Introduction

Marxism and Missions / Missions et marxisme

We know very little about Marxism and missions (or missions and Marxism). While a reasonable amount of research has been conducted on Christianity and Marxism, missions and missionaries have been left out. This is surprising since missionaries were usually the men and women on the ground dealing directly with Marxist forces and ideas as well as the individuals probably most concerned with the Marxist \textit{praxis}. Conversely, it is with missionaries that Marxists were often faced, equally if not more often than with Popes, bishops, parish priests or pastors. The question arises thereafter as to whether what has been said about the relationship between Christianity and Marxism stands for missions and Marxism specifically. Part of the question is about missionaries being distinct from an institutional church; part of the question is also about the empirical reality confirming, informing or refining our general understanding of the issue.

The idea of this special issue on Marxism and Mission is not to study the relation between Marxism and Missions in an abstract way – theoretically or theologically. Following SSM’s tradition, our aim is rather to gather case studies of an organisation, an individual or a place. The question of Marxism and missions seems to us particularly important because missionary institutions and individuals, and Communist parties and thinkers, were each other’s main enemy (and competitor) during most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, as we said, little has been written systematically on the subject. How did Marxists think of missionaries and how did their thinking evolve over time? Equally how did Marxists relate to missionaries on the ground and how did this relate to the Marxist theory? Similarly, how did missionaries see Marxism and Marxists, how did their views change over time, and how did they relate to “Communists” on the ground?

In the call for papers, we asked authors for articles looking at the relationship between Marxism and Missions in all its aspects, namely: at home and
abroad, Marxism as a theory and *praxis*, and missions as missiology and concrete religious practices. We stated: “Articles may relate to the competition between Marxism and missions in a particular country or region; to missionary’s views of Marxism; their attitude in the face of the growth of Communist parties or their take-over of power; the views or policies which missionaries might have developed in interaction with Marxism. Or an analysis of how Marxism understood Christian missions and how it deployed policies in relation to them; how Communists collaborated, competed or fought with missionaries. Or an investigation of the connections, commonalities and differences between Marxism and Christianity – and Modernity”.

In line with the call for papers, the first article of this special issue looks at the case of evangelical Christianity and the Revolution in Ethiopia in the 1970s. Written by Donald L. Donham, the text is a study of the arrival of the Socialist revolution in a specific locale, Maale, and its articulation with anti-modernist evangelicalism in that place. The paradox the author proposes to unpack is that the most fervent supporters of Socialism in Maale were former evangelical believers and catechists. Better, all Communists in Maale turned out in fact to have been evangelicals! Donham clears this paradox thanks to a meticulous historical reconstruction of the development of both religion and politics. He thereby shows how unintended connections developed between Marxism and missionary Christianity in Maale and how men and women could thereafter make the switch from one to the other without much effort when the Revolution arrived. Key to solving the paradox is the historical fact that Marxism and evangelicalism constructed a convergent sense of progressive time and that both offered people an entrance into modernity.

In the next article, Susan M. Rigdon looks at communism and foreign missions in China in the twentieth century. She discusses important commonalities between those missionaries in China who were influenced by the Social Gospel, and the increasingly influential communist party of China. Rigdon’s article provides background knowledge on the Social Gospel movement, offering helpful context not just for the missionaries featured in her article, but also for the Social Gospel-inspired work of Max Yergan, which is featured in the article by David Anthony, below. Both Social Gospel Christians and communists in China emphasized the value of revitalizing rural communities, and strived to achieve something like utopia on earth. Rigdon’s article explores several programs of the National Christian Council of China devoted to rural development that were launched in the 1930s – the same time that the