

**European Missions in Contact Zones:  
Transformation through Interaction in a  
(Post-)Colonial World**

**Veranstalter:** Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz; **Organiser:** Judith Becker (Mainz), BMBF junior research group „Transfer and Transformation of Missionaries' Images of Europe, 1700–1970“

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How were both Christian missionaries and their potential converts changed during and by their religious encounter in colonial or post-colonial times? An international group of scholars recently explored examples of this mutually interactive engagement in diverse contact zones across every continent. After the welcome by Johannes Paulmann (Mainz), JUDITH BECKER (Mainz) located the theme's origins in the changing historiographical landscape of the mission encounter, from stressing hierarchy to focusing, rather, on changes in concepts, attitudes and practices. Could one chart historically an intensification of prior religious and social convictions, or their modification or abandonment for new adaptations arising out of encounter?

JEFFREY COX (Iowa City) assessed Mary Louise Pratt's useful toolbox of concepts.<sup>1</sup> Incorporation, hybridity and creolisation help bypass the binaries of imperial and mission research. However, while missionaries could also exemplify the 'contact zone' and 'transculturation', religion is totally absent from Pratt's book, with its focus on travel-writing. Yet, suggested Cox, her 'narratives of anti-conquest' could also be traced in self-critical missionaries, explaining their role as helping people out of slavery, or working towards the self-governing church. Indeed, the anti-conquest narrative highlighted the historical fault-line between the power of missions and their aspiration to create a community of spiritual equals.

The general papers which followed on that first day largely concerned mission in India. JUDITH BECKER (Mainz) focused on how the Basel missionary polemic against West

African slavery, alongside an associated religious discourse on bondage and liberty, was transferred to and further modified in India when workers there found a fifth of the population bonded labourers. Becker identified five periods of adaptation to the Indian context, displaying different interpretations of slavery and evangelistic strategies.

PETER JAMES YODER (Rome, GA) offered a richer understanding of the indirect impact which distant 'contact zones' had on Continental religious thought in the 18th century. He asked whether the Pietist leader and Halle Mission founder, August Hermann Francke, in his hopes for far-reaching transformation via heartfelt education, came to use the word 'heathen' differently after contact with missionaries abroad. Ultimately, 'heathens' resembling the wise men from the east seeking knowledge, offered a positive pattern for conversion.

SABINE HÜBNER (Oldenburg/Mainz) focussed on how Pietist forms of prayer were influenced by the contact zone. Prayer was basic to the religious life of the Halle pioneers among the Tamils – as a precondition to, and means and indicator of, faith and engagement with others. Faced with missionary expectation of spontaneous, emotional, word-centred utterance of devotion, however, Tamils struggled to pray extempore at length. Hindu prayer used mantras, repeating only a few syllables. Consequently, through contact, wordless 'sighs' of lament or pleading became the term for the more formulaic prayer established in the mission.

The paper by MRINALINI SEBASTIAN (Philadelphia/Mainz) tried to capture the voice of the 'native', analysing two sets of texts, from Tranquebar and Mangalore. In conversations with locals in the 18th-century Halle reports, the universal availability of grace was received differently by different ranks of the social hierarchy. Letters from the 1870s from a famous Basel convert's family showed Dalit labourers deciding against a life of further bondage. The mission, with its radical argument about equal dignity in the eyes of God, afforded them room to make a human rights claim.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 1992.

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ANDREAS HEIL (Mainz) emphasised what an unstable construct the idea of 'the missionary' was in the post-1945 world: a 'contact zone' in itself, perhaps. An older stereotype of their task involving pioneering in new places interacted with indigenous nationalism and ecumenical thought in an era of decolonisation. Nevertheless, after the missionary expulsion from China, independent India would still let Westerners in for development work: ostensibly unhitching social activism from evangelism – although mission societies continued to see this as preaching in action, arising out of inner conviction.

A case study from ROSEMARY SETON (London) portrayed the large social gatherings of indigenous Christians and Church of Scotland missionaries organised by Miss Pigot, energetic female educationalist and lady superintendent in 1880s Calcutta. Yet her ability to bridge India's divide, showing the two races as one in Christ, also brought dismissal after accusations of mismanagement and immorality. Gendered conflicts of authority were at issue, alongside her ambiguous position as a Eurasian, while her mission house perhaps provided a third space in a contact zone – a potentially dangerous middle ground.

That first evening offered an informal joint interview, conducted by BRIAN STANLEY (Edinburgh), with two Christian scholars, ANDREW WALLS (Liverpool) and ROGER BOWEN (Cambridge), with extensive experience of African theology, spirituality and church growth, reflecting on changes in Christian mission there and at home over more than half a century.

There were two more papers on Asia. ANDREAS NEHRING (Erlangen) explored Buddhism, particularly the concept of 'Mindfulness'. Though widespread in the West now since the early 20th century and very popular in technologies of the self, its advocates hardly realise its roots in earlier interactions under colonialism between indigenous religious leaders and critical Western missionaries. In a creative reform project, Burmese lay people endeavoured to preserve Buddhist practices, including meditation. New monk experts later began to spread novel techniques and books to the West, while notable Burmese

world figures also practised it.

In looking at communication flows on a global stage, THORALF KLEIN (Loughborough) suggested that the controversial, flamboyant German, Karl Gützlaff, himself constituted a contact zone between Asia and Europe, with his diverse Chinese names, chequered career, three English wives and many published books in English. Via his initially transnational evangelistic trajectory, in Indonesia, Bangkok and Macau, or in alliance with English merchants, he hoped to open China to Christianity and science, alongside commerce and civilisation. His later years suggest an 'uneasy honeymoon with nationalism', via increased correspondence with and support from German missions.

The colloquium then turned its gaze to the Americas and Catholic missions. URSULA LEHMKUHL (Trier) compared two phases of flourishing Jesuit endeavour in the far North-West. Culturally open and comparatively respectful of the Indians, the Jesuits followed mystical and ritualistic practices closer to Indian customs than were Protestants', using 'creative assimilation' to achieve inculturation. But in the second generation, they might also be chased off settlements, though locals by then appropriated and manipulated Catholic symbols in their own interests.

STEFAN RINKE (Berlin) explored the Jesuit engagement with the Guarani of Paraguay, especially the space their missions occupied in a conflictual colonial society, and its internal structure. On cultural encounter, the record is mixed. The Guarani accepted missionary help and protection from settlers, while the Jesuits tried to build on indigenous religion and gender relations, yet encouraged a sedentary lifestyle. Within a relationship ostensibly of love and trust, Jesuits nevertheless misunderstood or condemned aspects of indigenous culture, mocking local rituals or the quirky use of western clothes.

MICHAEL SIEVERNICH (Mainz) explored the 1724 volume of comparative anthropology produced by Frenchman Joseph François Lafitau after his six years in the Jesuit mission near Montreal. Drawing on over a hundred ancient and modern authors, as well as extensive church documentation, Lafitau scoured every aspect of Indian life for vestiges of re-

mote antiquity. He was interested not in conflicting truth claims in religion but in discerning common cultural elements. A diversity of cultural practices unfolds as part of a wider humanity, with Indians neither barbarians for Europeans to denigrate, nor idealised 'noble savages'.

In shifting attention to the Pacific and Australasia, KATHARINA STORNIG (Mainz) argued that the social space of childbirth in German New Guinea provided a transnational contact zone of communication where all parties had to negotiate pollution taboos and cultural ideas of purity. Nuns did battle with the Vatican's prohibition of obstetrics for sisterhoods, because of the possible taint from blood and sexuality. Indigenous birth taboos isolated women socially, but nuns considered it morally safe ground to visit newborns, baptise babies and give out robes. Transformed ideas round childbirth meant that many indigenous women favoured hospital birth by the 1960s.

FELICITY JENSZ (Münster) probed contrasting portrayals of Australian Aboriginal religious beliefs. Unlike Durkheim's (ill-informed) negativity about such 'primitives', Moravian missionaries had a vested interest in showing that Aborigines indeed had religion. Besides, once personally engaged in the 'contact zones', they found things more complicated. Their descriptions of attempting to teach their faith help uncover the unfolding of indigenous understandings of Christianity, while Aborigines might surprise missionaries by being different from what they expected, leading to more nuanced reactions and later more tolerance and incorporation.

Four concluding papers turned the colloquium's attention to Africa. REBEKKA HABERMAS (Göttingen) provocatively questioned whether there was anything more to be said on mission and gender in non-European settings, focusing instead on the different gender agenda produced in the 'contact zone' of fund-raising mission supporters in Pietist, rural north Germany. Female sewing circles for bazaars sprang up informally from the grass roots, while women also helped organise big local *missionsfeste* every May, celebrating mission families abroad, bound together by hardships and inclusive of former

heathen. In this (constructed) mission heterotopy, men and women lived together without, or somehow beyond, gender, in a calm, peaceful pastoral idyll.

Sharing her research dilemmas in exploring early female mission education in Sierra Leone, SILKE STRICKRODT (London/Berlin) was not sure (unlike Habermas) that gender *had* been 'done' in West Africa, though domesticity perhaps has. Framing the gendered encounter now was as challenging as handling the rich Church Missionary Society (CMS) sources, without unduly privileging or overrating the experience of European missionaries and those who responded to – or rejected – them. Nevertheless, to integrate this girls' education into African, and Sierra Leonean, social history, questions round family, marriage, social mobility, parental agendas and female careers can be explored through detailed school registers and Freetown newspapers.

In his work on the Pentecostal Congo Evangelistic Mission (CEM), DAVID MAXWELL (Cambridge) was trying to close the gap between two scholarly approaches, one emphasising the sociology of mission stations, the second focusing on processes of proselytisation and acculturation. Faith missions like CEM were usually poorly resourced, and keen to evangelise urgently before the 'end times', hence initially built little. The first generation especially relied on African converts and former slaves for intimate material and emotional sustenance, both at home and on trek. Missionaries built deep relationships with such social and linguistic intermediaries, making co-workers confidants, valued informants and culture brokers. Though some converts became missionaries in their own right, later tensions over gender norms or eventual institutionalisation might spark independence.

The account by HEATHER SHARKEY (Philadelphia) of the ugly clash between the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) and their indigenous employee Henry Athanasian in Egypt perhaps had echoes of the case of Miss Pigot. The long-serving Armenian staff-member, previously in a position of regional leadership, likewise successfully took his mission superiors to court. Without status

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or recognition as European, somehow a 'native worker' more than a 'missionary', denigrated as cunning and despotic by a later superior, Athanassian fell victim, in a time of nationalist ferment, to defensive British parochialism and xenophobia, at odds with the potential egalitarianism of BFBS.

In his concluding reflections, BRIAN STANLEY (Edinburgh) questioned the lasting value of the contact zone as a concept, though it helpfully revealed contestation, transformation and paradox. More indigenous scholarship and viewpoints were also still needed.

The colloquium was ambitious in both its geographical and chronological coverage - ranging from the Rockies to New Guinea, from Calcutta to the Congo, between the early 1700s and the post-1945 era. It also did well to encompass both Catholic and Protestant missions, while offering welcome access in English to new German scholarship. Its alliance of theological reflections with vivid historical case studies makes possible a more coherent appraisal of the complexity of mission 'contact zone' interactions across the world over the last three centuries.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Johannes Paulmann (Mainz), Welcome

Judith Becker (Mainz), Introduction

Jeffrey Cox (Iowa City), Missionary Narratives of Anti-Conquest

Judith Becker (Mainz), Liberated by Christ: Evangelical Missionaries and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century South India

Peter James Yoder (Rome,GA), 'Temples in the Hearts of Heathens': Developments in August Hermann Francke's Preaching after the Halle Missionaries' Contact with India

Sabine Hübner (Oldenburg / Mainz), To Sigh before God: Prayer in the 18th Century Lutheran Mission in Tamil Nadu

Mrinalini Sebastian (Philadelphia / Mainz), Localized Cosmopolitanism and Globalized Faith: Echoes of „Native“ Voices in 18th and 19th Century Missionary Documents

Andreas Heil (Mainz), One's Own Concept Challenged: Western Missionaries Renegoti-

ating the Concept of the Missionary in a Post-colonial World

Rosemary Seton (London), Close Encounters, Racial Tensions: The Church of Scotland Mission in Calcutta [Kolkata], India

#### *Public Interview*

Andrew Walls (Liverpool) and Roger Bowen (Cambridge) interviewed by Brian Stanley (Edinburgh), The Experience of the Missions in Decolonizing Countries

Andreas Nehring (Erlangen), Politics and Meditation: The Influence of Missions on the 19th Century Burmese Lay Reform Movement in Theravada Buddhism

Thoralf Klein (Loughborough), How to be a Contact Zone: The Missionary Karl Gützlaff between Nationalism, Transnationalism and Transculturalism, 1827-1851

Ursula Lehmkuhl (Trier), 'Christianity Accommodated': Jesuits as Cultural Brokers at the American Frontier, 1840-1900

Stefan Rinke (Berlin), A State within a State? The 'Jesuit State in Paraguay' and Eurocentric Constructions of Space

Michael Sievernich (Mainz), Comparing Ancient and Native Customs: Joseph François Lafitau and the 'sauvages américains'

Katharina Stornig (Mainz), Cultural Conceptions of Purity and Pollution: Childbirth and Midwifery in a New Guinean Catholic Mission, 1896-c.1970

Felicity Jensz (Münster), Understandings of Religion within Australia: The Changing Conceptualisation of Christian and Indigenous Religion

Rebekka Habermas (Göttingen), Mission and Gender: Sexual Politics in the Colonies and at Home around 1900 in the German Kaiserreich

Silke Strickrodt (London/Berlin), The Place of Missionary Education in Nineteenth-Century Freetown Society: Methodological Considerations

David Maxwell (Cambridge), Intimate Outsiders and Local Confidants: Missionaries and African Christians in the Contact Zone, Katanga, Belgian Congo, c. 1910s-1920s

Heather Sharkey (Philadelphia), The Case of Henry Athanassian, an Armenian in the Suez Canal Zone: Questioning Assumptions about Missions and Missionaries

Brian Stanley (Edinburgh), Final Discussion

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