

BOOK REVIEWS

Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa Edited by T. O. Ranger and J. Weller. London, Heinemann, 1975, xvi, 285 pp., £2.50.

The British missionary is one of the more static figures in British fiction and his character has been accepted almost without modification in both American and British films. Occasionally, a writer like Graham Greene will flesh out the type figure by giving to his missionaries varieties of motives, methods and emotions, but for the most part the familiar figure remains. Benevolently paternalistic to the physical welfare of his people, he battles the satanic forces that grip their spiritual lives with whimsical good humour and an absolute certainty that he has a monopoly of the truth. No one is more responsible for these images of the missionary than the great nineteenth century missionary societies themselves. Concerned as they were to raise money for their work abroad — and they raised enormous sums — they sold their product with all the skill of a modern advertising agency. The public knew what a missionary should be like and should be doing and the societies shaped missionary narratives to confirm these images. Carlyle's Great Man, the solitary hero, that curious relic of Romanticism that persisted as a concept well into this century — T. E. Lawrence is a representative type — was able to be incarnated in the best known of the nineteenth century missionaries: Moffat, John Williams, Livingstone.

It is only fairly recently that the myth has begun to be challenged. As far as Central and East Africa is concerned we owe a singular debt to the writings of Professor T. O. Ranger who both in his own work and in books he has edited has made it clear that not only did the societies and individual missionaries bring a wide range of experience, expectations and emphasis to their work but more important came into situations that varied enormously from one another politically, socially and in their religious practices. For if the missionary was a stock figure in the old tradition, the 'heathen', whether he was a nomad on the edge of the Kalahari or belonged to one of the sophisticated cultures of West Africa, was offered to the missionary public as one of an amorphous group of savages waiting only to be enlightened by the gospel.

In his new book the most valuable section is probably the first, significantly entitled 'Christianity and Central African Religions' where the contributors deal with limited localities and the interaction between, usually, a single mission and the existing religion in the surrounding area. It is only through this sort of detailed history which allows no room for generalizations that the real complexity of any mission situation can be reconstructed and its uniqueness emphasized.

The second section of the book, 'Christianity and Colonial Society', shows the different reactions to colonial administrations that were possible within the established missionary and church bodies. Livingstonia, where the emphasis on industrial training sent out generations of skilled workers who were to have a profound effect on the economy of Northern Rhodesia, is shown in D. Cook's essay to have also given a social conscience to its adherents so that they brought with them a habit of social and community concern that resulted in the formation of welfare associations on the Copperbelt. Out of this tradition, that cut across the traditional groupings of clan and family, a national consciousness could arise. A contrast in reactions to

colonial authorities is shown in the essays on John Lester Membe and Bishop May. Membe, with extraordinary energy and organizational ability, was able to make the African Methodist Episcopal Church with its black American origins a significant congregation through large areas of central Africa. Bishop May, on the other hand, an establishment Anglican, saw his role as modifying the harsher effects of colonial office policy. Northern Rhodesian legislation for Africans was less unattractive than it might have been because of the work of a man like May, but the limitations of his background and his role as a Bishop of the established Church, finally made him less important a figure than Membe who as an African was able imaginatively to offer an orthodox and yet African witness that was appropriate to the needs of people moving into the new order that colonialism had created. Steele's important essay on Arthur Shearly Cripps appears in this section and Cripps stands as a useful figure between Membe and May. He was as close to the Shona as Membe was to the various African groups with whom he worked, and closer than May could ever have been. His achievements in terms of new churches and schools were minimal and his influence has to be seen as something far more intangible than the institutional church normally looks for as a sign of the success of its leaders. Cripps, who was more radically active in Southern Rhodesian politics than May was in the politics of the North, lived to see the failure of every cause he had espoused, and yet his grave is now an object of pilgrimage to local Shona. One likes Steele's phrase, that Cripps's mission, despite the outward signs of failure, was in fact a place of 'peculiar influence'.

The third section of the book I find the least satisfactory. Despite Ranger's valiant introduction, it is difficult to see any real connection between the need for contemplative life among Rhodesia's Catholic religious, recent manifestations of ecumenism in Rhodesia, and the combination of Christian spirituality and social activism that marks the Rukwadzano women of Rhodesia. The apparent connecting theme is the recognition that traditional African religion was profoundly involved in the social life of village and chiefdomship, and little distinction was made between the spiritual and the secular. This, it is implied, has been carried over into the particular expectations modern Christians have of the Church. The reservations one has about this section stem partly from the inadequate sampling of Weinrich's essay on the religious, but also from the suspicion, born out of one's own experience, that for many people the Church's chief value is seen to lie in its secular work. If this suspicion is true it could well be more significant than the examples chosen which might well be eccentric within the larger framework of the Christian life of Rhodesia. An article examining Africa's scepticism to Christianity's spirituality would have corrected the possibility of imbalance.

Undoubtedly, however, where the book's particular interest lies is in Ranger's introductions to the various sections. What he has achieved is to spell out the issues that should concern the future historians, sociologists, and missiologists who are attempting to examine the nature and significance of Christianity in Africa. He has described — and the essays to some extent provide — a radical departure from the old imperial history of missions which, however well intentioned, saw the whole process from the point of view of missionaries themselves. As so often before, Ranger, even if his findings are suspect in detail, has shown the way for a new history of African Christianity.