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In the fall of 2021, a Haitian gang kidnapped seventeen Christian missionaries and held them hostage for ransom. While the missionaries saw their release as an act of divine providence,¹ the kidnapers most likely viewed their captives as an economic commodity. The U.S. Department of State dealt with this as a political issue, while some Haitians viewed foreign intervention as an attack on Haiti’s sovereignty.² This one event demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of what some may perceive as a singularly motivated endeavor—conversion of a people to a particular religion. How religion spreads, who facilitates conversion, who benefits from proselyting, and what are the effects of this process on the peoples the missionaries seek to convert and on the missionaries themselves are all fascinating questions.

Missionary efforts are usually enacted on a global scale and have been an important force within world history. [In his 2005 article, David F. Lindenfeld](#) maintained that world historians tended to focus on “trade patterns, technological diffusion, itinerant foodstuffs, and germs.”³ While he admitted that these historians recognized the less tangible ideologies of religions, he believed that the vocabulary for dealing with religious encounters lagged behind that of more material ones. Since then, *Journal of World History* has had an issue dedicated to “civilizing missions” and two articles from that issue are presented here. But this special collection of articles goes beyond that specific topic, for it seeks to enhance our understanding of missionaries

¹ David Troyer, “Haiti Update: Press Release, Hostages Freed,” Christian Aid Ministries, December 21, 2021, <https://christianaidministries.org/haiti-kidnapping-update/haiti-staff-abduction/>

² Maria Abi-Habib, “F.B.I. Is Working in Haiti to Recover Kidnapped Missionaries,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/world/americas/haiti-protests.html>.

³David F. Lindenfeld, “Indigenous Encounters with Christian Missionaries in China and West Africa, 1800-1920: A Comparative Study,” *Journal of World History* 16, no. 3 (September 2005): 327.

and conversion and their place in the discourse on religion in world history, building on Lindenfeld's call. Some of the articles in this special collection focus on the religious beliefs of the missionaries and converts, and how those beliefs adapted to the cultures of parties. Other contributors analyze the political ramifications of missionary undertakings, while still others explore the varied cultural exchanges and entanglements which result from these encounters, many of which extended beyond the religious.

In analyzing the language of the religious beliefs about conversion, Lindenfeld focused on the conversion of peoples in China and West Africa during the long nineteenth century. He noted the appeal of new theologies among marginalized peoples in both regions, and the importance of Western education and medicine in drawing indigenes to the proffered religion. While the appeal of particular religious doctrines may help explain some personal conversions, the mode of proselyting can also have a broader cultural impact. [In his article, Yu Liu](#) focused on the proselyting techniques of Matteo Ricci in the early modern era. Here the missionary adapted to the cultural constructs of the region. Ricci was not just asking the indigenous population to conform to foreign ideas, but he as the missionary changed his approach to heighten the allure of the message. For instance, he believed dressing as a Confucian scholar would make his message more appealing to his listeners. While Liu noted that Ricci's limited success may have had more to do with the unusual social and political conditions of China during that period, he concluded that perhaps the larger effect of accommodation and cross-cultural exchange as how they aided in creating European and Western modernity.

[In her article dealing with the same period, Qiong Zhang](#) also noted missionaries' adaptation to Chinese culture, but focused on the missionaries' use of Aristotelian reason and science to persuade the Chinese to abandon their beliefs in divine animals, natural spirits, and

past heroes. These scholars draw interesting conclusions about the effects these religious missions had on larger philosophical movements such as the Enlightenment and modernity.

While the early-modern missionaries intentionally altered their dress to take advantage of the cultural constructs of their proselyting field, there were sometimes unintentional cultural and behavior alterations among both missionaries and converts in the period 1850 to 1950, [as Mona L. Russell points out](#). As the image of the “New Woman” emerged in this period, both the missionaries and converts changed female norms and spaces—not only where the missionaries preached but also when they returned home and brought with them material goods and images that altered the “New Woman.” The back-and-forth nature of these exchanges can also be seen in [Robert Shaffer’s article](#) on Kagawa Toyohiko’s trip to the United States, during which Kagawa, a Christian missionary from Japan, called for Americans to re-invigorate their Christian zeal. Like Liu and Zhang, Shaffer claimed that what have traditionally been regarded as Western movements are more likely global, multi-faceted interactions. In this case, Kagawa brought Eastern solutions to Americans trying to cope with the Great Depression. And like Russell, Shaffer showed how missionaries altered the culture of the United States.

There is always an element of power, real or perceived, in missionary efforts. By its very nature, proselyting is based on the presumption that one group has something greater than another group—be it knowledge, culture, or statecraft. [Adam Knobler, in his 1996 article](#), moved away from the vocabulary of “conversion” as defined by belief in a particular set of tenets, and defined it in purely political terms. With the Crusades serving as much of his backdrop, he charted out the use of the political alliances and useful military support as determining the “converted” status of Middle Eastern peoples. Often the political nature of missionary endeavors is tied to imperialism. [Michael Lazich showed](#) how missionaries’ attitudes about the opium trade

in Qing China played an important role in U.S. foreign policy. [Jesse D. Murray explored](#) the use of religious vocabulary to make the Siberian Buryat appear more Russian. Russian missionaries validated the concept of Shamanism as a religion and condemned Lamaism as foreign and detrimental to homogenizing efforts of the Russian Empire—religious vocabulary used for imperial goals. [Vahid Fozdar also explored](#) the use of religion to further imperial bonds and analyzed its effectiveness and limitations. In his study, he claimed that the British used Freemasonry as a religion and found it more successful than Christianity in tying India to Great Britain. Here the universality of Freemasonry could overcome the exclusivity of Christianity and more concretely demonstrate the “improving” nature of the British presence in India, as seen by the public masonic rituals in the building of Indian infrastructure. Power did not always reside with the imperialist entities. [Julia Hauser demonstrated](#) that internal competition and local demands could outweigh the goals of imperial governments. In her study of Ottoman Beirut, German missionaries submitted to the educational demands of locals and the pressure of educational competition rather than cave to the demands of German officials.

While ideas and power are a part of religious missions, these concepts are more nuanced and multi-faceted than previously believed. The essays in this collection demonstrate the layered interactions and cross-cultural effects of what may have previously been seen as a lopsided purely dogmatic activity. These articles demonstrate that despite the initial intentions of many missionaries, their efforts and presence had consequences beyond the introduction of new theological principles. These interactions have been moments of global, multi-directional transmission of beliefs, customs, ideologies, and politics, that are as complex and varied as the individuals involved in this enterprise. As ease of travel and communication increases, and

attitudes about religion change, where missionaries come from and where they go to, may differ from past patterns, but the intricacies and impacts of those global interactions will continue.

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