
The origins of this collective work are to be found in the symposium held at the Kampen Theological University, now the Protestant Theological University, Kampen (Netherlands), on the occasion of the retirement of Pieter Holtrop as Professor of Missiology. The end of the academic career of this missiologist and mission historian coincided with a broader process of rethinking the meaning, purpose, definition and even the label of “mission studies” within some academic circles. Traditional mission studies were also to be discontinued at the Kampen University and replaced by “cross-cultural theology” studies. This was not the only such case in the Western world, where the term “mission” had often lost its intellectual attraction. One of the contributors to the volume (Werner Ustorf) recalls how, in 2003, the School of Mission at the Fuller Theological Seminary in California was renamed as the School for Intercultural Theology. More than that, he points out the word “mission” had become a risky label in one’s academic curriculum. The reasons relate to a quite complex set of key words delimiting contemporary intellectual horizons: plurality, multiform Christianity, contextualization, local perspectives, gender studies, decolonization, and quest for spirituality (rather than religious institution), distrust of institutions, etc. They all undermine the traditional Eurocentric understanding of mission as a one-way process of the expansion of Christianity in its Western shape.

The book is divided in four parts. The twelve articles are in one way or another concerned with the subject of “mission history”, a particular field of interest of retiring Pieter Holtrop (however, sometimes the focus is wider and embraces the whole of missiology). All authors formulate their reflections from the contemporary intellectual perspective of changing paradigms and terminological shifts. This leads me to indicate the first reason for which this book should be analyzed carefully. This is not only a collection of the articles limited by its outlook on one’s area of study and meaningful to a narrow circle of specialists. It is as much a reflection on the contemporary world and Christianity (from the Protestant point of view) which is “no longer a Western religion only” (quote from Volker Küster in the Introduction). The academic reality resulting from such an approach seems to be very much alive and at the service of humanity rather than an exercise in the intellectual self-satisfaction. Should something so obvious need to be underlined? It seems so, especially when several articles in the book report on recent challenges facing the century-long academic tradition of missiology. What would be the reason for discontinuing some respected methods of intellectual inquiries and approaches if not for the sake of life itself?

In his article Werner Ustorf (Birmingham) asks “What’s wrong with mission history?” He recalls the controversial nature of missiology from the very beginnings of this discipline. He focuses then on the flaws and achievements of the traditional approach to the history of mission calling for the “updating of the concept” of the mission history. What was called in an old-fashioned way “mission history” should now be more sensitive to the complexity of Christian experiences across the world, especially so since the established Churches in Western Europe face rapid decline. Such processes themselves not only call for but demand the establishment, in place of the outdated approach of mission history, of an approach characterized by “interculturally informed mission history”. The new narratives should take into consideration failures of what were understood in the past as missionary projects and thus should take into account not only the processes of expansion but also the contraction of Christianity. The author points out that, despite the title of the multi-volume History of Expansion of Christianity, K.S. Latourette was a rare example of an author who already in the past decades had met this standard of critical study of missionary endeavor.

The next author (Bert Hoedemaker, Groningen) brings the discussion one step forward. He is also aiming at the deconstruction of the old missiological notions as a result of the “decline of Western Christendom”. He sees in the contemporary world the process of “reordering of forces of
culture, religion and modernity on a global scale”. As a result, not only the word “missions” is no longer useful to describe anything, but even the word “culture”, with its apparently attractive contemporary use in the concept of “multiculturalism”, becomes obsolete. Culture is nothing more than “the symbolic construction of community”. It is constantly evolving around multiple elements responsible for the creation of a cultural identity and is undergoing a constant process of redefinition. The author asks several important questions about relations between culture, religion, rationality and modernity, pointing out at the impossibility of creating sharp boundaries between them, although they can sometimes form rather compact blocks aligned against one another (eg. rationality or modernity vs. religion). Because the picture of the contemporary world is so dynamic, the field of mission history cannot simply survive disguised as “intercultural history of Christianity”.

Since there are no cultures as separate units, one needs to look for a “third space”. This space is apparently situated between the old-fashioned Western approach and the contemporary unrealistic vision of interculturality. Missiology and mission history must begin with the analysis of the “human cultural predicament” and must aim at offering a meeting point between small-scale experiences and the all-encompassing vision of the whole of humanity.

Since it would be impossible to focus on each and every one of the articles in the book, the following sentences are intended to be just brief snapshots of one or two important ideas explored in their presentations by the remaining authors.

Philip L. Wickeri (Berkeley) returns to the discussion on secularization and plurality of religions and mission with a concise historical summary of the most important studies on secularity and religion since 1945 (giving particular emphasis to Charles Taylor’s study A Secular Age, published in 2007). He emphasizes that the challenges of secularization are not the same in every corner of the world and that this should be taken into consideration when one formulates any missiological assumptions. Mechteld Jansen (Utrecht) reflects on missiology as a “critical theological guidance for crossing borders”. The concept of “border” is analyzed from many points of view. It could assume a variety of meanings – a limit between two proprieties, the differences of language, culture, religion, faith etc. As a positive reality, the borders are “markers” (they help to shape one’s identity); as a negative phenomenon, they are “barriers” (they exclude the other). Peter Holtrop (Kampen) speaks about the tradition of the historical analysis of mission as burdened with a colonial legacy. The recent interdisciplinary developments helped to disclose new realities beyond the past Eurocentric narratives. However the author points out that the discussion is not over as there is no final explanation of the structures of power related to the past missionary experiences. They include relations between “colonial system, ideology, religion and church”. Interestingly he turns not to any historical analysis but to the Johan Coetzee’s novel Disgrace in order to emphasize his point of view. All his reflections call for a renewal of missiological studies which should no longer occupy the minds of researchers with questions of “pressing for conversions and the propagation of a message” any more than with the dreams of naive ecumenism, in fact impossible as far as the subtle forms of colonialism still persist.

The above-mentioned five papers are followed by three sections dedicated to more specific subjects. These sections bear the following titles: Contextual Perspectives (case studies of Gambia, Rwanda, African Christianity), Gender Perspectives (a general overview of the topic and a case study of Indonesia), Methodological Perspectives (case study of three Asian novels and a sample of Chinese folk art). The article on “gender perspectives in mission history” by Gunilla Gunner and Karin Sarja (Sweden) could be aligned with the above summarized general reflections on the condition and the future of missiological studies and mission history.

It would be extremely difficult to enter into discussion with such a variety of ideas, most of which are well grounded in the observation of the contemporary situation of Christianity, theology, missiology and mission history from the Protestant perspective in the context of the centennial of the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh (1910-2010). Rather than entering the discussion, I am tempted simply to add certain personal questions as a spontaneous reaction to this important and thought-provoking volume. Without contesting the need for multiform contextualization of
intellectual reflection both on theology and on the history of Christian missions, one is tempted to ask whether such effort is possible from within the Western sphere of thought? If in the past “Western” meant “Eurocentric and colonial”, will it be enough to change the second side of this equation into “pluralistic and post-colonial (or anti-colonial)” to avoid retaining the same “Western” approach as the equation’s first side? Such an approach would apparently only do more justice to “the other”, mainly on the level of the narrative. I agree however that even a development of narrative is worthy of the intellectual effort, especially when both researcher and his narrative are influenced by the experiences of life itself. But shifts on the level of narrative will hardly bring a radical change on the level of the concrete conditions of humanity. The complete liberation of humanity may be a utopia as proven by the fact (to which Peter Holtrop pointed) that the end of colonial era did not mean the end of colonialism! - Pawel Zając, OMI.