This monograph by Andreana C. Prichard, the Wick Cary Associate Professor of Honors and African History at the Honors College at the University of Oklahoma, concerns the history of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in Tanzania and Zanzibar from its entry into the region in 1863 to the postcolonial period. As a Tractarian missionary society founded by David Livingstone, with support from Anglicans at Oxford and Cambridge, the UMCA sought not only to establish Christianity in Central Africa but also to abolish the slave trade. In relation to the UMCA, Prichard analyzes the quotidian experiences of female African lay evangelists. Over the course of seven chapters, she argues that female African UMCA adherents built and maintained an “affective spiritual community” through their daily embodiment of shared Christian values that transcended territorial, generational, national, and ethnic identities during a period of great social change in East African history (p. 4).

Prichard’s monograph underscores the complexity of cross-cultural encounters by highlighting the frequent inability of people who come from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds to understand each other’s expectations, motivations, and assumptions. When liberated Africans began to arrive in the UMCA mission in the mid-nineteenth century, they did not see themselves as having been “redeemed.” Instead, they interpreted their incorporation into the mission simply “as a transfer from one master to another” (p. 59). Not only did the UMCA missionaries tell Africans where they could live, whom they could marry, and to which God they could pray, but these foreigners also stripped them of their pre-Christian clothes and names. Missionaries even required converts to clean, cook, retrieve water, and maintain the grounds of the mission in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter. In short, what the UMCA missionaries believed was a solid lesson in the Christian work ethic and the value of wage labor most likely looked to Africans more like slavery.

Episodes of cross-cultural miscommunication continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, many African women at the Mbweni Girls School, which the UMCA founded in Zanzibar in 1887, could not see the value of teacher training. Raised in a society that valued people as the basis of wealth, these African women would have seen the accumulation of book knowledge as “an implausible way to get ahead in life” (p. 85). Misunderstandings also manifested in reproduction and marriage conflicts during the 1910s and 1920s—or what one colonial officer called “girl cases” (p. 159). As the 1921 Mbweni abortion scandal demonstrated, African UMCA adherents believed that abortion was a legitimate strategy for dealing with “socially dangerous” and “illegitimate” pregnancies (pp. 165, 166). While many Africans did not consider a pregnancy “legitimate” until a woman had undergone certain initiation and/or marriage rituals (p. 165), UMCA missionaries thought abortion was always a sinful and abhorrent practice. A 1929 marriage scandal where an old woman was accused of selling her granddaughter to an “Arab” man also highlighted the differing worldviews of converts and missionaries (p. 172). What missionaries believed was a case of sexual exploitation was probably nothing more than a marriage negotiation or a case
of redeemable pawnship through which the grandmother hoped to secure access to greater resources, security, and stability in turbulent times. The failure to understand the motivations of African adherents was also the reason why the UMCA established a religious order specifically for African women, Chama cha Mariamu Mtakatifu (CMM), rather than integrate them into the Community of the Sacred Passion (CSP). Missionaries believed that African postulants dropped out of the CSP in high rates due to their ‘imperfect’ understanding of the celibate life” (p. 193). In reality, Prichard shows, the racial and power dynamics of the CSP prevented African postulants from developing “the types of affective relationships” that they wanted to forge with their sisters in spirit (p. 196).

Prichard’s monograph includes a useful note about the challenges that she encountered while conducting archival research. In her discussion about the underfunded, disorganized, and fragmented Tanzania National Archives, Prichard raises an important yet frequently neglected question about the ways in which “local norms of gender, seniority, and status” can shape the archival experience of researchers. “As a young (and young-looking) female graduate student,” Prichard writes, “I experienced markedly different treatment and subsequently received even more limited access than my male contemporaries and older male colleagues” (p. 246). This observation about the sexual discrimination that female researchers may experience in African archives ought to be the subject of a thoughtful discussion among Africanist historians.

Prichard nevertheless draws on an impressive array of archival sources. She conducted archival research in East Africa at the Tanzania National Archives, the Zanzibar National Archives, Dar es Salaam University, and a variety of “tin trunk” and “shadow” archives (pp. 19, 214, 215, 246), by which Prichard means the sideboards, cabinets, and storage closets of former UMCA parishes scattered throughout Tanzania and Zanzibar. Prichard also did archival research in the United Kingdom at the University of Oxford, the School of Oriental and African Studies, the British Library, and the Convent of the Sacred Passion in Shoreham-by-Sea. She uses logbooks, mission diaries, registers, correspondence, autobiographies, sermons, marriage certificates, and other ephemera produced by both British missionaries and African agents of the UMCA. UMCA periodicals, such as *African Tidings*, *Central Africa*, and *Msimalizi*, also figure prominently in the endnotes of this monograph.

Prichard also uses oral data. Between 2007 and 2008 during her Fulbright-Hays in East Africa, Prichard conducted more than eighty formal interviews with elderly UMCA congregants and clerics and their UMCA descendents, members of the Anglican Church of Tanzania, former UMCA stakeholders, Mothers’ Union members, African and British nuns of religious orders founded by the UMCA, former UMCA teachers, and local historians. While some of the interviews, like the ones she conducted with members of CMM, allowed Prichard “to contextualize and give meaning to much of the information” in documents that did not do a good job of recording the historical experiences of women, she nonetheless candidly admits to her readers that, overall, “I learned less that had direct application to my queries than I had initially (and perhaps naively) hoped” (pp. 296n74, 248). Based on a close reading of the endnotes, Prichard only directly cites eight of her interviews (pp. 296n77; 297n80, n81, n91, n94, n102; 298n103, n104; 303n7). She occasionally draws on her own experience in the field, but at its core this monograph remains an archival project.

Prichard’s monograph could have more explicitly engaged with existing theories of religious conversion in Africa. Recent literature has focused on the role of discontinuity in African conversion, or the ways in which Africans created a radical break with their past through the act of public confession.[1] The UMCA, however, believed that conversion was a slow and incremental process. Adherents were won not by preaching the gospel from a pulpit but rather by following the apostolic example—that is, by “cultivating quotidian habits, performing embodied knowledge, and living out Christian principles” (p. 41). The practice of living in square European-style homes, speaking English, wearing Western clothing, and having monogamous relationships allowed African UMCA adherents to model Christian virtues for other Africans in order to show that “they, too, could live out the Christian ideal” (p. 116). While these details add to our understanding of mission practices, they also prompt us to ask in what ways the UMCA case adds nuance to, or even challenges, the dominant theories of religious change in Africa.

Prichard, however, should be praised for critically questioning the notion of “conversion,” as demonstrated by her location of the term in scare quotes (pp. 152-153). Conversion is an inherently imprecise and subjective process, but the majority of mission historians assume that it is an observable fact and use the term without critical evaluation. Prichard’s refusal to assign any clear denotation to a term that may have no possible def-
inition in scholarly discourse marks an important step in
the right direction, as the entire field of African studies
has taken the concept of conversion at face value for far
too long.

Sisters in Spirit makes an important contribution
to the historical literature on Tractarianism, Tanzania,
Zanzibar, African Christianity, Christian missions in
Africa, and lived religion. This well-researched and co-
gent monograph deserves to be read by all historians in-
terested in gender and Christianity in African history.

Note
[1]. See, for instance, Jason Bruner, Living Salvation
in the East African Revival (Rochester, NY: University of

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Citation: David D. Hurlbut. Review of Prichard, Andreana C., Sisters in Spirit: Christianity, Affect, and Community

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