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Global Early Modern Protestant Mission *General Introduction*

This special issue of *Exchange* moves away from the journal's usual analysis of "contemporary Christianities" to consider the roots of today's global and globalized Christianity. It does so because these roots are not well known and have often been understated. While the role of Catholic missions from early in the sixteenth century has been well explored, it is widely thought that there was no Protestant equivalent for more than another two and a half centuries, yet in fact today's plethora of indigenized Protestant denominations around the world have their origins in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The internationalization of Christianity thus has considerably earlier roots than is usually thought and this must affect our understanding of 'contemporary Christianities'.

The historiographical orthodoxy about Protestant mission history is that it essentially begins in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the foundation in 1792 of the Baptist Missionary Society, which sent William Carey and John Thomas to India as its first missionaries in 1793. In its wake, a plethora of Protestant missionary societies were established in England, the United States, Germany and the Netherlands. There is no question that the organization of these societies and the despatch of missionaries overseas was highly significant, indeed arguably epochal. Yet conventional historiography has concluded that early modern Protestants had nothing like the degree of disquiet about the dominion of "heathenism" that would be felt by the mid-nineteenth century when it would dominate Protestant missionary thought, and that neither did early modern Protestants "show much of an interest in missions at all. The massive missionary expansion of early modern Europe was financed and directed almost entirely by the expanding Catholic powers on the continent – Portugal, Spain, and France."¹ It has often been taken for granted that "Protestants made no serious or systematic efforts to do anything of the kind."² While philanthropy was alive and well in

1 Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-century England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 23.

2 Alec Ryrie, "Mission and Empire: An Ethical Puzzle in Early Modern Protestantism", in idem and Dorothea Wendebourg (eds.), *Sister Reformations II/Schwesterreformationen II: Reformation and Ethics in Germany and England/Reformation und Ethik in Deutschland und in England* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 189.

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Susan Thorne avers that “it was neither global in its scope nor missionary in its orientation ... Health, education, and welfare, rather than spiritual salvation, were its aims” and those who were already Christian were its intended recipients.³ Imperial territories in Africa and Asia “were almost entirely neglected” and such “colonial ministry” as did take place “was confined to European settlers for the most part.”⁴ In the British empire, “Anglican and Dissenting theologians actively discounted missionary claims to the nation’s attention, arguing that the biblical imperatives to proselytize had been incumbent upon the early Christians alone.”⁵ As Alec Ryrie has shown, Lutheran theologians had used a similar argument in the early seventeenth century to dismiss claims that scripture mandated mission to pagans and “[t]his view remained standard amongst Lutherans into the eighteenth century.”⁶ However, there are a number of significant exceptions to this picture.

While it has been known that Calvinist and Lutheran pastors and Anglican priests worked in European outposts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their efforts have been largely discounted. It has been assumed that the majority ministered only to fellow Christians, with apparently barely a thought for indigenous peoples and their religions. The articles gathered in this special issue shed light on the early Protestant missionaries, showing that they were not uninterested in reaching beyond their existing congregants. While later generations of missionaries organized on a larger scale and undertook mission more widely, in step with European expansion and colonization, there were strong efforts to proselytize even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is in line with more recent publications that have started to explore the global perspective of early modern mission.⁷

These papers developed out of the symposium “Exploring Early Modern Protestant Mission”, held virtually on 21 and 22 January 2021, organized by the Mission History Network. Papers included studies of missionary activity within the bounds of Christendom (one of which is published here), since such activity was in dialogue with extra-European mission and both shaped and was shaped by it. But in this publication the focus is on mission outside Europe.

Lisa Clark Diller studies the relationship between early modern Catholic and Protestant mission. When James II ascended the throne of England in 1685 he opened up space for his Catholic co-religionists to assert themselves.

3 Thorne, *Congregational Missions*, 23.

4 *Ibid.*, 24.

5 *Ibid.*, 23.

6 Ryrie, “Mission and empire”, 198–99 (but see 191 for Lutheran missionaries in North America and India).

7 E.g. Jenna Gibbs (ed.), *Global Protestant Missions. Politics, Reform, and Communication, 1730s–1930s* (London: Routledge 2019).

Their missionary efforts included the publication of pamphlets advocating the Catholic confession and the opening of schools. If English Protestants were worried about these developments, they were also inspired by this missionary strategy of Catholics. Indeed, Anglicans regarded Catholic competition as an opportunity to revitalize both within England as well as globally.

The global perspective of English Protestants is also the topic of Patrick McGhee's contribution. Using Psalm 2 ("I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance: and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession"),⁸ he studies theological reflections during the Interregnum (1649–1660) on the conversion of Native Americans in the Colony of New England. Whereas a binary was constructed between "heathen" natives and Christian English with a narrative of the "expansion" of Christ's kingdom, there was also a genuine conviction that some natives could be converted. McGhee further substantiates English commitment to the conversion of America with an analysis of collections for the "propagation of the Gospel in New-England", listing amounts of donated money. English local parishioners thus became actively involved in the Atlantic expansion of Protestant Christianity.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in West Africa, the situation was very different, because European presence there was limited to the coast and to the slave trade. As a result, most historians say no Protestant mission was conducted in this region in the early modern period. Martha Frederiks questions this narrative and argues that several missionary endeavours may not have been "successful", but the sources indicate recurrent attempts at missionary work among Africans as early as the 17th century. The characteristics of these missionary endeavours, such as education, attention for the vernacular and indigenous missionaries, already signal aspects of missions that would become the groundwork for mission in the nineteenth century. Lack of primary source material is a major problem in investigating this matter, but she uses three "windows" to gather evidence indirectly: reports from Catholics about Protestant presence, sources of the chartered trading companies in West Africa and evidence about the EuroAfrican community. She concludes that although missionary activity may have been very limited, nevertheless in the seventeenth century "Protestantism became a reality in West Africa".

The article by Lars Laamann takes us from the Atlantic to the Eastern Hemisphere. In the British and Dutch Empires, "Ultra-Ganges", more specifically Malacca and Batavia, missionaries developed new strategies to convert the native populations. Despite mutual political frictions between 1780 and 1840, Dutch and British missionaries maintained cordial relationships and exchanged missionary strategies in their endeavours, building on earlier

⁸ Ps. 2:8.

Portuguese efforts. In Malaya, as in India and the Dutch East Indies, missionaries were confronted with “predictable non-converts”, such as Hindus and Muslims. The Malay missions can be seen as experimental, because of the large community of Chinese migrants that were regarded as “potential converts” and a stepping stone to mission in China proper, made possible by the Opium War of 1840–1842.

In the final article by David Onnekink the breadth of global Protestant mission is covered. Peter Singer argued that early modern Christianity was largely detrimental to animal rights before 1800.⁹ This article investigates this claim by studying early modern travel accounts by missionaries. They were primarily focused on conversion, but in the process of their journeys they produced a unique series of travel accounts in which they also paid ample attention to landscapes, climate, local flora and wildlife. The analysis is based on three early modern descriptions by Danish and Dutch missionaries of the wildlife of New Netherland (America), Greenland and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). From these accounts a richer and more nuanced picture arises about missionaries’ views on animals.

Altogether the articles in this special issue present us with a rich picture of early modern global Protestant mission, ranging from America and Greenland, to West Africa, and to South East Asia. It shows how early modern Protestants were committed to global mission, how transnational Protestant networks emerged and how regional missionary strategies emerged. They also make clear that missionaries were interested in the peoples and landscapes and creatures beyond the confines of the European settler communities. Combined, these articles are testimony to the richness and variety of a truly global Early Modern Protestant mission.

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⁹ Peter Singer, “Prologue: Ethics and the New Animal Liberation”, in idem, (ed.), *In Defense of Animals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 3.