

SLOVENE WOMEN MISSIONARIES IN INDIA: CONTEXTS, METHODS AND CONSIDERATIONS

SLOVENSKE MISIJONARKE V INDIJI: KONTEKSTI, METODE IN PREMISLEKI

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The following five papers by scholars from various academic disciplines are intended as a contextual and methodological backdrop to a larger and on-going research project, begun in May 2017 under the title “Slovene Women Missionaries in India: A Forgotten Chapter in Intercultural Relations” (ARRS – J6 8258). Barely half way through this study, we are yet to complete the gathering and processing of primary data related to the lives of a dozen Slovene women missionaries, who left their native country over the course of the twentieth century and ended up in different parts of India, where they lived, worked and – in most cases – also died.

The first Slovene woman to be sent to India (Bengal) as a missionary was Barbara (Betka) Kajnč (1892–1984) from Velika Nedelja near Ormož. She travelled in the company of a much younger Macedonian-born Albanian, Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, today better known as Mother Theresa. Barbara Kajnč alias Sister Magdalena began her journey on 12 October 1928 from Zagreb to Ireland. There the two Yugoslav women joined the congregation of Loreto nuns in Rathfarnham, Dublin. Within months they were sent to India, reaching the colonial city of Calcutta on 6 January, 1929.¹

Over the following decades, a dozen other Slovene missionary sisters followed suit, most of them leaving within a few years of Sister Magdalena’s departure. They were: Marija Franko (1895–?), Mirjam Zalaznik (1899–1982), Terezija Medvešek (1906–2001), Cirila Doktorič (1906–1985), Uršula Fink (1906–1959), Conradina Resnik (1905–1997), Emilija Koren (?–?) and Štefanija Urih (1909–?). At that time, India was still under British rule, but the forces of nationalism and the anti-colonial independence struggle were rapidly gathering momentum. Temporarily suspended during World War II, the situation for foreign missionaries changed after India gained independence in 1947. Although those who were already present did not face eviction, newcomers were no longer welcome. Two Slovene women facing this situation were sisters Agnes (1927–2010) and Terezija Žužek (1928–2019). Both were part of the wave of Catholics fleeing the communist regime in the newly established socialist Yugoslavia immediately after the war. They were interned in Displaced Persons Camps in Italy

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¹ See Jelnikar 2016. The Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum hosted an exhibition on her life and work in India from 18 May to 10 September, 2018.

(Treviso, Serigallia, Barleta), effectively being made stateless. Holding medical degrees, the Žužeks joined the Medical Mission Sisters in South Shields, England, and eventually acquired British citizenship. It proved impossible to obtain a missionary visa to work in post-independence India with a British passport. They were sent to the newly-established Pakistan instead, working in Rawalpindi, Karachi, and Dacca (then still East Pakistan, before becoming Bangladesh in 1971).

As a Yugoslav citizen, the situation in 1971 was different for Marija Sreš (b. 1943), the youngest of our group of missionaries. The development of friendly relations between Nehru's India and Tito's Yugoslavia (this was the heyday of the Non-Aligned movement) smoothed the way for her entry on a missionary visa. Decades later, and in a drastically changed political climate, the same courtesy was denied her, as her missionary visa was not renewed, forcing her to return to Slovenia in 2010. With Sreš's departure from India, this chapter of Slovene women missionaries working and living in India was brought to what could very well be a permanent close.

The individual stories of our twelve protagonists must be read against the backdrop of dramatic historical changes in both India and Yugoslavia over the course of the twentieth century, which have also affected the relations between these two countries. To appreciate the twelve life stories brought together in this project, it is necessary to take not only this historical context into consideration, but also the way in which this research has been conceived and organized.

For reasons of time and funding, we have limited ourselves – for now – to exploring the life-stories of *Slovene* women missionaries only. However, we hope that the study can eventually be expanded to include Catholic sisters from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia (predominantly from Croatia) who have also been part of this same movement of missionaries.² For now, it makes sense to identify these women as “Slovene”, because they all hailed from what is present-day Slovenia. However, at the time, they would have left their native home as Yugoslav nationals, using a variety of European countries and different religious congregations as conduits for a life as religious women working overseas. These are – once again – the life stories of individual women, who for various personal reasons, and each under their own particular set of circumstances, nevertheless experienced this common “Divine call”, which made them renounce all socially-sanctioned ties of family, marriage and children to opt for a lifetime of devotion to Jesus by attending to the poor in a distant country. Of course, there is much that unites these women in opting for a missionary vocation, but it would be inaccurate to assume any self-conscious group identity on their part. Once they found themselves working in India amongst the native population, alongside other European and indigenous co-sisters, we can assume that their own particular identities became subsumed under the overarching category of being white Europeans, no doubt tinged with the then-dominant discursive brush

2 Štefanija Miketinac (b. 1920) from Zagreb is the last Yugoslav (Croatian) sister remaining in India. I had the opportunity to interview her in February 2016 in her room at the Loreto convent in Simla at the age of 96.

of rulers and colonizers. This invites the question of whether it mattered to them or to others that they were “Slovenian” or not.

This is one important aspect our study aims to probe, as it draws out the voices of these sisters, while situating them within the respective European religious congregations, in which they formed a minority, even if they were not entirely on their own (see Motosh). In view of the entrenched missionary-colonial thesis that sees proselytizing, almost inevitably, as working in collusion with colonial domination, it is important to bear in mind that, within the setting of Europe, these women occupied a subaltern position. Coming from geographical and socio-political “margins” rather than powerful colonial centres, they can’t be considered as agents of colonization in any overt political sense. Of course, this does not automatically absolve them of culturally imperialistic or patronizing attitudes, or even a sense of racial superiority; after all, they did go to India to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, their interstitial position warrants a closer look that will go beyond overly simplistic understandings of the missionary enterprise and intercultural encounters in general. Women’s voices, even though often marginalised or even silenced, can indeed be found at all levels of modern-day empires, and their positions can vary from being the staunchest imperialists to that of the most selfless liberators and advocates of human dignity anywhere in the world.

One of the key concerns of the project is also to consider if – and how – (Slovene) women missionaries expressed their individual agency within the prescribed practices as dictated by the rules of their congregations, not only within the strongly patriarchal Catholic Church, but within male-dominated societies in general. We can expect to identify tensions existing between the official doctrine of the Church and these women’s daily lives and work in the missions. For example, Mother Theresa became a “rebel nun”, as she went against her superiors and set up her own congregation, focused on reaching the poorest sections of Indian society, and breaking away from what she perceived as an environment that was too elitist and exclusivist (cf. Alpion 2006). Her early companion, Sister Magdalena, also did not lack in self-initiative. She singlehandedly set up a dispensary in what was primarily a teaching order, working tirelessly for fifty-three years as a nurse-cum-doctor in the remotest stations of Bengal. In contrast to Mother Theresa, however, Sister Magdalena preferred anonymity and introversion (Jelnikar 2016). Closer to us in time is Marija Sreš. Quite against the expectations or prescriptions of her Society of Jesus, she became an award-winning writer of fiction in Gujarati, lending her voice to *adivasi* women with whom she worked for close to four decades. Her writing also broached subjects that radically defy notions of Catholic morality, such as sexuality and same-sex love. In a recent interview, Sreš stated that both “Christianity and Yugoslav socialism taught her that all people were equal”, an attitude which she found lacking in her co-religionists coming from former colonizing countries (Spanish and French missionaries with whom she had worked), but also in caste-ridden Indian society (in Žigon 2005: 147–148). This is not to suggest in any way that Slovene women missionaries were by

definition “activists” or “renegades”. Nor do we want to play down the many aspects of their (self-)imposed subservience. Instead, based on evidence collected from our preliminary investigations, it seems important to think about these women as agents of transformation in the societies in which they worked as missionaries, rather than as merely passive recipients of “God’s will” as dictated to them by their superiors.

The extended time span covered by this project also allows us to trace generational shifts in approaches to missionary work, responding to the changing political situation in India, as well as to changes within the Catholic Church before and after Vatican Council II (1962–1965). We have found that, working in Gujarat in the 1980s, Marija Sreš did not actively convert people as a part of her mission, instead self-consciously following the revolutionary “spirit” of the Vatican II. Belonging to an earlier generation, the letters of Sister Magdalena show that she did make efforts to bring people into the fold of the church. Evidently, these two women operated with very different mental horizons, and our study is interested in identifying similarities as well as differences amongst Slovene women missionaries, seeing their attitudes as an outcome of a complex nexus of historical and personal factors.

A topic that has so far remained confined within the walls of religious orders (and their archives) is therefore approached as a complex intercultural phenomenon deserving critical attention from a variety of angles at the crossroads of related disciplines, such as modern history, cultural studies, anthropology, gender studies, philosophy, and the theological and non-theological study of religion. Our focus is on *religious women*, or rather women religious – a still too-often invisible or repressed subject of (secular) historical investigation. So, while the study probes the socio-historical and personal factors which motivated Slovene women missionaries to join religious orders and leave their countries, it will also engage theoretically with the notion of (female) agency. In a setting overdetermined by religious, ethnic, gender and cultural hierarchies, it intends to suggest that despite their invisibility and subordination, some of these women were active agents of social change.

What does a missionary vocation involve in theological terms? This was one of the primary initial questions of our study. In her paper “The Missionary Commission of the Church in Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions”, Irena Avsenik Nabergoj, whose expertise includes theology, explores the question of how the Church has negotiated its unchanging missionary injunction to spread the good news across the globe against the changing historical circumstances, including processes of globalisation, decolonization, and modernization, with the watershed event for the Catholic Church in the modern era being the abovementioned Vatican Council II. Following a brief historical overview of the milestones that have spurred the Church to take new approaches to its missionary mandate, and by looking closely at the Church documents, she focuses on the changes brought about by the instructions of Vatican II regarding missionary activities, particularly in relation to non-Christian religions. The axis around which much of the debate turns is that of religious conversion, or rather the meaning and purpose of evangelisation, which can never be

true if forced or imposed. The free acceptance of the presupposed “universality” of the Gospel, however, jars with any simultaneous respect for the supposed “truths” of other religions, as the document *Nostra aetate* (1965) now mandates. The notion of *interreligious dialogue* provides an attempt to resolve this tension, in which the final desired outcome is no longer religious conversion, but a deepening of one’s own faith and an understanding of a common core between all religions. This is an important point to bear in mind for understanding the changes in outlook and practice when comparing those of Sister Magdalena and Marija Sreš, for example.

The immediately relevant historical backdrop for understanding the opportunities and motivations of Slovene women missionaries in India can be traced back to 1925. This was the year in which the first Yugoslav Jesuit fathers, under the auspices of the Belgium mission, volunteered for India. The intention was to help re-establish the outreach Mission Stations of Basanti, Raghampur, Morapai and Khari south of Calcutta, which had gone into decline since their beginnings in the mid-19th century. Soon after, Yugoslav nuns were brought in to work in the areas of female education and medical services, the mainstay of Christian missionary activities and traditionally viewed as the most practical and effective means of spreading the faith. Helena Motoh delves into this part of inter-war history in her paper entitled “‘Our Bengal Mission’ – Negotiation of National and Transnational Agendas by Interwar Yugoslav Missionaries in Bengal”, as she focuses on the tension arising between the fundamentally universalist tenets of a Christian missionary vocation and the fraught nationalist agenda of a changing polity, in which political and national identities were far from unproblematic givens. With reference to a body of (almost exclusively male) missionary writing of the day published in mission journals, she demonstrates how these socio-political realities and debates in Old Yugoslavia had spilled over into the missionary field, only to ask the pertinent question of whether these debates had had the same impact on female representatives. How “nationalist” and/or “patriotic” were Slovene women missionaries in India, at a time when these discourses presented competing alternatives to universalism more or less globally?

With her expertise in Indology and gender, and by way of contextualising the diversity of religious realities confronting Slovene women missionaries as they entered the Subcontinent, Tamara Ditrich offers a panoramic view of the millennia-long tradition of asceticism and monasticism in India. In her paper “Female Renouncers in India: A Neglected Chapter in the History of Indian Religions”, and in line with our enquiry, she focuses on *female* renunciates, the Buddhist and Jain nuns and Brahmanical female ascetics, in itself a comparatively neglected subject of academic investigation. However preliminarily, she is ultimately interested in identifying the meeting points and overlaps between the diverse body of Indian spiritual practices and the foundational premises of European Christianity. While noting major fundamental differences between them, such as renouncing the world versus social engagement, doctrinal inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, and the decentralised institutions of Indian ascetics versus the hierarchical establishment of the Catholic Church, she suggests that

the long continuous tradition of social acceptance, respect and support for (female) ascetics in India served as a legitimising framework for Christian nuns, however different or even incompatible their doctrinal premises may have been. In other words, Indian spiritual realities informed how Christian nuns would have been received and allowed to contribute to society in India.

Methodologically, this micro-history of a number of case studies of Slovene women missionaries working in both colonial and post-independence India is not without its challenges. Women religious, unlike their male counterparts, typically did not leave many written records behind. Aside from letters surviving with their relatives and local churches, which are not always easy to obtain, we find occasional mentions in inhouse religious publications and annals. Obtaining the oral testimonies of those who knew and remember the sisters is therefore of vital importance to our study. It will include interviews with co-religious sisters of European, Eurasian or indigenous descent, family members, priests and other people they worked with, their staff (drivers, gardeners, *ayahs*), etc. Here we are working in line with the on-going efforts of feminist (and subaltern) historians, who have been using oral sources as grounds for shaping their arguments about marginalised histories unavailable through conventional documentation since the 1980s (Rossi 1985; Griffin, Braidotti 2006). This democratizing impulse is instrumental in legitimizing subjective experiences in narratives and interpretations of people's life worlds (Thompson 1988), as it applies in particular to that half of humanity that has been silenced throughout history: women. The aim of our study is to use oral history and biography to give this particular group of women a voice, because, for the most part, they have never been heard.

In his paper, "The Tongue is Mightier than the Printing Press? Reflections on the Production of Oral Histories and on Languages of Legitimation", historian Benjamin Zachariah examines the debates on oral history, critically considering the method's potential as well as its limitations for historical analysis. While it may be true that "oral histories open up areas that other histories fail to reach", he cautions against any facile presupposition of truth-value in an intercultural encounter that presupposes a common language, if communication is to even take place. His concept of "languages of legitimation" is key to deploying oral history as a critical tool for the recovery of histories and subjectivities that are otherwise inaccessible.

So far, we have been fortunate to have found a substantial number of letters written by the various nuns, which we can analyse as primary source material. However, one such find has exceeded all our expectations. These are over a hundred letters written between 1933 and 1997 by Sister Conradina Resnik to her family in Slovenia. They were generously provided to us by her grandnephew to be used in this research. Nataša Rogelja, an anthropologist and expert on female migrations and life narratives, has taken up the challenge of analysing this lifetime worth of letters, "a specific kind of 'raw material'", which is similar but different to diaries and journals. In her paper "A Life in Letters: An Anthropological Reflection on the Correspondence of

Slovene Missionary Sr. Conradina Resnik", she considers in detail the many different aspects which are important in the analysis of letters, from their materiality to issues of content. Her contribution, however, is also intended as a broader theoretical reflection on letter-writing as a window onto, and a way of retrieving, history.

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