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Albert Monshan Wu's *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860-1950* is an important contribution to a burgeoning literature on the twentieth-century transformation of Christianity from an ideological pillar of Western imperialism to a globe-spanning faith whose most vibrant centers lie in the global South. Traditional interpretations, as Wu explains, have either lauded this geographic recentering as evidence of a universalizing impulse within Christianity itself or criticized it as a consequence of the "self-secularization" of European churches (13-17). More recently, historians of the Catholic Church and the non-Catholic ecumenical movement have shown how, in response to the erosion of Christian milieus in Europe and the collapse of European empires, twentieth-century Western church leaders placed their hopes for the future of Christianity in the non-European world.¹ Wu's study adopts a methodology characteristic of recent scholarship, combining close attention to religious discourses and networks with a panoramic view of the political context. However, he moves beyond a focus on European elites to frame his investigation dialogically. *From Christ to Confucius* is an illuminating study of a century of interactions between German missionaries to China and their Chinese disciples and detractors.

Wu's scholarship rests on a wide-ranging archival and linguistic base, drawing on research in Germany, Italy, Taiwan, the U.S., and Vatican City. At the center of his analysis are the Berlin Missionary Society (BMS), formed in 1824 amidst a wave of Pietist revivalism (28) and the *Societas Verbi Divini* (Society of the Divine

¹ Udi Greenberg, "Protestants, Decolonization, and European Integration, 1885-1961," *Journal of Modern History* 89:2 (June 2017): 314-354, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/691531>; Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, eds., *Globalisierung der Kirchen: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Justin Reynolds, "Against the World: International Protestantism and the Ecumenical Movement between Secularization and Politics, 1900-1952" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2016). See also James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Word, SVD), a Catholic missionary order founded in 1875 in reaction to Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (37). The BMS and SVD established themselves as the leading German missionary societies in China during the 1880s. Wu's chapters, which pay equal attention to German missionaries and their Chinese interlocutors, chart a transformation in German missionary views of Chinese culture. During the 1880s and 1890s, German missionaries spoke disparagingly of 'Confucianism.' Drawing on prevailing racial and cultural tropes, they blamed Confucianism for Chinese backwardness, stagnation, and xenophobia, all of which were ostensibly incompatible with the progressive and universal values of Christianity. This impression was only reinforced by the challenges German missionaries encountered on the ground, including harassment by the Qing government and popular anti-Christian violence. Wu demonstrates how even landmark events, including the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the 1897 occupation of the port city of Qingdao by German troops, the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), and the nationalist revolution of 1911 only further entrenched dominant missionary attitudes. Halting recognition of the need to ordain Chinese pastors and priests was marred by the insistence of missionary leaders on maintaining European tutelage.

In Wu's telling, the First World War marked a watershed in the German-Chinese encounter. The well-prepared Japanese army handily overcame the "rag-tag" German troops at Qingdao in 1914 (106), and German defeat four years later meant Germany's permanent loss of its sphere of influence in the Shandong province. The collapse of the German empire had paradoxical consequences, fueling nationalist resentment but also enabling German missionaries to present themselves as allies of the Chinese against Western imperialism. Just as important, the end of the First World War transformed church-state relations in Germany. Wu perhaps overstates the extent to which the 1919 constitution of the Weimar Republic "demolished the elevated position Prussian church leaders once enjoyed" (138). Even under the Republic, the Protestant and Catholic churches retained the rights to collect revenue through the state tax system, offer religious education in public schools (including in confessional schools, which remained the majority in many states), and maintain Sundays as public holidays.² Nevertheless, Wu rightly points out the new centrality of the concept of the "people's church" (*Volkskirche*) in 1920s Germany. With the abolition of official state churches, Protestant pastors in particular called for a church that would reflect the history and character of the *Volk* rather than the political needs of the state. The *Volkskirche* was a nebulous term and could be appropriated for liberal, conservative, or fascist ends. In the context of the missionary movement, however, the ideology of the *Volkskirche* buttressed efforts to establish an indigenous Chinese church (145-151).

Of course, the interwar rapprochement between German missionaries and Confucianism was not a product of intellectual transformations alone. Rather, as Wu argues, shifting cultural attitudes reflected the emergence of a new set of enemies: a "resurgent Buddhism" that spread to China from Japan, growing atheist movements in both Germany and China, and, most significantly, the global rise of Communism (188-189). Confucianism now appeared as a bulwark of stability that would render the Chinese resistant to Communism and anchor Chinese Christianity within ancient cultural traditions. The establishment of a National Socialist government in Germany in 1933 meant that control over local churches was ceded to Chinese clergy more quickly than German missionaries had envisioned. With the Nazi "restriction on foreign currency exchange" that decimated the scope of missionary work (208) and then the ravages of the Second World War,

² For instance, see the statistics on elementary school types in 1931-1932 in Ernst Christian Helmreich, *Religious Education in German Schools: An Historical Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 137. The majority of elementary schools in the largest states of Prussia and Bavaria remained confessional schools.

Christianity could only survive in China with the support of indigenous pastors and priests. They, in turn, were forced to negotiate compromises with the Communist regime that came to power in 1949.

From Christ to Confucius offers a thought-provoking analysis of how missions served as sites of cross-cultural exchange where the relationship between Christianity and imperialism was remade. Particularly impressive is Wu's balancing of the internal and external contexts for the transformations of missionary practice. At times, the impression is unavoidable that German and Chinese Christians were hardly the shapers of their own histories but rather found themselves at the mercy of political events. As Wu notes early on, "A cynic might argue that the about-face of German missionaries was driven primarily by geopolitical resentment and alarm over the spread of global Communism" (13). However, Wu charts a more complex narrative by highlighting the long-term trajectory of German-Chinese interactions and the multiplicity of perspectives held by both Western and Chinese Christians. To give one example, the appointment of the first Chinese apostolic prefect in February 1934, against the wishes of the local SVD bishop, was the product of conflicts between the SVD and the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide). Although SVD leaders found themselves in a defensive position due to the growing influence of Communism in China, Wu shows how the elevation of Chinese Christians to leadership positions was also a longstanding aim of both the Vatican and Chinese priests themselves. Paradoxically, the seemingly inauspicious circumstances of the early 1930s brought a once sidelined vision of an indigenous church to the forefront of Catholic missionary policy (123-127, 202-205).

Amid the many strengths of *From Christ to Confucius*, certain criticisms can be raised. These should be taken less as indications of any weaknesses of Wu's study than points that deserve consideration in future scholarship. "Confucianism" remains something of a moving target throughout the book, and one comes away with the sense that German missionaries may not so much have reformed their attitudes toward Chinese culture as redefined Confucianism in a manner that suited their purposes. In the late nineteenth century, Confucianism appeared to German missionaries as a rival religion, while by the 1920s "missionaries now defined Confucianism not as a religion, but rather as a cultural force" that was resonant with Christianity (186). Wu compellingly describes his actors' categories, but one would like to learn more about why German missionaries initially defined Confucianism as a religion, and how their understanding of "religion" (not only of Confucianism) evolved. In particular, Wu might have engaged with recent critical scholarship on secularism, which argues that Western conceptions of the secular state depend on a normative concept of religion derived from (Protestant) Christianity.³ Wu's dialogical study offers a corrective to a unidirectional model of secularism centered on hegemonic Western definitions of religion. However, further research would be needed to examine how missionaries contributed to the institutionalization of distinctions between religion, culture, and secularity in the twentieth century.

Wu's treatment of the relationship between German missionaries and National Socialism also raises questions that deserve greater exploration. Wu concludes his study with the optimistic claim that "An examination of the German missionary enterprise...offers us stories of German individuals, institutions, and ideas that lived out alternatives to the racial hatred of interwar Germany." Yet the book does not entirely fulfill its promise to

³ For instance, Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). For a recent critique of this line of argument, see Udi Greenberg and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "The Cross and the Gavel," *Dissent* 65.2 (Spring 2018): 106-113, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/cross-gavel-secularism-religious-liberty-asad-milbank>, accessed 22 June 2018.

provide a “corrective to the hegemony of that overarching narrative” focused on “an upswing of racism and xenophobia” and the rise of Nazism (258). As Wu demonstrates, some BMS leaders, including the Society’s director, Siegfried Knak, welcomed Hitler’s government in 1933 while rejecting the German Christian (*Deutsche Christen*) movement, a radical pro-Nazi faction within German Protestantism (205-208). Although Wu acknowledges the missionaries’ divided attitudes toward National Socialism, his evidence suggests that even those missionaries who became critical of the Nazi regime were concerned narrowly with the exclusion of “non-Aryans” from the church and with the financial regulation of their activities, not with Nazi racism as such (207-209). Unfortunately, aside from references to works by John Connelly and Doris Bergen (143, 206), Wu does not engage with the vast literature on Germany’s Christian churches under National Socialism. Since the 1980s, scholars in this field have argued that missionary ideology severely restricted, rather than facilitated, Christian opposition to Nazism. While the *Deutsche Christen* defined the *Volkskirche* as a racial, “Aryan” church, their Protestant and Catholic critics sought to retain the possibility for Jewish baptism and conversion. However, beyond defending the right of Jews to convert to Christianity, most German church leaders did not speak out against the disenfranchisement, persecution, and annihilation of European Jewry. Christian critiques of Nazi church policy hardly involved a repudiation of antisemitism and racism, but were built on a supersessionist theology that regarded Christianity as the fulfillment and overcoming of Judaism.⁴

This omission has significant implications for Wu’s argument. For instance, Wu describes BMS director Siegfried Knak as a champion of “racial inclusivity” who defended missionary work in Africa against objections that missions undermined the churches’ obligations to the German *Volk*. Yet Knak’s inclusive vision of Christendom was premised on deep hostility toward Jews. In September 1935, Knak published a memorandum on the “racial question” in the *Berliner Missionsberichte*, in which he advised that “When necessary, the state should not avoid tough measures” to defend the *Volk* against Jewish “corruption [*Verderben*].” Knak’s statement, adopted as an official policy by the German Protestant Missionary Council, linked theological antisemitism seamlessly with racist vitriol: “For the Christian, the Jewish people is not only the enemy or the pest [*Schädling*] of his own people, but also the warning of God against the great sin of Israel, of putting one’s own people in the place that belongs to God alone.”⁵ One is led to wonder about the impact of antisemitism (which surely was not unique to Knak) both on the theology that German missionaries brought to China and on their role in Germany’s postwar reconstruction. Even after the

⁴ The seminal work, focusing on the Protestant Confessing Church, is Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, trans. Victoria J. Barnett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); on the antisemitic foundations of the Confessing Church’s theology, see also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3-8. Tom Lawson has aptly referred to the “missionary attitude” that governed the Confessing Church’s critique of “Nazi racial legislation” in his *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 106. On the limits of Catholic opposition to National Socialism, see Beth A. Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁵ Tanja Hetzer, “Judenmission,” in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Band 3: Begriffe, Theorien, Ideologien* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 155. For Knak’s statement, see Siegfried Knak, “Ein Wort der Mission zur Rassenfrage,” *Neue Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift* 13 (1936): 36-39, quoted 38.

Holocaust, the Protestant *Judenmission* attempted to convert Jews living in displaced persons (DP) camps.⁶ A fuller engagement with Christian understandings of Judaism in twentieth-century Germany would challenge the terms on which one can judge the “failure” or “success” of missionary encounters (261). To my knowledge, there is little scholarship that compares Christian missions to European Jews with missions outside Europe, or that examines how changing attitudes toward Jews after the Holocaust shaped Christian missionary ambitions around the world. Such comparisons are beyond the scope of what is already a rich and wide-ranging study, but are desiderata for future research.

The questions raised by Wu’s study are ultimately a testament to its achievement. The ambitious scope and engaging style of *From Christ to Confucius* means that this work is sure to appeal to a broad audience of scholars and students, not only historians of Germany and China but all those who are interested in global religious movements and transnational history. It persuasively demonstrates that religion deserves a central place in histories of modern globalization and transnational exchange.

Brandon Bloch is College Fellow in Modern European History at Harvard University, where his research focuses on the intersections of religion and political culture in twentieth-century Germany. He received his Ph.D. in History from Harvard in May 2018, with a dissertation on the role of Protestant intellectual networks in the reconstruction of constitutional law and the emergence of human rights politics in postwar West Germany. His work has appeared in *Modern Intellectual History* and is forthcoming in Christopher Spehr, Klaus Fitschen, and Ernst-Joachim Waschke, eds., *Proceedings of the Congress “Cultural Impact of the Reformation”* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt).

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⁶ Matthew D. Hockenos, “The German Protestant Church and Its *Judenmission*, 1945-1950,” in Kevin P. Spicer, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 173-200, especially 177-180.