Introduction

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This special edition of *Itinerario* arises from a day conference titled "Missions: Harbingers of Modernity?" held at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, in November 2008. The conference brought together a group of Australian historians, whose work includes the study of Christian missions, to address the long-standing debate over the relationship between missions and modernity. Approaching the centennial of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, often seen as a key moment in the development of modern missiology, it seemed timely to reflect on how missionaries in the era of the Edinburgh Conference, as well as their forbears, had contributed to or resisted modernity.[1] The articles in this collection are the fruit of that conversation and represent the increasingly widespread and historically detailed study of Christian missions being undertaken in Australia at this time.

Both "missions" and "modernity" are, of course, the subject of significant scholarly debate. Multiple and contradictory definitions of "modernity" have been proposed across a variety of academic disciplines, with some scholars rejecting the historical value of the concept altogether.[2] Christian missions are also the subject of much disagreement, particularly among those studying the colonial and postcolonial world.[3] Debates about missions and modernity overlap with and are energised by other hotly contested questions regarding the relationship between missions and colonialism, Protestantism and modernity and modernisation and secularisation.[4]

While the articles in this collection reflect these debates in their diversity of approaches to both missions and modernity, they represent a common conviction that both missions and modernity are best understood in relation to specific historical and geographic contexts. Ryan Dunch has argued that in studying the role of Christian missionaries in the transmission of global modernity, "we need a more dynamic and interactive framework, one that recognizes not just imposition, loss and resistance, but multiple possibilities, fluid frontiers, and creative potential in cultural interaction".[5] By analysing the details of the relationship between missionaries, their own societies and those they sought to evangelise, these articles aim to contribute to this more "dynamic and interactive" understanding of missions and modernity. The articles cover a wide range of locations, including the Dutch East Indies, Australia, India, China and Britain, providing clear evidence of the very substantial differences in missionary theory and practice across different places and

Itinerario volume XXXIV, issue 3, 2010 doi: 10.1017/S0165115310000641

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115310000641 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organisations, as well as support for the notion of multiple modernities emerging out of different societies at different times.

As a site of significant cross-cultural encounter within the colonial world, missions provide insights into both the construction and transmission of Western modernity, which recent scholarship has tied closely to European colonial expansion.[6] One theme that emerges strongly from the articles is the complicated relationship between missionaries and notions of social progress in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Helen Gardner's paper, "From Site to Text: Australian Aborigines and the *Origin of the Family*" shows how Engels' influential account of the development of the family drew upon accounts of Aboriginal people initially gained from missionary anthropologists. Gardner's analysis of the changes and reifications that occurred in these texts demonstrates how missionary "knowledge" could be used and misused in the construction of understandings which became central to Western modernity. The relationship between anthropology and missiology is further explored in Joost Coté's paper, "Missionary Albert Kruyt and Colonial Modernity in the Dutch East Indies". Coté shows how the influential Dutch missionary Albert Kruyt was deeply influenced by anthropological theories of social development. Though Kruyt was praised at the 1910 World Missionary Conference, the "new missiology" that he practiced brought him into conflict with anthropologists, other missionaries and the colonial regime in the Dutch East Indies, providing evidence of fractures within the Dutch nation itself. By comparison, Joanna Cruickshank, in "Race, History and the Australian Faith Missions", argues that the distinctive theology of Australian "faith" missionaries led them to reject significant aspects of the racialised understandings of historical time which were central to "Australian modernity" in the early twentieth century.

Women played a substantial role in the European missionary movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a number of these articles focus on the experience and impact of women missionaries in relation to modernity. In "Women, Missions and Modernity: from Anti-Slavery to Missionary Zeal, 1780s to 1840s", Elizabeth Dimock provides a new account of the early involvement of British women in missionary endeavours. She traces how understandings of cultural progress were developed by British women involved in the anti-slavery movement, fed into women's philanthropic work "at home" and exported overseas through women missionaries. Later generations of women missionaries are examined by Sarah Paddle and Margaret Allen, in articles which complicate any straightforward interpretations of missionary women as agents of modernisation within premodern cultures. In her paper "'To Save the Women of China from Fear, Opium and Bound Feet': Australian Women Missionaries in Early Twentieth-Century China", Sarah Paddle shows how women missionaries with the China Inland Mission (CIM) were influenced by notions of "modern" womanhood developing within China itself. She demonstrates that as a consequence of this and other factors, CIM women adopted missionary practices "on the ground" which were quite different from those traditionally promoted by the mission's hierarchy. Margaret Allen, in "That's the Modern Girl: Missionary Women and Modernity in Calcutta c.1907- c.1940", focuses on a more self-consciously "modern" group of missionary women, who were associated with girls' education and the Young Women's Christian Association in India. While these women embodied and actively promoted what they considered

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115310000641 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"modern" behaviour, Allen shows that alternative modernities were also developing among Indian women during this period.

As a whole, these articles demonstrate the importance of historical specificity in any discussion of the relationship between missions and modernity. This relationship may have been close, but these case studies show that it was usually fraught and never straightforward. This research also highlights the need to understand missions and modernity in terms of cultural exchange as well as cultural imperialism, as missionaries acted as intermediaries between European and non-European cultures and were themselves ultimately influenced by both.

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Notes

1 For a discussion of the 1910 World Missionary Conference and its significance, see Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, 7-31.

2 For discussions of the debate over the concept of modernity, see Rofel, "Discrepant Modernities"; Mouzelis, "Modernity"; Menon, "Religion and Colonial Modernity"; Hall, et. al., *Modernity*.

3 See Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism".

4 These broader debates are discussed in van der Veer, "Introduction", and Keane, "Sincerity".

5 Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism", 325.

6 See, for example, Kaiwar and Mazumdar, *Antinomies of Modernity*, and Burton, "Introduction".

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115310000641 Published online by Cambridge University Press