Sharkey, Heather J. (ed.)

*Cultural Conversions. Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013, 328 pp., 978 0 8156 3315 0, $39.95

This collection is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature that casts missionary history in the light of world history, treating missions as sites of cross-cultural interactions in which all parties are recognized as agents and causal relations are multidirectional. The central focus of these articles is often not the missionaries and the spread of Christianity, but rather the complex religious, social, and political situations that they provoke. Written largely in a postcolonial vein, these essays tend to highlight the contingency and unpredictability of missionary encounters; hence the theme of ‘unexpected consequences’. The editor explicitly prefers ‘unexpected’ to ‘unintended’, for in her view the latter term suggests the privileged perspective of the missionary going forth and spreading the word whereas the former implies that unlooked-for results are much more evenly distributed.

Like many similar volumes on this topic, this one is the product of a conference, which introduces an element of contingency into the structure of the book itself in that the choice of articles and their geographical range reflect the regional specializations of the editor/organizer and the participants. There are three articles each on the Middle East/North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa (including Ethiopia), and South Asia. Readers of this journal will note that five of the nine articles are set in the African continent. However, one will not find any treatment of these regions as interconnected, nor is there much by way of comparison among the individual studies. Instead, one has a series of very well-researched and well-written articles, worth reading by any student of cross-cultural religious interaction regardless of one’s own specialty. Moreover, the book makes a significant contribution by including the Arab world, a region usually neglected in collections of this kind, perhaps because of missionaries’ overall lack of success in converting Muslims. As the articles demonstrate, however, the unexpected consequences in the region were abundant and noteworthy.

There are certain thematic threads that run through the essays and that the introduction helps to elucidate. All will be familiar to scholars already working in the field. First, it is recognized that the category of missionary itself needs to be expanded beyond foreigners coming from Europe or North America to include the vastly more numerous native catechists, teachers, Bible women, and so on. Second, missionary interventions in a society were often divisive, exacerbating conflicts among existing groups, often abetted by Catholic-
Protestant rivalries. Third, on the vexing question of whether missionaries were accomplices to colonialist oppression and exploitation or enablers of empowerment and freedom, the editor sensibly answers, ‘All of the above’. The essays nevertheless tend to emphasize the latter function by focusing on missionaries as linguists, translators, and educators whose contributions to knowledge and society went well beyond attempts to convert people to Christianity. Yet in so doing they willy-nilly tended to promote a sense of national identity and resistance to foreign domination—a good example of unexpected consequences. Fourth, the essays point to the complexity of conversion itself, a process rather than a moment that sometimes occurs in the recesses of an individual’s mind, sometimes publicly and collectively, sometimes joyful, sometimes painful in its consequences, and inevitably intertwined and combined with one’s previous religious upbringing and tradition.

An elegant aspect of the volume is that each essay focuses on a different venue of missionary-indigenous interaction, collectively demonstrating the wide ripple effects of these encounters. David Gordon’s overview of competing Christianities in postindependence Zambia highlights the appeal of non-missionary variants for eliminating witchcraft (curiously, the case of Catholic Archbishop Milingo and his healing exorcisms is left out). Laura Robson looks at the small but influential Palestinian Episcopalian community and traces its vulnerability and decline in a time of political crisis, namely the anti-British uprising of 1936. Chandra Mallampalli focuses on an Indian court case involving the widow of a Protestant convert and whether her inheritance should have been subject to English or Hindu law. Stephen C. Berkwitz examines several examples of Buddhist literature in Sri Lanka over five centuries and the varied responses to missionary presence contained therein, showing how these contributed to the shaping of a national identity. Beth Baron vividly conveys a public scandal in Egypt in 1933 over the caning of a young Muslim girl in a Christian orphanage when she refused to participate in prayers; a member of the Muslim Brotherhood appears to have stoked the outrage. Paul S. Landau peers into the mind of English missionary Robert Moffat through his diaries and letters, showing how an emotional bonding experience with tribal chiefs on the remote South African highveld in 1827 led him to transform his theology and the language he used to translate the Bible. James De Lorenzi presents the biography of Gabra Mikä’él, a mission-educated Eritrean intellectual who worked as a colonial clerk and represented a distinct group of ‘colonial notables’ who managed to combine collaboration and patriotism. Mrinalini Sebastian tells two intertwined stories: one of how the linguistic work of Basel missionaries in south India contributed to the academic study of Indology in Germany; the other of how a young Brahmin convert, ostracized by his family,