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Book Review of:

WALTER L. WILLIAMS, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900*.
Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, 260 pp.

Professor Williams has written an accessible and useful book which stresses an often forgotten aspect of the christianization of Africa, namely that black Americans played a vivid and particular role in that process. The author's expertise lies less in the African reception of that evangelism than in the kinds of Afro-American who took this role upon themselves, the sort of culture which pushed them towards such work and the personal triumphs and crises that resulted from it. Its early focus allows the reader to understand better how, despite emancipation, American blacks achieved full freedom only in the running of their churches. Their success in this area led them to wish to evangelize farther afield; but, rather than being simply part and parcel of the rise of missionary sentiment within Christianity, American blacks working in Africa often felt in terms that could be expressed as pan-Africanist.

For many the strain was immense. Despite their own feelings that they should somehow feel close to the African world their ancestors had been torn from, many of them were Christian Americans above all; African practices and ideologies which they tried to comprehend and sympathize with all too often simply appalled them. The propensity to understand marked them off from many white missionaries but in the end their absorption of Western Christian values led them to condemn 'pagan ways' no less than their white counterparts.

Williams is undoubtedly right in stressing the importance of this work in the developing relationship between American blacks and Africa. It undoubtedly fostered interest in Africa among Afro-Americans. But it also to some extent laid down some of the rather paternalist context of the early links between Africans and Americans within the pan-African movement.

There are in addition to the text, some very useful tables on, for example, Africans educated in America before 1900.

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Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900. By Walter L. Williams.
(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982. xviii + 259 pp. Map, illustrations, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.50.)

In recent years scholars of nineteenth-century Afro-American and African relations have benefited from several fine biographies of leading Pan-African intellectuals and clergymen, including works by Edwin Redkey on Henry M. Turner, Hollis Lynch on Edward W. Blyden, and Cyril Griffith on Martin R. Delany.

Walter L. Williams's book is an important addition to Pan-African scholarship because it elucidates the broader background against which such dynamic leaders emerged. Williams identifies less-recognized black American missionaries to Africa while charting thoroughly the different roles black and white American churches played in the African mission field during the late nineteenth century. He argues convincingly that the Afro-American missionary nexus with Africans was a more vital antecedent to twentieth century Pan-Africanism than was the emigrationist movement.

The first half of the book covers the development of the Africa mission activities of the independent black denominations. While Williams attributes the missionary work of black churches largely to the influence of white church bodies that sponsored black missionaries, he is careful to point out other factors that resulted in significant independent black church mission movements. Those factors included "increased Western interest in Africa, an expansionist Christianiteology, emigration sentiment, the decline of white church use of Afro-American missionaries, and especially the consolidation of well-developed large black denominations."

The author describes concisely the African missionary activities of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), A.M.E. Zion, and black Baptist churches. Especially noteworthy are the details of little-known black missionary figures such as William H. Sheppard (Presbyterian), Alexander P. Camphor (Methodist), and Thomas L. Johnson (Baptist). In the second half of the book, Williams shows that although black missionaries identified racially with Africans and opposed imperialism in Africa, in general they viewed indigenous African culture and religion (including Islam) as inferior and ungodly.

The author also provides a useful overview of the activities of black colleges and churches in educating Africans in the United States. Despite its Western chauvinism, Williams concludes, "the mission movement emphasized the concept, crucial to the rise of Pan Africanism, that the future status of black Americans was eventually tied to that of Africans." The book has some weaknesses. Theological and Christian historians will wince at the loose, secularized meanings the author attaches to such words as "heathen" and "mission." Williams quotes the missionaries frequently but with not enough length or depth to expose readers to subtleties of their theological reasoning and moral pragmatism.

However, despite that semantical laxity, historians now have a meritorious account of religious and educational linkages that post-Reconstruction Afro-Americans painstakingly fostered with their African brothers and sisters.