



The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198831723.001.0001>

Published: 2022

Online ISBN: 9780191869587

Print ISBN: 9780198831723

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CHAPTER

3 Defining Mission Studies for the Third Millennium of Christianity

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198831723.013.2> Pages 37–55

Published: 19 December 2022

Abstract

Given the multiple definitions—speaking theologically and historically—of the word “mission,” the field of “mission studies” naturally also resists a self-evident univocal meaning. Mindful that academic disciplines (or sub-disciplines) require certain self-limitation, however, this chapter will offer a brief historical perspective on the field, then seek such self-limitation. It will explore a variety of types of studies that constitute mission studies to argue that the field must always necessarily operate on two levels. First, it must remain grounded in the actual realities of discourses and practices that are identified as mission in the present. Second, mission studies must remain open to discourses and practices to be identified as mission later, or, looking into the past, retrospectively. In so doing, mission studies remains true to the limitless possibilities implied by the theological categories that have long been central to its enactment while remaining grounded in empirical realities.

Keywords: [mission studies](#), [missiology](#), [mission history](#), [world Christianity](#), [intercultural studies](#), [missional](#), [comparison](#)

Subject: [Christianity](#), [Religion](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Collection: [Oxford Handbooks Online](#)

“Mission studies” appears in the titles of journals like *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* and *Mission Studies*, and in the names of academic organizations such as the Korean Society of Mission Studies, the US-based Midwest Mission Studies Fellowship, the International Association for Mission Studies, and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. “Mission studies” also identifies fields of study and units within larger academic or ecclesial institutions—for example, as an academic area label at Nijmegen

University and Boston University, and at the Crowther Mission Studies Library of the Church Mission Society. In such uses, the term “mission” performs as an adjective modifying “studies.”

Related terms in English identify similarly oriented entities: “missionary,” “missiology,” or “missiological,” or, sometimes, simply “mission.” Thus, there are the *Indian Missiological Journal* and the *Japan Mission Journal*, as well as *Missiology*, the *International Review of Mission*, *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology*, and the *International Bulletin of Mission Research*. In languages besides English, similar terms abound: *sciences de la mission* in French-language journals, like *Revue Africaine des Sciences de la Mission* from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the Spanish journal, *Misiones Extranjeras: Revista de Misionología* (Foreign Missions: Review of Missiology); the Italian *Mondo e Missione* (World and Missions); and the German *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* (roughly, Journal for the Study of Mission and Religion). In all these cases, the implication is that the designated entities concern themselves with studies—a wide-ranging notion labeling multifarious informal and formal scholarly undertakings—that focus on mission, a term that has come to designate human efforts to spread Christianity.

p. 38 This volume follows convention, identifying mission with historical attempts to extend Christianity. This chapter defining mission studies will have two parts. First, it will establish the domain of reference for the academic field or area conventionally meant by “mission studies.” Accepting that academic disciplines and sub-disciplines change over time, this chapter will outline the history of the study of mission, highlighting recent changes in its scope and the self-understanding of scholars involved.

Second, the chapter will look ahead to the future of mission studies. It will suggest its likely future, and also articulate what *ought* to be the scope and role of mission studies moving ahead, to orient it in a certain direction in intellectual inquiry more broadly. This chapter, therefore, will be retrospective as well as prospective, descriptive and also prescriptive. Anticipating likely transformations in the world Christian movement and in scholarship, the chapter seeks to establish a course to follow through appropriate articulation and self-limitation of the field, shaped by a desire for conceptual and disciplinary clarity.

Mission studies must operate at two levels to move forward. First, it should remain focused on the ordinary sense of the term “mission,” so that it never ignores its place in advancing understanding of human efforts at spreading Christianity. Secondly, mission studies must be open to new ways of defining Christian mission that acknowledge past realities retrospectively linked to mission, and new understandings of mission that expand its scope, as discerned by scholars both theological and non-theological. By remaining open to these two levels—an ordinary sense and an expanded sense, historically and theologically—mission studies can thereby reflect its development over time and maintain its relevance in academic and ecclesial realms.

The Scope of Mission Studies

For several reasons, the label “mission studies” naturally resists a self-evident, univocal definition. First, its use is often anachronistic due to historical changes in language and academic practice, since the word “mission” and its cognates in other European languages were not applied to efforts at spreading Christianity until the sixteenth century. In addition, the formal and self-conscious study of mission in academic life dates only to the nineteenth century, while the term “missiology”—the most popular term designating the theological discipline dedicated to studying Christian mission—only appeared in the early twentieth century.¹ Since what came to be called “mission” was studied in a variety of ways before that term described it, implicit and informal mission studies occurred centuries before “mission” described its subject matter, and even longer before it was institutionalized within the academy.

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A second challenge in defining mission studies precisely arises from the many other terms used to describe both the practice designated by mission and mission studies. This proliferation of labels means that mission studies often occurs when called something else, while certain terms that indicate links to Christian mission in some uses ↴ do not do so in other uses. Examples of terms analogous to mission include a variety linked to “evangelical,” and others related to “apostolic,” and they range from traditional labels for Christian mission like “propagation of the faith” to more recent ones linked to “intercultural.”² These days, much of what (until recently) was called “mission studies” or “missiology” at academic institutions, takes place in units designated as “intercultural studies,” or related terms. Thus, both Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary in the US grant degrees in Intercultural Studies, and universities like Göttingen in Germany and Trinity College Dublin in Ireland offer degrees in Intercultural Theology. In each case, much of the curriculum is clearly reminiscent of approaches and disciplines that in the past would have been part of missiology.³ To add to the confusion, other academic programs with no links to Christian mission, historical or otherwise, also can be called intercultural studies.

A third challenge to a settled meaning for mission studies consists in the considerable historical evolution that the meaning of Christian mission itself has undergone, with manifold theological and other semantic developments, even recently. The word “mission” had a prehistory within theology prior to being deployed to describe Christian efforts to spread the faith—part of speculative reflection on the Trinity, since the Son and Holy Spirit had “missions” from God the Father. In addition, since its sixteenth-century application to evangelizing efforts, the term’s content has never ceased to be subject to ongoing theological reflection. Thus, even when limited by the implied further adjective “Christian,” the field of Christian mission studies resists an obvious and self-evident definition.

Mindful of these challenges to defining mission studies precisely, it is nonetheless the case that the study of Christian mission within academic institutions began in the nineteenth century. Moreover, scholarship about mission has undergone considerable transformation since the middle of the twentieth century.

The Institutionalization of Mission Studies and Recent Challenges to the Field

Mission studies became institutionalized in the nineteenth century, shaped by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s (1768–1834) influential decision to append the study of mission to practical theology, one of the four major fields in theological education that emerged in Protestant academic theology. With German Protestant Gustav Warnek (1834–1910), the academic subject of mission studies took on a life of its own, both as a practical discipline preparing missionaries, and as a theoretical discipline integrating Christian mission with other theological fields. Catholics soon followed, with Joseph Schmidlin (1876–1944) inaugurating the first Catholic chair in mission at Münster in Germany in 1910. The term “missiology” itself was coined to describe the now burgeoning academic discipline by the Dutch Jesuit scholar Ludwig J. van Rijkervorsel in 1915.⁴

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As a new academic field, missiology in the twentieth century continued serving as a preparatory discipline for those anticipating becoming missionaries, while also ↴ developing as an embracing term for the study of mission history and the development of theologies of mission. This latter task drew mission studies into engagement with other areas of theology, including ethics, systematic and fundamental theology, and biblical scholarship, as well as church history more broadly. The twentieth century witnessed growing institutionalization of the field in many universities, as the study of mission took a formal place in seminaries and universities, especially across western Europe and North America.⁵

Since the middle of the twentieth century, a number of historical transformations have raised challenges to the practice and study of Christian mission. The end of formal colonialism in much of the world, beginning in the late 1940s, the growth of Christianity in the once-colonized world, and its recession in the countries

that initiated and oversaw colonialism, as well as important ecclesial events, like the expansion of the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, have all generated novel circumstances shaping mission studies. Other later developments have also affected the field. These include the growth of ecumenism among many global Christian bodies, so that Catholic and Protestant missionary reflection occurs in a closer relation than before. Recent decades have also seen the proliferation of Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity, as well as the splitting of global Protestantism, with many Christians resistant to the alleged non-evangelical instincts of the World Council of Churches and desirous of more unapologetic preaching of salvation through Christ. Other religions have also changed, with new energetic efforts at proselytism by adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, and especially Islam. Other changes included the end of the Cold War with a resulting renewed openness to Christianity in the former Soviet bloc and the new growth of Christianity in places like northeast India and China. Finally, 2010 saw the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference on World Missions, which occasioned considerable missiological reflection and important statements on mission by global Christian bodies, including the Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Movement, and various Orthodox bodies.⁶

Scholars in mission studies have self-consciously sought to address such changes. This is reflected in the large number of articles and books focusing on missiology whose titles include words that mark their novelty. Epitomizing this trend were three volumes entitled *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, that came out in the 1990s, edited by James Scherer and Stephen Bevans.⁷

Changes in Mission Studies since the Mid-twentieth Century

Transformations in mission studies have taken many forms, reflecting changing evaluations of Christian mission itself and new scholarly approaches to the practice, theology, and history of mission.

p. 41 One cause of the widespread felt need for newness in mission studies has been the criticism of Christian mission since the widespread decolonization of much of the world, beginning in the 1940s. Awareness has grown of the historical effects of colonization and often accompanying missionary evangelization on local populations, effects often seen to be deleterious to their flourishing. This awareness—though sometimes uncritical and reflexive—has generated criticism of mission, past and present, at times even leading Christians themselves to question missionary evangelization. This opprobrium has likely shaped the diminished frequency of mission in the titles of academic chairs and areas in universities across the world—and the growing preference for terms like “intercultural studies” or “world Christianity” for such units and positions.

Since the latter twentieth century, a second development has been a proliferation in the range of scholars who explore mission, bringing with them new interpretive frameworks. Missiology had long been the purview of seminaries and universities—many historically linked to Christian denominations—and it has been mostly there that chairs and academic units dedicated to mission studies have been located. Yet, in the wake of the end of the colonial period, numerous non-theologically inclined scholars have given heightened attention to Christian mission as a complex set of historical practices, with important implications for a variety of issues and disciplines. Missiology, though formally synonymous with mission studies, is rarely invoked overtly by scholars in those disciplines, perhaps because it seems too tethered to theology or too obscure for notice. Regardless, Christian mission has grown as an object of study in numerous fields, including literary studies, various social-scientific disciplines, history (including the history of science), and area studies linked to the colonized and colonizing world. Missionaries and their work have been studied for insight into the emergence of ethnic and linguistic identities, the nature of colonialist rhetoric, the classification of biological species of plants and animals, and for roles in galvanizing colonialist, as well as proto-independent and democratizing, political attitudes.⁸

Criticisms of mission, and growing awareness of the diverse impacts of missionary practice, have changed the ways many missionaries are trained. Insight has grown into the problems arising from differences in social power that arise between missionaries and those they meet, with resulting distortion of evangelization.⁹ Preparatory programs for mission increasingly include the study of anthropology and related disciplines, in the hope of fostering deeper appreciation for cultural and social difference within interpersonal and intercultural encounters typical in missionary evangelization.¹⁰

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Closely linked to new types of preparation for missionaries, and of more importance for the larger field of mission studies, have been transformative approaches to theologies of mission developed since the mid-twentieth century.¹¹ Demographic changes in the distribution of Christians on the globe have undermined the default “us/them” assumptions of past missionary practice and theology, in which mostly European missionaries brought Christianity to the rest of the world. Mission is widely considered to no longer be a unidirectional move from some self-appointed center, like Rome, Canterbury, or Constantinople, into a non-Christian milieu. Instead, mission has many centers, and is seen as moving “from everywhere to everywhere,” with major sources of global missionary energy in Brazil, South Korea, and Nigeria. The rapid growth of Christianity in the once-colonized world has made such places sources of insights into theologies of mission, too, generating new ways of encountering and interpreting Scripture, new ways of reading the Christian past, and new mission methods.

Changing awareness of the directionality of mission has accompanied broadened definitions of Christian mission beyond attempts to convert others and expand the church. Two important changes have been noteworthy. One prominent trend links Christian mission more directly with God’s activity, the *missio Dei*, instead of foregrounding the singular role of their churches’ members as agents of mission. Articulated in theological reflection and official statements across many Christian bodies, this fundamental theological reorientation has led to locating mission more centrally in the church’s life in the world instead of portraying it as something occurring at the church’s peripheries.

A second trend in the theology of mission, also adopted by many Christians, connects Christian mission with the centrality of the Reign of God to Jesus’s life and ministry as portrayed in the gospels. Thus, a concern for emulating Jesus’ healing and other support for human flourishing has become part of what scholars and church bodies perceive as missionary activity, so that “mission” means more than increasing Christian adherence.

These changes have integrated Christian mission more tightly to discipleship itself, understood individually and collectively. They have also forged links between and among God’s mission, human development, and Christian mission. They have also, however, led to concern among some Christians—especially, but not only, Evangelicals and Pentecostals—that preaching salvation through Christ has been sidelined. Thus, there has also been a backlash of sorts, with some lamenting that Christian mission has been, in certain interpretations, reduced to human advancement.

Yet the divisions among Christians over the necessary centrality of proclaiming salvation through Christ should not overshadow the growing ecumenical consensus in the theology of mission. The integration of Christian mission more deeply with God’s active ongoing presence in the world as *missio Dei*, and the tighter connection of mission to Christ’s ministry, have meant a corresponding placement of mission at the center of church life for many Christian bodies. This transformation has affected mission theology itself, as well as Christian theology and church experience more generally.

One notable resulting innovation has been called the missional church movement, which has sought to explicate the implications for church communities everywhere of the centrality of Christian mission. Many credit Scottish missionary and later bishop, Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998), with the foundations for the missional church movement, emphasizing as he did the missionary role of all the baptized and articulating

the corresponding responsibilities for church communities to embrace mission in all their activities. Newbigin's insights have inspired the Gospel in Our Culture Network, which has sought to foster such self-understandings among Christian bodies around the world, and sponsored much academic reflection on the missional church.¹² The word "missional" has grown in mission studies' academic discourse, indicating a concern for Christian mission beyond older more restrictive uses of the term "missionary."

p. 43 Different practices of cross-cultural and international mission in traditional mission-sending countries have also generated new horizons for mission studies. One place of growth has been in the scholarship linked to so-called "short-term missions": that is, experiences linked to Christian faith that take believers from one part of the world to another, for periods ranging from a few days to a few months, in what are sometimes called "mission trips." Often humanitarian in orientation, and carried out by congregations that are comparatively wealthy in relation to those they are visiting, such practices have generated criticism. Yet these practices have also produced new preparation programs, as well as analysis of the role of such experiences in the lives of participants, their effects on the communities to which such short-term missionaries head, and their relationship to the fuller discipleship of sending communities.¹³

Changes in mission history have also reflected larger developments in mission studies, becoming more ecumenical and seeing the impact of Christian mission in more comprehensive terms. In the early modern period, competing versions of universal Christian history linked to Protestants and Catholics told the story of the spread of Christianity differently. In particular, Protestant and Catholic historiography revealed divergent emphases in the historical unfolding of Christian mission: stressing or underplaying the role of the bishop of Rome, for instance, in the church's evangelization.¹⁴ The nineteenth century continued the trend, with works that sought comprehensive historical studies of Christian mission, yet were invariably shaped by the divide between Catholics and Protestants. In 1846, for example, the French Ultramontane Catholic intellectual Baron Henrion (1805–1862) published *Histoire Générale des Missions Catholiques*. Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists published histories of the missions as well, often focusing instead on the work of missionary societies linked to their churches. Different Catholic missionary groups did the same, continuing to the present day.

Comprehensive histories of Christianity that foreground missionary work written since the mid-twentieth century have usually been more ecumenical. These include the multiple volumes of Kenneth Scott Latourette, published between 1937 and 1945, and continue, in single volumes, by Stephen Neill (1964), Herbert Kane (1978), and even more recent overviews by Dana Robert (2009) as well as Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi and Justo González (2013). Historians of Christian mission have also been influenced by historians and social scientists who study colonialism, locating missionary practices in relationship to other social transformations. The work of historical anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, for example, on the effects of missionary Christianity on peoples of southern Africa, has led many mission historians to see missionary evangelization as linked to encroaching global capitalism, colonial-era political domination, and cultural ruptures.

p. 44 One important development in mission history, with implications for mission studies more generally, has been concerted ecumenical and international efforts to preserve historical records of missionary activity. This builds on previous historical preservation, since missionary societies (Catholic and Protestant) have long collected and collated their written, and other, archival materials. Interest in supporting historical research based on these sorts of primary materials is not new. Among Catholics, efforts to gather scholarship on mission in a single place led to the Vatican-linked creation of *Bibliotheca Missionum* in 1917, under the direction of Robert Streit, OMI. It was renamed *Bibliografia Missionaria* in 1933 and discontinued only recently.¹⁵ In addition, both Catholic and Protestant missionary-sending groups developed periodicals to garner support for their work, in which the writings of missionaries often featured.

Over the past several decades, however, new ecumenical efforts have appeared at historical preservation. For example, since the early 1970s, the International Association of Mission Studies has sponsored a working group under the heading “Documentation, Archives, Bibliography and Oral History” (DABOH), which strives to “rescue the memory of the people of God.”¹⁶ The online *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) represents another effort to capture the Christian past, often linked to missionary activity, using open-sourcing to gather voices from many sources.¹⁷

Besides missionary writings and mission society periodicals, scholars of mission history value as important documentation the proceedings and statements of large missionary gatherings. These include the writings emerging from the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference and subsequent twentieth-century meetings that gathered global missionaries, mission organizers, and scholars. Documents on mission emerging from the World Council of Churches, as well as preceding organizations, like the International Missionary Council, as well as Catholic documents on mission issued by Vatican offices and the popes, also constitute important texts for mission history.

Recent Comprehensive Works in Mission Studies

Four influential overviews of mission studies produced since the early 1990s reflect these changes in approaches to the theology and history of mission and resulting implications for mission studies, more generally. All four are wide-ranging and broadly ecumenical in their approach, and their differences and evolution suggest the future of mission studies.

David Bosch’s 1991 *Transforming Mission* reflects decades of developing scholarship in mission studies. Bosch (1929–1992), a South African Reformed theologian, who courageously resisted the apartheid movement during his life, brought together insights from biblical research and offered an historical overview of changing historical paradigms for mission operative in different places and times in church history. These serve as a preamble for presenting a series of thirteen images or metaphors for mission—for example, mission as the quest for justice, liberation, or contextualization—that, together, constitute what he called an “emerging post-modern paradigm” for mission.¹⁸

Slightly more than a decade later, two American Catholic priests and members of the Society of the Divine Word, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, published *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* in 2004. Compared to Bosch, their discussion of Scripture is briefer, their historical overview less paradigm-focused, and they engage critical theory less. Bevans and Schroeder summarize contemporary theologies of mission around three themes: mission as *missio Dei*, mission as preaching salvation through Christ, and mission as participation in the Reign of God. They elaborate each of the three with reference to a wide and ecumenical variety of mission and theological scholarship. They also illustrate the growing consensus that theology must reflect the settings in which it is practiced, giving rise to the notion of contextual theology. Bevans and Schroeder conclude by presenting a model for mission as “prophetic dialogue,” which brings together the three themes, and is constituted by various elements that comprise their preferred model for mission moving ahead.¹⁹

Stanley Skreslet’s 2012 *Comprehending Mission: The Questions, Methods, Themes, Problems, and Prospects of Missiology* differs from the very influential *Transforming Mission* and *Constants in Context*, operating more as an overview of the somewhat inchoate field of mission studies than as an effort at constructing a new theology of mission from strands of ecclesial and theological reflection. Skreslet, an American Presbyterian, reconnoiters mission studies, moving beyond mission theology and practice to reflect the growing range of disciplines involved in the study of Christian mission. His comprehensive portrayal of the field includes chapters on the Bible and mission, mission history, mission and culture, mission and other religions, mission practices, and the missionary vocation. In carrying out what might—in an analogy to

historiography—be called a “missiography,” he charts the “community of practice” that constitutes mission studies today, which constitutes an array of scholarly orientations.²⁰

German Protestant Henning Wrogemann’s vast three volumes with the overall title *Intercultural Theology*, published first in German, and from 2016 to 2019 in English, represent a more recent attempt at an overview of the area marked out by mission studies. Reflecting academic terminology from continental Europe, Wrogemann very self-consciously avoids calling his undertaking “mission studies” or “missiology,” yet he also discusses (at length) the relationship between mission studies and his venture, finding many points of connection. Seeking a middle ground between those who want intercultural theology to replace mission studies, and others who defend mission studies and see intercultural theology as quite different, Wrogemann believes that a jointly-named field of intercultural theology/mission studies adequately protects the concerns of various positions.²¹ Wrogemann draws upon numerous scenarios from contemporary world Christianity and past history to advance his arguments, engages sophisticated critical theory, and reviews the history of theologies of mission—all in an attempt to develop an intercultural theology adequate to the realities of global Christianity today. Like Skreslet, he seeks an overarching perspective on the fields in question; yet he delves deeper into critical theory and presents a more complete scholarly apparatus, with myriad references to works in many fields. He also builds on Bosch, as well as Bevans and Schroeder, devoting the entire second volume to theologies of mission.

For Wrogemann, the diversity of today’s globalizing world forces theology to be intercultural and interreligious, and he advocates a theology of mission that he calls “oikumenical doxology.” He urges the inclusion of intercultural theology/mission studies as a distinct sixth discipline in theological studies, analogous to systematics, ethics, biblical theology, church history, and pastoral theology.²²

p. 46 Together, these four works help to define the scope of mission studies today, and they suggest a future for mission studies as well.²³

The Future of Mission Studies

Since the mid-twentieth century, mission studies has both expanded into areas not previously considered part of the purview of missiology and adapted to new practices of mission with appropriate critical reflection. Over the same period, the theology of Christian mission—long central to missiology—has developed ecumenically sensitive and widely (though not universally) shared general assumptions that situate mission more centrally into the ongoing life of Christians and their communities. Mission studies has become a capacious term, while, at the same time, operating with a precise meaning in many of its articulations. Mission studies has a formal academic orientation: the self-conscious study of Christian mission within academic life. Yet it has also attended to matters not formerly recognized in the past as Christian mission.

Mindful of the probable future of world Christianity and academic scholarship, three trends should shape and define mission studies. First, the study of Christian mission will interest a growing diversity of scholars. Second, a mission-minded approach will be brought to bear upon more areas of Christian life and scholarship. Third, innovative comparative approaches—historical, intercultural, and interreligious, especially—will yield new insights into Christian mission, past and present.

The Ongoing Relevance of Christian Mission for Various Disciplines

Christian mission will continue to interest scholars outside religious and theological studies. In his *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*, for example, historian David Hollinger explores how important social changes in the twentieth-century US drew strength from the contributions of US Protestant missionaries and their children. Shaped by their experiences in the mission field, he argues this group had an outsized influence on issues such as declining concern for religious orthodoxy in Protestant churches, race relations, policies in US higher education, and US diplomatic relations—especially with Asia.²⁴ Other historians also study Christian missionaries with increased sophistication and make a variety of arguments. Emily Manktelow, for example, explores how missionary families shaped British colonialism.²⁵

p. 47 Anthropologists also engage mission-linked topics in new ways. Amy Stambach studies mission-sponsored education in eastern Africa to argue that missionaries, Christian churches, and the contemporary nation-state have complex, overlapping interests in educational practices, with important consequences for Africa's future.²⁶ Anthropologist Webb Keane uses missionary practices to consider how certain Indonesians encountered with missionary Christianity not only new themes and symbols, but a new Protestant-inflected approach to causality as missionaries sought to counter what they perceived to be superstition. Keane develops the notion of semiotic ideology to describe how social change linked to missionary Christianity often entails not only new content, but also new approaches to reality itself.²⁷ Keane and others help constitute an emerging field, the "anthropology of Christianity," which takes seriously the various social changes that Christianity—often linked to mission—fosters in diverse situations.

Anthropologists and historians will continue to use mission-linked materials in their works. Yet the significance of mission and mission studies has also been recognized in a variety of other fields. In an important edited collection, Carine Dujardin and Claude Prudhomme explore the relationship between the developing science of missiology and various scientific endeavors in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. Several articles in the volume also make the provocative case that missiology operated as a particularly freighted discipline in European Christianity's institutional relationship with science more generally. On the one hand, missiologists, seeking to establish their new discipline as a science, engaged scientists directly in a variety of disciplines, since missionaries and their writings brought new biological species, geological knowledge, and geographic awareness to Europe. Even more significantly, missiology became a way that both Protestant and Catholic authorities sought to engage science more generally, using the new field as an argument for the compatibility of science and religion in the face of religious skepticism.²⁸

New Missional Approaches

Mission studies scholars have continued to adopt a mission-based (or missional) perspective on increasingly diverse topics in Christian life and scholarship. Recent works in mission studies have linked Christian mission to social movement theory,²⁹ human development,³⁰ media studies,³¹ environmental stewardship,³² hip-hop culture,³³ disability studies,³⁴ and economics,³⁵ and many have linked mission with business practices.³⁶ As advances in technology and communication proceed, these will undoubtedly create new possibilities for evangelization and new realities—including ethical quandaries—into which a missional perspective will be sought by Christians.

Mission studies will also play a larger role in the historical study of Christianity moving forward, and not only in the study of mission per se. Increasingly, scholars recognize how reflection on practices of evangelization shaped Christian thought and action more generally, long before nineteenth-century institutionalization of any formal academic undertaking, and before the term "mission" labeled

p. 48 evangelizing efforts. They recognize that often reflection on the spread of Christianity was implicit, even occurring unselfconsciously and, thus, going unlabeled.

Contemporary scholars in mission studies reflect upon the clear evidence already in the New Testament that the earliest Christian missionary efforts—described in St. Paul’s letters, reflected in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in the gospels, and recounted in the Acts of the Apostles—were subjected to reflection.³⁷ Similar evidence of reflection on mission shapes historical understandings of every succeeding period in Christian history. Studies of important early texts like the *Didache*—as well as first-millennium figures like Origen, Eusebius, Bede, Augustine of Canterbury, and Cyril and Methodius—draw attention to how mission concerns operated throughout Christian life and practice. Medievalists will continue to explore how mission reflection continued among Western Christians. Mendicant religious orders, like the Dominicans and Franciscans, each developed characteristic missionary approaches. The Franciscan Ramon Llull (ca. 1232–1315), a Spaniard, famously urged the acquisition of languages of non-Christians—especially others in the Mediterranean area, like the many Muslim groups—in order to facilitate missionary evangelization.

Historians of Christianity pay increased attention, as well, to the consequences of the appearance of the term “mission” to describe Christian evangelization. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) influentially deployed the term “mission” to describe Christian efforts at evangelization, especially those of the Jesuits, the Catholic religious order that he founded. Following Loyola’s inaugural deployment, the use of the term “mission” by Propaganda Fide, the Vatican’s office for organizing missionary activity founded in 1622, helped to cement its normalization in European languages, first among Catholics, and then Protestants. Its primary referent in trinitarian reflection was replaced, as mission in Christian language increasingly described efforts to spread Christianity, especially outside Europe.³⁸

Meanwhile, a variety of Jesuits and others involved in mission in the early modern period creatively engaged the peoples whom they sought to evangelize, thereby shaping Catholic theology and practice. Such pioneers, first Catholics and later Protestants, are well known for responding to practical questions that arose during the evangelization of peoples newly encountered by European missionaries across the globe. Matteo Ricci in China (1552–1610) and Roberto de Nobili in India (1577–1656), both Jesuit missionaries, self-consciously experimented with methods of adaptation to elite social expectations in their respective lands. In Latin America, the Jesuit leader José de Acosta (d. 1600) categorized peoples by levels of civilizational achievement, advocating different missionary strategies for three groups. One scholar argues that the Jesuit international mission in the early modern period was the first effort in which Christianity’s interest in saving others took on a global dimension.³⁹ Yet, adapting missionary approaches to different types of people not only showed a new level of reflection on mission: it shaped how the church approached such people groups. On the one hand, it accorded them all human dignity as potential Christians. On the other, it denigrated many for their alleged lack of “civilizational” achievements, thereby providing legitimization for discrimination and domination.

p. 49 Protestant missionary activity also shaped broader church realities. Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), shaped by a growing Pietism in his native Germany, urged missionary activity to pursue the internal conversion of those evangelized. The Moravians, founded by Zinzendorf, thus are credited with introducing voluntarism—the expectation of personal self-conscious conversion among the evangelized—into mission. The voluntarism that Moravians introduced into missionary practice not only shaped mission but also led to a new form of missionary organization: the voluntary mission association. This new social reality had profound effects on Protestant Christianity in Europe and North America.

Beginning in the early modern period and continuing to the present, the primary referent of Christian mission remains efforts at spreading Christianity. Despite some questions about its future in theology—Michael Stroope calls mission’s place in the life of the church a “murky river,” and argues that it should be transcended⁴⁰—its future usage in this ordinary sense seems quite secure. At the same time, the historical

origins of the term within trinitarian theology, and its larger connotations of any sort of sending, have never disappeared. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660), Catholic priest and reformer in Paris, founded a religious order that he called the Congregation of the Mission, more commonly called the Vincentians. He named it thus not to indicate that all went overseas to work among non-Christians, but to spur them to evangelical zeal, whether in Europe or outside. In addition, “missions” remained a term used by Jesuits, Vincentians, and others (Catholic and non-Catholic) for preaching campaigns, especially in rural Europe. That ongoing dual reality in term—with a primary referent and a broader application—continues to shape mission studies.

The Promise of Comparison

With an eye toward an increasingly interreligious future in light of globalization, Christian mission studies have much to gain from being put into a comparative perspective with other religiously motivated efforts at religious growth and expansion.

Christianity represents one of the three so-called world religions that are commonly thought of as “missionary”—that is, religions that conventionally embrace the spreading of their message through deliberate efforts that themselves take on religious significance. The other two, Islam and Buddhism, use other terms to describe such efforts. Also clearly missionary in their orientation are more recently appearing religious (or para-religious) bodies, such as the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons; the Unification Church, sometimes called “Moonies”; the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or Hare Krishnas; the Divine Light Mission, which has become Elan Vital; and Scientology. Each undertakes self-conscious efforts at spreading their message. A potential area of growth in mission studies lies in insights deriving from comparisons with other religious bodies that have taken seriously the impulse to expand themselves through self-conscious historical practice. These religions’ analogous efforts to propagate themselves have been subjected to academic scrutiny like Christianity, though not to the same degree.

Already in the 1830s, about the same time that Christian mission appeared as a topic in European universities, Western scholars highlighted similarities among the missionary tendencies of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. By the late nineteenth century, this commonality was deduced in the construction of categories in the growing field of comparative religion, such as in an 1873 lecture at Westminster Abbey by one of the founders of the comparative religion, Max Müller. Other religions—for example, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Judaism—were sometimes called “national” or “indigenous,” to indicate their comparatively lower inclination to propagate themselves beyond a self-defined people group, compared to the missionary religions. Jesus’ so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 served in scholarly comparative frameworks as a measuring stick for allegedly similar, self-conscious statements by the Buddha and Muhammad to spread their message. In addition, the third-century BCE Buddhist ruler King Ashoka and successive Muslim regimes between the seventh and sixteenth centuries were likened to Christian kings and later ecclesial bodies, like the Vatican and Protestant missionary agencies, all of whom used political and economic power to direct missionary activities to extend their faiths. The Buddhist “dispensation,” allegedly formulated by Ashoka at a council of monks as a plan to spread the *dharma*, and the Arabic term *da‘wa* (literally “to invite”) were seen as analogous to the Christian missionary impulse.

In retrospect, scholars recognize that such comparisons often rendered a disservice to the histories and religious identities of these non-Christian religions. In the name of comparison, categories rooted in Christianity—especially Western Protestantism—served as self-regarding measures for implicit valuations and rankings of religious vitality, morality, and merit, to the detriment of accurate depictions of these other religions.⁴¹

Yet the mistakes of past comparative undertakings do not undermine possible insights that can arise from more limited comparisons into particular aspects of human efforts to spread religions—Christianity and others. Sociologists like Rodney Stark, following the traditions linked to Max Weber and historical work by A. H. Harnack and others, study the spread of Christianity on strictly sociological and historical lines. Similar research into the spread of Buddhism has been done by Jonathan S. Walters (who built upon Erik Zürcher’s influential work) and into Islam, by scholars like Richard Bulliet. Matthew Kuiper has examined the history of *da’wa* in Islam, showing that neither the Qur’an nor other early Islamic writings have a singular vision of *da’wa*. In fact, Kuiper shows that *da’wa*—not unlike “mission” in relationship to the New Testament—has a complex scripturalist orientation, thus inviting fruitful comparative work in the future.⁴² Drawing on such historical research, sociologist Robert Montgomery has sought to compare missionary practices of Christians with other analogous practices in other religions.⁴³ Much more can be done.

p. 51 **Defining Mission Studies**

Looking ahead, mission studies will necessarily continue to include at least three different kinds of academic products. First, comprehensive works that seek to cover the area designated by mission studies will continue. Bosch and Wrogemann will have successors, increasingly from the places where Christianity is growing, and from ever-more diverse voices. Second, there will continue to be academic writing that focuses on Christian mission—or some facet of mission studies—without seeking to be comprehensive. These will include historical studies in which missionary practice plays a prominent role, anthropological research in which mission-generated social change produces new cultural forms, and theological reflection that takes seriously mission as a central theological theme. Third and finally, numerous works will discuss Christian mission, yet not make it the center of their engagement, so that they will be relevant to mission studies without constituting works in mission studies *per se*. In its relationship to many works within these latter two categories—studies of particular facets of mission and studies that engage mission tangentially—mission studies will resemble many academic fields.

To accommodate this future, any operative definition of mission studies must remain aware of the historical and semantic changes and ambiguity linked to the word mission.⁴⁴ It also must operate simultaneously on at least two levels. First, it needs to remain grounded in the actual realities of discourses and practices that are identified as Christian mission by Christians and others in the present. “Mission” can mean many things, since myriad human organizations, from banks to basketball teams, have “mission statements.” Yet when operating in its rather restricted and overt way mission refers to Christian efforts to expand Christianity, understood very broadly. This has been, over the past several centuries, the most common sense of the term “Christian mission.”

At the same time, however, mission studies must have a second level of operative possibility. It must also remain open to discourses and practices to be identified as Christian mission later, or to past mission-linked discourses and practices not previously viewed as such. It must also include scholarship that studies Christian mission under other labels, such as intercultural studies, contextual theology, and world Christianity. By paying attention to the obvious referents of mission studies, on the one hand, and also remaining open to the potential scope of its domain, on the other, mission studies can remain true to the ambiguities in the term mission itself. After all, mission had a history in theological language within the Trinitarian life of God—as the dynamism of God’s activity through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Today’s growing consensus around mission as rooted in the *missio Dei* is a return to the historical origins of the term, without disregarding the innovation of linking mission to human activity. What Ignatius of Loyola sought for members of his Society of Jesus—that they would all have a mission, like Jesus—is now common parlance as an assumption for all the baptized among mission scholars.

p. 52 By maintaining these two levels, mission studies can thereby have a particular focus, while maintaining openness to the limitless possibilities implied by theological categories that have long been central to mission's enunciation and its practiced enactment. After all, Christian mission can be understood not merely as efforts to spread Christianity, but also as human cooperation of any sort with divine action (understood as God's mission) in the world. By defining mission studies this way, mission studies can properly remain grounded in empirical realities that are discernible and subject to analysis within many non-theological frameworks as well, while remaining open to considerations of God at work in the world—which, by definition, is subject to no constraints.

In *Comprehending Mission*, Stanley Skreslet adopts Andrew Walls' definition of missiology: "the systematic study of all aspects of mission."⁴⁵ Looking into the future, one can imagine that Christian forms will continue to diversify, with new polities appearing linked to Christian identity and belonging in new social milieus. Mission will remain central, no matter the ecclesial forms that arise, and in any setting in which Christians embodying them live and reflect upon their faith and seek to share it with others.

Notes

1. Paul V. Kollman, "At the Origins of Mission and Missiology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 425–458.
2. Jan A. B. Jongeneel, *Philosophy, Science, and Theology of Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 1:15–70.
3. One recent book title mixes terms creatively: Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, eds., *Intercultural Living: Explorations in Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018).
4. Jongeneel, *Philosophy*, 1:63.
5. The best account up to the mid-twentieth century remains Olav Guttorm Myklebust, *The Study of Missions in Theological Education*, 2 vols. (Oslo: Egede Instituttet, 1955, 1957). See also Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 43–50. For a focused look at developments in Europe in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see the essays in Carine Dujardin and Claude Prudhomme, eds. *Mission and Science: Missiology Revisited/Missologie Revisitée, 1850–1940* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015).
6. For a fuller discussion of these changes, see the chapter by Brian Stanley in this volume.
7. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds. *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds. *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994); James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds. *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 3: Faith and Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999). For other titles, see Kollman, "At the Origins," 446, n. 26.
8. For examples, see Patrick Harries and David Maxwell, eds. *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) and Dujardin and Prudhomme, *Mission and Science*.
- p. 53 9. One particularly influential discussion of this issue is Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: The Role of Affluence in the Christian Missionary Enterprise from the West* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).
10. Stanley H. Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission: The Questions, Methods, Themes, Problems, and Prospects of Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012), 2–4, 76–94.
11. For surveys of theologies of mission, see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 281–347; Oborji, *Concepts of Mission*; Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission*, 70–75; Craig Ott, ed. *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Henning Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).
12. For a seminal statement of the missional church movement, see Darrell Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the*

Sending of the Church in North America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). On the Gospel in Our Culture Network, see “About the Network,” The Gospel and Our Culture Network, accessed December 27, 2018, <https://gocn.org/>.

13. Recent works that seek to guide short-term missions include: Jan Bradbury, *A Mission that Matters: How to Do Short-Term Missions without Long-Term Harm* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018) and Tim Dearborn, *Short Term Missions Workbook: From Mission Tourists to Global Citizens*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018). Important studies of short-term mission include Robert J. Priest, ed. *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right!* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008) and Brian M. Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).
14. Justo L. González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 131–144.
15. David Henige, “Bibliotheca Missionum: A Case of Benign Neglect,” *History of Africa* 5 (1978): 337–334.
16. “DABOH,” International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), accessed December 10, 2018, <http://missionstudies.org/index.php/study-groups/daboh/>.
17. “Home,” Dictionary of African Christian Biography, accessed Dec. 10, 2018, <https://dacb.org/>.
18. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).
19. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*.
20. Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission*, 12–15.
21. Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 20–25.
22. Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 377–407.
23. Other important comprehensive efforts include works by J. H. Bavinck, J. Verkuyl, J. Andrew Kirk, Francis Oborji, Jan A. B. Jongeneel, Craig Ott and Stephen Strauss, Michael Goheen, John Terry, and a collection edited by Charles Van Engen. Of particular note is the Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series published to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Edinburgh 1910. Now reaching thirty-nine volumes, it constitutes a remarkable collection of missiological works, covering diverse places, eras, and issues in mission studies. Many of the volumes are available for free download. (See “Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series,” Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, accessed September 22, 2019, <http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/list.php?cat=3>.) Important encyclopedias and dictionaries go back to the nineteenth century, including those of Warneck, Schmidlin, Edwin Bliss, and James Dennis. More recent efforts include one led by Karl Müller, another by Jonathan Bonk. Lamin Sanneh and Michael McClymond prepared a handbook on world Christianity that covers much of the same territory.
24. David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
25. Emily J. Manktelow, *Missionary Families: Race, Gender and Generation on the Spiritual Frontier* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
26. Amy Stambach, *Faith in Schools: Religion, Education, and American Evangelicals in East Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
27. Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Missionary Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
28. Dujardin and Prudhomme, *Mission and Science*.
29. Gregory P. Leffel, *Faith Seeking Action: Mission, Social Movements, and the Church in Motion* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007).
30. Matthew Clarke, ed., *Mission and Development: God’s Work or Good Works?* (London: Continuum, 2011).
31. Omotayo O. Banjo and Kesha Morant Williams, eds., *Contemporary Christian Culture: Messages, Missions, and Dilemmas* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

32. See "7. Ecological Perspectives on Mission," Edinburgh 2010, accessed Dec. 6, 2018, <http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/transversal-topics/7-ecological-perspectives-in-mission.html>.
33. Daniel White Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).
34. Benjamin T. Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the Lens of Disability Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).
35. Michael Barram, *Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).
36. "Books," Business as Mission, accessed January 11, 2019, <http://businessasmission.com/library/books/>.
37. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 15–178. Notable studies that focus on the Bible and mission include works by Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, Lucien Legrand, Richard Bauckham, and a recent volume edited by Michael Goheen (*Reading the Bible Missionally*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).
38. Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12–15.
39. Clossey, *Salvation*, 6, 256–257.
40. Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 4–8.
41. Jonathan S. Walters, "Buddhist Missions," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, Mircea Eliade, and Charles J. Adams (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005); "Missions: Buddhist Missions," Encyclopdeia.com, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/missions-buddhist-missions>.
42. Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions: Indian Muslims and the Modern Resurgence of Global Islamic Activism* (London: Routledge, 2018), 17–49.
- p. 55 43. Robert L. Montgomery, *The Spread of Religions: A Social Scientific Theory Based on the Spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam* (Hackensack: Long Dash Publishing, 2007).
44. Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, 9–27.
45. Skreslet, *Comprehending*, 12.

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