Sisters Crossing Boundaries
German Missionary Nuns in Colonial Togo and New Guinea, 1897–1960

Katharina Stornig

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
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Katharina Stornig
Introduction

On October 24th, 1881, twenty-eight-year-old Helena Stollenwerk (1852–1900), a farmer’s daughter and heiress to the parental farm, wrote to Arnold Janssen (1837–1909), a German priest and the founder of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), one of the first and most important German Catholic mission-sending societies established in 1875, and asked him for admission. In her letter, Helena spoke of her deep yearning to become a missionary nun in China that had shaped her vita since her childhood in Rollesbroich, a small village in North Rhine-Westphalia. She wrote:

In [my] early childhood […], when I occasionally heard or read in the annuals of the Holy Childhood [Association] about the proselytization of the heathens, every time I felt a keen longing to play my part in the proselytization of the poor heathens; yet I thought that women were not suited at all to this endeavor, and this often made me feel very sad; only later I came to understand that nuns in fact could do much for the proselytization of the heathens; especially in China […].

Although until then Janssen had rejected all applications by women, in 1882 he invited Helena to come to the society’s headquarters, which, due to German legislation during the so-called culture war, had been established in the Dutch town of Steyl, where he offered her a position as a kitchen maid. In the hope of getting closer to the fulfillment of her missionary vocation, Helena stood up to the initial resistance of her parents and her confessor, ignored her

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1 Historian Simone Höller referred to the foundation of the Society of the Divine Word in 1875 as the »seedling« from which organized Catholic missions developed in Germany. Cf. Simone Höller, Das Päpstliche Werk der Glaubensverbreitung in Deutschland 1933–1945, Paderborn 2009, p. 40.
4 Cf. Salesiana Soete, Geschichte der Missionsgenossenschaft der Dienerinnen des Heiligen Geistes, Diss. Universität Wien 1953, pp. 14f.
sisters’ complaints, left her home and inheritance and moved to the society’s headquarters. There she performed kitchen work for seven years together with another six women who had joined her in waiting for a German congregation for missionary nuns to be founded. In 1889, Janssen eventually established the Servants of the Holy Spirit and the kitchen maids became novices.

The new foundation appealed to many women, and candidates from all over Germany and Austria applied for admission. By 1900, despite Janssen’s strict selection procedure, which had resulted in many applications being rejected, the congregation counted 201 members who had already spread over four continents. Contrary to Helena Stollenwerk’s hopes that were pinned on the Catholic mission venture in China, however, the Servants of the Holy Spirit’s first «missions among heathens» as they called it, were established in Togo (1897) and New Guinea (1899), both part of the German colonial empire since 1884. Helena Stollenwerk, now Sister Maria, never went abroad. At Janssen’s request, she became the master of novices and stayed in the congregation’s Motherhouse in Steyl until her death in 1900. Yet her successors soon acknowledged Helena as one of the congregation’s co-foundresses and commemorated her as the «spiritual mother of thousands and thousands of virgins» who, following a divine calling, «wandered out to the very borders of the universe in order to gain souls for the kingdom of Christ.»

Missionaries are people who migrate for religious reasons. Referencing the Great Commission (that is, the instruction of the resurrected Christ to his apostles to spread his teachings to all nations and baptize them as described in several passages in the Bible), Christian missionaries have long been traveling the globe. Etymologically, the term «missionary» derives from «missio», the translation into Latin of the Greek terms «apostole» and «apostólos» which signify an «act of sending» or «someone who is sent». A «missionary», in the Christian understanding, is a person who is sent to the various parts of

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5 At some point during her youth, Helena’s confessor even barred her from reading the Holy Childhood Association’s periodical and talking about her desire to become a missionary nun. Cf. ibid., p. 25.
7 By 1900, the Servants of the Holy Spirit had established a network of branches over four continents. Up to 1918, they founded women’s convents in Argentina (1895), Togo (1897), New Guinea (1899), USA (1901), Brazil (1902), China (1905), Japan (1908), Philippines (1912) Netherlands (1910) Germany (1912), Austria (1912) and Indonesia (1917).
8 Apart from the missions «among heathens», i.e., the majority, non-Christian, populations of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Servants of the Holy Spirit also engaged among European migrant populations in the Americas.
the world on behalf of a Church in order to evangelize\textsuperscript{11}. Historically, the term gained importance with the sending of the first Jesuits to China and the Americas in the sixteenth century. In Catholic tradition, the missionary profession was gendered male, with its conception relating to clerical authority and a gendered definition of ministry and discipleship that barred women from delivering the sacraments and preaching the gospel\textsuperscript{12}. Early modern women, however, who, as Jo Ann McNamara has insisted, were »no less enthusiastic than men« about the idea of serving a missionary vocation, would engage in a different kind of apostolate, one that concentrated on the inner domains of prayer, religious exercises and spiritual support\textsuperscript{13}. Since the period of Catholic Counter-Reformation, which had seen the external world being assigned to priests, while nuns were being confined to the inner world of their respective cloisters, many nuns transformed the latter into the venue of their missionary vocation, participating in Christianization through fortifying themselves and practicing silence and enclosure\textsuperscript{14}. It was only in the last third of the nineteenth century that women were admitted to the Catholic mission fields in larger numbers. Yet, even though at that time many women, like Helena Stollenwerk, enthusiastically volunteered to serve the resurgent Catholic missionary movement, they were considered as the subordinate assistants to men. The notion of the roles of nuns in missions as a function supplementing the proselytizing activities of priests also determined the ideas of founder Janssen, who in 1891 codified the Servants of the Holy Spirit’s »principle purpose« by the task »to aid the works of the Society of the Divine Word’s priests« in the fields »especially through those kinds of work that naturally better befitted women than men«\textsuperscript{15}.

From this point of view, it is hard to imagine that the nuns formed an important part of (the organization of) Catholic life in German Togo and New Guinea and impacted on the social relations in both colonies more generally. After all, in Janssen’s understanding, »works that naturally better befitted women than men« first and foremost involved domestic chores (cooking, laundering, ironing, sewing etc. for themselves and the priests), the cleaning and decorating of missionary churches or chapels and what was then called


\textsuperscript{12} Strictly speaking, the Church only considered ordained priests missionaries. This was due to their role as administrators of the sacraments and the preached Word. Cf. Josef \textsc{Glazik}, Missionar, in: Josef \textsc{Höfer} / Karl \textsc{Rahner} (eds), \textit{Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche} 7, Freiburg 1962, p. 457.


\textsuperscript{14} Cf. ibid., p. 515.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. the first draft of the congregation’s constitutions, in: \textsc{Soete}, Geschichte, p. 19.
works of charity«. Colonial historiographies addressing both settings have done little to challenge this impression. While scholars did acknowledge the presence of nuns, they continued to either ignore their activities or to subsume their experiences under those of men, largely confining missionary nuns to subordinate clauses or footnotes. This can partially be explained by their research agendas that were marked by the overarching interest in the Christian missions’ impact on the arenas of politics or economy rather than on the religious and cultural domains and their often invisible power over daily habits and implicit practices. But it is also the missionaries’ scattered settlement pattern, their engagement in the sector of education as well as their close interaction with both western and indigenous agents in the colonial encounter which secures them a prominent place in the modern colonial historiographies in both areas. All this, to be sure, equally applied to


17 The first scholars of mission to insist on the need to scrutinize the interplay between power and meaning not only in the sphere of politics (and institutionalized power relations) but also in what they have called the »arena of common-sense meanings« in day-to-day worlds are Jean and John Comaroff. Cf. Jean Comaroff / John Comaroff, Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa, in: American Ethnologist 13 (1986), pp. 1–22. Additionally, Adrian Hastings has pointed to the inseparability of religion and politics in early colonial Africa, arguing that even though most missionaries attempted to avoid the sphere of politics, »there was no way in which the average missionary could avoid politically significant behavior«. Cf. Adrian Hastings, The Church in Africa, 1450–1950, Oxford 1994, p. 408.


19 Peter Hempenstall has referred to the missionary infrastructure in terms of personnel, churches, farms and schools as a »state within the colonial state«. According to him, missionaries frequently »gained a level of acceptance among New Guineans that other colonial parties were often denied«. Cf. Peter Hempenstall, The Neglected Empire. The Superstructure of the Colonial State in German Melanesia, in: Arthur K. Knoll / Lewis H. Gann (eds), Germans in the Tropics: Essays in German Colonial History, New York 1987, pp. 93–118.

missionary nuns. In German Togo, the Servants of the Holy Spirit established and maintained five women’s convents mostly in the settlement area of what had come to be known as the Ewe-speaking population groups. Two of the convents were situated along the economically important coast (Lomé since 1897 and Aného since 1901) and three in the country’s interior (Kpalimé and Atakpamé since 1905 and Kpandu since 1912). The nuns’ pattern of settlement in German New Guinea was even looser: The ten convents established before 1914 were scattered along the linguistically fragmented north coast of the mainland within a distance of more than 500 kilometers.


22 This book generally uses present-day names for places. Colonial toponyms are used only in the quotations. During German colonial rule Kpalimé was called Agome Palime.


24 Up to 1914, the nuns established convents in Tumleo (1899), Monumbo (1902), Bogia (1905),
Up to 1960, another twelve women’s convents followed. Throughout Togo and New Guinea, the nuns established and managed girls’ schools, contracted indigenous girls and young women as boarders or housemaids and organized Catholic feasts. In addition, they sought to maintain close contact with the respective indigenous populations mostly through their engagement in nursing and what they called charitable services.

Catholic nuns constituted a considerable quantitative share of the missionary workforce in particular and in the European settler communities more generally. From 1897 to 1918, fifty-one Servants of the Holy Spirit moved to the Prefecture Apostolic Togo, which had been erected by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903 Pa.) on the territory of the homonymous German colony in 1892. There, they lived and worked side by side with 109 of the Society of the Divine Word’s priests and friars, thus accounting for more, than 30% of the Catholic mission’s European personnel. Given the generally small number of German settlers in Togo, the Catholic missionaries thus not only formed an important social group along with their Protestant counterparts, administrators, traders and merchants but also constituted a considerable part of the European population. In 1907, for instance, colonial administrators recorded 288 »whites« living in Togo, only forty-four of whom were women. At that time, sixty-one Catholic missionaries, among them eighteen nuns, were living in the colony. The percentage of women in the Catholic mission in the prefecture apostolic Kaiser-Wilhelmsland, which Pope Leo XIII established in 1896 on the German part of the New Guinean mainland and offshore islands of the same name, was even higher. In 1907, at a time when administrators recorded 144 male and thirty-eight female »white« settlers (mostly administrators, planters or Protestant missionaries) in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland, eighteen nuns and twenty-seven male missionaries worked in the prefecture. Besides, at the end of 1908, eleven newcomers raised the number

28 Denkschrift über die Entwicklung der Schutzgebiete in Afrika und der Südsee im Jahre 1906/07, BArch, R 1001/6537, p. 15.
29 Cf. APF N.S. Vol. 478, 113.
30 Cf. Denkschrift, BArch, R 1001/6537, p. 15.
31 Thus, the nuns accounted for 40% of the missionary personnel in the Prefecture Apostolic. Cf. APF N.S. Vol. 414, 394.
of women missionaries to twenty-nine. In contrast to the Togo-based nuns who in 1917/1918, when German colonial rule had drawn to an end, were all expelled, their colleagues in New Guinea were ultimately allowed to stay and continued to work during the Australian military occupation (1914–1920) and subsequent colonial administration (1920–1973). To date, the Servants of the Holy Spirit’s mission in New Guinea has lived through two world wars and three regimes. Between 1899 and 1960, a total of 181 European and North American nuns moved to the New Guinean mainland.

The lack of attention paid to missionary nuns active in Togo and New Guinea mirrors three larger trends in colonial and mission historiography addressing both regions. First, most historians have focused on Protestant missionaries, a fact that can be explained by the better accessibility of Protestant missionary archives and their less complex, as compared with the Catholic case, institutional involvement. Second, it reflects the strikingly persistent perception of colonialism as a masculine undertaking which has shaped the analysis of empires for decades. Third, it relates to the type of archives that historians have consulted and the kind of evidence they have

33 While the Servants of the Holy Spirit returned to Togo only in 1989, their New Guinean branch has developed to date.
34 Cf. COLES/MHAILC, Sent by the Spirit, pp. 43–53.
37 Cf. e.g. Trutz VON TROTHA, Koloniale Herrschaft. Zur soziologischen Theorie der Staatsentstehung am Beispiel des »Schutzgebietes Togo«, Tübingen 1994; SEBOLD, Togo; ERBAR, Ein »Platz an der Sonne«? While historiographical surveys on German colonialism have taken the aspirations of secular women into consideration, they have largely not referred to the hopes that religious women linked to colonial expansion. Cf. Andreas ECKERT/Albert WIRZ, Wir nicht, die Andere auch. Deutschland und der Kolonialismus, in: Sebastian CONRAD/Shalini RANDERIA (eds), Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften, Frankfurt a.M./New York 2002, pp. 272–392; CONRAD, Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte.
preferred. Women are under-represented both in colonial and Church archives. Unlike their husbands, the wives of Protestant missionaries had no obligation to write to institutions at home or journal editors. Nor were private letters to relatives recorded in archives or considered by researchers, who would examine the missions’ political and economic significance instead. Ultimately, it was the male missionaries and Church leaders that negotiated with colonial governments and district officers. Despite the fact that Catholic nuns wrote large amounts of letters and reports to their European congregations’ headquarters, their voices can hardly be traced in colonial or Church archives, for the simple reason that with neither colonial offices nor the Propaganda Fide, the Roman department of the ecclesiastical administration in charge of the spread of Catholicism, they would negotiate directly.

This book sets out to develop an alternative perspective on the missionary encounter rather than attempting to enrich existing narratives by adding women. It therefore mainly draws on the sources produced by its principal subjects, missionary nuns. These are mostly the correspondence with Europe, travelogues, chronicles, reports and, to a lesser extent, articles, photographs and memoirs, all of which provide new insights into the nuns’ religious and practical worlds and their gendered dimensions as they moved within and across imperial and religious systems. The book, moreover, draws on colonial records and ecclesiastical sources in order to scrutinize the power relations that structured the nuns’ missionary engagement and their ambiguous roles as enthusiastic women missionaries who on the one hand took their privileged position as »white« Christians for granted and on the other subordinated to male religious and secular power. Ultimately, religious perspectives are accorded a prominent place because, to borrow from Andrew Porter, missionaries »viewed their world first of all with the eye of faith«.

Since the 1980s, new approaches in the humanities and social sciences have opened exciting ways of thinking about modern mission history. Historians of empires and anthropologists have moved away from studying colonial and indigenous societies as two opposed, culturally and socially homogeneous groups to place their focus on encounters and cultural exchange.

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40 In the following I concentrate mostly on the missions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
41 Already in 1989, Ann Stoler has criticized that scholars examining the colonial encounter took »the politically constructed dichotomy of the colonizer and the colonized as a given, rather than as a historically shifting pair of social categories that need to be explained«. Cf. Ann L. Stoler, Rethinking colonial Categories. European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule, in: Comparative Studies in Society and History 31 (1989), pp. 134–161, here pp. 136f.
Scholars have departed from the simple dichotomous conception of colonial histories in terms of western impact and indigenous resistance and started to acknowledge the complexity of colonial societies and the immanent tensions and contradictions that marked the systems of rule\textsuperscript{42}. Recent scholarship has revealed much about the various western and indigenous agents that shaped and were shaped by colonial pasts and, moreover, fuelled the interest of mainstream historians and anthropologists in missionary archives\textsuperscript{43}, which came to be seen as privileged sources to study the colonial encounter and cultural change through records relating to everyday life\textsuperscript{44}. Historical and ethnographic studies of missions, often conceptualized as case studies or microhistories, have discovered a great deal about the (individual) missionaries’


biographies\textsuperscript{45}, transculturality\textsuperscript{46}, conceptions of »self« and »Other«\textsuperscript{47} as well as the limits of missionary power\textsuperscript{48}.

A second important impact on the study of missions has come from feminist theory. The first studies to examine the late-nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement as a sphere of activity or even professional opportunity for »white« American women were conducted in the United States\textsuperscript{49}. Patricia Hill has argued that thousands of American middle-class women experienced their engagement in the missionary movement, both at home and abroad, as a socially acceptable activity enabling them to renegotiate their own roles\textsuperscript{50}. Hill and others have depicted the modern mission venture as the single largest social movement in which American women participated\textsuperscript{51}. To be sure, feminist scholars of mission have not only reintroduced forgotten women to mission histories but, moreover, started to study the relationship between men and women in mission-sending institutions and their particular forms of social organization abroad\textsuperscript{52}. Most of this predominantly Anglo-


\textsuperscript{46} In this context, first and foremost the German research project on transculturation, which has been based on the exploration of the archives of the Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft, must be mentioned. E.g. cf. Rainer Alsheimer, Mission, Missionare und Transkulturalität, in: Jahrbuch für Volkskunde 23 (2000), pp. 189–240; Stefanie Lubrich, Missionarische Mädchen- und Frauenerziehung. Fallstudien aus Westafrika, Bremen 2002; Azamede, Transkulturationen?


\textsuperscript{48} Cf. Sonja Sawitzki, Ho/Wegbe, Die Etablierung einer Missionsstation in West-Afrika, Bremen 2002.


\textsuperscript{52} Much of this pioneering work has focused on Protestant women missionaries in Australia and the Pacific regions. Cf. Patricia Grimshaw, Paths of Duty: American Missionary Women in nineteenth-century Hawaii, Honolulu 1989. Significantly, in Jolly and Macintyre’s volume on family and gender in the Pacific all twelve historical and anthropological chapters deal with missionary institutions which came to be seen as the primary colonial institutions impacting on
phone scholarship has focused on Protestant missions, examining the roles the so-called missionary wives played in the missionary household economies, exemplifying western gendered ideals through their own lives. Looking at the British and American religious institutions in the Pacific regions, scholars like Patricia Grimshaw and Diane Langmore have examined cultural conflict over gender relations, marriage, sexuality, parenting and the family through the study of missionary records. Fiona Bowie’s important edited volume of contributions by historians and anthropologists entitled »Women and Missions« (1993) has done so with a focus on Africa. Focusing on the study of the gendered and racialized body as a site for the imagination, inscription and operation of power, scholars have, moreover, started to examine mission activity in relation to an imperial body politics that attempted to discipline its subjects and propagated new standards of dress, bodily adornment and beauty. Shifting the focus from the missionaries to the missionized, historian of Africa Heidi Gengenbach has argued that missionary activity and colonial efforts in Mozambique represented an intimate intercession and had become an embodied experience where power engages even private identities, behaviors, and affections. Most recently, histo-
rians and anthropologists have started to examine the ways in which indigenous women made sense (or use) of gendered mission Christianity as well as the roles they played in evangelization.

Missionary records, moreover, have come to be used as sources for the study of the relations between gender, race and empire. Feminist scholars have shown that constructions and ideologies of gender were central to the cultural and religious agenda promoted by the missionaries of both sexes and placed them within the broader context of the so-called »civilizing mission« of colonialism. Pointing out the hopes and strategies that European women, both religious and secular, placed in colonial expansion, historians have profoundly challenged the perception of empires as genuinely masculine enterprises. Applying a postcolonial theoretical framework, some scholars, in emphasizing the crucial roles of missions in the interplay between colonial

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metropolis and oversea empires in the context of gender, have argued for
the full integration of mission history into mainstream historiographies. This
work is part of larger efforts of historians, anthropologists and literary schol-
ars to re-examine the ways in which imperialism has shaped European socie-
ties and cultures. Historians have re-evaluated the role of missions in the
emergence and circulation of knowledge as well as metropolitan ideas of
gender and race. Scholars of British imperialism like Antoinette Burton and
Susan Thorne have pointed out the ways in which British women managed to
make use of the image of colonized women (as individuals in need of rescue
and liberation) and the ideology of »white« hegemony in order to negotiate
their own advance. Susan Thorne has brought together early British femin-
nism and missionary enthusiasm by showing that the missionary movement
offered Victorian women not only employment opportunities and the valori-
zation of their skills and virtues but also the institutional space to challenge
male privileges. Like others, she has come to the conclusion that the success
of this »white« middle-class missionary feminism depended on the subor-
dination of »non-white« or working-class women, for it »rested on the exis-
tence of a degraded female Other in the colonies and at home«.

Compared with the Protestant case, less attention has been paid to the
study of the experiences and activities of Catholic nuns in modern mission-
ary contexts. This appears striking considering the growing scholarly inter
est in the study of religion and the significance of religious experience for
feminine concepts of life. Early modern historian Silvia Evangelisti has

63 Patrick Harries, Butterflies & Barbarians. Swiss Missionaries & Systems of Knowledge in
64 Cf. Antoinette Burton, At the Heart of Empire. Indians and the colonial Encounter in late Vic-
torian Britain, Berkeley 1989; Hall, Missionary Stories; Susan Thorne, »The Conversion of
Englishmen and the Conversion of the World inseparable«. Missionary Imperialism and the
Language of Class 1750–1850, in: Frederick Cooper / Ann L. Stoler, Tensions of Empire. Colo-
nial Cultures in a bourgeois World, Berkeley 1997, pp. 238–262; Susan Thorne, Congregatio-
nal Missions and the Making of an imperial Culture in nineteenth-century England, Stanford
1999; Catherine Hall, Civilizing Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination,
1830–1867, Cambridge 2002. For the German-speaking context Rebekka Habermas has argued
for the need to revaluate the roles of missions and their religious networks in nineteenth- and
twentieth-century German society and culture. Cf. Habermas, Mission.
65 Cf. Antoinette Burton, Burdens of History. British Feminists, Indian Women and imperial
66 Susan Thorne, Missionary Imperial Feminism, in: Huber/Lutkehaus (eds), Gendered Mis-
sions, pp. 39–66, i.e. p. 60.
67 While at the beginning the study of gender and religion was a domain of English-speaking
scholarship, the last decades have witnessed a growing interest in German historiography. Cf.
Catherine Prelinger, Charity, Challenge and Change. Religious Dimensions of the mid-nine-
teenth-century Women’s Movement in Germany, New York 1987; Edith Sauber (ed.) Die Reli-
gion der Geschlechter. Historische Aspekte religiöser Mentalitäten, Wien/Köln/Weimar 1995
(L’Homme Schriften 1); Susan E. Dinan/Debra Meyers (eds), Women and Religion in old
and new Worlds, New York/London, 2001; Clark Elizabeth, Women, Gender and the Study

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observed that nuns »have recently attracted many fans«. Scholars increasingly reject the conventional treatment of nuns as ahistorical and passive subjects having withdrawn from society. Instead, historians and anthropologists have started to explore the histories of convent life within and beyond the confines of Europe. Nuns have been re-integrated into mainstream historical narratives and it has become clear that the historical evolution of women’s orders or congregations has always been closely intertwined with broader social, political and economic developments in Europe and beyond. Early modernists have demonstrated that women’s monasteries were among the first institutions to be recreated in the Americas and scrutinized their vitality to the erecting and securing of religious orders and colonial regimes. Sarah A. Curtis has recently traced the life trajectories of three French nuns, showing how they helped Post-Napoleonic France re-establish a global empire. In her important contribution to the study of female religious life forms in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, historian Relinde Meiwes has explained the proliferation of Catholic women’s congregations by their members’ active involvement in society in general. According to Canon


Law, women’s congregations differ from women’s orders in status and rules. In contrast to the members of orders, who take the indissoluble so-called »solemn vows« and are subjected to strict »papal« enclosure, those of congregations can be dispensed from their »simple« vows and live under conditions that facilitate the combination of work and religious life. Outlining a dynamic picture of these founding histories, Meiwes has related women’s enthusiastic engagement in religious life forms to both their striving to renegotiate their roles in a changing society and their religious concepts that derived from a gendered monastic tradition. Anthropologist Gertrud Hüwelmeier has introduced nuns to the discussion of globalizing processes in the social and cultural sciences by pointing out the transnational religious networks that Catholic women’s congregations created and maintained since the late nineteenth century. Significantly, most women’s congregations established during the 1880s and 1890s, hence at a time when religious and secular expansion enthused many Germans, were missionary congregations.

According to Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, it was mainly two factors that had persuaded Christian Church leaders to admit growing numbers of women to the mission fields since the second half of the nineteenth century. These were the crucial contributions of women to the various mis-

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73 Originally, the term »nun« had applied exclusively to the members of religious orders and only later was expanded to members of congregations, who were correctly entitled as »sisters«. In this book, the word »nuns« is used for two reasons. First, as Jo Ann McNamara has pointed out, in the perception of those concerned the distinctions were much blurrier than suggested by Canon Law. Second, the term »nun« comes closer to the way in which the subjects of this book saw themselves. McNAMARA, Sisters in Arms, pp. 631–644.


mission movements at their home fronts in many western countries as well as the growing awareness among Church leaders that women missionaries could propagate new forms of evangelization, given that they had access to places that were out of bounds to men. The employment of women missionaries became a prominent issue in the last third of the nineteenth century – at a time when the conversion of indigenous women gained significance in the eyes of Christian leaders, who increasingly came to view indigenous women (in their capacity as mothers) as the key to changing indigenous moral and religious regimes77. In the eyes of founder Arnold Janssen, who since the 1870s had emphasized in the Catholic media women's importance to the mission venture, nuns enjoyed two significant advantages over priests operating in missions. Firstly, indigenous peoples would not identify women with the representatives of foreign powers striving for domination and profit. They were, as a consequence, less likely to become the targets of (violent) resistance, but, quite the contrary, would engage sympathy and gain the people's confidence78. Secondly, Janssen, who wrote this with a strong focus on the Catholic missions in China during the 1870s and 1880s79, credited missionary nuns with key roles in the creation of an indigenous clergy. Accordingly, they were needed abroad in order to educate indigenous girls to become pious Christian mothers, who, in turn, constituted the precondition for the emergence of what Janssen called »good families«, meaning particular social units and domestic environments in which »priestly vocations could thrive«80.

Ultimately, what Jane Hunter has called the »feminization of the mission force« depended on the enthusiasm of large numbers of Christian women to go abroad81. In one way or another, several scholars have explained this within a predominantly secular argumentative framework, suggesting that women missionaries experienced migration as a liberating move with the missionary situation providing opportunities for adventure, professional service and achievements rarely available to them at home82. Still, for women missionary life also entailed multiple hardships. Studies on Protestant missionary wives, the best researched group in this context, have shown that these

77 Cf. GRIMSHAW/SHERLOCK, Women, pp. 184f.
78 Cf. BORNEMANN, Arnold Janssen, p. 222.
79 The mission in China, established in 1879, was the Society of the Divine Word’s by far most important field of work particularly during its early years.
80 Cf. HUBER, The Dangers, p. 186; Bornemann, Arnold Janssen, p. 222.
women’s manifold duties (e.g. housewifery, childrearing, cooking, cleaning, food supply, etc.) were set in pre-industrial household economies; they frequently resided in isolated areas without medical schemes, had suffered the loss of their husbands and children and lacked official recognition. Somewhat paradoxically, comparatively little attention has been paid to the religious concepts, beliefs and experiences that informed these women’s motivations and gave shape to their activities abroad. In fact, even the few studies dealing with Catholic missionary nuns have privileged secular patterns of explanation.

Missionary nuns, however, based their individual life choices first and foremost on their religious belief system and a vocation they derived from a divine calling. Helena Stollenwerk’s life trajectory shows that missionary vocations related to individual experiences within broader historical developments in and outside the Catholic Church, to the Church’s multiple entanglements with the non-Christian world and to the kind of globalized religious order the Church constructed. The nuns’ total dedication to a life-long service within the mission venture must be understood as their acting upon the powerful desire to realize this individually experienced divine call. Even though they were aware of the high death rates on the mission field, departing nuns often referred to the realization of their missionary vocation as the »aim of their lives«; for it allowed them to actively contribute to what they perceived to be the most meaningful venture of their times. For these women, to venture abroad in the capacity of missionaries meant to work for both their own salvation as well as the salvation of others. Speaking in terms of women’s empowerment, the entry of nuns into the mission force not only signified the transcendence of the cloistered convent, access to employment and the departure for an adventure abroad, but also implied their participation in activities that were associated with the clergy. Their missionary experiences and practices are, indeed, incomprehensible without considering both the religious and secular cultures of which the nuns were a part as well as their gendered dimensions. Just as the religious beliefs, concepts and traditions

84 Huber has emphasized the professional tasks that the nuns were expected to perform abroad (i.e. as managers of girls’ schools, orphanages and hospitals). Cf. Huber, The Dangers, p. 183. In her dissertation about German and Austrian nuns in South Africa, Martina Gugglberger has suggested explaining the life choices of her subjects of study between individual and social limits and ruptures in terms of a »regulated adventure«. While entering a congregation was seen as a socially accepted life path for women, the missionary context involved the possibility to transcend social and cultural norms (e.g. through higher education and migration). Cf. Martina Gugglberger, »Ich wollte immer nach Afrika!« Lebensgeschichten deutschsprachiger Missionsschwestern nach 1945, Diss. Universität Salzburg 2009, pp. 5f.
The last third of the nineteenth century witnessed a considerable increase in the active participation of women in the various Christian missions. Katharina Stornig focuses on the Catholic case, and particularly explores the activities and experiences of German missionary nuns, the so-called Servants of the Holy Spirit, in colonial Togo and New Guinea in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Introducing the nuns’ ambiguous roles as travelers, evangelists, believers, domestic workers, farmers, teachers, and nurses, Stornig highlights the ways in which these women shaped and were shaped by the missionary encounter and how they affected colonial societies more generally.

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