David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson  

*Beyond Conversion & Syncretism* looks at how “different indigenous peoples have responded to the intrusion of foreign Christian missionaries into their worlds” (p. 2). It employs case studies from a two-hundred-year period, including cases from India, Australia, Guatemala, Southern Africa, Cuba, China, and the United States. The methodologies range from specific in-depth studies to comparative ones that look at how similar Christian experiences worked in different cultures. The editors hope to “point to a more nuanced and differentiated picture of such interchanges than is conveyed by terms presently in use” (ibid.). Overall, the editors and authors seek to give voice to how indigenous communities used conversion and syncretism to their own purposes.

The introduction, written by the editors, provides a clear and concise overview of missionary history, the role of conversion and syncretism in scholarship and correctly identifies the lack of “theoretical models for religious interactions which would enable historians to make these connections” (p. 3). Additionally, they address how missionized populations and recent scholarship have accused anthropologists and missionaries of acting as agents of imperialism. From there, the two editors split the terms, conversion and syncretism, and delve into them separately. Miles Richardson chooses to discuss the various forms and transformations of conversion, while David Lindenfeld takes more time to discuss what syncretism means. After the introduction, the editors divide the book into two sections: “Conversion and Its Complexities” and “Syncretism and Its Alternatives.”

Overall, the book raises more questions than it resolves. Have scholars only approached the effects of conversion from a European perspective, missing how individuals use Christianity for their own purposes? What does and should conversion or syncretism mean? How has syncretism been misinterpreted? Such questions point to the need for more research on and less stigmatism about missionary work and its long-term consequences. Essays like Saurabh Dube’s on India and C. Mathews Samson’s on Guatemala highlight how the process works differently for individuals and societies. How little missionaries control the message once it becomes introduced to a culture becomes an inherent theme in the essays. Not every group rejected conversion and many of those who sought it out did so for important and rational reasons, just not always the reasons missionaries expected or wanted. Many essays point out that the scholars’ polarizing views of missionization, either condemning
the missionaries or praising them for transforming “backwards” societies, have masked the agency of the indigenous people involved. By avoiding the subject of missionary work altogether, anthropologists, historians and others have not explored the power and agency of those being missionized.

This book works best when the authors embrace the contradictions and frustrations in the field. Elizabeth Elbourne’s article on Southern Africa and Northeastern America, Joseph Murphy’s on Cuba, and Sylvia Frey’s on New Orleans provide quick case studies in how to question the biases and presuppositions of those cultural critics who denigrate the impact of missionaries (in many cases revictimizing indigenous peoples by denying them the right to choose cultural change). All three essays demonstrate the multi-layered effects of cultural contact. They also show how blurry the lines become between forced change, like missionary work, and chosen change. These essays highlight how, for historians and anthropologists, it becomes difficult to understand the motivations of indigenous peoples when we constantly apply theories instead of listening to the actors themselves.

As valuable as the content is, the book struggles under the weight of some structural issues. The tension between the very narrow and in-depth case studies and the broader comparative works can be a bit dizzying at times. Richard Fox Young’s article on Robin Horton’s ‘intellectual theory’ starts at such a micro-level that the reader interested in conversion but unaware of Horton can struggle to follow the narrative and analysis. Several of the articles feel cut from larger works, leaving terms and parameters undefined and vague. This problem becomes particularly apparent in some of the comparative pieces, though Anne Keary’s piece on Northwestern America and Eastern Australia stands out as a model of comparison. The terms ‘conversion’ and ‘syncretism’ take on different meanings with each essay, which is part of the point of the volume, but this shifting leaves the reader responsible for tracking the changes without much guidance. Despite the editors’ attempt in the introduction to provide a framework, the whiplash construction of the volume, from micro-study to large comparative work, works against the concepts at hand.

These problems raise one final question for the volume: Who is the audience of the book? Especially in history, using missionaries as windows into the past, a new form of salvage ethnology and colonialism, has grown in the last ten years. But the bulk of these works remain focused on one area of the world, interpreted through the historiography of colonialism. This book offers a rare opportunity at comparison: between missionary groups, missionary fields, and indigenous responses. While scholars will find much to debate, most will only read the chapters related to their area of specialty. For students, the book’s structure presents many difficulties because chapters assume knowledge and