Introduction: Maritime Missions

Jenna M. Gibbs
Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA
jgibbs@fiu.edu

Sünne Juterczenka
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
suenne.juterczenka@uni-goettingen.de

Abstract

The global mission mandate, present in the New Testament and pre-modern Christianity, took on new force in the early modern period. Missionaries promoted the globalization of Christianity, and in so doing contributed to the broadening of intellectual horizons across the world. Often traveling by sea, they were among the first to cover the vast distances that the maritime empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would subsequently span. This special issue explores the connections between three dynamic fields of research: missions, the history of knowledge, and maritime history. Taking a global and trans-denominational perspective, we seek to shed new light on some of the encounters, networks, exchanges, and transfers facilitated by maritime missions and the interactions of culturally and religiously diverse protagonists during the long eighteenth century.

Keywords

Introduction

The global mission mandate, present in the New Testament and since pre-modern Christianity, took on new force in the early modern period.1 Under the sway of Western European colonial expansion and increased maritime technology and travel, early modern missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, zealously promoted the globalization of Christianity and, in so doing, contributed to the broadening of intellectual horizons across the world. Often traveling by sea, they were among the first to cover the vast distances that the maritime empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would subsequently span. Transoceanic in scope, this special issue explores the connections between the histories of religion, knowledge, and maritime history. All three fields have recently seen critical revisions and have opened up to fruitful and mutually enriching intersections that form the background to this volume.

The contributors to this special issue first met at a workshop that took place in May 2019 and was hosted by the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., itself an institution with a quintessentially transatlantic outlook. As part of a tandem fellowship program in global and transregional history, we conceived and organized this workshop together in an extremely fruitful and enjoyable German-American collaboration. In addition to the six papers brought together here, others presented during the workshop explored the religious and scientific missions of Spanish Augustinians, German Jesuits, Puritans, and British Methodists and Quakers. They covered a broad range of topics such as education, whaling, ethnography, and philanthropy. What united them was a transoceanic perspective and an interest in probing the relationship between missions, knowledge, and the maritime world. The case studies in this issue do not pretend to be comprehensive. We have not, for example, included an essay on the avowedly global Moravian missions, about which there is a vast literature. The essays nonetheless provide diverse snapshots of the intersections between missions, the maritime world, and knowledge production. One essay focuses on French Franciscan Catholic missionaries, one on Italian Capuchins in West Central Africa, the others on various Lutheran and Reformed Protestant missions in North America, South America, India, and China. They represent a trans-denominational approach as well as a flexible definition of “missions.” While they highlight very different aspects of missionary life and work, they share a broad approach that acknowledges missions

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as multi-faceted, productive, and deeply implicated in, yet frequently at odds with, imperial geopolitics.

For a long time, the historiography of missions was dominated by church historians and theologians, but over the past decades it has developed and expanded in several directions and has proved immensely fertile ground for studying early modern cultural encounters, global mobility and exchange, and transregional relations. As pioneers of globalization, missionaries produced a rich store of source material that lends itself to a broad variety of historical research.\(^2\) If the Catholic and Protestant strands of Christian missions emerged at different points in time and diverged widely in development and intensity, their study is today increasingly combined to bring out similarities, differences, and connections between them. Joining the main churches and religious orders in their endeavor to globalize Christianity and often competing with them, non-conformists, multi-denominational revival movements, and missionary societies have emerged as driving forces in the history of missions. Like overseas missions, those within Europe are also being recognized as essential to mobility, exchange, and communication.\(^3\) It has become increasingly obvious that missions were never limited to a one-way transaction of religious instruction and conversion, but rather constituted a complex mutual exchange that touched upon many spheres of life. Meanwhile, the historiography of Christian missions has been transformed from a somewhat exclusive and constricted field into one attracting scholars from diverse backgrounds.

Likewise, maritime history was a specialist domain for a long time but is today one of the most vibrant fields in historical research. It has seen renewed efforts to overcome a mostly land-locked historiography, and some scholars have even proclaimed an "oceanic turn" and a "New Thalassology."\(^4\) This shift is not to deny that the maritime dimension has always played a major role in certain strands of historiography, e.g., in economic and military (naval) history. In the history of exploration and navigation, oceanic voyages have always taken center stage. Historians in seafaring countries like Great Britain, Spain, France,
the Netherlands, Italy, and Scandinavia have traditionally been more invested in studying the maritime dimension than in others. The recent upsurge in maritime history, however, has generated new interest in places like Germany and Austria. The importance of culture has been brought to the fore and the impact of migration and maritime trade (including the slave trade) has been highlighted. The relevance of maritime trade even to the “hinterlands” and to communities far inland has been revealed. Where rich studies previously conceptualized oceanic regions as discrete but interlinked entities (e.g., the Mediterranean or the Black Atlantic), recent research has emphasized that, instead of barriers, oceans more often than not constituted pathways linking parts of the world that had seemed remote and isolated from a narrowly Eurocentric perspective. Maritime scholarship has received further impulses from postcolonial thinking, especially in regard to maritime empires.

The scholarship has also been enriched by interdisciplinary cross-pollination, which has, in particular, fostered interconnections between maritime history and the history of knowledge in important ways. Knowledge has emerged as a category that cannot be limited to Western scientific definitions: maritime routes, transoceanic mobility, and global networks all played a crucial role in the transfer of knowledge. The critical revisions in the history of science have incited a new awareness of non-Western (“indigenous”) knowledges that had important impacts on the history of knowledge in general. We aim to strengthen this awareness further by highlighting the increase in knowledge circulation caused by early modern maritime travel, specifically by overseas missions and transoceanic religious networks that nurtured scientific studies. In focusing on the unfolding of religious as well as scientific missions in

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7 Two recent examples of this kind of work are Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003), and David Cannadine, *Empire, the Sea and Global History: Britain’s Maritime World, 1763–1833* (New York, 2007).

8 See, for instance, Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, eds., *Sea Changes. Historicizing the Ocean* (New York, 2004).
the imperial maritime world, we seek to further illuminate the relationship between religion and science.

The study of knowledge transfer is also integral to an ongoing re-evaluation of the role of religion in the Enlightenment. Until recently, the notion that evangelicalism was shaped by the Enlightenment and vice versa ran contrary to the historical mainstream. The preponderance of scholarship on the Enlightenment stressed its emphasis on reason and its contribution to secularization of thought. Meanwhile, even though the early, crucial contributions of missionaries to European fields of knowledge such as linguistics and ethnography – by the Jesuits, for example, who stood out in this respect – have been of long-standing interest to historians, the scholarship on evangelicalism and missions often pitted religion in opposition to Enlightenment. Since the 1990s, there has been a plethora of research seeking to debunk the bifurcation between Enlightenment and religion (specifically missions). Yet some resistance to examining them under the same analytic lens still remains. “Maritime Missions” seeks to contribute to this ongoing debate with papers that highlight missions and different kinds of knowledge production – from botany to theology, navigation to linguistics – throughout the Enlightenment period.

The articles in this special issue feature missionaries from different backgrounds and working in different parts of the world whose work was characterized by exceptional geographic mobility. For most, ocean crossings were more than mere preludes to their missionary ventures. Indeed, many made multiple, often lengthy crossings over the course of their lives. For some, like the French Franciscans that Jordan Kellman investigates, oceanic voyages afforded opportunities for scientific inquiry and observation. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Minim friar Louis Feuillée dramatically experienced the hazards of shipboard life as he encountered mutineers and freebooters, narrowly escaped drowning, and survived a deadly fever. But he also took a lively interest in navigational science, then on the brink of solving the major problem of determining longitude at sea. Sailing between France and the Levant, the Antilles, South America, and the Canary Islands, Feuillée and his fellow friars used the oceans as a medium of knowledge production and transfer, all the while translating skills and techniques from their monastic tradition into scientific methodology. As a form of Enlightenment observation and even aesthetics, their

9 One significant contribution to this reappraisal, for example, was Brian Stanley’s edited volume, Christian Missions and the Enlightenment (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001). This became the catalyst for more recent works such as Sujit Sivasundaram, Nature and the Godly Empire: Science and Evangelical Missions in the Pacific, 1795–1850 (Cambridge, 2005).
practices uniquely resolved the tensions between wonder and disciplined observation, between European and Native American expertise.

Meanwhile, as Justine Walden illuminates, seventeenth-century Italian Capuchin missionaries to Kongo and Angola in West Central Africa produced a discourse critiquing Atlantic slavery and Portuguese colonial domination that made its way back into the Western world. But this knowledge production was a two-way flow because the Capuchins' critique of Atlantic slavery was shaped by their Mediterranean experiences of slavery and the maritime world. From the early sixteenth century onward, in keeping with their dictates to aid the poor and the sick, the Capuchins had extensive experience with outreach in the Mediterranean ports, engagement in maritime economic exchanges, and galley slavery, including as chaplains on the galley ships. After becoming missionaries in coastal West Africa, most actively in Soyo and Loando, which were Atlantic slave-trading hubs for transportation to Brazil and Spanish America, the Capuchins became highly critical of the emergent Atlantic slave trade and its ruthless emphasis on the economic exchange of human “cargo” – at odds, for the Capuchins, with earlier Mediterranean modes of maritime slavery that allowed for religious and humanitarian outreach. The Capuchins crafted a critique of incipient capitalism and the Atlantic slave trade, framed by their prior knowledge and maritime experiences of Mediterranean slavery in the form of reports such as those from Francesco dal Port Maurizio and Dionigio Carli. The Capuchins in Kongo and Angola were thus a vibrant conduit of knowledge and discourse on slavery and antislavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

So, too, was Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, born in present-day Ghana, who first traveled to the Netherlands before returning to Africa as a missionary for the Dutch Reformed Church. Jake Griesel undertakes a thoroughgoing reexamination of Capitein's Dissertatio politico-theologica de servitute, libertati Christianae non contraria (1742), a spirited defense of slavery, despite Capitein himself having been a slave in his youth. Well-read and firmly rooted in the theological traditions of his day, he earned a doctorate in theology from the University of Leiden based on his learning and argumentative skills. Little is known about Capitein's personal experience of sailing to the Netherlands and back again, but it was his connection with Dutch maritime commerce that made his unusual career possible, and his dissertation immediately pertained to a key area of European commercial activity in the Atlantic region: the trade in enslaved Africans. While Capitein has in the past been dismissed as opportunistic and lacking in intellectual independence, Griesel's analysis brings to light a voyager between worlds who succeeded in gaining enough trust and approval from the ecclesiastical authorities and the WIC to secure
the permission and funding for his missionary project. If Capitein’s case sits somewhat uneasily with recent efforts to bring to the fore the role of enslaved people in resisting and finally overcoming slavery, it also illuminates the deeply fraught relationship between missions and slavery.

For travelers in the early modern period, crossing an ocean was a memorable, often disturbing, and sometimes profoundly formative experience. Especially for the religiously inclined, a crossing could be a decisive, if not transcendental and transformative, event. Missionaries were no exception, and descriptions of ocean crossings, often of a uniquely introspective quality, feature prominently in spiritual or mission diaries, especially of those engaging in the spiritual soul-searching encouraged by religious non-conformists. German Pietists were among them. They were educated at the Glauchasche Anstalten in Halle, a philanthropic educational institution and a hub of Lutheran reform founded towards the end of the seventeenth century. As Markus Berger shows, the physical distance from Halle brought about a personal sea-change for Johann Christoph Kunze, the subject of his article. After training in Halle, he was sent to Pennsylvania in 1770, where the Lutheran Church had already gained a foothold since the 1740s. After arriving on the other side of the Atlantic, he and some of his colleagues emancipated themselves from strict prescriptions made by the Hallensian authorities, embarked on a mission to convert Native Americans, and became involved in charitable work as well as politics. Unlike their predecessors, who have received far more scholarly attention, Kunze and his second-generation colleagues forged links with other non-conformists to an unprecedented degree, reaching out to and cooperating with American evangelicals as well as European revivalists and creating a truly trans-oceanic and trans-denominational religious network.

The early initiatives from Halle, especially the missions in Tranquebar (today Tharangambadi in Tamil Nadu), were followed by and partly spawned similar ventures. Two papers in this special issue concentrate on those more recent missions. Darin Lenz reconstructs the collective trajectory of three American missionary families who, inspired by British evangelicals, embarked on a journey to India in the 1830s, sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners. During their lengthy voyage to India, the unwonted but largely agreeable shipboard life filled them with excitement and anticipation. Upon arrival in Bombay and hence in British dominated territory, however, they soon realized that their optimism had been delusionary. Lacking the support and resources available to their British colleagues, they were barely able to survive, let alone

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fulfill their missionary duties. Their vulnerable circumstances forced them to critique colonial culture and question their knowledge of the peoples they aimed to convert. Overpowered by sickness, frustration, and despair, the conditions they faced could not have been further from their initial expectations—a situation they experienced as disempowering and deeply unsettling. The example illustrates what could be a striking gap between missionary ambitions and on-the-ground realities. Exacerbated by a sense of cultural displacement, the missionaries’ separation from their home country seemed all but unbridgeable both in a literal and a metaphorical sense.

By contrast, Jean DeBernardi’s paper highlights not only the relatively smooth adaptation of some missionaries and the manifold connections they forged between far-flung corners of the world, but also continuities between different historical moments in the history of missions. The nineteenth-century missionary projects promoted by the Brethren, an evangelical movement originating from Anglicanism, exemplify such connections and continuities. They modeled their missions on the eighteenth-century Lutheran Danish-German missionary initiatives originating from Halle and from the Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum) that, like Hallensian Pietism, pursued missions on a global scale. Viewed through DeBernardi’s anthropological lens, their flexible appropriation of earlier missionary strategies, implemented during their missions to China and Southeast Asia, was an intriguing case of inter-denominational knowledge transfer, as were their scholarly linguistic compilations. Resourceful and creative, the Brethren fused traditions and techniques from different geographic areas and cultural contexts, and deftly used this eclecticism to their advantage in straddling a global mission field.

Together, the papers in this issue investigate mutually constitutive dynamics between global religious, scientific, and imperial agendas, as well as the complexity and ambiguities resulting from these. They shed new light on some of the encounters, networks, exchanges, and transfers facilitated by maritime travel and the roles and bi-directional interactions of culturally and religiously diverse protagonists. In so doing, they demonstrate the scope, dimensions, and impact of maritime missions as catalysts of global and trans-regional interconnectedness, but also of enduring conflicts, violence, and discontents. The essays also demonstrate how missionary activities in the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries forged deep interlinkages between the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and East Asian oceans. Following the lead of scholars who recently recognized the intertwining of Christian missions, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, with the history of knowledge, and situating these in the maritime spaces that were both the arena and the
means of colonial expansion, this special issue also seeks to explore the fluidity between different oceanic regions. As the early modern period was, crucially, a period of maritime expansion, we think that overseas religious and/or scientific missions deserve even more attention not only as part of that expansion but also as specifically shaped by and shaping global oceanic mobility.

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