

Engel, Elisabeth: *Encountering Empire. African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900–1939*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2015. ISBN: 978-3-515-11117-1; 303 S.

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Recently, scholars from a broad range of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities have focused on the history of Christian missions. Thus, a broad range of questions have been posed dealing not only with the expansion of religion and transnational church building processes, but also various issues connected to the study of cultural encounters, transfers and interactions in (post-) colonial contexts more generally. Given that this body of work is characterized by a strong focus on the sources produced by white missionaries from Europe and the United States, the book by Elisabeth Engel, discussing the roles of Afro American missionaries and their church building activities between America and colonial Africa, presents an important contribution to this field. Focusing on the AME Church in the first half of the twentieth century, Engel highlights the ways in which colonization and mission activity have connected Africa and America examining what colonial Africa meant to black Christian communities and their emancipatory projects in the United States.

Founded in 1816, the AME Church became known as the first institution in the United States that was established, funded, managed and maintained exclusively by black people. Praised for its role in the struggle for black self-determination by leading Afro American intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, the AME Church so far has been largely regarded within the analytical framework of US history. Engel's book challenges this view. Pointing to the pivotal role and far-reaching effects of missionary work and experiences abroad, she argues that the history of the AME Church in the United States cannot be studied without including the activities of its missionaries in colonial Africa. By showing how AME people, texts, images and ideas circulated across the Atlantic, Engel argues on the contrary

that the transnational church connected black communities in Africa and America in myriad ways and thereby touched the lives of Africans and Afro Americans on both continents. According to her, Africa was present in AME religious circles in the United States and narratives about Africans inspired both missionary vocations and mission supported infrastructures in America. Engel introduces Afro American missionaries as significant actors to the debate on black transnationalism and Pan-Africanism, which has so far privileged other groups such as slaves, intellectuals or anti-colonialists.

Taking encounters as its main theme, „Encountering Empire“ is structured into three parts, each of which focuses on the contacts between Afro American missionaries and a particular group present in colonial Africa at that time. The first part of the book discusses the relationship between the AME Church and native African communities. Pointing to the AME Church's initial rejection to engage with African people due to perceptions of Africa as the „dark continent,“ Engel suggests that the writings of individual missionaries, who had nonetheless decided to venture into colonial Africa, gradually started to change this. Indeed, she suggests that popular travel writings by AME priests produced shifting perceptions of Africa among Afro American missionaries and their supporting groups in the United States. The second part of the book discusses the encounters and connections between AME missionaries and the larger Christian missionary movement and global ecumenicalism. Engel draws reinforced attention to the basic ambivalences marking this inner-Christian encounter which evolved from shared values of Christian unity and the everyday workings of race and social meanings of blackness in this enterprise. Engel shows that, despite racial overtones in global ecumenicalism, the AME Church promoted itself within the movement as a black church with a particular mission in the South Atlantic region. This became possible as its missionizing activities in Africa were not only recognized but also took place at a time when some ecumenists had already begun to reflect on their own imperial practices and an „ideal of a nonimperial Africa missionary“ started to

emerge (p. 189).

The third and last part of the book discusses the encounters between Afro American missionaries and colonized people in British South and West Africa. In this part, Engel particularly asks how colonial politics (and indirect rule) and social relations shaped the ways in which AME missionaries encountered and perceived both the colonizers and the colonized. As she shows, „nativity“ became a key issue in this context, as the concept structured the relationship between Afro American missionaries and Africans in many respects and influenced the power relations and division of labor within AME missionary communities (p. 195). As non-natives, Afro American missionaries enjoyed a different status, which shaped the hierarchies emerging within the religious communities in colonial settings in very basic terms. At the same time, however, both dealt with British colonialism and, ultimately, contacts between Afro American missionaries and native Africans also paved the way for powerful ideas of self-determination to spread in colonial Africa. With that, Engel successfully complicates a simple understanding of colonial oppression by tackling the issue of native/non-native relationships and addressing the question of the limits of colonial rule and power.

„Encountering Empire“ introduces a fascinating topic and presents an important contribution to the historiography on Christian missions, as it highlights the agency of Afro American actors in this enterprise. Moreover, the book introduces religious actors to the study of black transnationalism in the Atlantic region. Yet, despite the book’s main focus on missionaries, the question of the significance of religious beliefs and motivations remains largely open. Engel’s understanding of religion seems to relate first and foremost to collective issues such as church membership and institutional affiliation. In turn, little explanatory value is given to religious belief and experience as well as spiritually driven activities. In part, this may be due to the systematic structure of the book, which is organized around the various encountered groups rather than along unifying elements. Just as the role of religion remains partly open, the concept of encounter

could have been worked out more clearly and made explicit. It would be very interesting to learn more about the qualitative differences between the various types of encounters addressed in the book to get a clearer idea about the driving forces behind them: While Engel tackles several kinds of real and imagined encounters between Afro American Christians, Africans and white missionaries and draws on a wide range of theoretical work, she does not always fully explain how the individual encounters described (e.g. literary encounters in travel writing, face-to-face contacts or long-term interaction) feature in her larger story. In other words, „Encountering Empire“ at times presents a very detailed analysis of individual texts or source material without establishing clear references to the book’s principal theme. This, in turn, leads to a fragmented narrative in some places. Overall, however, Engel’s book convincingly emphasizes the importance and complexity of historical contacts between Afro American missionaries and colonial Africa and is therefore of significant interest to scholars interested in the history of Christian missions, black transnationalism and the relationship between America and colonial Africa more generally.

HistLit 2016-4-032 / Katharina Stornig über Engel, Elisabeth: *Encountering Empire. African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900–1939*. Stuttgart 2015, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.10.2016.