

Book Review

David Lindenfeld, *World Christianity and Indigenous Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 415. \$104.52 cloth, \$39.99 paper.

David Lindenfeld has written this masterful book to answer the following question: “what can the study of cross-cultural interactions tell us about religions and how they operate in world history” (1)? He notes that in studies of world history, historians have generally neglected religion and he aims to correct that by developing a vocabulary with which to study the religious encounters western missionaries had with native peoples around the globe. He begins his book by creating a detailed framework through which he lays out the different reactions to Christianity that native peoples had, including rejection or resistance, selective incorporation, concentration of spirituality, conservation of form, vernacular translation, dual religious participation, selective acculturation, and acceptance and commitment. He proceeds, over the course of eight chapters (each chapter devoted to a region of the globe, from Colonial Latin America to the Pacific Islands), to discuss indigenous peoples’ reactions to Christianity and Christian missionaries.

In many cases, Lindenfeld identifies ulterior motives in indigenous peoples’ willingness to engage with Christian missionaries. For example, the elite in Colonial Latin America used missionary schools to build a literary indigenous elite across central and South America. In Sub-Saharan Africa, several kings used Christian missionaries to access European trade networks and the finished technological goods that flowed in exchange for African commodities, including most tragically, slaves. Similarly, in Japan, early Japanese daimyo allowed missionaries to work in their domains in order to attract Portuguese merchants who would trade in such luxury items as Chinese silk and Southeast Asian luxury goods. This pattern is perhaps most pronounced in the Pacific Islands where researchers noticed that those indigenous peoples interested in western trade migrated to coastal towns where Christianity flourished, along with western trade, whereas those peoples more interested in preserving traditional religious practices stayed in the interior villages where western merchants rarely made an appearance. In these cases, indigenous peoples demonstrated selective acculturation, dual religious

participation, or selective incorporation, in essence choosing to incorporate elements of Christianity while still practicing, either secretly or openly, elements of their traditional religion.

Lindenfeld notes in several instances the prevalence of selective incorporation, or what earlier scholars have termed syncretism. For example, several areas such as Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa more readily accepted elements of Catholicism because local spirits and deities were able to be grafted on top of the Catholic system of saints as well as the ritual around the Catholic religious observation. This also lent itself to a local network of local shrines at which the newly incorporated saints could be venerated as the local deities had been for generations. This also helps to explain the rapid spread of Pentecostal Christianity in areas such as Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific Islands: Paul's gifts of the spirit fit in well with local traditional ideas such as shamanism as well as the role of faith healing and visions or trances practiced in many indigenous communities across the world.

Lindenfeld devotes individual chapters to each region where Christian missionaries were prevalent from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In each case he begins with a brief description of the indigenous religion before moving onto an equally brief history of early missionary activity in these regions. In most cases, aspects of the indigenous religious worldview played a role in how native peoples interacted with Christianity and what strand of Christianity came to the forefront. Lindenfeld also highlights the missionaries' own cultural baggage that led them to associate, for example, settled agriculture as a prerequisite to a civilized society, and by extension to the adoption of Christianity. He also outlines which native aspects of society missionaries were willing to accept, and this in turn played a big role in whether Christianity took hold in a particular region. In most areas of the world that adopted Christianity to a greater or lesser extent, selective incorporation and dual participation seem to be the predominant pattern of adoption. For example, in Colonial Latin America, despite efforts to root indigenous religious observation out, local peoples nevertheless continued to celebrate the Day of the Dead in various stages of openness. Similarly, in Africa, local religious leaders continued to practice remnants of earlier faith healing and trances, except now these practices were done in the name of God rather than of local spirits. And finally, Lindenfeld highlights several regions where indigenous peoples themselves became missionaries to other indigenous peoples. For example, the Copts of Egypt began to send missions to sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific islanders commissioned local "teachers" to sail to other islands proclaiming the new faith. In all cases, indigenous peoples interacted with Christianity on their own terms, despite sometimes harsh measures to make them drop earlier religious practices and conform precisely to western notions of proper Christian behavior. Lindenfeld ends by celebrating such diversity, likening it to biological diversity: "The argument for the preservation of such cultural diversity parallels...the argument for biological diversity.

Both represent centuries of accumulated adaptation to their environments and thus constitute a knowledge base for a broader range of solutions to the challenges we are likely to face as a species than a few hegemonic culture and religions can provide” (404).

This book is extremely well researched, as one would expect from a scholar who has spent his entire career engaging with this topic. This results in a thorough book that should find a place on the shelf of any historian of religion, and in particular of Christianity. However, the book is probably not for the casual reader, and neither is it entirely suitable for a high school or lower-level college curriculum. Rather, the book would make an excellent addition to the syllabus of anyone teaching graduate seminars, courses at seminaries, or advanced undergraduate courses. Individual chapters can also make a good addition to courses concentrating on particular geographical areas such as India, East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the limited appeal outlined above, this book is an extremely well-researched and organized work of scholarship, the achievement of which should be celebrated by the community of world historians, among whom David Lindenfeld includes himself.

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