

Lindenfeld, David and Miles Richardson (eds.). 2011. *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism. Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800–2000*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 328 pp. Hb.: \$95.00 / £55.00. ISBN: 9780857452177.

The vocabulary we use has a profound influence on the ways in which it is possible for us to understand the world. This seems to be the fundamental motivation behind the recently published volume *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism*. The volume has as its aim to study ‘the ways in which different indigenous peoples have responded to the intrusion of foreign Christian missionaries into their worlds’, and the ‘strategies and processes by which this negotiation typically takes place’ (p. 2). The objective is to develop a more nuanced picture of such encounters than the vocabulary currently in common use, especially the notions of conversion and syncretism, can convey.

The volume delights by its broad geographical and denominational range. The articles discuss cases from North and Central America, Africa, Asia and Australia, often by comparing two cases from different continents. The missionaries often being Europeans, South America is the only continent not discussed in the volume. The Christian denominations covered vary from different branches of Catholicism, African Churches and Baptism, to the Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians.

The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with conversion and the second one with syncretism, although it is clear – as the editors of the volume also state – that the processes of syncretism and conversion are very much intertwined. In the chapters of the first part entitled Conversion and its complexities, Saurabh Dube looks at conversion in the context of Central-Indian people’s autobiographies and biographies through the notion of vernacular translation. Mathews Samson continues with autobiographical accounts and discusses the interplay between context and agency, or the space between the processes of conversion and the potential convert, among the Guatemalan Maya population. The focus is on people’s production of their ethnic identity, or Maya-ness. Elizabeth Elbourne concentrates on the interaction between imperial militaries, Christianity and alliance politics in the borderlands between New York and Six Nations territory, on the one hand, and Cape Colony of Southern Africa, on the other. She shows how conversion to Christianity was different for the colonised peoples in frontier zones than for those in settled colonial states. In his chapter, Richard Fox Young discusses Robin Horton’s Intellectualist Theory in relation to the reconversion of Tamil Christians into Shaivite Hinduism and argues that rather than explaining conversion to Christianity, Horton’s theory does better in explaining reconversion back to traditional religions.

The second part of the volume, *Syncretism and its alternatives*, consists of five chapters. In the opening chapter Joseph M. Murphy looks at one “syncretistic” case in the context of Afro-Cuban religion and argues that the well-established correspondence between the orisha-spirit Shango and the Catholic saint Santa Barbara is not just a way to veil fundamental beliefs in the age of oppression, but that it rather ‘extends and enhances the social and spiritual possibilities of their devotees’ (p. 139). Anh Q. Tran’s chapter deals with a literary source called *Conference of Four Religions*, which claims to be a record of a religious meeting or debate among representatives of four religions, having taken place

in 1773 in Vietnam. David Lindenfeld compares the Chinese Taiping and the West African Aladura movements, and introduces the term “selective inculturation” to describe the processes of syncretism taking place within them. In her contribution, Sylvia Frey looks at the processes of acculturation in the context of Catholic French nuns evangelising a black diasporic community in New Orleans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, Anne Keary compares missionary encounters in north-western America and Eastern Australia and the ways in which the colonial constructs and practices in each case influenced the identity politics of the parties involved.

Whether intentional or accidental, four chapters out of nine in the volume use intercultural and intercontinental comparison as a tool for approaching the topics under study. Furthermore, two of the remaining chapters develop their analysis through the comparison of biographical narratives. Comparison as a method appears therefore as one central theme in the volume and, as such, it would also have deserved to be discussed more profoundly in the introduction. It is, however, briefly discussed in some of the contributions, such as those by Lindenfeld and Keary.

In general, the volume would have benefited from a more purposefully written introduction. Perhaps because of the different disciplinary backgrounds of the editors, the introduction has been left somewhat unformed. Instead of discussing in-depth the previous uses and theorisations of the volume’s key terms, conversion and syncretism, in the humanities and social sciences in general, the editors have decided to take, in my view, a more superficial introduction to the uses of the terms in the fields of history, anthropology and religious studies. Moreover, the discussion in relation to religious studies leans heavily on theological approaches disregarding the existing theorisations in the field of (more humanistic-oriented) religious studies.

Furthermore, the introduction fails to bring together and lift up the highly interesting topics and approaches commonly addressed by the majority of the chapters. Among the most important theses is the interplay between the macro- and micro-levels of culture. Most chapters approach this interplay from the point of view of colonial structures’ influences on missionary encounters and on the domestication of the Christian religion. Through the comparison within and between chapters, the volume offers its readers a possibility to study and to better understand the relationship between colonialism and missionary Christianity as well as the ways in which different colonial settings influence the processes of intercultural encounters, identity formation, and religious change. Another topic many of the chapters at least implicitly discuss, and which still remains under-theorised in social sciences, is the collective aspect of conversions to Christianity. To what extent, under what conditions and how can conversion be considered and understood as collective action?

In general, the volume offers a wealth of material for those interested in missionary and cultural encounters, conversion and the processes of domestication of Christianity. It also forms thought-provoking reading for scholars and students of historical and present day Christianities.

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