BOOKS I HAVE READ: CONSTRUCTING MISSION HISTORY

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Mission history shouldn't all be about missions. This book provides a nuanced and thoughtful approach to the way in which the church has grown through history.
Category: Reviews

Years ago, I read Comprehending Mission by Stanley Skreslet, a book which I still consider to be one of the best available on the subject of mission (though I didn't review it for some reason). With this in mind, I was very excited when I learned that he was publishing a new book. Constructing Mission History: Missionary Initiative and Indigenous Agency in the Making of World Christianity does not disappoint.

Before getting into some details, it is probably worth saying something about what this book is not. It is not a history of evangelical missions since William Carey or a history of 20th century mission work. You will look in vain to find many modern mission agencies mentioned by name. If that is what you are after, then you need to read a different book (though I'm not sure what book that would be and I'm open to suggestions). Nor is this a book which sets out from first principles to define what mission should be; Skreslet starts with observations and describes what mission actually is in practice.

It is a large format paperback of 460 pages, 50 of which consist of references and an index. It will set you back around Â£25 for the paperback and I'm not sure whether electronic versions are available. I reckon that the book is aimed at undergraduates in seminary or serious students of mission and world Christianity. I was a little alarmed when the author said that he would be using "speech act theory" as an analytical tool, as this often renders books nigh on incomprehensible. I had no need to fear; though dense, the prose is clear and approachable.

As is so often the case, it is the subtitle that gives an indication of what this book is about; it presents a very clear thesis that missionaries are not the only actors in shaping the past, present and future shape of the church. Indigenous Christians have always played a role in shaping, adapting and - sometimes - radically altering the message brought by the external agents. This is why we have the phenomenon of world Christianity (or Christianities) rather than a monolithic copy of North-Atlantic Christianity.

The introduction sets the scene for the book, presenting three master-narratives for mission; Promise and Fulfilment, Mission as a form of Colonialism and the Lens of World Christianity. Each of these narratives is shown to contribute towards our understanding of mission, while none of them are adequate on our own to describe the phenomenon.

Section one considers three drivers of missionary initiative in the modern era: Mediating Salvation, Knowledge Sharing and Practicing Benevolence. I found this section particularly helpful and I appreciated the more detailed analysis than is usually provided by the proclamation-works of service dichotomy.

The second (and final) section considers some of the factors that are involved when mission takes place. The first chapter in this section considers "power encounters". This is not to be understood in the supernatural meaning of the term, but rather looks at questions of influence, economic, political and other expressions of temporal power. The usual narrative is that missionaries had all the power on their side, but Skreslet demonstrates that indigenous Christians were able to express themselves and played a decisive role in shaping their expression of Christianity. This chapter also looks at the role of others in the story, such as government and cultural actors.

The second chapter in this section considers ways in which missionaries have attempted to create Christian societies; whether that be gathering converts into villages, or more large scale efforts to establish "Christianopolis".

The final chapter considers the role of vernacular Christianities and considers who is responsible for shaping and developing them. There is (an all too short) section on Bible translation here (yay!).

Missionaries and mission agencies have an interest in presenting a narrative about mission in which they play centre stage. They may even perceive this to be the case. However, as Skreslet demonstrates, mission has always involved a nuanced interaction between missionaries and indigenous Christians who are active participants in shaping their own future. We need to start telling a more accurate story.

Who should read this book? Students of mission should definitely be familiar with the contents of this work. They probably aren't going to buy it, but seminaries should have more than one copy on their library shelves. I would also argue that people who are interested in church history should read it. Too much church history (in this part of the world at least) is told through a very Eurocentric lens. We need to get away from that!