Introduction

Christian Missions in Colonial Contexts: Past and Present Entanglements

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Over the past few decades much has been written about the entanglement of mission work and colonialism.1 Discussions over the role and legacy of Catholic and Protestant missions continue to take place in the global historiography on European and American missions, and in more localized discussions across a diverse range of post-colonial, and not-yet-postcolonial contexts. Despite dis-

agreement over the precise nature of their legacies, it is clear that in social, religious, linguistic and educational terms, Christian missions have shaped the societies with which they engaged; at the same time, the missionaries and their home societies were also altered by these engagements. This special issue of Social Sciences and Missions incorporates perspectives from around the globe to look at these multifaceted histories and their legacies. It offers interdisciplinary perspectives on a range of topics including the philosophies and theologies of colonial Christian missions and the multilayered relationships between missionaries, indigenous peoples and colonial authorities, as well as gender, land rights, education, indigenous religious movements, and contemporary religious and charitable practices. These themes are explored in settings spanning from North America to South Africa, Syria and Lebanon, Fiji and Australia, Ghana, Guyana and Angola.

The articles all began life as papers presented at a 2015 conference, entitled Colonial Christian Missions and their Legacies, which was hosted at the University of Copenhagen by one of the editors of this volume, Claire McLisky. This conference created a forum for scholars from diverse disciplinary, institutional and geographical backgrounds to discuss the historical relationships between missions and colonialism, the ongoing repercussions of these relationships, and their representations. This special issue showcases a selection of the papers given at the conference, with a particular focus on religious, social and political impacts. Collectively, they argue for the ongoing significance of Christian missions, whether eighteenth-century or twentieth-century, for contemporary societies around the world.

As editors, we had two aims in compiling this special issue of Social Sciences and Missions. The first was to take up a number of challenges issued recently by scholars of colonialism and missions; the second is to extend the insights of postcolonial scholarship on contemporary legacies of colonialism to the histories of colonial Christian missions. In recent surveys of work on the subject, the historians Karen Vallgård, Patricia Grimshaw, and Peggy Brock have pointed out the need to break down monolithic constructions of both Europe and European missionaries and ‘indigenous’ or ‘colonised’ peoples to encompass a more nuanced view of the entanglements between Christian missions and colonialism.

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2 Most of the original presentations are available for video or audio streaming on the University of Copenhagen website. http://video.ku.dk/search/perform?search=colonial+christian+misions.

3 Another collection of papers from the conference, focusing specifically on the social and cultural impacts of colonial Christian missions on colonised and colonising societies, was published in a special issue of the Journal of Social History in March 2017, edited by Claire McLisky.