonial incentives were very low. He emphasizes this theme throughout the chapters, continuing the argument while introducing trade, politics, racism and theology. He uses a multitude of examples to support his argument, concluding that the intersection between missionaries, trade and imperial government were inevitable in the context of their relationships in the empire.

Andrew Porter, the author of this work, is a distinguished member of the department of History at King's College London. He held the Rhodes Chair of Imperial History in the University of London from 1993 to 2008. Porter's works have mainly revolved around the history of Britain's empire from the late 1700s, investigating the impact of British domestic concerns and party politics in the empire. *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914* is his most recent work and was published by Manchester University Press in 2004. This book has been awarded the Biennial Reese Memorial Prize in 2006 for its compilation of scholarly work in fields of Imperial and Commonwealth history. Porter continues to edit and contribute chapters to *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. III: The Nineteenth Century* and the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, among many others.

Porter presents his findings in a chronological approach. In each chapter, he introduces a new time period. He paints a clear picture of the start of the British Protestant missionary societies and their progress until the 1910s. The first two chapters of the book highlight the time period between 1701 and 1812. Porter describes British Protestants in this time period as having "developed a new confidence from the understanding that atonement for the wickedness of mankind

achieved by Christ's death was available to all individuals without exception through divine grace, rather than to an elect but unknown few."<sup>1</sup> This widespread belief and acceptance of this concept caused "an enormous sense of relief, joyful excitement and an impulsive wish to share one's faith, all of which contributed hugely to the emotional fervor of the century's religious revivals" and "encouraged missionary enterprise."<sup>2</sup>

Here, Porter begins his argument by recounting the religious fervor which brought about the missionary movement. Mission stations overseas in the Americas, Africa and the Caribbean are briefly mentioned to have started. The main focus of the first two chapters highlights the philosophy and thinking which spurred missionary movement. Porter lays the grounds that with the expansion of empire, "openings for missionaries were understood not only as a consequence of deepening awareness on the part of Christians but as providential opportunities brought into existence and made plain by God himself."<sup>3</sup> The motive and belief of the missionaries were made clear from the beginning, with their thinking "dominated by the concept of an all-embracing, superintending Providence."<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 3 introduces the intersection between missions, government and empire. It highlights the dependency missionary societies had on the imperial government. Porter uses India as an example. He describes that "there was no escaping the need to engage regularly with the imperial government and its officials if India was to become a serious field for British missionaries."<sup>5</sup> He explained that having the protection of the imperial government landed support and aid whenever needed, and this inevitably led to consequences.

Chapter 4 discusses the rise of education along with missionary movement and expansion. This started because missionary work took a turn to spreading the gospel in order to "improve[e] the conditions of ... non-European peoples."<sup>6</sup> As imperial expansion continued, trade between Europeans and natives increased, causing a need to teach the English language. Porter uses the mission society in Sierra Leone to depict how religious literature was taught in English in village schools, and "in this they were assisted by Freetown's developing position as the seat

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

government of the West African settlements.”<sup>7</sup> As the English language took precedence over vernacular languages, many Africans attended mission schools. From the missionaries’ perspective, this also enabled the equipment of natives to carry on the missionary work as “many British missionaries died of the weather” and were “looking for them ... to fill the needs in local churches and in schools.”<sup>8</sup>

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the idea of marriage between missionaries of different societies as ways to bridge relationships of various missionary societies. They also discuss the different controversial views missionaries had toward slavery. While some saw slavery to be detrimental, others reflected that the circumstances of slaves “contributed to their spiritual liberty and everlasting happiness.”<sup>9</sup> It was their exposure to the British government that allowed them to “become acquainted with the knowledge of Letters & the written word of God” and to “embrac[e] of the gospel as the only source of consolation.”<sup>10</sup>

From chapter 7 onwards, the waning numbers and progress of missionary societies from 1850 are investigated. The declining numbers of converts, the criticism toward excess spending in English education for the natives and the lack of support in England prompted a decrease in the movement. Porter incorporates mission work done in China and the missionaries’ approach to the rise of Islam in chapters 8 and 9. Missionaries also took a more proactive approach in becoming involved in commercial and official affairs. Many saw it as their responsibility to speak up “in cases where converts’ interest were at stake” and saw it as their ability and duty “to call on effective official intervention.”<sup>11</sup> The philosophy of eschatology, which is a field of study in theology about the end times of Christ’s second coming, was discussed in connection to the missionaries’ feelings of urgency in spreading the gospel with the rise of Islam.

Chapters 10 and 11 narrate the further decline of missionary activities outside of Europe, with Porter attributing the downfall to racism and racial categorization. Porter concludes with restating that feelings of anti-imperialism and motivations to detach from the empire played a role in affecting the missions’ activities.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 210,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

Examining Porter's work, one can see a rich usage of archival sources and primary documents. Embedded in each chapter are correspondences, letters, and personal biographies of missionaries. Porter's work covers diverse geographical grounds, spanning from Africa to Asia to the Caribbean and the Americas. He does, however, frequently provide examples from missionary societies in India and Sierra Leone. About 50 missionary societies were referred to in his work.

Porter's approach in presenting his argument is chronological. This is done to effectively portray the evolution in missionary societies' methods and philosophies over time. The frequent mentioning of the then current events, such as the abolition of slavery and the rise of Islam, provides a clear picture of the position and reasoning behind missionary actions. Hence, Porter uses a chronological approach in presenting his material and argument to align with the changes in current affairs, shedding light on the motive behind missionaries' work.

For example, the power and influence of the East India Company in the early 1800s is mentioned. Because of its dominance in India, missionaries had many interactions with imperial trade and government. Porter expanded on the East India Company's influence to contextualize the reason for their close relationship. As William Carey, a missionary, wrote, "our going into the interior depends as much upon the rule of government as before."<sup>13</sup> Missionaries needed the protection of imperial powers and had "their places of settlement ... firmly controlled."<sup>14</sup> By addressing the East India Company's rise of power along with the strong ideology of faith spurring the Christian missionary movement, Porter guides his readers to the conclusion that missionaries' affairs with the imperial forces were inevitable, yet that their zeal in spreading the Gospel still dominated.

Another approach Porter used was to compare and contrast regional missionary societies to provide a better understanding of missionaries' actions around the globe. When discussing the intersection between missionary efforts and trade, Porter referred to the work in India while describing the situation in Sierra Leone. Analyzing the construction of missionary schools that helped spread the English language through religious literature, Porter commented that "in India many evangelicals either ignored or were frankly skeptical about commercial prospects regarding missionary schools."<sup>15</sup> In Sierra Leone, "it was impossible to ignore the future of legitimate trade; they were convinced of its potential."<sup>16</sup> In this example, Porter explained the criticism many had

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

toward the construction of missionary schools in light of helping local trade and evangelical works. His method of comparing and contrasting highlights similar phenomena happening globally and supports his argument that British Protestant missionaries around the globe were prompted to the same actions, such as constructing schools, in order to achieve the same goal – to spread the gospel. This is just one of many examples throughout the book where Porter highlighted similar trends happening in different colonies. In doing so, he provides a holistic depiction of the expansion of the missionary effort, and supports his argument of missionaries' absence of imperial motives on a global scale, such as constructing mission schools to spread the Gospel instead of facilitating trade.

Looking at Porter's work from a transnational historian's point of view, there are three key themes worth noting. He uses transnational elements in his book to support his argument that missionaries' motives, even in their intersection with trade and empire, were first and foremost related to their faith and religious beliefs. Firstly, marriage between missionaries of different societies and countries fostered interconnected relationships between missionary societies around the world. In Porter's own words, "marriage played a role in integrating missions with each other as well as into society at large."<sup>17</sup> For example, Anne, the Scottish Robert Moffat's daughter, "leavened a Scottish London Missionary Society family by her subsequent marriage to Jean Fre-doux."<sup>18</sup> This marriage between Scottish and French missionaries further expanded when the British missionary David Livingstone also married one of Moffat's daughters, Mary, in 1845. Porter described that "these links were still vigorous in 1877 when Robert Moffat himself spent several weeks in Paris, speaking and meeting prominent French Protestants."<sup>19</sup> Although there were undoubtedly various self-contained missionary families, "genuinely international, cross-denominational ties between societies, among individuals and within families were plentiful."<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates how the "Protestant missionary world drew its energy from sources and continued to organize itself in ways that transcended narrowly national, domestic and imperial categories," allowing "British, American and continental European societies" to have interconnections.<sup>21</sup> Porter argues that this transnational connection allowed missionaries to pay less heed to boundaries imposed by the empire such as on differing national identities, but to focus on "possible duplication of each other's efforts and then expanding scope for evangelical co-operation."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, through marriage, many transnational connections were made, with missionaries from different countries and missionary societies becoming interconnected and sharing resources, allowing an expansion in missionary work in various regions.

Next, Porter discusses the concept of slavery. The transnational concept of slavery became extremely controversial for many missionaries in the colonies. Slavery is viewed as a transnational element because it brought together the intersection of missionaries, natives, plantation owners, the imperial government and the missionary supporters at home. As explored in Saunier's work, transnational history embodies not merely matters of geographical differences, but the interplay of peoples and cultures of diverse backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> In the Caribbean missionary societies, many missionaries were involved in unqualified abolitionist movements because of their frequent interactions with slaves.<sup>24</sup> When they saw that slaves were restricted from attending religious meetings, inflicted with "punishments ... for attending churches and chapels," "prohibitions on religious education and literacy" and enduring "ethical and sexual corruption on all sides," all of this impacted missionaries as their work advocated opposing concepts such as peace and devotion to church.<sup>25</sup> These frequent occurrences "progressively sapped the reservations of missionaries and their societies about their involvement in public affairs."<sup>26</sup> Things became so heated in many colonies that Jamaica, for instance, revised their slave code and attempted to attack missions. The persecution of missions caused much uproar and response in Britain among evangelical supporters. Therefore, due to differing views on slavery, heated exchanges between local authorities, plantation owners, natives, missionaries and supporters in Europe occurred. This brought about much communication and interaction of these different parties, creating many connections of people from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and geographical locations which transcended national borders.

Another example of Porter's application of transnational history is his use of cross-disciplinary materials. Not only did he discuss imperial and cultural history at length, he included theology and philosophy into his work in order to contextualize the missionary movement. He attributed the beginning of the overseas missionary movement in the 1700s to the belief of "an all-embracing, superintending Providence."<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of the 1800s, a new theological philosophy had emerged in Britain. Missionaries were "convinced ... that Christianity was uni-

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<sup>23</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Porter, *Religion versus Empire*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

versally acceptable and beneficial to any society that embraced it” and also drew on “the rationalist features of eighteenth-century thought in matters other than theology to support their continuing belief that Christianity could be introduced by universally applicable means,” in this case, meaning education and trade.<sup>28</sup> The constant weaving of the changing theological philosophies provided much context for the missionaries’ work. For example, this belief prompted the construction of missionary schools in many colonies. In Chapter 8, Porter describes how the British Protestant millennial thought in the first half of the century was rooted in enlightenment ideas of progress.<sup>29</sup> This spurred the belief that civilizing the natives was of imminent importance, and caused missionaries to build schools and implement the British ways of trade, governance and education, such as using English as the language of instruction in missionary schools. At the same time, the growing millennial enthusiasm and eschatological speculations of the period contributed to a renewed sense of vigor in the mission field.<sup>30</sup> With the belief in the imminent coming of Christ’s second return, the upheavals in China and the rise of Islam caused much excitement in England.<sup>31</sup> This theological belief pushed many missionaries to venture into territories in Africa where Islam was prevalent, hoping to convert Muslims into Christians. The emphasis of theology and philosophy as motivations for the missionaries’ work not only supported Porter’s argument that their incentives were far from imperial, but also drew material and evidence from multi-disciplinary sources, to construct his argument in a cross-disciplinary approach.

After reading Porter’s work, I admit that he carries an extremely convincing argument. His usage of diverse examples throughout decades spanning multiple geographical regions is sufficient evidence to convince his readers. However, I would ask the following questions. The start of the missionary movement also saw an explosion of British industry in the world market. This era saw a “wave of national dynamism and self-confident expansionism which came with the industrial revolution and the triumph of “progress.”<sup>32</sup> Porter did not mention a rising sense of nationalism among the British as the missionary movement expanded. This leaves the question of whether this height of nationalism could have been the driving factor for missionaries to spread their religion. As feelings of self-confidence were boosted, could this have also been a reason for the missionaries to see their religion as superior to those of other regions, hence feeling a need to establish foreign missions? Although Porter highlighted the theological beliefs that prompted

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>32</sup> A. Hamish Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, 1865-1945* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993), 2.

overseas expansion at the beginning of his work, he failed to acknowledge that there was also a similar rise in nationalism which may have permeated the workings and beliefs of mission societies. Without mentioning this, one wonders if such an important occurrence could have been left out on purpose.

I would also argue that Porter left out a key point which could have supported his argument – the element of consent. As British imperialists “ruled without the consent of their subjects” and “British investors had no interest in the consent of slaves and indentured servants,” the missionary movement differed greatly in this regard.<sup>33</sup> Protestant British missionaries were committed in principle to only evangelize and convert natives into Christians upon their consent. As the fundamental belief in Christianity lay in one’s voluntary acceptance of the faith, the missionary movement differed greatly from the imperialist movement in that missionaries were “committed to voluntary non-western leadership in the institutions that they built” as well.<sup>34</sup> This meant that natives could also host leadership positions in the church. Failing to mention this is not detrimental to his work, but Porter could have elaborated on this concept as the fundamental difference between the missionaries’ work and the imperial government’s.

Porter’s work is greatly renowned and praised in his field, and a scholar commented that Porter had set before himself a “monumental task” in compiling research for this book.<sup>35</sup> Many works involving Protestant missionary history have cited this book as a reference, crediting it as reliable and comprehensive. Most notably, scholars have praised Porter for being able to build a bridge between three distinct branches of history: British ecclesiastical history, imperial history and regional studies around the world. His use of archival sources has been broadly applauded.

*Religion versus Empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914* is a scholarly work extremely worth reading. Living in Hong Kong, there are many missionary schools established under British colonial rule. The ability to understand the motives behind constructing such schools, such as teaching English and incorporating religious studies into the curriculum, has been profound. Although Hong Kong was not explicitly mentioned in Porter’s work, the similar trend that exist throughout the various colonies shows the fundamental beliefs motivating such works in Hong Kong.

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<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Ken Farrimond, Review of *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*, by Andrew Porter, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 127-128.

For the reader, this book is comprehensive yet written too densely. The numerous examples interwoven between the chapters make it overwhelming at times. As the first half of the book is written in chronological order, the repetition of certain themes could create confusion as the same ideas change overtime, making the argument presented at the beginning of the book refutable with its change at the end. For a reader unfamiliar with British missionary history and a basic understanding of Christianity, it may be difficult to grasp the content fully. The theological terms used, such as eschatology, may create confusion among the readers. It is therefore advised to have a basic knowledge of these fields before investigating Porter's work in an in-depth manner.

Mentioning certain missionary societies, such as those in Sierra Leone and India, were very consistent, while others in China and the rest of Asia were not mentioned as much. China was mentioned briefly, but areas such as Australia and New Zealand were neglected although they also had British Protestant missionary societies established there. The complete leaving out of such geographical regions may cause some readers to wonder if missionary societies operated differently there because they were ignored in this work.

Nonetheless, one will thoroughly and surely have a very comprehensive picture of the British Protestant missionary movement from its past into the present after reading *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914*. The wealth of sources cited provides great insight into the twists and turns of this field. World historians will also find this book extremely interesting as it unfolds and presents elements of transnational history in different forms, such as through the lens of marriage, slavery and multi-disciplinary approach.

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