Travis Glasson


Recently new scholarship framing religion as an independent category of identity and human motivation has transformed the way we think about the spread of faith inside and outside the British Empire. Work by Andrew Porter, Jeffrey Cox, and Rowan Strong has shown the importance of the early eighteenth-century Anglican foundation of Protestant missions to later missionary expansion. This important book by Travis Glasson extends and deepens our understanding of the earliest English Protestant missionary society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). While the book is constructed largely as a study of the eighteenth-century Atlantic World, religion, race, and the institution of slavery, it also has broader importance to the study of the often surprisingly complex and multifaceted world of imperial and colonial society where religion functioned with a motivational power only misleadingly reduced to material or social forces. Nevertheless, Glasson also impressively demonstrates the degree to which economic, worldly realities forged the environment of empire and influenced religious beliefs, often in ways that contradicted and corroded Christian ethical precept, and in the eighteenth century, reinforced the emergence of new racial hierarchies while providing support for the institution of slavery.

From its 1701 founding the SPG channeled a strong reformist urge whose supporters conceived of the Church of England as a competitive global communion vying with Dissent and Roman Catholicism. Leading members in its first decades criticized the savageries of the slave trade and the practice of unduly brutal mastership. While laying the ground for a critique of the institution of slavery itself, such formulations fell short of abolitionist or emancipationist programs which only emerged later in the century. The commitment to critiquing the brutalities of slavery (often in the name of a rationalist natural theology that emphasized the unity of humanity) combined in the minds of many early supporters with commitment to reforming Christianized mastership. The missionary impulse—to Christianize both slave and indigenous peoples, as well as ministering to European colonial populations—grew here well before the rise of the Evangelical Revival.

Almost from its beginning, however, the SPG was also drawn into a troubled relationship with black chattel slavery, when it accepted Christopher Codrington’s 1710 bequest of his Barbados sugar plantation, with a commission to use the profits from its slave-worked cane fields to educate and Christianize...
colonial society. Such early entanglement with the institution of slavery had the effect of rapidly undermining earlier colonial reformist impulses.

In particular *Mastering Christianity* illustrates the extraordinarily corrosive influence the institution of slavery had on any attempt to spread a gospel of benevolence or inclusion. Consistently the SPG constructed Codrington as a demonstration project in the creation of benevolent mastership. Codrington, however, was seldom able to turn a profit, and the constant pressure to successfully manage the estate meant that the lukewarm attempts of the Society to enforce a kinder, gentler form of slavery achieved next to nothing. Glasson is scrupulous to record instances of missionary Anglican successes in the assembling of enslaved congregations and black baptisms. In this, his study provides insight into a category of black religious experience previously not much explored. Nevertheless, the overwhelming response of enslaved people to Anglicanism was rejection due to its associations with the power of masters. When black Protestant Christianity emerged it did so very largely in association with the enthusiasm and license delivered by the evangelical Great Awakening.

The futility of the SPG program remained unintelligible to the SPG Standing Committee and the majority of its supporters. In an old story of missionary evolution, the failure of the early mission led supporters to blame the objects of conversion, rather than the missionaries. Glasson takes seriously the varied and evolutionary nature of Anglican understandings of human difference tracing the path by which Anglican thinkers attempted to reconcile the diversity of human cultures and conditions with scripture, a process Colin Kidd has labeled “ethnic theology.” This process remained fluid early in the century, but influenced by the hardening of racial theory connected both to emerging proslavery propaganda and the SPG’s own experience of slaveholding, in the decades following the 1750s society members increasingly embraced racial narratives to understand the missionary encounter. One parallel result was waning support for the SPG’s own missionary agent, the African-born black Philip Quaqua at the Cape Colony, in his attempts to forge an African mission to Africans.

Glasson demonstrates, often in quite considerable detail, that a lively debate operated over slavery within the Church of England. Furthermore, his analysis offers an important revision to earlier interpretations that suggested the SPG’s missionary Anglicanism was a form of humanitarianism ultimately supportive of the abolitionist cause. In Glasson’s revision, however, the entanglement of SPG interests with slavery tended instead more strongly to reinforce slaveholding interests. There were, of course, committed abolitionist Anglicans, such as Granville Sharp and James Ramsay, who critiqued the Society’s position. However as a bastion of property and established interest the SPG and its