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Mélina Joyeux, Marion Robinaud

## Introduction

### Catholic women's missions in 20<sup>th</sup>-century colonial and post-colonial worlds

The vitality of present studies on Catholic missions in the colonial and post-colonial worlds<sup>1</sup> owes much to the exploration of unpublished sources. While it is now well-known that missionary activity underwent a revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the opening up of archives and the pursuit of targeted sociological and ethnographic research have contributed to shift the focus to the various mutations of this activity over the course of the long 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women missionaries were for long overshadowed by their male counterparts, perhaps partly because the men made their archives accessible much sooner and much more widely (Curtis, 2017: 250). Historians and anthropologists of the missions are still dependent on the random release of the private archives of religious congregations, not to mention the Vatican archives, whose declassification does not correspond to any fixed time-schedule. The articles in this issue are thus based on sources which have so far been little explored, mainly originating among the female congregations under study (the White Sisters for Algeria, the Montreal Grey Sisters for the Canadian West, the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary for Upper Egypt), but also coming from a local church (Archbishopric of Tunis) and the archives of the papacy of Pius XII (1939-1958), which were opened in March 2020 and shed new light on missions in times of post-colonial transition and the discussions leading up to the Second Vatican Council<sup>2</sup>. While distance in time, and a number of

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1. 'Post-colonial' is here intended broadly to indicate a period of time following the colonial period, and a context 'freed politically, economically and culturally from colonial forms of domination and their possible successors, but at the same time deeply marked by this domination' (Sibeud, 2004: 87).

2. On the issues and scientific avenues opened by these archives, see Valbousquet, 2022, together with the studies arising from the French National Research Agency (ANR) project 'Globalvat: Rebuilding the World, Society, and Human Identity (1939-1958): The Global Perspective of the Vatican Archives' (2022-2025), led by Laura Pettinaroli, and the five-year programme of the

logistical factors (for example, the relocation of the White Sisters' archives in 2016, which made access to them a great deal easier) may have contributed to these openings, current political and media concerns have also revealed the tensions surrounding access to sources. The example of residential schools for Canadian Indigenous peoples, explored in this issue, is particularly telling. Following a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in which the Church took part in 2008, and revelations concerning the hundreds of unmarked graves discovered on the sites of former schools since the summer of 2021, the Indigenous peoples are demanding the full release of the archives of congregations and institutes involved in the boarding school system, after decades of obstacles to or bans on access to primary documents. This shift of focus in the Canadian context also shows the benefits of an approach that combines sources of different kinds. Two of the articles here draw both upon archival documents and oral sources. The study of women's missions brings out the notion of an 'emergency ethnography'. While the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century fathers of anthropology, convinced that indigenous societies were doomed to disappear, did everything they could to gather data on the peoples concerned, the urgency of gathering knowledge and first-hand accounts in our field is switching camps as the number of missionaries declines in many parts of the world (Dumont, 1990). The voices of the last remaining and now elderly nuns who witnessed the colonial process stand out as sources in their own right, complementing and qualifying the data from the archives.

The cross-referencing of written documents and oral sources further entails an interdisciplinary exchange between history, sociology and anthropology which is enacted in the present special issue<sup>3</sup>. At the point where studies on Catholic missions intersect with those on colonial and post-colonial societies, the focus is here on those sources that allow for insight into the ambivalent relations between missions and colonialism, seen through women's eyes. The chronological spread of contributions, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 2022 – the date of the socio-anthropological enquiry presented by Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière – reveals the constant negotiations and transitions running through the long 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a period marked by the unfolding of the second wave of missionary zeal in the Catholic Church, which had begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and led not only to a considerable expansion and internationalisation of existing congregations, but also to the creation of new ones, several of which were reserved for women, in particular in relation to the 'great exile' brought about by French secular legislation of the 1900s (Cabanel and Durand, 2005). In a colonial situation, the presence of congregations of nuns supported pastoral

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École française de Rome 'ArchivesPie12' (2022-2026), led by Fabrice Jesné, Laura Pettinaroli and Nina Valbousquet (<https://archivespie12.hypotheses.org>).

3. The articles gathered here emerged from a workshop in November 2021 organised with the support of CêSor (CNRS/EHESS) and the HASTEC centre of excellence hosted by the EPHE-PSL (ANR-10-LABX-85). Our thanks go to the editorial board of the ASSR for its advice and support in the process of bringing this issue to publication.

activities aimed at the gradual conversion of communities, but they were also drawn more or less willingly into the social, educational, health and economic policies then being imposed on local peoples. Education and caring, activities traditionally associated with women in Western culture, characterised the role of nuns in missionary territories. But their activity cannot be restricted to these two functions, and their continued presence in a post-colonial context must also be investigated. For this long 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed independences, the increased visibility of the demands of Indigenous peoples, and emphasis on the concept of inculturation in the wake of Vatican II. Studying the strategies of Catholic women's congregations across this period, whether or not they were in harmony with (post)colonial policies, inevitably leads one to call into question the plans drawn up for the social and cultural transformation of local populations, and the ways in which missionary nuns understood otherness and engaged with it over time. Comparing different case-studies, individually circumscribed without being separate, makes it possible to consider both the aims, the adjustments and the effects of the human relations woven around the mission, and the legacies and lasting impact of the presence of women missionaries after independence.

## **Women on a mission, between history and anthropology**

A number of authors have emphasised the rich potential of interchange between mission history, colonial history and women's history (Ardener, Bowie and Kirkwood, 1993; Rogers, 2009). In a move intended to bring women out from under the shadow of their male counterparts<sup>4</sup> (Curtis, 2010b; Cova and Dumons, 2012), missionary sisters have been the subject of rich and varied studies since the 1990s: overviews mapping the presence of female congregations across the world (Dufourcq, 1993), monographs and case-studies devoted to a particular congregation or region (Cornet, 2005; Stornig, 2013; Langewische, 2014), biographies shedding light on individual missionary experiences (Lecuir-Nemo, 2001; Brouwer, 2002; Curtis, 2010a), collections of source-material exploring the nuns' words and deeds (Paisant, 2009). In these studies, Catholic congregations have remained somewhat in the background, and have mainly been viewed from the standpoint of the social history of education and health (Sanchez-Summerer, 2010; Clancy-Smith, 2012; Barthélémy and Rogers, 2013; Bruno-Jofré, 2013; Fredj, 2013).

Across the range of these two spheres of activity, nuns appear as key actors in the 'mission to civilise'. Despite their complex relations with the colonisers and the authorities, missionaries collaborated actively with the colonial project in the various empires (Prudhomme, 2004; Daughton, 2006; Borne and Falaize, 2009; White and Daughton, 2012). The development of

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4. This is a historiographical tradition which in France goes back to the 1980s: see in particular Langlois, 1984, and the historiographical overview by Rogers, 2013.

cultural policies was not a smooth one, marked by frequent debates about the possibility and the appropriateness of assimilating Indigenous peoples. The ambiguities and contradictions manifested by the colonial authorities on these questions, the gap between what was said and what was actually put into practice, the tension between imposing a dominant culture and taking account of local identities – the latter option apparently predominating after the First World War – have long since been revealed (Bouche, 1976; Conklin, 1997; Cooper and Stoler, 1997). Recent studies have taken these conclusions further and refined them, emphasising the interest of a new approach to the ‘mission to civilise’ and in particular to its educational aspect, reinterpreted in the light of gender, race and transnational sharing of models (Kamphuis, 2018; Reynaud-Paligot, 2020; Matasci, Bandeira Jeronimo and Gonçalves Dore, 2020). They have also stressed the need for a multi-faceted history by shifting the focus from the colonial authorities to those embodying the ‘mission to civilise’ on the ground: teachers, medical personnel and missionaries. Far from being mere auxiliaries following official orders, missionaries had their own position in relation to the authorities and the Indigenous peoples, their own agendas and practices, their own motivations and contradictions (Foster, 2013; Kamphuis and van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2020; Vu Thanh, 2022). In missionary terms, the ‘mission to civilise’ was expressed by the drive for the ‘regeneration’ of the colonised peoples, this being understood in a religious sense (rebirth through baptism) as much as in a social and cultural one (transformations in daily life associated with the idea of moral improvement). Studying the shape, methods and meaning attributed to this project in a variety of contexts has led the contributors to this issue to focus on the day-to-day relations between the nuns and local peoples, and to investigate the way in which they saw their own position in this interaction.

In the wake of existing research into the first contacts between Europeans and local peoples, historians and anthropologists have considered the spaces where contact took place (‘zone’ or ‘world’) (Pratt, 1992; Rey-Goldzeiguer, 2006), and the notion of ‘colonial encounter’ (Price, 2008; Bertrand, 2011), understood as a situation which ‘daily brings into contact individuals or groups of people who, however violent the system in which they are (willingly or forcibly) enrolled, retain their autonomy and act out their own strategies’ (Fauvelle, 1999: 105). Without denying the existence of a framework of domination, these approaches have profoundly regenerated the history and social and cultural anthropology of colonialism by shifting attention to the ordinary social relations which it engendered, to the reciprocal cultural influences and to the spaces where meetings and negotiations took place (Grimshaw and May, 2010; Blanchard and Thénault, 2011). Missions emerge as quintessential ‘place(s) of innovation and intercultural encounters’

(Routhier and Laugrand, 2002), where a ‘long conversation’<sup>5</sup> (Comaroff, 1991) develops between missionaries and local peoples, marked by confrontation and continuous adaptation. From this point of view, one can imagine a historical anthropology of Catholic missionaries which would take account not only of a diachronic history of the missions in a given territory, but also of a synchronic approach including exchanges, dynamics and the circulation of ideas and knowledge. Because of the gendered division of missionary work, nuns were, even more than their male counterparts, brought into daily contact with local people, and in particular with women and children: they were responsible for nursing, women’s education, or overseeing residential schools. They were also held to have easier access to domestic spaces and were thus charged with home visits that enabled them to take the missionary project of ‘regeneration’ right to the heart of families. Their archives, and in particular their diaries, report on these daily exchanges. Far from simply providing material for religious history, they cast light on the history of the social, cultural, economic or technical changes brought about by the ‘encounter’ between missionaries and local peoples (Verdeil, 2013: 11). But there too, research which has been undertaken from the viewpoint of these intercultural exchanges has been focused on Protestant missions (Murre-van den Berg, 2005; Prevost, 2010; Grimshaw, 2011), whereas very little work has been done as yet on the Catholic side.

## Research fields

The different case-studies presented here are thus intended to investigate the specific nature of the presence of missionary women, and of their contact with local peoples, in the colonial and post-colonial situations at the heart of the British and French Empires. To this end, they draw on the abundant historiography currently devoted to women’s missions. On the one hand, the emergent transnational history of the missionary phenomenon (Gewurtz and Jalagin, 2017) has certainly taken an interest in nuns (Rogers, 2014, 2020; Dumons, 2020, 2022). Some of the articles gathered here thus look at the issues raised by the internationalisation of missionary staff with precise examples which will enrich existing enquiries into the circulation of missionary models. On the other hand, our contributions are part of the evolution from the history of women in missions to the history of the gender of missions. This latter investigates the gendered division and hierarchisation of missionary labour, extending existing research on the care-work undertaken by nuns (Brejon de Lavergnée, 2018), and the construction and circulation of different models of femininity and masculinity across the various organisations (Haggis, 1998; Huber and Lutkehaus, 1999; Okkenhaug, 2010;

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5. Understood as ‘the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably “syncretic” manner in which the social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter’ (Comaroff, vol. 1, 1991: 250).

Gabry-Thienpont and Neveu, 2021). The articles also address the question of the spaces of a mission, constructing a panoramic view of the multiple places in which missionary activity was carried on, beyond the school, the dispensary or the hospital: light is shed on workrooms, residential schools, home visits and even clubs, and on the educational and apostolic strategies in play there. Several contributions raise the question of the funding of the organisations, and of the economic and practical teaching dispensed in their establishments, thus also illuminating a material aspect which is rarely studied, *a fortiori* in the case of women's missions (Pirotte, 2005). Finally, exploration of the dimensions of the religious imaginary which inspired the nuns gives a more intimate insight into the meaning that they gave to their presence on the ground. In the light of their experience, some minor pathways are also sketched out, relating to the reception of missionary activity by those to whom it was addressed, the resistances and reappropriations that it gave rise to, in short, the agency of local populations.

That is the case in the article by Mélina Joyeux, who is concerned with the workrooms run by the White Sisters in colonial Algeria between 1880 and 1940. By studying the role of the workrooms as part of the missionary strategy, she reveals the power structures that the Sisters established not only with local people, but also in varying degrees with the colonial authorities. Caught in the middle, the White Sisters were constantly negotiating their position. The workroom may seem to be a place for technical teaching, but it was nonetheless an advantageous tool for the social transformation of local people. It highlights the model of femininity promoted by the Sisters, one which attempts to reconcile women's domestic role with their economic contribution to the household. By analysing the material and technical aspects of the mission, the author emphasises the integration of workrooms into the colonial economy via the promotion of local handicraft production. The flow of technical skills taking place in these training-places reveals a process of acculturation affecting both the nuns and the Indigenous women.

As places for the transmission of knowledge and practical skills, the workrooms of the White Sisters in Algeria are here compared to the Indigenous residential schools in Canada. In a quite different context, at the heart of an institutionalised system of assimilation, Marion Robinaud's article focuses on the teaching curricula and the practical means for transmitting them adopted by missionary women in the residential schools of northern and western Canada from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By establishing a typology of the different forms of apprenticeship and the teaching programmes set up, the author shows how the transmission of academic knowledge remained subordinate to that of ways of doing things (practical, industrial and household knowledge), and ways of being (work ethic, responsibility). The aim was to educate Indigenous women in a new gendered economic and social order. Examining the Sisters' role in the gendered division of missionary work, the author, like M. Joyeux, emphasises the



model of femininity promoted on a daily basis by Catholic women in these establishments.

In this way her findings echo those laid out by Annalaura Turiano in her analysis of the transformation that took place between the 1920s and the 1970s in the activities of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary in Upper Egypt, at the hinge-point between the colonial and post-colonial eras. With great subtlety, A. Turiano analyses the complex position and ambivalent strategies of these missionary women confronted to the colonial policies in force before 1950. They relied on socially discriminatory recruitment for their schools, including local elites while excluding pupils from poor families. But they extended their ambitions beyond the sugar-growing colonies to which they had been called, and rolled out their activities in health and education to far-flung regions. The author also emphasises the gendered nature of missionary work in small communities of converted Copts, even if the boundaries between genders were permeable. She shows how women were central to the strategies for converting and consolidating communities of converts: it is through them that the Sisters aimed to assert a ‘Catholic distinctiveness’. Passing from the teaching at the heart of the Franco-Belgian sugar colonies to ‘social works’, via the ‘Indigenous works’ aimed at the Coptic and Muslim local populations, the author shows how the congregation redeployed and adapted its strategies in this region at the advent of Egyptian nationalism.

This analysis of missionary reconfigurations at the time of decolonisation is taken a step further in the study by Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière, who establishes a sociology of female Catholic congregations in contemporary Tunisia. He examines the combined effects of the secularisation of the independent Tunisian state and of the changes of direction in missionary aims post Vatican II. While the missionary presence is characterised by a shrinking, ageing and increasingly international staff – factors that tend to undermine the separation between congregations –, missions have also to redefine their *raison d’être* given that the aim to convert is sidelined and even rejected in the name of interfaith dialogue and the avoidance of ‘uprooting’. These considerations on the place of converts in their native society is almost a mirror-image of those on the place of missionaries in post-colonial societies, and the policies of acculturation at work enabling them to pursue their activities in harmony with Tunisian institutions. The article highlights the paradoxical way in which nuns think of their own position, between civic commitment and outsider status, between the ‘indigenisation principle’ and the ‘pilgrim principle’. The author reveals an eschatological dimension to their religious imaginary, and stresses the relative failure of the missionary ideal in independent Tunisia.

In this way, this issue offers a contribution to a socio-cultural history and a historical anthropology of women’s missions in colonial and post-colonial situations. The focus on North Africa (Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia) – a region often left in the background of missionary studies compared with sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, despite the wealth of questions arising from the way missions adapted to Islamic soil (Verdeil, 2013) – and the shift to the



Canadian field are intended to explore the common ground, the divergences and the shades of difference that define women's missionary presence and action across the 20<sup>th</sup>-century world. Some points of convergence seem to be constant, albeit with local variants: the type of works undertaken, the norms and values circulated, the need for more or less adaptation to the terrain of a particular mission. But given this very process of adaptation, any attempt to generalise about the effects of missions is bound to be risky (Rogers, 2014: 9). The variations are driven by the history, organisation and orientation of the various congregations; by the social, cultural and religious particularities of the peoples encountered, but also by the political context which both frames and constrains apostolic action in colonial and post-colonial situations.

How, and by what means, did women missionaries integrate themselves into local social, political and religious structures, or on the other hand disassociate themselves from them? What role did material and economic factors play in missionary strategies and in interaction with local populations? How were bodily transformations and changes in everyday life and material culture related to the transformation of local worlds? How could a mission become a strategic tool giving distinctive roles and validation to both women missionaries and women to whom the mission is dedicated? How did women's missions reshape themselves in post-colonial settings? These are the questions that the texts gathered here address, in an attempt to redefine the shape of the female missionary presence in multiple colonial and post-colonial contexts. This issue envisages missionaries as actors capable of reflecting on their own practices and of (re)defining their actions according to the situation. It uncovers the practical methods of missionary activity, the difficulties it faces, the adjustments it must make to adapt to particular territories, and the variable nature of its outcomes. But implementing this approach necessarily means taking account of bias arising from the sources, and of the difficulty of having access to them.

## The challenges of the sources

In recent years the sources emanating from female congregations, and in particular their archives, have become an object of study in their own right. Anne Jusseaume, offering a number of avenues for research, emphasises how much the archives of female congregations have renewed and enriched social, religious and secular history (Jusseaume, 2016). While she foregrounds the 'possibilities' that are open, especially regarding relations between the individual (the nun) and the institution (the congregation and beyond that the Church), she does not address the question of access to the sources for researchers who are not members of the institution. Yet every scholar interested in the archives of religious congregations (whether male or female) has come up against this difficulty. Over and above the constraints and issues inherent in the consultation of any private archive, the overlapping individual research experiences gathered here confirm a specific characteristic of Catholic women's

congregations in this respect. This is analysed by Sarah A. Curtis in an article which has been a shared point of reference in our collective deliberations (Curtis, 2017). Based on her own experience of research in the archives of French congregations, Curtis attempts to explain the nuns' reluctance to open their archives to external enquirers. She concludes that they have strategies of 'self-protection' and 'self-perpetuation' of a 'family history', which leads her to emphasise the role of the professional historian in negotiations with those responsible for the archives, with an aim to revealing the 'social legacy' (Berthold, 2015) of women's communities. In a post-colonial context closer to our concerns, Marion Robinaud too has dwelt upon her own difficulties in accessing not just the archives, but also the oral accounts relating to the sensitive history of the Indigenous residential schools in Canada (Robinaud 2021). When transitional justice is called for, self-protection seems to reach its limits, and the opening of the archives becomes a major issue for those studying the relations between missionaries and local peoples.

The authors of the contributions that follow have joined in raising the question of accessing and consulting sources belonging to the congregations that they have studied. Without developing a systematic process of reflection on this, each of them has offered an element of insight into the practices of their archival research. Whether it is inventories gone missing, the choice of documents made by the archivist or nun responsible for the archives, or the restrictive conditions for studying them, such details give a glimpse of what lies behind the scenes of research into women missionaries. What source-study reveals to scholars irrevocably shapes their research, its materials and its outcomes. There are in addition questions worth asking about the possible impact of gender on the conditions of access to these archives, in a research field which has a strong feminine slant. The discussions between our group of authors have enabled us to share different experiences of this relationship with our field. For anyone embarking on a history of missions there is often a disconnection between the places studied and the places where research takes place, given the centralisation of congregational archives in the provincial houses and European and/or Roman motherhouses of the orders – a centralisation that gathered speed after decolonisation, keeping pace with the closure of mission stations. This documentary context raises the question of memories and the possibility of local histories of the missionary phenomenon: what traces of it, if any, are left today? What sources can be garnered in formerly colonised territories, which are in some cases countries where missions still exist? Most female congregations seem to have kept few - or no - archives in their houses going back over more than a decade or two. The archives of local Churches, the rich bibliographical collections assembled by missionaries over the colonial period and institutionalised in libraries and research centres<sup>6</sup>, the

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6. For the Maghreb, for instance, the Institut des belles lettres arabes in Tunis, the Centre d'études diocésain des Glycines in Algiers, or the Centre culturel et de documentation saharienne in Ghardaia.

study of architectural heritage, and of course the resources of oral statements by the nuns and those to whom the mission was addressed, not to mention of family and collective memories: all these are now marshalled to the benefit of research. They open avenues which may continue to enrich our reflections and the sources proposed in this issue.

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