

Book Reviews

Johannes Rebmann: A Servant of God in Africa Before the Rise of Western Colonialism

by Steven Paas

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Reviewed by
Todd Statham and Erwin van der Meer

Dr. Steven Paas (born 1942) has been active in Africa for many years. As a missionary in Malawi with the Reformed Mission League of the Netherlands he taught at Zomba Theological College and served as a minister of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). As a prolific author Steven Paas authored several books, including volumes on Western and African Church History. He also compiled the much needed dictionary of Chichewa/Chinyanja. Studying the history of Chichewa lexicography stirred his interest in Johannes Rebmann (1820-1876), a German missionary in East Africa with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) who compiled the first Chichewa (Chinyanja) - English vocabulary in the 1850s. His lexicographical collection was published a year after his death as the Kiniassa dictionary in 1877. Paas provides an interesting, compelling and well-researched biography of Johannes Rebmann.

Johannes Rebmann (1820-1876) has not often been considered worthy of scholarly attention. A German missionary to East Africa during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Rebmann's career was long in years but short in converts. He spent a lifetime studying several African languages, specifically Chichewa, Nika, and Swahili - it was for others, after his death, to polish his lists of words and scraps of lexicography into publishable dictionaries and grammars. He devoted himself to the planting of the church in present day Kenya and Tanzania.

Chapters 4 to 7 describe Rebmann's missionary work in East Africa, initially with J. Ludwig Krapf and later with his wife. These chapters vividly describe the enormous obstacles pioneer missionaries in pre-colonial Africa faced, including warfare, hostile tribes, personal differences, criticism in the field and at home, political problems, lack of resources, lack of medical care

and personal tragedy, in Rebmann's the death of his wife. We also read of a fledgling church being established, successes in translation work and the progress of the Gospel against all odds.

Yet his sending organization, the British Church Missionary Society (CMS), considered a few times calling him home because of a lack of fruit in his field of labor. Some colleagues loudly complained that his style of mission was holding back the progress of the church in East Africa. Several British colonial officials pitied him as an eccentric. Where the name of Johannes Rebmann is remembered today, it is not as a missionary but rather an explorer: the first European to set eyes on the magnificence of Mt. Kilimanjaro in 1855. All in all, Rebmann's premature death in his German hometown, his fifty-six year old body broken and blind, would seem to have closed out a remarkably unsuccessful missionary life. The great value of Steven Paas' *Johannes Rebmann: A Servant of God in Africa before the Rise of Western Colonialism* is to recover Rebmann as a significant figure in the history of mission in East Africa - and a figure whose significance is by no means merely historical. Paas does this in two ways.

First, Paas convincingly demonstrates that the parallel career of Rebmann's far flashier friend and co-worker Johann Ludwig Krapf (1810-81) has obscured his rightful place in the history of East African Christianity. Krapf, who like Rebmann was trained at the Basel Mission in Switzerland, worked as a missionary in Ethiopia before joining his fellow Württemberg German in 1846 in the sultanate of Zanzibar under the auspices of the CMS. Shortly after their joint work came to an end in 1855, Krapf published self-aggrandizing accounts of their travels and missionary work that largely ignored Rebmann's contributions. Moreover, as Krapf's vision for the future of mission in Africa diverged considerably from Rebmann's own, he disparaged his former colleague for retarding the growth of the kingdom in Africa. The widespread dissemination of these publications, as well as Krapf's influence on contemporary missionary circles, argues Paas, blackened Rebmann's name among the official CMS leadership, and has ensured that his significance in the history of mission in East Africa remained in the dark. Most egregiously, Krapf robbed Rebmann of his due as a path-breaking student of several African languages. When both men were in retirement in Germany, Krapf (by all accounts an inferior lexicographer) took possession of the dying man's manuscripts in the Swahili language and published them under *his* name. Then Krapf published Rebmann's landmark *Kiniassa* (Chichewa) dictionary with a preface lamenting that Rebmann had contributed "nothing of any great value in regard to Philology." It is surprising, then, that Rebmann has not often been considered worthy of scholarly attention?

Paas is able to bring Rebmann's work out of the shadows through careful research in the archives of the CMS, the Basel Mission, and the Johannes Rebmann Foundation in Gerlingen, Germany. From the primary sources, an

engaging - and far more accurate - portrait of Rebmann comes to light. Against the dramatic backdrop of shifting British colonial policy toward the slave-trading sultanate of Zanzibar, Paas shows us a devout and humble missionary, who with his wife Emma and several dedicated African assistants, made slow but sure progress for the gospel among the tribes of coastal East Africa through steady pastoral work and evangelism, and whose lexicographical labor would be invaluable for future mission work from the coast to Lake Malawi.

If historians of mission and African Christianity will appreciate *Johannes Rebmann: A Servant of God in Africa before the Rise of Western Colonialism*, so too will missiologists. The second way in which the author recovers Rebmann from neglect is, interestingly, to value Rebmann's missionary labors precisely because he was "unsuccessful", i.e., he forsook the quick convert of a superficial evangelism for the tedium of learning African culture in order to plant the church deeply in a new soil, and patiently wait for its growth. Here, the contrast with Krapf could not be greater. Both were raised in the spiritual ethos of Württemberg pietism, and absorbed its emphasis on cross, conversion, Bible, and the coming kingdom of God. (As a point of criticism, Paas spends far too much time trying to connect Krapf to an odd variant of south German pietism that espoused universal salvation, even though it affected neither his fervor for mission nor the particulars of his missionary career). Yet Krapf held an essentially "itinerant" understanding of mission, advocating for the rapid establishment of a chain of mission stations stretching across the equatorial latitude. He publically condemned as complacent Rebmann's essentially "settled" understanding of mission that held that the missionary's immersion in local culture was necessary to contextualize the Christian message. This contrast was directly reflected in their respective approach to the study of African languages. Whereas Krapf started with English and sought to fit Swahili words to the sense of the foreign language, Rebmann took an opposite course:

"We must learn from them and ascertain the true and exact meaning of every word they mention, and especially learn their way of expressing themselves with their interesting proverbs and proverbial sayings, in one word the genius of a language, and not try to teach them what they might possibly call this and that of things they never heard of and are not likely to get acquainted with" (160).

Their difference in translation method is symptomatic of their major difference in missionary method: namely, is the Christian message to be *imposed* or *inculturated* in an alien setting?

The life and ministry of Johannes Rebmann has been so defined by Johannes Krapf that historians of mission and missiologists have not recognized the true significance of this pioneer of Christianity in East Africa. Yet even in Paas' highly revisionist biography, Rebmann remains entwined

with Krapf in presenting the reader with two very different approaches to trans-cultural mission. It is clear which one Paas favors - and his stimulating study of Rebmann makes it hard to disagree.

Rebmann's life and work as a missionary as described by Paas bears remarkable resemblance to what missionaries wrestle with in the present - the struggle of language study, the problem of cultural differences, the tension between traditional and modern Africa, disease, death, hardships, political problems, social injustices, petty rivalries, tensions between workers on the field, and communication problems and misunderstandings between the field and the home front. In conclusion the book is an interesting biography and monograph for both historians of the church, missiologists and all who labour in the mission field.

Mark Shaw

*Global Awakening:
How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution*

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010
221 pp. pb ISBN 978-0-8308-3877-6 USD \$20.00

Reviewed by Jason Bruner

The explosive growth of Christianity in the twentieth century is both a remarkable and well-established fact. The scholarship on Christians and Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America has illuminated important and fascinating dimensions of the diverse character of the world Christian church. It is Mark Shaw's contention in *Global Awakening* that the role of revivals in the development of non-western Christianity has been underrepresented in existing scholarship. Shaw argues that global revivals are at the heart of Christianity's shift to Africa, Asia and Latin America, acting as the "delivery system for a variety of forces and factors that account for global Christian growth, vitality and diversity" (29).

Mark Shaw is currently the director of the Centre for World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi, Kenya. His previous scholarship includes *The Kingdom of God in Africa* (1997) and studies in the history of Christianity and world Christianity. In *Global Awakening*, Shaw expands upon these interests to produce a work that is expansive in breadth without losing attention to local contexts.

Shaw positions his work with a concise definition: "Global revivals are charismatic people movements that transform their world by translating Christian truth and transferring power" (16). While Shaw understands these movements to be the work of the Holy Spirit, he also understands them to be contextual and conditioned by unique circumstances that allow for distinct Christian expressions. The model Shaw develops for global revivals contains five dynamics: spiritual, cultural, historical, global, and group (16). Thus, Shaw's analysis is markedly multifaceted and rejects mono-causal origins of revivals. The diversity of these revivals, therefore, is as important as their commonalities. These differences are related to another important characteristic of Shaw's revival model. Within "cultural dynamics" Shaw distinguishes between indigenization, inculturation, and contextualization. Shaw uses these terms to describe specific dimensions of cultural dynamics present in global revivals. Indigenization refers to the transfer of power to "new people" who had been marginalized. Inculturation is the dynamic between the revival message and the deep world view of a people. Contextualization is that

element of the revival that motivates a people to change their world, in a spiritual or political sense (20-24).

Shaw then presents case studies that focus upon one figure in a global revival, describing an identifying characteristic of that revival as it relates to his global revival model. Therefore, none of the chapters provides a comprehensive overview of any revival, which is certainly beyond the scope of any single volume. Rather, he seeks to illuminate one dimension of a global revival in a distinct context. These studies cover the Americas, Africa, Europe, India, and East Asia. While most of these revivals are known to the student of World Christianity, Shaw occasionally offers a unique revision of them. For example, his treatment of the North American evangelical revival led by Billy Graham draws out global dynamics that are often overlooked in American historical analyses of the movement. At the same time, specialists of any of the particular revivals might not necessarily find new historical or theological material about the revival. Specialists will also find each revival placed within a sophisticated analytical model that allows for comparison and contextualization with similar movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Non-specialists will also find the book quite accessible and useful as an introduction to revival studies or to a particular movement.

Global Awakening is based largely upon prior research on these revivals, though it stands as a valuable contribution in light of other revival scholarship. The historical or theological material from which Shaw draws in constructing each revival is often quite recent, and includes many solid and up-to-date sources. Those interested in further reading of any of the revivals can find reliable resources in the footnotes of each chapter, though the book lacks a bibliography. Shaw's work also stands out among comparable projects on revivals. Shaw distinguishes his work from J.E. Orr's work on revivals. Orr's work lacks Shaw's analytical depth and is less historically sophisticated. Comparatively, Orr presents a rather monolithic picture of global revivals with less concern for unique local expressions. *Global Awakening* differs from Allan Anderson's *Spreading Fires* (2007) in that Shaw considers revivals that are global but not necessarily "Pentecostal". Shaw is less concerned with tracing the intricate missionary and literary connections that connect revivals than he is with expositing their distinctive elements as they relate to his broader project of describing these remarkable movements.

Shaw condenses a vast range of material in each chapter, providing contextual information, issues raised in the revival, and an assessment of one of those issues as it relates to his global revival model. As a result, description and exposition of revival movements are sacrificed for analytical considerations. This means that some chapters lack a clear sense of cohesion. Chapter four on V.S. Azariah and the Dornakal revival is probably the best example of this, as it was quite complex in its content. While Shaw consistently focuses upon national/indigenous actors in each revival, women

remain quite peripheral or entirely absent from much of the work. Additionally, Shaw's work includes revivals that are not explicitly Pentecostal in nature, but still focuses upon revivals that are from the evangelical spectrum of Protestantism. Catholicism, therefore, only receives a passing mention in a footnote (141).

Global Awakening offers a multifaceted analysis of eight global revivals in the twentieth century. The work evidences analytical depth and attention to historical context with a focus upon the important work of non-western Christians in developing indigenous, contextual expressions of Christianity. It is often personal in tone, interesting throughout, and applicable as a comparative study with other revivals. The work flows out of commitments to the Christian faith and has relevance to the church leader, the historian, the missiologist and the theologian who seek to take seriously the extraordinary developments of the global church in the twentieth century. As such, the work is highly recommended.

E. Paul Balisky

***Wolaitta Evangelists: A Study of Religious
Innovation in Southern Ethiopia, 1935-1975***

PICKWICK Pub., A Division of Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-157-0 \$35.54 US on Amazon.com

Paperback, 390 pages

American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 6, 2009

Reviewed by Tibebe Eshete

Paul Balisky is a Canadian missionary from SIM who spent more than forty years in Ethiopia. He is an author and scholar. He has also taught courses at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology.

Evangelicalism is one of the most vibrant and growing expressions of Christianity in Africa. It is also one of the largest and most geographically diverse religious movements in Ethiopia. Paul Balisky joins a rapidly developing literature about the history of the evangelical movement in southern Ethiopia by providing a compelling story of the Wolaitta indigenous missionary enterprise. The Christians among the Wolaitta people make up one of the most important sections of the SIM-founded Kale Heywet Church (Word of Life Evangelical Church).

The *Wolaitta Evangelists* is about how the Wolaitta evangelists announced their newfound faith enthusiastically not only to their own Ometic language group but also to the surrounding ethnic people (xvii). It is the first ever detailed account on the remarkable contribution of entrepreneurial Wolaitta evangelists to the growth and expansion of Christianity in Ethiopia. It offers a fascinating and engaging account of the epic adventures of ordinary people who have largely been written out of political ecclesiastical history. Paul Balisky's presentation of the story of the "founding fathers" of the Wolaitta Church namely, Biru Dubale, Wandaro Dabaro, and Dana Maja, highlights the power of individual commitment, the rise and prominence of ordinary but mission-minded people, and the inspirational significance of the message of a higher calling, which may be defined as the transmission of the gospel as stipulated in the Great Commission. In a way, the book lays down the foundational edifice of the Kale Heywet Church, which has the largest evangelical Christian community in Ethiopia.

The author approaches this important subject by carefully crafting the narrative into eight chapters and an epilogue section. In so doing, he ably dwells on topics that are crucially pertinent and vitally connected to the larger story of Wolaïtta evangelists such as: the historical background of Wolaïtta before and after its incorporation into imperial Ethiopia; the landscape of the indigenous religions of southern Ethiopia; encounters between primal religions and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; the rise of prophetic movements like that of Essa Lale; the Italian occupation and its socio-political and religious impacts; the Wolaïtta evangelists' outreach activities in southern Ethiopia within their ethnically affiliated communities and far beyond in places like Kafa, Bale, and Arsi; and modalities of partnership with the SIM missionaries.

Wolaïtta Evangelists, which is a product of a Ph D dissertation, draws from research and firsthand experience and is based on rich sources, interviews, archival materials and extensive field research with copious footnotes identifying key issues to help unfamiliar readers. It is a finely textured and well written masterpiece fuelled by the author's strong desire to spell out the distinct contribution of the Wolaïtta evangelists in the epic expansion of Christianity in southern Ethiopia by incorporating his lived experience and insights as a missionary. With an evident appreciation for history and the subject of his field, Balisky explores a range of themes of cultural, political, and missiological relevance that are essential to an adequate understanding of the contexts of the growth of evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia.

The book makes a distinct contribution to the study of religious and social movements. For instance, the author's investigation into the realm of primal religion (primal world views, primal consciousness, and imagination) is of crucial importance. It is a subject whose significance has been highlighted by Kwame Bediako, the late Ghanaian theologian, but not sufficiently treated in the Ethiopian context. His brief but insightful description of ancestral spirits (pp. 231-232) is a new addition to a growing interest in the study of primal religions in Africa. Though the impact of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on primal religion awaits further scrutiny, Balisky shows that the rise of prophetic movements expressed through the voices of men like Esa Lale represent indigenously inspired religious initiatives that arise within an Orthodox Christian tradition whose potency had declined over the years. In the contexts of center-periphery relations in Ethiopia, such movements can also epitomize voices from the margin.

Another significant contribution of the book is the author's investigation of the Italian period and how the discontinuity of the historical momentum

ironically generated a default atmosphere for the expansion of Christianity. This has been discussed by other authors, including Raymond Davis (*Fire on the Mountain*), but Balisky's nuanced approach reveals his rich insight and understanding of the local contexts. Another merit of Balisky's work is his inclusion of indigenous gospel songs (pp. 157-159) as articulations of "folk theology" and their significance in transmitting the gospel in a largely "illiterate" society, thus stressing the importance of songs in the evangelization process.

No doubt a major significance of the book is Balisky's probing and provocative accounts of the Wolaitta evangelists in their evangelization of a large segment of the people of the southern Ethiopia, the indomitable zeal with which they accomplished it, the sacrifices they made and the success that was achieved against great odds. Balisky also emphasizes the mission-sending congregations that served as their home support base, and he notes the partnership of the SIM. Balisky is quick to admit that Wolaitta evangelists bore the brunt of the work and consequently grants them the credit they deserve by noting, "the evangelists are able to accomplish what expatriate missionaries could not do on their own" (p. 279).

The book is a unique contribution to the understanding of what can be termed as inter-zonal cross-cultural evangelization. It is a book which demonstrates that the evangelical faith has fulfilled its promise as an inspirational and liberating power in the lives of the many millions it has influenced by empowering them to reconfigure their identity in the context of the socio-political reality of imperial Ethiopia.

This book is more than mission studies or church history. It is a work that contributes new insight to understanding the history of the peoples of Ethiopia from the perspective of the periphery. It also vitally demonstrates the fresh angles the study of religion can provide to the field of socio-political and cultural studies in Ethiopia.

Overall, *Wolaitta Evangelists* is a veritable storehouse of information on the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, and a timely and relevant one for that matter. It is an invaluable resource for understanding the phenomenal expansion of the evangelical faith in Ethiopia and the role of local agency. It serves as a key point of reference for all those in the academy, the church and the wider society who want to have a fuller understanding of the evolutionary dynamics and social significance of a religious movement.

Having said that, it is important to note that Christian scholars should be wary of the implications of an overly sympathetic treatment of the subject they

study. Out of his deep compassion for the people who constitute the subject of his study, Balisky exhibits a tendency to not being fully sensitive to the complexity of the Ethiopian experience. I call his attention to the plea of the late Professor Kalu, "It is impossible to do any academics in the African context, at the edge of the twenty-first century without a concern for the ashes on our faces," (*Power, Poverty, and Prayer*, p.199). Kalu urges us to view our scholarly endeavor as a moral discourse and thereby he directs us to treat the subjects we study with modesty and care. From this perspective, Balisky's use of certain emotive terms in some parts of the book does not seem to have redemptive significance. For instance, to insert the quote on p. 29 "the Amhara is to rule, not to obey" without sufficiently exploring the cultural context of its usage, the use of words like, "Amhara colonizers " (p. 100), "hegemony of the Amhara" (p. 214), "Ethiopian imperialism", "myth of evangelization" (p. 50) to cite but few, do not promote healing. Applying the notion of the "myth of evangelization" to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is particularly offensive and demeans its legacy, which is admittedly uneven, in southern Ethiopia. Balisky himself admits the role and evangelistic enterprises of the national church through the 14th to the 17th centuries (pp. 87, 307).

If part of a Christian scholar's calling is to bring healing as best he can, then Ethiopia's "problematic" past should be approached cautiously so we do not cause people to remember it in a way that haunts them. This is especially true given the current volatile ethnic situation in Ethiopia and the need for unity among Christians. We need alternative viewpoints that help people move beyond the issues that divided them in the past by building a middle ground for the nation's collective future.

Balisky also needs to pay careful attention to the time of Menelik's expansion. Menelik's political project was to unify Ethiopia in the midst of the challenge of European imperialism, surely a laudable goal no matter how faulty his methodology was. To explain his national project in terms of a quest for rich sources of both "food and labor" (p. 67) is to provide an overly simplistic version of a complex process. Our leaders and those doing their bidding were ignorant of the future and they did not have the benefit of hindsight that we enjoy. What some perceive as failures need to be weighed in light of their situation, namely their existential challenges, opportunities, and limitations.

Despite these minor imperfections, theological institutions, historians and missiologists will find this a valuable volume to add to their library.

Books Received

T. Desmond Alexander

From Eden to the New Jerusalem: Exploring God's Plan for Life on Earth

Nottingham: IVP, 2008

ISBN 978 1 84474 285 1 pb 208 pgs

Thomas C. Oden

The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition

Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2011

ISBN 978 0 8308 3933 9 pb 279 pgs

Gerald H. Anderson (with John Roxborough; John M. Prior; Christoffer H. Grundmann)

Witness to World Christianity: The International Association for Mission Studies, 1972-2012

New Haven, Connecticut: OMSC Publications, 2012

ISBN 978 0 9762205 9 6 pb 227 pgs