Introduction: “Christianity, Gender, and the Language of the World”

Jane Hunter
Lewis & Clark College
hunter@lclark.edu

Critics of cultural imperialism at home and abroad have prompted historians to pay good attention to the role of nation in framing Christian overseas missions. Yet women volunteering for missionary activity in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries rarely would have phrased their commitments as service to nation. In the rapidly secularizing United States, missionary volunteers came from church-going families and referred to a spiritual calling. Indeed, in 2014 when I first talked with a North American missionary daughter who had converted to communism and still lives in China, she expressed curiosity about what had become of the distant world of her childhood. “Do they still talk about the call, whether you have a call?” she asked about missionaries today.1 The call came from God, and helped to demonstrate that your motives were pure—that you had spiritual motives for the abandonment of home ties for service on the other side of the world. Those assessing questions of missionary motive and identity must respect those spiritual motivations within the mix of identities carried to the field.

Recent historians of women and the empire in both Britain and the United States have made that point. Elizabeth Prevost’s assessment of the state of the field in British studies suggests that there “is a resistance to serious analyses of faith,” and sees in attention to faith real potential for exploring commonality and divergence within missionary communities. Picking up on Prevost’s work, Sarah Pripas-Kapit too suggests that historians of U.S. missions “have effectively privileged race over religion as an analytic category, producing histories of hegemony that position women missionaries simply ‘as products of a dominant discourse of nation and empire’.” Interestingly, scholars from the countries that were “missionized” appear to take religious faith more seriously, perhaps as a result of the extra scrutiny scholars accord to motivations for

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1 Isabel Crook, informal conversation with Jane Hunter in Beijing, 22 June 2014.
conversion overseas—or maybe simply reflecting the largely secular character of the professoriate in the United States.\textsuperscript{2}

Religion is important because in its pure form it summons ideas that extend beyond the temporal and earthbound. The basis of the missionary impulse was a belief in a universal thought system—judged to be so powerful and benign that it inspired extraordinary self-sacrifice among its early emissaries. For those on the receiving end who could get beyond the military force framing the missionary arrival, and the overarching righteousness that often accompanied it, aspects of that message could be formative. The message of Christian love in particular could be compelling for both men and women, especially for those who experienced childhoods in which patriarchal discipline had framed their upbringing. Y.C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu), who would go on to found a literacy movement and become one of China’s most famous Christian converts, described the teacher responsible for his conversion, a missionary of the conservative British China Inland Mission. He “lived literally a Christian life” and “loved us, mothered, us, fathered us ...,” Yen recalled. “We believed in that Christ in whom he believed.”\textsuperscript{3} If the message of Christian love characterized lessons from many denominations, especially in the 1920s and following, the role of Christian love came to especially define a women’s missionary movement attempting to find its bearings in the midst of what many participants considered an increasingly secular, sinful, and war-mongering world.

The three papers in this theme issue provide fine-grained analysis of members of Christian communities from both sides of the missionary exchange—those traveling to the Far and Near East to missionize, those born in Christian communities in Asia, those who converted to Christianity and changed their lives as a result, and those who simply saw opportunities in the Christian presence and took them. They embed their studies in the important and telling details of particular place and time, and they show how that detail shaded or burnished the meaning of the Christian presence in Asia. The variety of


\textsuperscript{3} Quoted in Charles W. Hayford, To the People: James Yen and Village China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 16.