MISSIONS, NATIONALISM, AND THE END OF EMPIRE: REPORT ON A CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE CURRENTS IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY PROJECT, QUEENS' COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, UK, 6-9 SEPTEMBER 2000

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Christian missions in the twentieth century, despite their greatly extended geographical scope and numerical weight in comparison with the nineteenth century, have to date received only a fraction of the scholarly attention that has been lavished on the Victorian mission enterprise. Despite the volume of historical inquiry now being devoted to the process of decolonization, the role of churches and missions in assisting, retarding, or responding to that process is still largely unexplored. What is incontrovertible is that the face of Christianity across the globe is now strikingly different from what it was in 1914, 1945, or even in 1960. To what extent the end of the western colonial empires has been directly responsible for precipitating that transformation, and to what extent the transformation has overtaken and subverted the traditional agencies of Christian mission, rather than being in any primary sense initiated by them, were questions at the heart of this conference. The 115 delegates hailed from all over the globe and represented a variety of disciplines—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, missiologists and theologians. The seven main papers and 31 shorter communications delivered covered a great variety of topics and all continents, but four main themes may be isolated.

First, the complex fashion in which mission movements have juxtaposed elements of nationalism and universalism. Adrian Hastings’s opening lecture on ‘The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism within Twentieth-Century Missionary Christianity’ identified the Congregation of Propaganda Fide and the International Missionary Council, followed by the World Council of Churches, as the bodies primarily responsible...
for recalling Christians in the West from nationalist preoccupations to a truly 'Catholic' understanding of the universality of the Church. Yet Hastings warned against those forms of Christian universalism which claim to be pure and simple but are in fact highly particular 'nationalist' expressions of universalism. As the conference proceeded, the ambiguous relationship between ‘nationalism’ and ‘universalism’ became still more evident. Ogwu Kuku's paper on ‘Passive Revolution and its Saboteurs: African Christian Initiative in the Era of Decolonization’ identified a group of high school and university students of Nigeria in the years 1967-75 as an example of those who have 'sabotaged' missionary attempts to retain control of the post-colonial African church, but they did so by means of a charismatic search for powerful religiosity that drew heavily on American cultural patterns. The local and the universal, the national and the international, are more often to be found in ambiguous and subtle combination than in simple binary opposition. Other papers, such as Hartmut Lehmann’s survey of the career pathways taken by German missionaries after the disappearance of German colonies in World War I, pointed to a similar conclusion.

The conference was concerned, in the second place, with contrasting patterns of Christian identity. In Ghana, Zambia, Uganda, or Tanzania—though not, of course, in Islamic Sudan or northern Nigeria—there has generally been no difficulty about affirming both Christian and emerging ‘national’ identity. In countries of white settlement the tensions were for a time greater, as in Kenya in the era of Mau Mau. Yet even here Christian words, in the hands of Kikuyu readers or converts participating in often unofficial processes of biblical translation, as Derek Peterson emphasized, supplied a grammar for a new politics, enabling the young to challenge the wisdom of the old and wealthy and articulate anti-colonial sentiments through identification with the subjects of biblical narratives. Although in sub-Saharan Africa Christianity was the religion of the colonial power, there has been in Africa no lasting contradiction between Christian and national allegiance. In India and China, as papers by Judith Brown and Daniel Bays, and a forum on China made clear, such a ready identification between Christian profession and nationalist sympathies has not been possible. In India, partly because of the logic of the caste system and partly as a result of the British encouragement of separate religious electorates, political alignments became irretrievably entangled with questions of fundamental religious identity. As a result, nationalist opposition to Christian missions focused not, as in Africa, on questions of defining cultural boundaries or on challenging missionary control of the church, but on the central issue of religious conversion.