

Christian Missions and the Environment

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1. Introduction

The spiny babbler is a bird species that only lives in Nepal, mainly among scrubs and small trees. Discovered in the 19th century, it was thought to have become extinct until it was rediscovered in the late 1940s. In 1949, ornithologist Robert Fleming travelled to the Himalayas to catch a glimpse of the rare bird. His fascination and expertise resulted in the publications of the classic *Birds from Nepal* in 1957 (Fleming and Rand 1957; Fleming et al. 1976). During his travels, Robert and his wife Bethel Fleming, a physician, encountered poverty and health problems. Together, they decided to establish a hospital in Tansen in southern Nepal, which became the starting point for the activities of the United Mission to Nepal. For Fleming, his love for birds matched his compassion for people.¹

This Special Issue of *Religions* deals with the tangled relationship between Christian missions and the natural environment. The connection is not at all obvious: after all, mission is about converting people, not engaging with non-human creation. Missionaries were primarily concerned with evangelization, or were active in the fields of education, medicine, emergency aid and development (Stanley 1990; Etherington 2008; Woodberry 2012; Maxwell 2011; Lew 2013). As Fleming's example shows, however, the connection between mission and the natural environment surfaces in unexpected configurations. Although Fleming's dual concerns were not logically connected, his story shows that missionaries always operated within a natural environment. Indeed, most missionaries were not environmentalists at all; however, they still realized that nature was not just a backdrop to their activities but inextricably connected to many of them. In their mission fields, culture, religion, society and economy were all connected to the natural environment. Even the language of mission (mission fields, harvest of souls) was saturated with agricultural terms.

Even so, the scholarly literature on the connection between mission and the natural environment is surprisingly thin (but see Mulwafu 2004; Grove 1989; Stanley 2015; Endfield and Nash 2002; Darr 2005). It is not that scholars of mission have not noted nature, but, with few exceptions, they did not see it as a topic of interest for its own sake. As a result, mission studies focus overwhelmingly on either the human-centred activities of mission or its tangled relationship with the colonial context. At the same time, the literature on environmentalism seems to have overlooked the role that religious organisations play. As such, there is a strong case for the axis between Christian missions and the environment to be explored, as Dana Robert (2011) called for. This volume heeds that call.

In the winter of 2023/2024, the editors of this volume, Richard Darr, Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo and David Onnekink, came together to discuss the contents of a Special Issue for *Religions* on this topic. Each of us are engaged in research on mission and the environment, and we believed that a Special Issue on this topic was timely, for three reasons. Firstly, although scattered and limited, it is important to point out that there is indeed scholarly



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literature on mission and the environment. Various case studies [see above] show that past missionaries were engaged with the natural environment in multiple ways: to study botany, develop agriculture and engage with the problems of erosion and desiccation. This Special Issue recognizes that tradition and encourages further research.

Secondly, ever since the rise of eco-theology in the 1960s and the awareness within churches of the current ecological crisis, missionary societies and Christian NGOs have reluctantly become involved in environmental action, or at least testified to the importance of it (e.g., [Onnekink and Ros 2024](#)). This means that studying mission and the environment is not just of scholarly interest, but has tangible relevance for real-world situations and the potential for social impact.

Thirdly, we believe that debates on the relationship between mission and the environment tend to focus on the West or Western colonialism in the Global South. Since the ecological crisis is a global one, it is important to discuss its implications and solutions on a global scale. The number of missionary societies from the Global South is rapidly expanding, and eco-theology is developed in Latin-America, Africa and Asia independent of but in conversation with the Global North (e.g., [Kwaku-Golo 2014](#)). The global ecological crisis calls for a global missionary response.

2. Overview

In our Call for Articles, we formulated eight questions, which can be clustered into two categories. The first category is historical: how have Christian missions in the (colonial) past engaged with the natural environment, and how have Christian NGOs continued to do so in the (post-colonial) present? The second category investigates the way in which missionary theology has developed a growing awareness of the importance of the natural environment. Of the articles that were proposed, seven were ultimately published in this Special Issue that deal with both the historical (the first four articles mentioned below) and theological (the second three articles mentioned below) dimensions.

Rutger Mauritz investigates the relationship between Christian missions and agriculture from a historical perspective. Focusing on the World Missionary Conferences between 1910 and 1938, he distinguishes the emergence of a new concept: ‘agricultural missions’. Precisely because non-Christian religions were intimately involved with the natural surroundings and the agricultural rhythms of sowing and harvesting, this kind of mission was expected to have a deep impact. From these, a wider vision of mission in rural areas developed, in which agricultural missions were engines of change and development. Key quote: ‘Thus, agricultural and rural missions existed in 1938 as an independent branch of missions. Together with the natural environment, the social and economic environments of the countryside were acknowledged as the fourth dimension of missions’.

Jooyoung Hong studies the relationship between missionaries and botanical science in early modern China. Gardens were not just pleasant, beautiful or interesting, but represented the dominion of man over nature, or more specifically the creative and ordering powers of the Chinese Emperor. Jesuit, and later Protestant, missionaries who studied plants did not just do so out of scientific interest, but also as a way to establish a dialogue with Chinese intellectuals. In the process, Christian notions about nature were conveyed into China, with the result that European and Chinese intellectual systems merged. Key quote: ‘Given that botany emerged as a hybrid theology between science and Christianity, gardens should be understood as both religious and political spaces that publicly exhibit power.’

Mick Feyaerts investigates spatiality as a concept in the relationship between mission and the environment, concentrating on the case study of the Catholic Church in Kikwit in the Democrat Republic of Congo. Established as a mission station in the early twentieth

century, the historical development of the church was determined by the landscape of the city and its surroundings. The Kwilu River that runs through the city saw a lively, residential and commercial area on its left bank and a rural area on its right bank. As a result, a plethora of activities developed on the left side, such as schools, hospitals and churches, whereas the right bank saw the emergence of contemplative retreats. This caused the church not just to organise a multitude of activities, but also a fuller theology that allowed it to develop independently from Western mission. Key quote: 'A powerful physical reality, nature has the potential to support, limit, and inspire humans in their individual and collective endeavors'.

Rutger van der Hoeven and David Onnekink study the historical perception of the natural landscape by missionaries to uncover articulated and unarticulated environmental views. Their case study is based upon a collection of photographs made by Dutch missionaries in independent Nigeria between 1960 and 1968. Few of the photos focus on 'nature' as such, usually centring on human activity in context. But, precisely for that reason, many photos capture trees, animals, agricultural fields and landscapes more generally. Key quote: missionaries were 'instrumental in developing a Western gaze of tropical nature, even if their photography cannot be defined as environmental.'

Eco-theology is explored by Loveday Chigozie Onyazonwu and Ucheawaji Godfrey Josiah through the lens of love. Agapeic love, they argue, is part of the mission of the church. This does not extend only to people, but to the whole of creation, as everything is interconnected. In a very practical manner, this also means that people have a duty to testify to love in a visible manner in their direct neighbourhood. To this end, the researchers investigated the waste management practices of churches of a wide variety of denominations in the Port Harcourt metropolitan area in Nigeria, focusing on refuse in church premises, only to find limited awareness of creation care in practice. Key quote: 'The one who loves his/her neighbour will not harm his/her health nor destroy his/her environment, nor pollute the source of his/her drinking water, nor the air he/she breathes, nor the beauty of the environment which brings him relief from stress or strain'.

The importance of theology in the engagement of churches with the natural environment is also highlighted by Christian Tsekpoe and Emmanuel Awudi. The authors focus on Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Ghana, which traditionally strongly believe in the necessity of evangelizing. As a result, these churches do not connect mission to care for the non-human environment. This article investigates a shift in the theology of the PCC, in which ecological notions are incorporated into mission statements. The authors also propose ways to advance the concept of 'eco-mission'. Key quote: 'strategies for reimagining traditional doctrines to enable the full integration of eco-missions within the broader mission of the church.'

What is the environmental role of the modern successors of mission societies, Christian NGOs? This is what Jan van der Stoep, Maarten van Nieuw Amerongen and Antonie Treuren set out to investigate. Their research focuses on food security, a central concern in development cooperation and of importance in human interaction with the natural environment. The authors propose to employ the Christian notion of stewardship as a starting point for thinking about this issue, as it describes the relationships between man and earth and amongst people. The authors then propose three principles that follow from stewardship: working together with nature, empowering local communities and adaptive transformation. Rather than arguing for universal solutions, they emphasize that each context requires a different strategy to allow for its uniqueness, in which values and interest are balanced. Key quote: 'The concept of stewardship can help Christian development organizations find direction in dealing with the tension between food security and caring for the environment. It emphasizes the potential of smallholder farmers and the

well-being of local communities as much as possible. At the same time, it is mindful of the achievements of modern science and technology.'

3. Observations

This Special Issue surveys the global range of mission and the environment, with case studies on the Netherlands, Nigeria, Ghana, Congo and China, but also on global mission. Chronologically, the articles span the 16th until the 21st century. An overall observation is that the relationship between mission and the environment cannot be generalized or simplified. Indeed, if anything, the case studies on waste management on church premises in Nigeria in the 21st century, Catholic missionaries in 16th century China writing about botany and the missionary world council in Edinburgh in 1910 have little in common at first glance. Mission and the environment were entangled in myriad ways. The historical and geographical diversity is overwhelming and leads to a complex conglomerate of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Even so, the articles also show several patterns and synchronous developments.

Firstly, although temporal diversity is obvious, there seems to be a chronological development in the encounters between missionaries and the environment. Broadly speaking, there appears to be a growing interest of mission in the significance of nature. As Mauritz shows, in 1910 at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, agriculture was recognized as a context of mission but hardly a subject in its own right. By 1938, the phenomenon of 'agricultural missions' gained weight. In the article by Van der Hoeven and Onnekink, Dutch missionaries in the 1960s seemed blissfully unaware of the significance of landscape, but in the 21st century, as Van der Stoep, Nieuw Amerongen and Treuren point out, agriculture and food production have moved to the heart of Christian development programmes. Even so, it would be incorrect to construct a simple, linear development. As Hong points out, missionaries in the 16th century already showed a keen interest in botany, which only gained impetus in later centuries. Some 19th century missionaries were already interested in processes of desiccation and deforestation. Perhaps these two insights can be harmonized by concluding that, although individual missionaries have always been interested in environmental and agricultural issues, these gradually moved towards the centre of the overall strategy of missionary societies and Christian development aid and cooperation.

The second observation runs parallel to the first one. Although missionaries were increasingly interacting with the natural environment, they also developed a missionary theology that encapsulated this interaction. Of course, theologians have always understood creation as an expression of divine will, or more specifically a 'book of nature' that could be read alongside the Bible itself. Even so, for a specific missiology of nature to develop would take time. As Mauritz shows, the World Missionary Councils in the early 20th century acknowledged the value of agriculture and attention to the natural environment but did not necessarily see this as an integral part of mission. The same held true for the missionaries in Nigeria in the 1960s. According to Feyaerts, however, churches in Congo that developed from a mission station were inspired by natural beauty, established contemplative communities and developed a theology of creation care. As Tsekpoe and Awudi show, 21st century missionary Pentecostal churches in Ghana are on a trajectory to fully integrate creation care into their theology. Onyazonwu and Josiah argue that missionary theology and care for nature should be interconnected for current Nigerian churches. Again, a warning must be made against simple linear developments. As Hong shows, early modern missionaries already engaging with phyto-theology, the notion that understanding of God could be gained from a study of plants, an insight that became part of their missionary strategy. But here again, the pattern seems to be that there have always

been missionaries that understood nature as part of their mission, but that the late 20th and early 21st century saw a massive movement towards a missionary theology of nature that was shared far more widely by churches and missionary societies. Although nature was always of interest to some missionaries, such as Fleming, we are currently witnessing a global move towards a more holistic understanding of the place of the natural environment in missiological understanding.

A third observation is that the spectre of colonialism looms large over the subject. Mission, of course, was entangled with European imperialism from the very beginning in the late 15th century. Even if some missionaries were critical of colonial rule, they often (but not always) worked within a colonial context. It is important to note that there is an increasing awareness of the importance of indigenous agency, which critiques the full conflation between mission and colonialism. Even so, almost all of the articles in this Special Issue confirm the importance of the colonial or post-colonial context. Mauritz and Hong show how colonial mindsets were key in conversations about botany and agriculture. Hoeven and Onnekink show how such ways of thinking endured in the post-colonial era. Feyaerts argues that Congolese churches moved away from colonial mental structures in their development of an independent eco-theology. Van der Stoep, Nieuw Amerongen and Treuren argue that colonial history endures in the current relationship between the Global North and the Global South. And Tsekpoe and Awudi state that Pentecostal theology in Ghana is indebted to the American ‘prosperity gospel’.

Fourthly, the articles show the ambivalent attitude of missionaries towards science in their dealings with the natural environment. Several authors notice that science is embraced and even promoted for the sake of environmentalism and mission. Hong points out how Catholic missionaries were keen scholars of botany, and Van der Stoep, Nieuw Amerongen and Treuren promote a responsible use of scientific and technological insights in development of food production. Tsekpoe and Awudi rather observe how Pentecostal churches in Ghana were, until recently, dismissive of science and technology because of their strained relationship with the spiritual values of Pentecostal theology.

Fifthly, there is an increasing awareness amongst scholars that the natural environment is not just a backdrop to mission—a stage upon which missionaries act—but that nature has agency. This is most strongly voiced by Feyaerts, who argues that nature has the power to support but also limit human endeavour. Whether this amounts to environmental determinism is an open question, but it shows that mission was often dependent on the natural environment, and missiology is influenced by it. This also shows in the perceptions of Dutch missionaries in Nigeria in the 1960s, who were overwhelmed by the vast landscapes. Their inclination to ‘develop’ was rebuffed by some of the more inhospitable landscapes they encountered. This observation is at odds with the notion that humans can re-create nature or even destroy it. In the bleak church premises in the Port Harcourt Metropolitan area, as Onyazonwu and Josiah point out, nature itself is buried by refuse and concrete parking lots. Van der Stoep, Nieuw Amerongen and Treuren propose that it is essential for Christian NGOs to strive for a balanced relationship between human needs and the preservation of nature.

A sixth observation is related to awareness and acknowledgement. As for awareness, although Catholic missionaries in 17th century China were consciously studying botany in a scientific way and applying phyto-theology to their dialogues with Chinese intellectuals, Dutch missionaries in Nigeria in the 1960s were seemingly unaware of their basic attitudes towards the natural environment. Even so, these could be gleaned through the photos that they took. Although in Nigeria Pentecostal churches are setting up awareness programmes on creation care, litter is seemingly unconsciously dropped by members attending these same churches. It is also important how media pick up the topic. As Hong points out in his

article, although Catholic missionaries in China made important contributions to botanical science, their Protestant counterparts were far more successful because they published extensively about their findings. As for acknowledgement, as Mauritz shows, missionaries at the World Missionary Conferences recognized the importance of the natural environment and agriculture but were reluctant to acknowledge that agriculture should, therefore, be an integral part of mission. As Van der Stoep, Nieuw Amerongen and Treuren, and also Onyazonwu and Josiah show, arguing the case for a full-fledged ‘environmental mission’ is still in full swing.

The seventh and final observation is that it is not easy to define the very scholarly subject this Special Issue sets out to investigate. Although ‘mission’ is fairly well-described, the ‘natural environment’ does not quite catch it. Nature is a secular term that does not capture the religious dimension of creation, and, moreover, meant something very different in the 16th century than in the 21st century. Creation is more easily paired with mission for its obvious religious connotation, but is all-encompassing, also including the universe and indeed, humans themselves. It lacks precision. Environment is a term that is ideologically problematic, as it is by definition a human-centred term. Ecology is perhaps a word that is more suitable, but would it include agriculture, as a vital area of human interaction with the natural landscape? Although determining the scope of the relationship between mission and the ‘natural environment’ is a struggle, the articles in this special issue are testimony that there is indeed a field of study. It is a field that has implications for a multitude of related studies on (post-)colonialism, development and environmental studies. It is also a field with the potential of real-world impact.

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Note

¹ I owe Nico Smith for pointing me to this story.

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