CHAPTER 1

The Indigenous Evangelist in History

The spread of Christianity to the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific since the sixteenth century is an accepted part of global history, but the processes by which it took hold among diverse peoples has yet to be clearly delineated. This book spotlights indigenous agents of religious conversion and cultural change during the initial phase of Christianization in societies where the religion was previously unknown or confined to a small segment of the population. By focusing on these particular indigenous evangelists in relation to different kinds of authority we hope to clarify crucial differences between the work of foreign missionaries and local agents.

Even though many historians have now moved away from the binaries of the them and us of colonial history, it is only when we consider the experiences of individuals who were subject to the pressures of change that we can re-imagine/reinterpret the broader processes to which they were exposed. The spread of Christianity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a particularly interesting aspect of the modernizing trends of this era because it was both part of and separate from colonization. In some regions Christianization ran ahead of colonization, in other parts, with or after the establishment of imperial overrule. Religious change could tear communities apart, or become a unifying force. It could facilitate relations with colonial regimes or alienate people from them. It was often a means to modernization as it introduced such skills as literacy to non-literate societies, or made literacy more generally available in hierarchical societies where the lower echelons were denied access to education. Indigenous peoples often saw missionaries, sometimes mistakenly, as a means of accessing resources and power in the world beyond the confines of their local societies. By following the lives of a few indigenous men and women who became Christians and then communicated their newly acquired deep faith to others through their evangelical activities we reveal the realities of their lives and the context in which those lives were lived.

Most scholars now acknowledge that the remarkable expansion of Christianity in Africa, Asia and the Pacific in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries owed far more to the efforts of indigenous preachers than to the foreign missionaries who loom so large in publications. As Adrian Hastings famously remarked of Africa, ‘The Christian advance was a black advance or it was nothing. It was one in which ever so many more people were involved
but very few of whom we can ever name...in general the black [evangelical] advance was far more low-key and often entirely unplanned or haphazard.\textsuperscript{1} In a similar vein, E.R. Simmons wrote that it was all too easy ‘to forget the part the Maoris played in their own conversion.’ The spectacular progress of Christianity in early nineteenth-century New Zealand was ‘primarily a Maori story not a European one.’\textsuperscript{2} Paul Landau takes that insight farther by speculating on the content of unobserved and unrecorded conversations about belief. ‘Teachers played a larger role than missionaries in many places, and Christianity developed in ways missionaries did not understand. Christians practised their faith alongside or even prior to the ministrations of Europeans.’\textsuperscript{3} Some of these local evangelists were the paid subordinate agents of missionary societies, but more often they were enthusiasts who spread the word on their own initiative.\textsuperscript{4} For this reason the lives and work of evangelists who were instrumental in the conversion of individuals to Christianity went largely undocumented for much of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century.

In more recent times social scientists, missiologists and historians have mined a richer vein of source materials to chronicle the work of indigenous evangelists and religious innovators in the twentieth century. As a result there is now a substantial body of literature devoted to these agents – too large to summarize here. A few milestones particularly relevant to the problem of religious authority deserve mention for marking out new directions in research. In 1948 a Swedish missionary bishop who had worked in South Africa, Bengt Sundkler, published \textit{Bantu Prophets in South Africa}, a study of churches that had sprung up under independent African preachers and prophets.\textsuperscript{5} He divided these into the categories of Ethiopian and Zionist. The Ethiopians derived mainly from black clergy who had split from European mission churches, because they felt undervalued or subject to racial discrimination. He applied the label Zionist to movements founded by charismatic individuals with a prophetic gift who departed on important points of doctrine from western Christian orthodoxy.

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  \item \textsuperscript{1} Adrian Hastings, \textit{The Church in Africa} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 436.
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