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Review

Fischer, Moritz & Thiel, Michael (eds), *Investigations on the “Entangled History” of Colonialism and Mission in a New Perspective: 20. Ludwig-Harms-Symposium 28. – 29. 5. 2021 in Hermannsburg*. Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2022. ISBN: 9783643914132 (pb), 9783643964137 (pdf)

Review by Dr Jörg Zehelein¹

This edited volume contains contributions from the 20th Harms symposium that was organised from Germany by the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology Hermannsburg and the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Agency in Lower Saxony in May 2021. Among a majority of German voices there is one essay from Africa written by Harvey Kwiyani (Malawi/United Kingdom). Geographical relations addressed by this mainly historically interested book are European encounters with North America and Asia, but especially with Africa. Out of thirteen essays eight contributions explicitly analyse mission encounters with Africa(ns) and are of particular interest in this book review.

The theoretical framework for this collection of essays from disciplines such as secular history, religious studies, missiology, intercultural theology, and systematic theology is the hermeneutic of entanglement history. Editor Moritz Fischer develops this approach in conversation with Hartmut Kaelble, Sidney Mintz, and Rebecca Habermas as a postcolonial, hybrid, subalternity/contact-zone-aware paradigm. Its emphasis is on studying missionary encounters, discourses, negotiations for power and meaning, struggles for emancipation and reconciliation, and the spreading of Christianity from a perspective of

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(dis)entanglements, i.e. complicities and resistances against imperial powers (pp. 1-14).

Concerning historical entanglements of mission and colonialism Jobst Reller depicts Ludwig Harms, German revivalist and founder of Hermannsburg mission, as a paternalistic facilitator of cross-cultural mission to Africa (pp. 51-57). He points out that even though Harms distanced mission from colonialism, second and third generations of Hermannsburg missionaries developed strong ties with colonial structures, e.g. agricultural settlements. The contribution of Harvy Kwiyani comes as a criticism of such entanglements as he understands mission and colonialism as 'strange bedfellows' (p. 108). Seeing to the realities of mission and colonialism attached to each other, Kwiyani develops a vision of mission constantly detaching itself from colonial or imperial powers.

As long as we keep attaching this beautiful and life-giving missio Dei to empires, it will always be used to marginalise, dominate, and colonise others. (p. 112)

With a focus on Leipzig mission in the Kilimanjaro region Karolin Wetjen examines the boundary between mission and colonialism as the attempt to demarcate the religious and the secular (pp. 115-130). On the one hand, as Wetjen delineates, missionaries negotiated for cooperation and stressed the benefits of mission for the colonial project, on the other hand, colonial authorities needed to be assured of the exclusively 'religious' aspirations of mission that should not transgress the boundaries of the 'secular'. With an outlook on Ethiopia as the only non-colonised African country, Stanislau Palau explores how that country was considered promised land by post-war Germany which had lost access to its former colonies. The questionable figure of Max Grühl is depicted by Palau as somebody who was deeply entrenched in adventurism, Nazi racial ideology, and colonial aspirations, but managed to convince Hermannsburg Mission to establish a mission venture to Ethiopia which they considered 'a clear and distinct call from God' (p. 215).

From the perspective of subalternity, Hanna Mellemsether employs the theory of the 'contact zone' and describes encounters of Norwegian missionaries with South Africans in the 1920s (pp. 59-76). She sketches the pursuit of political and religious independence (especially Petrus Lamula) and how the

missionaries stabilised the boundaries between oppressors and oppressed. The sending organisation in Norway, however, openly criticised its missionaries who were, as Mellemsether elaborates, often born in South Africa and in the eyes of the natives clearly standing on the side of White domination. Related to the idea of subalternity, Gunther Schendel employs the rhetoric of reverse mission in his narration of the visit of Ethiopian pastor Daffa Djammo to Germany/Hermannsburg in 1952 (pp. 77-94). The Ethiopian church leader is depicted as a role model for partnership and even a ‘form of “Mission to the North”’ (p. 93). However, as Schendel critically points out, Djammo also had to serve as poster figure in Hermannsburg mission’s publicity work.

Beyond mere historiography, some of the contributions provide valuable perspectives for a postcolonial theology of mission. Moritz Fischer lists some remarkable tenets of a theology of mission: God’s revelation in Jesus Christ urges people to embark on a mission that relates (entangles!) people across cultural, economic, social, and political conditions. It is, however, aware of violent or unjust entanglements and tries to overcome those by peaceful and reconciling disentanglements (p. 157). Wilhelm Richebächer addresses the complex issue of mission and power with particular reference to discourses on conversion and the theological distinction of law and gospel.

A critical appraisal of this volume reveals a relatively high number of typographical/formatting errors and, from a postcolonial perspective, inappropriate language. On pages 143-144 the term ‘tribe’ is still in use; on page 15 the *continent* ‘Africa’ is listed next to *countries* like Indonesia and India. The reconstruction of history from the perspective of subaltern subjects and agency is praiseworthy, but not sufficiently implemented. Despite the volume’s vision of decentralising the West (p. 13), most contributors are Germans. Furthermore, many contributions still focus on global actors and mission agencies from the Global North. Besides the need of increasing the number of contributions from the Global South, insights into the ‘impossibility of the history of the subaltern’ (Gyan Prakash) could have helped to acknowledge unavoidable dilemmas, but also possibilities of reconstructing subaltern history from within and against discourses of hegemonic claims of power and knowledge.