

## Introduction

### **Religion and Empire. Rethinking Religious Dynamics in Colonial and Postcolonial Histories**

Often entrenched in studies of missions and the evangelising role of their agents, the history of religion – not only as an expression of a theological phenomenon of belief and faith – in the spaces colonised by European powers has sought to highlight its multifaceted role in building modern societies, at home and in the colonies. Approaches based on broader historiographical dynamics – such as the perception of the transnationality of the Christian religious phenomenon (and beyond) – have opened up new fields of analysis for studying the interaction between religion and empire. The debates surrounding the role of missionaries beyond their evangelising function – which implies a reappraisal of the concept of evangelisation as a process of transmitting cultural values and practices and not just beliefs and procedures of faith – have contributed to discussing the emergence, development and criticism of the so-called “civilising mission” or the impact of religious agents on the complex education policies outlined by colonial states and their reverberations in the post-colonial moment. Furthermore, questioning the evangelising action of missionaries outside the traditional limits of evangelisation in strictu sensu has also contributed to debating the acculturation and cultural adaptation processes within colonised societies.

The agency of religious workers and converts has multiplied. From civilising agents, educators and critics of colonial and post-colonial political systems to participants in humanitarian crises and migratory processes, missionaries are presented in multiple layers, which shows a more diverse picture of their historical action. On the other hand, the converted populations, central agents in the processes of evangelisation, who were often marginalised and seen as passive elements/receptacles of moral values and socio-cultural behaviour over which they did not intervene, are given a new voice.

The historiography of missions and religious phenomena in colonial and post-colonial contexts has also benefited from including new historiographical trends and dynamics. At the same time, their study has contribu-

ted to problematising other dimensions of coeval historical processes, such as the expansion of educational and development policies (LANKINA and GETACHEW 2012; SCHEER et al. 2018; MASANGO 2019; MEIER ZU SELHAUSEN 2019), the emergence of local nationalisms (with the active participation of missionaries and converts), the role of religious entities in humanitarian crises and other global processes of flows of ideas (HASTINGS 2003). On the other hand, these studies reveal the importance and diversity of archival sources (including oral accounts, photographs, and other expressions of material culture) for historical analysis, multiplying agents and voices, complicating genealogies and historical processes, sometimes stuck in teleological and simplistic views of the relationship between human communities and the religious factor and the way religion is expressed in societies. The articles in this volume present a wide variety of archives, ranging from state archives to those of religious organisations (London Missionary Society, Archiv des Diakonischen Werkes der EKD, DRC Archive) and international organisations such as the WCC and UNESCO.

The relationship between “Religion” and “Empire” has been a subject of much debate and analysis<sup>1</sup>. The simplistic and overly reductive assertion that Christian missionaries were mere agents of the empire significantly diminished their agency, and this has been questioned by different historians (PORTER 2004; PRUDHOMME 2004; ETHERINGTON 2005). Like many other imperial actors, missionaries viewed the empire and colonialism through their own agendas and intentions. Across various places and periods, they were consistent collaborators with imperial and colonial authorities – often wielding their own sources of authority and power. On the other hand, missionaries also occasionally acted as critical voices against colonial practices – not necessarily anti-colonial, but questioning the methods used by political and administrative authorities in managing colonial affairs and dealing with indigenous populations.

Moving beyond the often narrow historiographical perspectives on the interaction between politics and religion in colonial contexts, as well as the role of missions, several studies have emphasised the complex and often controversial nature of these dynamics, particularly in the trajectories of decolonization (STANLEY 2003; STUART 2011; FONTAINE 2016; FOSTER

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<sup>1</sup> The historiography of missions and religion in 19th- and 20th-century colonial contexts is vast. Since the late 1980s, there has been a renewal and the development of new approaches to understanding the agency of missions and the communities they converted to Christianity, in a clear attempt to move beyond the traditional historiography produced within religious environments, often by former missionaries themselves.

2019; AMBANI 2021). Works highlighting religious organisations' transnational networks and global reach also provide innovative insights into these processes (MARSHALL 2013). The modalities of religious internationalism have become central to understanding both colonial and postcolonial dynamics and legacies (CAREY 2008; GREEN and VIAENE 2012; MILFORD 2022). The relationship between missionaries and colonial administrators was complex and multilayered, ranging from cooperation to questioning and, at times, to more or less open opposition to unconditional support. This dynamic was not uniform across different locations or throughout the colonial period. Not all missionaries supported the early efforts of European colonial expansion – especially during the 19th century – nor did all of them question the system during its decline in the 1950s.

This special issue results from a collaborative network set between the Center for the History of Society and Culture (University of Coimbra, Portugal) and the VID Specialized University (Stavanger, Norway) focused on studying the entanglements between Religion and Empire across different chronologies and geographies. This network comprises scholars who have been working on religious phenomena in imperial contexts and highlighted the role of religion and religious players in reassessing a multilayered understanding of historical processes linked to colonialism and the complex and controversial relations between colonisers and colonised peoples in colonial and postcolonial times. With a trans-chronological and trans-geographical approach, this special issue offers a diverse and multi-layered understanding of the complex connections between religion and empire. It shows how diverse this field is and should be.

Reuben Loffman's article explores the close relationship between the Belgian colonial administration in Congo and the American Presbyterian Congo Mission (APCM), through the late 19th century, despite the increasing accusations against Leopold II's regime in central Africa. While other Protestant missionaries criticized and eventually condemned Belgian's colonial brutality, Loffman highlights the confluence of interests between the two.

Retief Müller explores the thought of Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands at the beginning of the 20th century, who developed the idea of 'sphere sovereignty' – a concept that would later influence the theology of apartheid and the term '*zwart Gevaar*' (black danger). This concept would ultimately shape the Afrikaner mindset towards the black population in South Africa. Müller discusses the Dutch support and sympathy for the Boers, which fostered a kind of 'tribal' affiliation that evolved from earlier ideas about the stages of civilization. He highlights the role

played by key Dutch figures, first by the theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper, and later by Dutch Calvinist pastors working among the Boers in South Africa at the turn of the 19th century. These figures were often seen as missionaries serving Dutch emigrant colonists, deeply involved in the contentious interactions between British expansionism in South Africa and the Boer states' resistance to British imperial control.

Frieder Ludwig highlights the efforts of 'de-Westernization' made during the 1961 Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in New Delhi, aiming to show the complex web of loyalties and "transloyalties" involved in the negotiation process during the event. Part of a larger research project addressing tensions between different loyalties – referred to as "transloyalties" (LUDWIG et al., forthcoming a and forthcoming b) – among various key actors, Ludwig's article focuses on a particular moment in the history of the WCC, situated within the Cold War and the decolonization process. Criticism of colonialism and the call for Western churches to move away from their colonial past and paternalistic attitudes were central concerns for many participants in the Assembly and WCC members. The idea of "transloyalty" explored by Ludwig illustrates the importance of viewing religious actors as composite figures representing multiple agendas and goals. On the other hand, through Ludwig's analysis, one can emphasise the significance of international arenas like the WCC as crucial spaces for debate where conflicting views on religion and colonialism intersect.

The importance of international religious arenas like the WCC lies in their ability to analyze the diversity of debates and participants within religious spaces and their impact on a broader understanding of the social transformations occurring in the Global South and North. This raises questions about existing historical narratives and their implications in the present.

Ana Guardião, also addressing the role of the WCC, explores the relationship between Portuguese colonial authorities and faith-based voluntary organizations during the Biafra Crisis in the late 1960s, to show how these relationships helped shape international debates on humanitarian aid. In a period of increasing international criticism of the Portuguese colonial system and amidst a colonial war producing its own humanitarian crises, the Portuguese state established sometimes conflicting forms of cooperation with organizations such as Caritas Internationalis, Das Diakonisches Werk, and Nordchurchaid, which were concerned with rebuilding their relationships with newly independent African countries, often suspicious of the colonial past of European religious organizations. Guardião argues that the idealism of Christian missionary organizations (mostly Protestant), which inherited a

long tradition of Protestant criticism of European colonialism dating back to the mid-19th century, clashed with pragmatic decisions aimed at advancing their humanitarian efforts and preserving their activities in post-colonial spaces.

For Christian religious organizations, the need to remain in a decolonized world was a central concern after World War II. To remain in their mission territories after the formal end of colonial empires, they sought to adapt through processes of indigenization (critical in Roman Catholicism) and de-Westernization of their practices, striving for a more global image of their denominations. The replacement of Western (European and North American) leadership in religious institutions with “appropriate” members from among the local evangelized populations was carefully managed by Western-based religious institutions, creating complex networks of contact between missionaries and converts. This process, while partly based on a genuine sense of inclusion and the expansion of the Christian community, also served as a strategy to maintain the influence and respectability of Western religious actors, sometimes leading to controversies and divisions within religious organizations both at home and in mission lands.

Asia was one of the first regions where these issues emerged, even before the post-World War II wave of independence movements, particularly in China. The traditionally tense relationship between foreign missionaries and Chinese converts, on the one hand, and Chinese imperial (and later republican) authorities and nationalist groups, on the other, became more complicated in the early 20th century, first with the Boxer Rebellion and later with the fall of the monarchy in 1912. However, this apparent separation does not reflect the diversity of positions within Chinese Christian communities. Marina Wang’s text shows how the selection of a Chinese principal for the Tientsin Anglo-Chinese College in the 1920s illustrates the intricate relationship between Christian missions, the Chinese government, and the local community during a time of emerging nationalism in China and other regions. Drawing on the concept of “transloyalty” explored by Frieder Ludwig, Wang’s case study of Tientsin highlights how the relationships between these various actors “were inextricably intertwined”, and how individual positions and affiliations could not be easily reduced to previously defined or later-perceived loyalties or identities.

One of the key areas of focus for Christian churches, both before and after independence movements, was education, which colonial administrations had often delegated – sometimes almost entirely – to Christian missionary organisations, particularly in educating indigenous populations in

the colonies. Education was central to missionary work, and evangelization often took place within the school environment. It was through schools that imperial imaginaries and narratives justifying the “civilizing mission” of the empires were widely disseminated in colonized spaces. Deeply connected to the work of missionaries and colonial and nationalist perspectives, education contributed to fostering the idea of cooperation between missions and empire. On the other hand, the school was also a privileged space for developing anti-colonial criticism and, eventually, resistance to colonialism.

In the post-colonial period, the fundamental foundations and goals of education became a space for debate about the future of young nations. Ellen Veia Rosnes addresses debates about the type of citizenship to be promoted to the Malagasy population immediately following Madagascar’s independence in 1960. The discussions surrounding the educational system for the Malagasy population reflected the differing interests and expectations of various actors, including the new state, Protestant organizations (which hoped for changes in an education system previously dominated by the Catholic Church during the colonial period), and international organizations such as UNESCO.

This collection of texts addresses some of these issues based on scientific analyses using various written and other sources to demonstrate a complex and multilayered process. Its first aim is to illustrate the diversity of approaches that the relationship between “Religion” and “Empire” can bring to other debates and coeval historical processes and to understand the present day of the various societies considered. Covering different historical moments and geographies (from America to Asia to Africa), the articles presented sought to investigate various representations of the colonial world from religious agents and dynamics, including Catholics and Protestants, and showed the importance of integrating various scales of analysis to understand the interactions between colonizers and colonized and other agents who participated in this historical process but who are not included in these terminologies. By promoting a diversified dialogue, the volume makes it possible to establish lines of comparison between different periods and territories and to explore various forms of expression and representation of the colonial world, interweaving political, educational, cultural, economic and social processes. This issue presents a range of possibilities. Far from exhausting or being representative of the dimensions of the connections between religion and empire, this set of articles shows us the diversity of hypotheses, actors and dynamics for understanding various social and political transformations reverberating in today’s world.

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