BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHRISTIAN MISSION

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I'm left with mixed feelings after reading this book; there are some great parts, but as a whole it is just OK.
Category: Reviews

I'm a little conflicted aboutÂ Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World ReligionÂ by Dana Robert. It is excellent in parts, but the whole book doesn't live up to the promise of the stronger sections.

Overall it is a medium format paperback of 214 pages; of which the last forty or so comprise the bibliography and index. It will currently set you back just under Â£20 on Amazon for the paperback or Kindle version. Don't even look at the price of the hardback - it will give you vertigo. To be quite blunt, if you have twenty quid to spend on books, I'm not sure that I'd suggest investing it here. See if you can get a second hand copy somewhere or borrow it from a library (which is what I did).

The book is helpfully divided into two parts; the first looks at the history of mission and the second at a few specific issues.

Part 1 The Making of a World Religion: Christian Mission Through the Ages

Chapter 1. From Christ to Christendom. This covers similar ground to the introduction to Sunquist's book which I reviewed a couple of days ago. Overall, I think that Sunquist does a better job, however there is one key point in this overview which is lacking in many other mission histories. Robert goes out of her way to underline that point that in order to develop into a world religion, Christianity first of all has to be rooted inÂ communities as a local one.

Chapter 2. Vernaculars and Volunteers, 1450- . For me, this chapter was the highlight of the book (well, it would be). It highlights both the importance of Bible translation and volunteer movements in the transmission of Christianity worldwide. I'd suggest that Wycliffe people who take an interest in missiology should get hold of the book, even if it is only to read this chapter.

Chapter 3. Global Networking for the Nations, 1910 - . This does what it says on the tin and covers familiar ground. If you are really interested in this period you need to get hold of Sunquist's book which I linked to above or Yates' Christian Mission in the C20.

Part II Themes in Mission History

This section looks at three issues; I'm not sure why these particular ones were chosen and all of them are dealt with more thoroughly in specialist books. That being said, these chapters are a good introduction.

Chapter 4. The Politics of Missions: Empire, Human Rights and Land. This is a fairly balanced overview of a hideously complex subject.

Chapter 5. Women in World Mission: Purity, Motherhood, and Women's Well-Being. I'm sitting at home writing a blog post, while Sue is in Madagascar checking the translation of Matthew's Gospel into a local language. It's good to see someone highlight the important role of women in mission;

more of this sort of thing please. Another good point in this chapter is the highlighting of the way in which mission helped to promote the cause of women's well being around the world. This is another story that we need to hear more of.

Chapter 6. Conversion and Christian Community: The Missionary from St. Patrick to Bernard Mizeki. You can't talk about mission without eventually talking about missionaries. This chapter focuses on a medieval missionary to Ireland and a nineteenth century Mozambican missionary to the Shona. There is nothing particularly revolutionary here; but it is good to see that the reflections don't focus on the usual subjects such as Loyola, Carey or Hudson-Taylor.

Postscript: Multicultural Missions in Global Context. This tells a rather good story about the contemporary reality of the church. It would make a great little blog post if copying out the whole chapter didn't infringe copyright!

Who should read this book? Well, the ferocious price tag means that it will have limited readership. Anyone who is a serious student of mission history should read it, but serious students will also have access to library copies. Otherwise, there is material in individual chapters which would be of interest to people reading and writing on the particular themes raised. However, it is difficult to recommend this book to a general readership. There are cheaper and better introductions to mission history available.

To close; an interesting quote from chapter 2 (p.36):

> *Protestants did not invent the idea of translatability. Rather the Protestant Reformation recovered the practice of earlier centuries, when the translation of the Bible solidified the cultural identities of ethnic peoples. The nations of Ethiopia, Armenia and Georgia retained their ethnic Christian identities through centuries of opposition because the Bible was put into their languages by the fourth and fifth centuries. In the late ninth century, the brothers Cyril (d. 869) and Methodius (d. 885)put the language of the Macedonian Slavs into written form, translated the Bible into the language known as Old Church Slavonic, and founded churches that used the langauge. Old Church Slavonic became the sacred langauge of Slavic Orthodoxy, and helped the Russians and other Slavic peoples to retain their identity despite the attacks of Tartars, Mongols and others who sort to destroy them.*