

religion and medieval feudalism by the People's Liberation Army? Is it escaping the rules and discipline of monastic life and living for yourself in the 'freedom' of a Western consumerist society? Or is it in training the mind to live in the present moment and work with whatever circumstances are sent your way? As Lama Yeshe says in the introduction, 'This is my most deeply held wish: that more and more people will begin to tame their unquiet minds so that they may be able to live joyfully and to offer compassion to every living being on this earth' (p. x).

Finally, this is a story of hope and transformation. Lama Yeshe relates that people have come to him with stories of hopelessness, but he insists that change is possible for every single one of us, however broken or exhausted we may feel, and that every challenge we face is the raw material for our transformation.

Frances Hume

Frances Hume studied theology at the University of St Andrews. She is the National Development Officer for Interfaith Scotland.

<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v32i1.2910>



Jennifer C. Snow, *Mission, Race, and Empire: The Episcopal Church in Global Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. viii + 360, ISBN 978-0197598948. £25.99

What an important contribution this is to ongoing efforts to effectively, creatively problematise our tendency to valorise and venerate oversimplified historical narratives. Our prevailing (supposedly neutral) historical narrative is often given through a *de facto* white male perspective and is thus limited in its range and application without first making critical adjustments. It is furthermore essential when considering any discussion about the church to ask who is being excluded in our historical narratives. This conviction animates Jennifer Snow's *Mission, Race, and Empire*.

Observing and correcting absences is as crucial to the task of critically narrating church history as listening with a generosity of spirit to those already present. Snow's openness about her own identity as 'a white



Christian Episcopalian lesbian who teaches at an Episcopal seminary,¹ a laywoman as well as an academic' underscores the importance of recognising our positionalities in such discussions (p. 5). It is here important to acknowledge my own position as a white, British-Irish, male Anglican. There are privileges inherent in this identity that have informed my perspective, and it is therefore crucial to recognise that my voice has already been over-represented in conversations about race, empire, and missionary endeavours. My attempt to define or address these issues is itself implicated in the kinds of dynamics Snow critiques. Self-awareness is therefore essential.

Understanding the context in which Snow writes also requires attention to how discussions of race vary across national lines. The differences between the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States in discussions of race and identity are significant. Such discussions are electric with meaning, for reasons both laudable and lamentable. African Americans have a four-hundred-year history in the US, whose deep roots can be traced back to the earliest colonial days, and it ties their experiences and struggles with the American narrative in a unique way. By contrast, the presence of large numbers of Black individuals in the UK is – broadly speaking – a post-war phenomenon: many Black Britons trace their ancestry to the Caribbean and other Commonwealth nations, which have their own storied histories with European colonialism. Historical contexts shape the dynamics of these conversations and demonstrate the importance of considering local histories and lived experiences of oppression.

While the concern may be raised that it seems inappropriate for me to speak on issues that primarily affect others in different contexts – or, more than that, to speak as someone whose ancestry may be identified with oppressors to varying degrees – it is crucial to note that the issues addressed by Snow transcend geography. This fact is implied by her locating her discussions in a 'global context', as the subtitle of her book indicates. Here, it is important to note that readers expecting a book that places the American Episcopal Church within a broader context as a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion should look elsewhere. Recent news stories remind us that Black pain knows no borders, and it is our responsibility to acknowledge both the privilege that our identities carry with them and the necessity of solidarity with those who have been

¹ Church Divinity School of the Pacific, in Berkeley, California.



oppressed. For the gospel to be good news for some, it must be good news for all. Snow's work is commendable for drawing attention to this.

Snow's book is divided into three main sections, each reflecting different eras and the predominant themes in missional thinking and practice in the American Episcopal Church: 1600–1800 (“Christianizing the Colony”); 1800–1920 (“Church-Planting, Civilizing, and Christianizing”); and 1920–2019 (“*Missio Dei*”). The first section explores the origins of the American Episcopal Church during the expansion of the British Empire. In doing so, the ways early missionary movements aimed to convert indigenous people by imposing English language and culture (and the resultant social inequalities and racial distinctions) are made plain. The second section examines the nineteenth-century shift towards a more structured model of mission amidst competing denominations, in which the Episcopal Church sought to expand its influence both at home and abroad while struggling with issues of racial injustice and inequality. The third part relays the critiques levelled at traditional missional practices, particularly those critiques emerging in the twentieth century, and the transformative understanding of *missio Dei*: the mission of God in the world, moving beyond church-centric models and sparking internal and global debates on race, gender, and sexuality.

Snow offers a wide-ranging (yet thorough) exploration of four centuries of mission work and successfully highlights the stories and contributions of historically marginalised groups: those whom liberation theologians would refer to as being found, for various reasons, on ‘the underside of history’. ‘Training the lens on mission’, Snow writes, ‘shifts our understanding of the narratives and personalities of church history; the “marginal” becomes central to the story’ (p. 318). Lesser-known figures and events feature prominently. I was particularly heartened to read of Ng Ping and his significant contributions to Chinese missions and the Chinese American community (pp. 206–07). Initially an anti-Christian campaigner in Hawaii, he later became one of the first Chinese Episcopal priests in the US after being influenced by Deaconess Emma Drant. After changing his name to Daniel Wu to better integrate into American society, he continued his community work in California, particularly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. He led two Chinese congregations in the Bay Area and was active in advocating for Chinese-American rights and organizing their communities against the Chinese Exclusion Act. He was also involved in supporting Chinese immigrants detained at Angel Island. Wu’s



personal life was heavily influenced by the restrictive citizenship laws of the time, and his wife lost her US citizenship upon marrying him. Throughout his life, Wu demonstrated a commitment to both his faith and the rights of Chinese immigrants.

Nevertheless, there are some important gaps in the book. For example, I note a distinct lack of emphasis on the contributions of lay women to the missionary endeavours of the Episcopal Church. Perhaps risking some degree of conjecture on my part, this lack could stem, in part, from Snow's positionality as a laywoman: she may have inadvertently under-emphasised the contributions of a group to which she belongs as she takes her own experiences as self-evident, or perhaps hoped to maintain a sense of distance or objectivity. As a laywoman, she may have wanted to avoid perceptions that she was over-representing her own 'group', as it were.

It is also somewhat surprising that, despite Snow's clear passion for rethinking mission, the definition of 'mission' that she adopts – and which shapes her approach – echoes earlier, more problematic models: 'the church incorporating others beyond its current boundaries' (p. 2). Three issues can be identified with this definition. First, the extension of the concept to cover any endeavour by which the church expands its reach (and the resultant loosening of the meaning of the term) is a challenge from the point of view of epistemic justice. Might not this wording allow those in power to dictate the terms of inclusion, thereby marginalising other forms of knowledge or agency? Second (and relatedly), the definition adopts a problematic model of inclusivity wherein the centre is still situated as the seat of power: those at the centre have the ability to include (or exclude) those on the margin. Both liberation theology and postcolonial theory should alert us to the need to question this implicit centring of power within the church as the 'includer' of marginalised groups. Oppression is often accompanied by a spirit of vague benevolence; missionaries can become instruments of oppression while still seeing their activity as a laudable service. Third, this definition makes mission the sole property of the church and missionaries the agents of a divinely-ordained purpose, whereas I would be quick to point to the work of the Spirit beyond the church doors. *Extra ecclesiam nulla missio* is not a maxim we should make our own. *Missio Dei* is meant as a break from such models.

Nevertheless, Snow's work reminds us that reflecting on the complexity of church history – especially its activities in the name of mission – is an antidote to ongoing truncated, falsely irenic narratives.



Reviews

Rather, the book offers our contemporary faith contexts an urgently needed counterbalance by rendering the truth of where we are and how we got here rich and full, fraught and frustrating. I do not argue that her book should be read in a way that is primarily informational or explanatory, for that is not its aim; rather, reflecting on it invites us to adopt certain postures in the present in our missionary endeavours and beyond: patient expectancy, vulnerable uncertainty and (above all) humility. Snow's book is not a conclusive statement about conversations on mission, race, and empire but should be vital reading as part of an ongoing discussion. The mission of God is, by definition, unfolding and unfinished – so too are the works that explore it.

Christopher West

PhD candidate in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen

<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v32i1.2911>

