



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (NELC)

Department of Near Eastern Languages and
Civilizations (NELC)

9-2013

An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812–1920

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers

 Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), and the [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (2013). An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812–1920. *Church History*, 82 (3), 753-755. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0009640713001054>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/49
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812–1920

Disciplines

History of Christianity | Missions and World Christianity | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812-1920. By Jay Riley Case. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Xiv + 311 pp. \$99 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

“Burma was not Connecticut” (p. 33), as American Baptist missionaries realized with a jolt when they arrived in what is now Myanmar in 1812. And yet the two places became surprisingly linked after 1828, when thirty “wild” Karen men, from the jungles of southern Burma, trekked three days to reach a Baptist station. A legend had been circulating among some Karen people about a lost book that would return and uplift them; they had heard about the missionaries’ holy book and decided that it must be the text. These Karen trekkers asked for Christian instruction from the missionary, who found them perplexing and initially tried to fob them off. Upon returning to their hills, these men told others about what they had learned and come to believe; soon other Karen people were embracing Christianity, too. Within a few decades, in Connecticut, New York, and beyond, this apparent Karen success story was prompting American Baptists to question their assumptions about what it meant to be civilized or not. For the American Baptists, this experience also inspired a new theory of “native ministry”, which informed efforts to establish colleges for African-Americans in the post-bellum South.

This example perfectly illustrates the unpredictability that runs through *An Unpredictable Gospel*. In this excellent book, Case argues that “world Christianity pulled American evangelicalism in new directions” (pp. 259-60) amidst nineteenth-century American missionary efforts in places as far afield as South Africa, Chile, and India. It did so while forcing American Protestants to engage in heated debates over the relative importance of education on the one hand, and spiritual fervor on the other, as goals of Christian living and missionary endeavor.

The book’s chapters revolve around a set of strong-willed evangelical missionaries, particularly from Baptist and Methodist backgrounds, who blazed trails in the nineteenth century while resisting institutional control. These individuals tended to adhere to universalist ideas about Christian fellowship that ran counter to influential racial, and sometimes gender, ideologies of the period. Some, like the African-American Henry McNeal Turner, flatly rejected an idea that was pervasive among white Americans: that the American republic enjoyed God’s special favor and thus had a civilizing as well as a Christianizing mission to play. Turner’s convictions led him to forge trans-Atlantic connections with a Christian named Mangena Mokone who, in response to the denigrating treatment that white Wesleyan missionaries meted out to black people, broke off to establish independent, “Ethiopian” churches in pre-apartheid South Africa.

Case calls the individuals he features representatives of “democratized Christianity” (a term he uses in a complimentary way to suggest reliance on grass-roots persuasion in matters of worship) and “antiformalist evangelicalism” (suggesting a tendency not to establish formal structures, institutions, and bureaucracies). Some

of these individuals became associated with the Holiness movement, which he describes as a kind of “enthusiastic revivalism [associated with] a deep yearning to experience the power of the Holy Spirit” that arose within Methodism especially (p. 144).

Case advances refreshingly clear arguments. He contends that “[American] missionaries were almost always lousy at converting large numbers of non-Westerners”, although they provided resources, ideas, and opportunities that made it possible for indigenous Christians to evangelize (p. 7). He adds that, “...evangelistic success emerged more often when missionaries operated from positions of weakness” (p. 8), not when they were allied with imperial powers. At the same time, he argues that antiformalist missions were able to flourish because they tapped into the institutional structures and resources of formal churches and missions. For example, the globetrotting evangelist, William Taylor, tried to shrug off Methodist mission-board oversight over his operations in Chile and Peru, but appealed to the same board to ordain his evangelists as a way of enhancing their local prestige. Case also argues that the Methodist-Holiness movement abroad, exemplified by the efforts of people like Pandita Ramabai (a female Hindu Brahmin convert to Christianity in India), set the stage for Pentecostalism well before the 1908 Asuza Street gathering in Los Angeles, California.

Some readers may need a magnifying glass to read this book, because Oxford University Press used a tiny font – perhaps to cut costs by using less paper. Probably for a similar reason, the book includes endnotes but no bibliography – something that will disappoint researchers who try to consult it for its references. Scrutiny of the endnotes shows that the author draws primarily on American missionary memoirs and mission periodicals. This source base explains why the book presents itself as a study of American evangelicals, notwithstanding its strong transnational and international dimensions.

Case portrays conversion as something that occurs wholly as the result of a dawning spiritual conviction, and pays little heed to economic and political motives that may figure into the process. For example, he does not scrutinize the role that an association with American missionaries and their foreign, non-Buddhist religion may have played in empowering the Karen “hill tribes” of Burma vis-à-vis that country’s Buddhist establishment. It was not only, as Case suggests, that history threw a “curveball” (p. 53) in the mid-nineteenth century, when American Baptists offered to delegate powers of ordination to Karen converts, and the Karen refused. The Karen may have been capable of running their own evangelical communities, but, to continue with the baseball analogy, they still wanted or needed Americans on their team. Fast-forward to today and one can see another, long-term political outcome that Case could add to the score of the “unpredictable Gospel”: the fact that so many Karen rebels (who have been waging a guerrilla insurgency against the Burmese government since 1949, in a bid for regional autonomy) have been Christians.

Case writes with verve, treats his subjects with respect, and covers fascinating material. Readers may disagree with some of his arguments, but there is no doubt about it: this book will appeal to a wide audience while stimulating lively debate.

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania