

Reeves-Ellington, Barbara; Kish Sklar, Kathryn; Shemo, Connie A.: *Competing Kingdoms. Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960*. Durham: Duke University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4650-0; 415 S.

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This nice collection of essays is part of a larger effort by scholars to internationalize the field of U.S. history, and reflects the effort by some of these scholars to make women's history a focal point. Originating in conversations at a conference on American women missionaries at the University of Oxford in 2006, the purpose of the volume is to analyze the impact of American protestant women missionaries in different regions of the world, from the beginning of the foreign mission movement in the U.S. in the 1810s through the mid-twentieth century.

Essays by twelve historians address specific missionary efforts in twelve different locales in the Middle East, Africa, Japan, China, India, and the U.S. These essays are grouped in three sets according to topics that focus, in turn, on women and womanhood, missions in cultural context, and the contributions of American protestant women to nationalism in the U.S. and abroad. The essays range widely in terms of their attention to different times and places, and in terms of the conclusions their authors reach about the impact of American protestant women missionaries in situations where they served. Introductory and concluding essays frame the volume and perform the important service of highlighting common themes.

Two of these themes are particularly worthy of notice not only with respect to the study of American protestant women missionaries, but also with respect to the volume's larger goals of furthering international studies of U.S. history and making women's history a focal point. First, as volume editors Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shemo point out in their Introduction, the effects of American missionary work were inconsistent for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of the discontinuities bet-

ween how missionaries were perceived by others and how missionaries perceived themselves, their religion, and the needs of other people. Conflicting and often shifting agendas separated American women missionaries from the people they targeted, who welcomed, tolerated, exploited, or rejected them, resulting in countless forms of misunderstanding. As the authors of numerous essays in this volume do an excellent job of showing, missionary achievements often fell far short of missionary objectives because the people and cultures that missionaries intended to change played large roles in determining the outcomes of missionary intervention. With unpredictable results, people perceived and responded to American protestant missionaries on their own cultural terms.

The second notable finding with respect to the volume as a whole, highlighted by Mary A. Renda in her concluding essay, is that American protestant missions were profoundly shaped by racist categories and racialized systems of social interaction. While more than a few women missionaries resisted racism as individuals, and trespassed racial boundaries in a spirit of equality as sisters in Christ, enveloping assumptions about white protestant supremacy thwarted or enfeebled these transgressive efforts that individual women missionaries made to transcend race. The symbolism of female purity and the ritual practices of protestant domesticity that virtually all missionaries espoused drew missionary women into profound complicity with the norms of the white protestant American culture and the tendencies of those norms to elevate white people above people of color.

The contributions this volume make to transnationalizing U.S. history and foregrounding interactions among women in that history are important, as are the contributions each of its twelve specifically-focused essays make to the study of American missions. Nevertheless, the volume's achievements on all three fronts are hampered by the weakness – and in many cases absence – of ideas or theories about what religion is, and how it operates a mediating force of both social cohesion and historical change. While religion does mean different things to different people, as the authors in this volume repeatedly demon-

trate, it would have been helpful if the authors had attended more to how religion derives from larger social forces and mediates those forces through symbols, stories, and ritualized activity. A more robust historical conceptualization of religion would have given more shape to the authors' assessments of the effects American missionary Christianity. Instead, the authors tend bring the religious beliefs and religious practices of their subjects along as unexamined baggage, without fully exploring how the theologies and practices to which missionaries were so devoted mediated larger cultural forces, and contributed to processes of change, resistance, and appropriation.

More robust analysis of religion and its social functions might have yielded additional insight into the larger effects of American protestant missionary women, and the social and intellectual forces they indirectly contributed to and, in some cases, helped set in motion. American missionaries between 1810 and 1960 may not have achieved either number of conversions or kinds of cultural transformations they hoped for, but the visibility of their religious embodiments, their religious relationships with men, with children, and with each other, their enormous religious investment in literacy and print media, and their religious ideas about subjective experience and objective truth spread far beyond anything they could see, much less control. Due to an undertheorizing of religious power and its contagious effects, the volume does not do justice to the transnational impact of American protestant women missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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