Wolfe on Best, 'Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire'

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Jeremy Best’s Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire examines the role played by German Protestant missionaries in shaping colonial culture during the long nineteenth century, representing a more nuanced narrative than other scholars tend to find in colonial studies where national identity and biological racism inform official policy and practice. The title “Heavenly Fatherland” reflects the overarching universalist and internationalist ideology characteristic of German Protestant mission work at that time. In the process, Best gives a more positive presentation of missions' leadership, especially those associated with creating Missionswissenschaft (missiology) but qualifies the unintended negative impacts of missions’ work in the field. Despite this revision (or reclamation, if one prefers) of evangelicals leading up to World War I, the work is by no means an exercise in apologetics. Best posits that missionaries were integral during this period because they were situated in a position to both facilitate and benefit from increased globalization. He notes that the primary goal for German Protestant missionaries as they proliferated around the globe was to “[create] Christians and not Germans” (p. 41).

When it comes to the individuals associated with missionary efforts, Best invests heavily in examining the activities of those in leadership positions. His argument about how missionaries were responsible for shaping and informing cultural perceptions of colonialism is strongest when focused on those leaders based in Germany, from those like pastor Gustav Warneck who worked in the academic realm of Missionswissenschaft and associated publication and distribution of journals, to the public-facing propaganda programs designed to promote awareness and garner support from the laity. The latter example was best reflected in charity associations, or Hilfsvereine. These groups offered a tangible avenue for Christian congregations to contribute monetarily and in kind to support efforts overseas. The information shared by these groups coupled with traveling magic lantern shows provided a depiction of colonialism which was much more universalist and positive than that found in secular depictions more concerned with celebrating economic opportunities and presumed German (or European) superiority. Chapter 5 of Heavenly Fatherland highlights the stark contrast between the missionary guest lectures that included African converts and the Völkerschauen (“human zoos”) that tended to exoticize and make a spectacle of non-Europeans. In his analysis, Best acknowledges the depiction of non-Germans in the popular press and advertising but makes the argument that mission societies served to shape a more respectful and humanized image of the Other that disseminated across German congregations and other public venues. Despite an otherwise supported case, his
claim that mission societies were the “main creators of Germany’s colonial culture” is slightly exaggerated (p. 146).

In the last chapter, Best begins by doing what most mentors warn young historians to never do—entertain history in the subjunctive mood. In Best’s “what if” case of an intended though not actualized 1920 international meeting of missionaries hosted in Berlin, a detour into hypotheticals works brilliantly to emphasize one of the key arguments of his work—that German missionary groups prior to the First World War were dedicated to internationalism and cooperation with British and American co-religionists rather than to a nationalized German colonialism. The actual conference that represented international, ecumenical cooperation was the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. It featured key figures of German Protestant mission societies like Gustav Warneck and Karl Axenfeld. This meeting was critical in promoting an ecumenical (though it barred Catholics) and international collaboration to ensure successful proselytization across the globe. By emphasizing the rhetoric and actions of Germans involved in this conference and the wider scholarly community, Best anchors his claims that these colonial actors and influencers were on a path to increased internationalism with the intent of fostering a universalized Christian identity across all peoples. The break between the conference that actually happened and the one that did not was the Great War, which dampened the spirit of internationalism. By including the hypothetical of what could have been, Best ties everything back to the argument that there were other historical trajectories rooted in the German cultural framework that were constructive rather than destructive. Mission efforts were popularly supported by German citizens, especially in smaller and rural communities, as evidenced by donations and attendance at missionary-sponsored events. The individual missionaries, though not perfect, tended to be well-intentioned toward non-Germans, embracing diverse cultures while promoting a globalized unity among believers, albeit in the name of expanding a common Protestant Christian identity.

At times, Best presses his thesis a bit forcefully and would benefit from simple qualifiers like “some” or “most.” Protestant missionaries did not act in a monolithic fashion, a point that Best elucidates in the details of his work, but the author tends to revert to lumping them all together in his introductions and conclusions when juxtaposing these religious actors against secular advocates of colonial policy. For example, Best states that missionaries did not eschew their German citizenship, which may have been the case in East Africa, but elsewhere some did when geopolitical realities exerted pressure to do so (p. 16). This brings up a minor critique of the work, namely the limitations imposed by German East Africa representing only one type of colonial environment within the German Empire (p. 47). For instance, Southwest Africa also had a cohort of missionaries who developed in a similar fashion, but the issue of cooperation with the colonial government took a slightly different tone, thanks in part to the introduction of German settlers. The issues addressed by Best in the first three chapters pertaining to German identity, the language used in churches and schools, and so on were more complicated as these missionaries sometimes also served as the pastors for settler congregations. This duality could lead to tension as settler identity and goals did not align with the universalist vision of missionaries.

These issues aside, Best’s work is significant and contributory for several reasons. First, he incorporates archival material from modern-day Polish collections that have not always been utilized in discussions of the Berlin Mission Society. While this organization was one of the many mission societies active during the “Age of Empire,” it was also one of the largest based in central Europe.
Second, Best offers a challenge to the “Windhoek to Auschwitz” thesis by demonstrating that there were alternative trajectories and worldviews in Germany, the colonies, and among Germans connected with wider international communities (p. 10). This work highlights that there is still much room for continued scholarly discourse on this issue but also, more poignantly, how changing one’s chronological or geographic focal point of research informs the degree of continuity seen when postulating linkages between Germany’s colonial experiences and policies enacted during the Third Reich. Finally, this monograph demonstrates that German colonial history is a thriving field in the wider transnational trend of the past two decades, though it is an area that could use more conversation and attention. More scholars need to include missionaries in the discussion of colonialism as the latter were not merely agents or tools of the colonial administration.


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