Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (eds.)

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In a recent edited volume titled Mission Continues: Global Impulses for the 21st Century (2010), there was no mention of the phrase ‘reverse mission(s)’—even in a chapter titled ‘Crossing Boundaries’ (197). Carriers of religious ideals, messages, ideas, and material cultures across cultural and geographical frontiers are generally regarded as ‘missionaries’—those sent with a (religious) message. Since the work of Christian missionaries in previous centuries is still receiving renewed interest, contemporary changes and understandings of missionary activities are addressed by a wide range of scholars from diverse disciplines. Religion on the Move! is a fitting redress of conspicuous lapses in some missionary literature and scholarship in highlighting the concept of ‘reverse mission’, and providing recent empirical research that documents and indeed interrogates (chapters 2 and 10, for example) instances of the mobility of religions from one culture and context to another and some of the unresolved complexities involved in these processes. The central intention and importance of this book are stated clearly in the very first paragraph of the editors’ introduction: ‘In the post-imperial era, we must draw a different map showing the power of South Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Nigeria, with its arguably more democratized religious capital than monetary wealth’ (1). Yet it may be argued that this statement of intention harbours the spectacular weakness of this collection of essays. To claim that the contemporary moment in Africa or elsewhere in the non-Western world is a ‘post-imperial era’ is to ignore the insidious and ongoing ravages of neoimperialist, neocolonialist ethos. Further, to assume that ‘religious capital’—whatever this means in the context of these essays since it is not defined anywhere in the text—is more powerful than ‘monetary wealth’ loses sight of the capacity of financial wealth to transform into, and control or radically change and capture, religious capital.

Religion on the Move! emanated from a 2006 African Studies Association meeting in San Francisco as well as a subsequent panel meeting of a 2008 Association for the Sociology of Religion meeting held in Boston. Building on a previous edited volume (Adogame and Spickard 2010), Religion on the Move! takes the debates, manifestations, and theorisations of ‘reverse mission’ well beyond the boundaries of Christianity to encompass Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Further, it pushes the debates from ‘transnational’ religious dynamics of African churches that the 2010 volume was concerned with mapping out the contours of ‘new dynamics of religious expansion in a globalizing world’ (as captured in the sub-title of the book). As the diverse chapters in
the collection show, the dynamics of religious expansion are instantiated in reverse missions, syncretistic processes as well as indigenisation of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam in contexts and cultures different from their initial establishment. When religion is on the move, it transgresses inter- and intracultural and national boundaries and often destabilises the flows of ideas, images, and persons between the global and the local. The meaning and manifestations of what is characterised as the local is easy to grasp in this book as a locus and site of culturally inscribed agency and power (9); the same cannot be said of the inverse, the global, which is anything the authors want it to be. For example, some chapters stretch the meaning of global to claim that the Izala movement in Nigeria is a ‘global Islamic movement’. In what ways can this group as well as similar Islamic movements (such as Tablighi Jama’at in Kenya or even NASFAT in Lagos) or such Pentecostal churches and ministries that include ‘worldwide’ or ‘International’ in their names be said to exemplify global entities that are engaged in ‘reverse mission’? There is a limit to analytical clarity when every transnational network is loosely conceptualised as global. Not every instance of ‘religious expansion in a globalizing world’ can be fruitfully conceptualised as global; similarly, not every instance of African migrant religious outposts in Europe or America qualifies as reverse mission.

Conceptualising religions as systems of communication inherently implies that they are intrinsically and horizontally boundary crossing and transgressing. The dynamics that generate boundary transgression are frequently determined by factors external to religion, such as economic, political, sociological, and even technological elements that impinge on the context of being religious. When religions cross or blur boundaries, they invariably erect new, even more formidable ones that reflect identity, positioning, and belonging. Religious systems are structures of stigmatisation and exclusion even when and if the rhetoric is about converting and reaffiliating ‘the whole world’. One form of border crossing, boundary transgressing, is captured by the rhetoric of reverse mission that is frequently deployed to underscore evangelistic efforts of mostly migrant communities from former mission countries in the global south to ‘re-establish Christianity’ in the global north. Reverse mission (or ‘evangelisation’) is a contentious, ambivalent, slippery, and protean concept, often filled with hubris and triumphalism. As some of the essays (e.g., chapter 2: ‘Ignoring the East’ by Dyron B. Daughrity; chapter 4: ‘Church Mission Society and Reserve Mission’ by Rebecca Cato; chapter 10: ‘Religion in Motion’ by Annalisa Butticci; and chapter 21: ‘Reverse Evangelization’ by Damien Mottier) in Religion on the Move! grapple with this concept, proponents frequently forget an important historical dimension in both mission studies and the construction of comparative history of religions: if there is any such