

James Skidmore

Today I'm speaking with Jeremy Best, author of *Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire*, published by the University of Toronto Press. Jeremy is Associate Professor of History at Iowa State University of Science and Technology. He is a scholar of the history of race, religion, and culture in 19th and 20th-century Germany. Jeremy, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

Jeremy Best

Skid, thank you so much for having me and for this real honour. I'm really pleased and flattered to have been selected.

James Skidmore

Marvellous.

Jeremy Best

Great to be here.

James Skidmore

Great to have you. You offer in *Heavenly Fatherland* a revisionist history of German imperialism. Basically, your claim is that German Protestant missionaries who plied their trade in imperial Germany's colonial holdings were more internationalist than nationalist in their worldview and that as a result, German colonialism – at least as practiced by these missionaries – was not an attempt to assert racial superiority. Now, do I have that right?

Jeremy Best

Yeah. I wanted in the book to engage with what's a recurring theme in German history and German studies, this question of continuities and discontinuities. And missionaries in German colonial space felt like a place where I could do that, where I could talk about how we have different structures of power, different structures of ideology and race and so forth. And one of the things that I wanted to drive home with the book is that I really have come to see this period of the 1880s to World War I and beyond as a period of sort of multiple colonialisms. There's one big colonial project, we can say, [which is what] all the Western and other colonial powers are engaging in and it filters down through even some smaller states. But then we need to look into that and parse out that there were multiple projects going on. And so there was in some way – and I don't want to overstate this – there was in some way a German colonial project that was distinct in certain ways from other colonial projects. But also there was a missionary colonial project. And, in fact, Germany's missionaries had a distinct project. And these projects, to keep using that word, intersected with others.

Through this, it helped me bring Protestant missionaries into the history of Germany in general. And while there is work on this and there's been work on this in particularly the German language, there hasn't been very much in English. And that is paired with, generally, a study of missionaries that I see as sort of compartmentalized into mission studies and into religious studies and theology, and not integrated with historical studies. And so this was a project bent on that. And in doing that, what emerged for me and what I discovered is just the extent of colonial culture across Germany in this period. We have had for a long time – I think this is being turned around – this notion that the German colonial period was minor, it was brief, it was unimportant. And lots of other scholars have shown that to be false. And again, bringing religious history into this was yet another opportunity to show that in

fact, colonial history and colonial culture was widespread across Germany before World War I and after, and that there was an ongoing importance of religious history as well through this period. So I'm participating sort of in these two projects of restoring German colonial history or perhaps revealing it, as well as demonstrating that religious history continues to be vibrant and important. And one of the outcomes of this, I think, is that, to come back to your question, is that we discovered that the history of racism and racial science in Germany is much more complicated than it's been treated, in many ways. And by integrating different thinkers and different actors into that study, we end up with a much more enriched and complicated, as I already said, story that makes it harder to draw these straight lines between or—generally backwards from Nazism.

James Skidmore

You bring a lot of nuance to the period, to our notions of what German imperialism was and what it led to. And yeah, we do draw a straight line. And I guess with your notion of these multiple colonialisms, as you put it, we have to follow different routes. We have to follow these different paths. I'm really curious; I'd never heard the term *Missionswissenschaft* before reading your book. So that was interesting to me to learn that. And I know another jury member remarked that they never thought they would find a history of missionaries exciting, and yet they did. So, who were these missionaries? Tell us about that.

Jeremy Best

That might be one of the best compliments I've gotten about this book, is this notion that I took a topic and made it exciting to a reader. And I think that's really flattering. And I guess I'll thank the anonymous jury member for that compliment. And I'll be honest, I hadn't heard the word *Missionswissenschaft* before this project. I hadn't heard its general English translation of *missionsology*, really, before this project. And I didn't know as much about missionaries either. I think what I discovered is that these missionaries are exciting if you get yourself sort of used to thinking about them, right? I think missionaries are often a sort of metaphor of European and Western colonial dominance; and that's absolutely true. And nothing in this project is meant to excuse or elide or minimize the ways in which the missionaries were part of a project. And when we talk about colonial projects, I want to stress that they overlap and they intersect. And that the missionaries absolutely were part of a cultural colonial project that was aiming to intentionally or unintentionally, or rather perhaps maliciously or unmaliciously, transform [or] destroy indigenous cultures. But these missionaries are exciting because, if we take them as individuals or as collectives, they're adventurers. [It's] a difficult position of trying to be empathetic to historical actors and try to treat them with respect and admire some of their qualities, if you can, but not excuse their actions. But when we think about [the fact that] these are folks who set aside their lives and they went to another place to do something that at least in their minds was philanthropic, was humanitarian, I think that that's an important step to take. It's one that I try to teach my students; is that historical empathy is key to doing our work, and so recognizing that the missionaries generally didn't set out to mistreat people or to create bad outcomes.

To come back to the *Missionswissenschaftler*, the practitioners and the ideologists or the theologians that [they] are, what's also exciting, I guess, about them is that they're inventors. I mean, they create this discipline. The period my book covers is the invention of *Missionswissenschaft* – which has parallels and there's some precursors that certainly scholars with expertise in this might quibble – but really, as a modern intellectual discipline, it's created in the 1870s and 1880s in Germany and in some other countries. But the Germans are the ones who really turned it into this sort of interdisciplinary project, integrating theology with anthropology, or ethnography with agricultural sciences, with pedagogy [etc.]. And I think that's really interesting; particularly, I would guess, to a scholar to hear

about how a group of scholars got together and did their work. And I think that what's also interesting about them is that they teach us something about nonconformity in Germany. Very often, Protestants are sort of lumped in as all kind of a collective, owing to the power of the state church and the hierarchies. But the missionaries – and maybe we'll come back to this in other ways – were Pietists, they were Moravians, which are sort of sometimes Pietists as well. And their mission societies exist outside of the church hierarchy. They're very rarely directly supported by church leadership. And so we get a bit of a sense of otherness within the German structure that I think adds a bit of dynamism to what they're up to because they feel free to make their own way, I think.

James Skidmore

Yes. What you do in your book, I think, that's really quite good is that you give us the on-the-ground kind of view, if you will, from the missionaries' point of view. Not that you're trying to defend them or promote their work or what have you, but simply so that we can understand how they understood what they were doing, how they understood their mission. And you point out that it's not this kind of uniform Lutheranism or Protestantism; that these are missionaries from various Protestant sects, part of that larger, even worldwide ecumenical movement among Protestants, of course. And you give us a sense of their work in Africa. You're focusing especially on Africa in this book. And I thought that was really useful because what we find out by hearing about what they're thinking and what they're trying to do in terms of the educational part of their mission, for example, with the Africans they're working with – they don't appear to be lackeys of the state, if I can use that term. Or they even take some exception to the idea that they should be educating Africans to simply serve the colonial purposes of the German state, of the imperial state. Or rather, they think they should be educating Africans because they feel they should be bringing that Western cultural "Gut," is the German term, to them. And so what I find really interesting is: why weren't they so inclined? Why were they a bit at odds with the imperial colonial project?

Jeremy Best

Yeah. This was a really important finding, I think. But before I get into it, I want to reiterate [is that] we don't want to set aside this sort of collaborative or supportive nature that the missions provided, right? They were often pioneers – and that's a phrase that's been used in many places. They were often the first Europeans or white people to go into these areas with the intent to stay. They were almost always the ones who learned the local languages and made that useful. And there's plenty of evidence that they also facilitated some of the economic transformations that followed. That said – and the German missionaries are not entirely unique in this in the sense that they saw themselves as autonomous and they saw themselves as having to maintain that autonomy – I do think it's unique to German history to recognize a serious group of Protestants who are not ashamed of their Germanness, that are very comfortable being Germans, but who are standing outside of the state-friendly or the staatsfreundliche relationship that the church is often assumed to have in Germany, particularly the Protestant church.

What led them to be able to sort of incline themselves against or away from the state purpose or the state goals of colonialism: one is the Pietism, which has this deep history of anti-hierarchical, anti-state relationship in Germany. That, through Pietism's sort of second wave in the early 19th century, links the missionaries with the Romantic movement, which has its own anti-state elements within it, but also has its anti-capitalist or anti-industrialist elements that come through. And so when we start there, the missionaries are already sort of prepositioned in their intellectual tradition to see the colonial project of state domination and economic exploitation as problematic. That's not a thing they particularly want to participate in. We also see, I argue, in one place – in passing, but I think it's important – is that the

connections to inner mission, which is mission work to re-christianize and to serve the poor and the disenfranchised in Germany, is connected to these outer missions, or foreign mission work. And that experience of what it is that capitalism is doing to people is important for their opposition to state-run capitalistic colonialism. And there's an interesting part where they say [that] that structure is what has led to why there are so many socialists; and we as Christians are opposed to socialism, and if we allow that to happen in the colonies, then the colonized people will become socialists and we will lose them as well. So there's sort of a logic they follow.

What's most important to me, though, is that the theology that the missionaries end up with, that grows out of these origins, is one that says: Christianity and Protestantism especially are far more important than any other identity, and that our project is to create those kind of people to convert, to evangelize our faith. And we can see in that formation, it ties back again to the Romantic interest in language and the linguistic origins of identity. And when the missionaries link their own interest in language to how to reach those that they would convert, they become very interested in indigenous languages. And they link that indigenous language—which is not surprising, right? But they link that to building communities and saying: this community of Africans – I particularly focus on German East Africa, or what is now Tanzania – this community, these various – at the time they would have called them tribes; they're called tribes now, but that's a modern usage – that the way to make Christians is to make communities of Christians. And the way to make communities is to recognize the bonds that exist amongst them. And then that will then link upward, if we're sort of thinking upward into a universal Protestantism. And so that sets them again against a secular colonial project that's looking to create colonies of German subjects and colonies of German workers or German labourers. And so this sort of aversion to the state and to cultural transformation helps drive this outsidership to the state-driven project.

James Skidmore

Yeah. It is striking what you write in the book about the support for local languages, for example. That surprised me; the respect for the indigenous and local languages, and a very proper view, I think, of the connection, of course, between language and culture, cultural identity. So that was, to me, really striking because I'm not familiar with this work. And of course, I just assumed that the missionaries would be very much about German only.

Jeremy Best

Yeah. And some of that grows out of the knowledge that an American or a Canadian or generally a European has of mission work, [which] is of the British mission project or the American mission project or whatever home country the scholars are speaking of. If it's the British, American, or Canadian too, then it very much is much more likely – although not universally oriented – towards a cultural transformation project, right? We want to make these people into English-speaking, [English-dressing people]. There's much more of a tendency in that direction, at least in the period before World War I.

James Skidmore

You also write in the book – and you mentioned already – the Hilfsvereine, so the organizations back home in Germany that supported the work of the missions. And what's interesting there is that you feel that those Hilfsvereine helped to influence German attitudes towards the inhabitants of the German colonies. Can you tell us what's the evidence for that?

Jeremy Best

Well, so of course the caveat here has to be to try to be a very careful scholar, that unless someone tells you what they think about a thing, you can't know, right? Rezeptionsgeschichte is very difficult. But what I can do is I can show you what was put before them, what they encountered, and somewhat make a reasonable argument that they encountered all these things. And knowing how humans work, it seems unlikely that they weren't influenced in some serious way. So the first thing to start talking about is simply to say [about] these Hilfsvereine [is that] each of the mission societies had their networks of them. In my book, I focus on the Berlin Mission society's Hilfsvereine. They had well over a hundred of them scattered across Protestant Germany, especially concentrated in what was politically Prussia and Prussian Saxony, and in other dense places of Protestant population. And it's pretty safe; we can count them up [when] we kind of compare them to the major secular advocacy organization of the colonial society, the German Colonial Society. And there are more chapters just for the Berlin Mission Society than there are for chapters of the German Colonial Society. The membership numbers are—it's hard to calculate those exactly, but it seems quite reasonable to suggest that the colonial society had—the numbers are escaping a bit, but somewhere in the low hundred thousands. And the Mission Societies, just the Prussian or just the Berlin one, was reaching numbers of that scale easily. And so [we can] start adding up numbers. So first of all, just sort of the networks and their size and the volume of information we put out there. And then in terms of the evidence of what was going on with these Hilfsvereine, in the archives of the Berlin mission, there are examples of both reports by these Hilfsvereine of what they're up to, with some hints of what the positioning of the Hilfsvereine was. You know, they put on a Missionsfest and had such-and-such missionary come visit, and he spoke on X-Y-Z. And the language being used tended to match and be sort of continuous with what was being produced at the upper levels of the mission societies and the Missionswissenschaftler with this sort of sense of cultural equivalency or cultural sensitivity, whatever language we want to use on that.

Jeremy Best

So we have evidence of what the Vereine were actually up to. There's also evidence of how the mission societies tried to guide what they're up to: they offered training sessions for traveling speakers [inaudible 00:21:06]; they offered training sessions for pastors and teachers; they offered training sessions for the boards of these local Hilfsvereine. And in those training sessions, there's a pretty consistent messaging that matches the theology that I see elsewhere that says: the indigenous are our brothers and sisters before Christ. What matters the most is their joining of our community, a general respect for linguistic and, to some extent, cultural diversity. We also have scant pieces here and there where converted Africans and also converted East and South Asians, Chinese, Indians are brought back to Germany on speaking tours as visitors. And one of the important juxtapositions I have is: one man was brought back as part of a brass choir from South Africa, and he participated in a colonial exhibition in Berlin and sort of was displayed with his fellow performers at the zoo. And we have that happening in the man's same trip, from what I can reconstruct: he was brought to the small city of Angermünde, just north of Berlin, to participate in the Missionsfest. And there he is presented, yes, he's presented in a sort of European Christian way, but he sings and speaks in his birth language, and he is described as a fellow Christian. There's a difference here. It's a difference of degrees, but it is a difference. So the evidence is there, right? That the missionaries were—you could almost say they're putting out almost a fire hose of their own version. And people can't help but get at least a little bit wet, I would argue.

James Skidmore

That's a good analogy.

Jeremy Best

Thank you.

James Skidmore

And just the treatment of that one person in the brass choir; one day he's in the zoo, the next day he's a Christian like the rest of us. In the book, you write that the missionaries, they rejected this notion of the essentialized, racialized, biological categories. They rejected that, but they still considered Africans as culturally inferior. So that seems to be almost a similar kind of—you're trying to hold two opposing ideas at the same time. Not you, but the missionaries. And so I'm wondering: how did that work? Because to me, that's still racism in a way.

Jeremy Best

Oh, it is. Yes. The missionaries were still racist, right? You know, there's some scholarship that talks about the 19th century as the racial century, right? And we could probably extend that beyond. And [the missionaries] absolutely held racial ideas. But [a] big part of the argument for continuities between the racial state as constructed in the 19th century in the German colonies and the racial state as constructed in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s is that there's this continuity of biological racism, that there's this connection. And certainly there's a connection, right? There certainly are biological racists in the 1890s and 1900s, and there's biological racists in the 1930s and 1940s. But there are also other kinds of racial thought that have other outcomes potentially. And this racial view of the missionaries is that they have different racial ideas. It's a slippery slope to use that; and it's absolutely true that they have sort of a separatist or a segregationist notion. Not that they want to segregate, but that same sort of notion that there is a difference and that these cultures should be kept separate and kept together. And scholars on South Africa have pointed to the direct line from that thinking to apartheid thinking. And it's actually there. But there is also space in the missionaries conception for cultural autonomy; there is space for appreciation. It is absolutely and always from a position of superiority. I think, to come back to the notion of trying to put ourselves in the minds of the missionaries, is: on the one hand, they are just surrounded by racial thought. It is the best of knowledge at the time, and they're trying to be the best of intellectuals. They are also people who are certain that they have the truth, right? That they have Christian truth and [that] Protestantism is the right way to be. So how could you go and be a missionary and not think that what you had was better than what was being offered? But what emerges is that they go and sometimes they decide it's not all the way better or it's not perfect. And that suggests to me a certain openness to difference.

And the other way to talk about this is that Protestant superiority at the time amongst missionaries extended the other direction, to the sense of other white Europeans who are wrong because they're Catholic or because they're Orthodox or because they're Jewish; that Protestantism is the best way to be in the world, period. And that there's a bit of an opening that we see in which it was a little more comfortable, I think – and I don't want to speak for people of the past, let alone people of colour – but I think it was a little more comfortable to at least imagine a space in the version of the world that the Protestant German missionaries were creating; I think it would have been a little bit more easy to imagine a space where you could be some – I'm getting out ahead of my skis – I think some space to be black or to be African or to be whatever other self-identity there was. But again, I don't want to defend what was clearly a racist thing. I fall back on what my PhD advisor said: it's racism, but it's not your grandfather's racism. And sort of the sense of: [it's] not a temporal thing, but just some other version that we need to recognize the nuance and the difference to really understand what's going.

James Skidmore

Understand it for what it was. You know, books answer questions, but they also raise new questions. What new question does your book raise?

Jeremy Best

That's great. I think it raises a question [about]: if we get 10,000ft up, how do you construct a multicultural society? I think it's a question of whether a universalistic set of values which the Protestants have – you know, there's a universal Christian base that they think everyone has access to and everyone should be in – or whether there's some other more multicultural or inclusive [view]; which is better. And I know where I sit. But I think it's an ongoing human debate is: how do we deal with difference in society, difference in culture and common humanity, and how do we build societies that allow people to be their fullest selves but also in community with others who might be different? I think that's a question that the book kind of points to. And we just got finished talking about how these missionaries can have this sort of universalist message. And it's very easy for them to say: we're all brothers and sisters before Christ. But then when the rubber meets the road, they are slow-walking any attempt to ordain African priests. They are continuing paternalistic relationships in other places. They are proving incapable of really getting the German administration to do the things that they want. So the limits of this, both internal and external to the movement, are important. So that's sort of a good question. The other part of it was like, well, I wrote the book because I don't have any more questions. [laughing] But there are of course more questions.

James Skidmore

There are always more questions. [laughing]

Jeremy Best

Yeah, [and] I'm interested in the transition of this period where the missionaries were kicked out. Generally, German missionaries were kicked out of all the mission fields and: what happens while they're gone? Where do they go? The conclusion of the book has a bit of an epilogue section that talks about [the fact that] many of them moved into inner mission work in Germany and a number of them were sort of disenchanted with the project and turned away from the universalistic internationalism. But I'd be interested to see some more work on that.

James Skidmore

Right. And then finally, just as we're talking about books, what have you read lately that you'd like to encourage others to read?

Jeremy Best

That's a great question. I'm jumping on a bit of a bandwagon, but Monica Black's "A Demon-Haunted Land" is just an outstanding book. I just read it – both because I wanted to, but also I'm teaching a graduate course, a graduate seminar – and it is a beautifully written book that sort of takes you through this brief period of West German history and [discusses] this figure, this Gröning figure, who's this sort of wonder doctor, faith healer, maybe he's a con man. And [the book] does – what is the best work I think you can do when you're working on histories of religion or spiritualism or magic – it doesn't engage very much with whether or not what Gröning was doing was "real." Because, to come back to something I said earlier, if we're going to do history and we want to tell what was "real" about the past, it's important to respect the subjectivity and the subjective experience of people in the past. And so if it was real to the people receiving Gröning's healings, then it was real. Because it had a

historical impact. It had an impact on people's lives. And so I think Monica Black's book is a really good example of that. And it's written very accessibly; I'm really impressed that it seems to be doing a good job of reaching a wider audience and bringing people into this study of German history, which is so important to me.

James Skidmore

All right, well, thank you. Thank you, Jeremy, for that recommendation. And thanks for speaking to us today about your book, "Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire."

Jeremy Best

Well, thank you. Skid. This is really great. And again, I'm totally floored and honoured to have been put on this list. I'm really happy to talk to you about my book. Thank you.

James Skidmore

Wonderful. Congratulations.

Jeremy Best

Thank you.

James Skidmore

So you've been listening to Jeremy Best, who is one of the six shortlisted authors for the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize for 2021, books published in 2021. For more information on Jeremy's book and the other books in the shortlist, please go to our website, wcgs.ca. Thanks for listening.