Introduction

A State of the Field

After a spell of studies in the 1960s and 1970s on missionaries, nationalism, and the emergence of local Christianities, the study of mission declined in the 1980s and became the purview of scholars of church history and missiology. This situation changed in the early 1990s, however, and the turning point can be said to have come with the publication by anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff of a two-volume opus, *Of Revelation and Revolution* in 1991 and 1997.¹

As noted by Derek Peterson in this issue, graduate students in the 1990s found that the Comaroffs’ volumes opened up fruitfully the pursuit of questions tied to the interaction between Christian missions and local culture, society, politics, and history. Not everyone agreed with the Comaroffs’ approach and their conclusions, but all concurred that this was the work to grapple with when entering the field of inquiry of missions and missionaries. As a result, *Of Revelation and Revolution* took the study of missions out of the specific reach of missiologists and church historians and, most vividly and innovatively, as well as with great theoretical sophistication, modelled how and why social scientists of all disciplines would find in the mission station a site of immense complexity, one full of what Cooper and Stoler called the “tensions of Empire.”²

The field of study on missions has grown significantly in the 1990s and 2000s. Many excellent monographs and edited volumes in all the social sciences have appeared on such aspects as empire and missions, gender,

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sciences, anthropology, health, maps, ideas, race, etc. In recent years, summative works have come under the pen of Andrew Porter, Jeffrey Cox, and Norman Etherington – see Etherington’s article in this issue. And at least one new collection of books has been launched at Eerdmans entitled “Studies in the History of Christian Missions”. Last but not least, new journals have emerged: our own of course, and the excellent francophone Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes, published by Karthala in Paris.

This special issue of Social Sciences and Missions asks, after two decades of academic growth, where we stand today and what is the state of the field? What has been the progress, quantitatively and qualitatively in the study of missions and missionaries, and what are the limitations, if not the failings, of the field? Where do we stand historiographically, and what are the theoretical evolutions and questions of the day – and are there things still missing?

To provide a state of the field in the social sciences on missions, we have organised this issue by asking two key scholars to reflect and share their views of the past as well as the future – Jean Comaroff (co-author of Of Revelation and Revolution) and Norman Etherington (author of Empire and Mission). Jean Comaroff delights by sketching key elements of her upbringing in South Africa, illuminating the intellectual genesis of Of Revelation and Revolution, and giving the reader an incisive commentary on the globalization and commodification of religion in the past decade. Norman Etherington, on his side, reflects and responds to the critiques which have been made against his edited Mission and Empire, a companion to the Oxford History of the British Empire and, just as importantly, he takes this opportunity to discuss the evolution of the field – past, present and future.

To accompany these two senior scholars, we have asked for contributions from a newer generation of scholars working on missions. Barbara Reeves-Ellington, a historian of the U.S., researches on American women missionaries in the Ottoman Empire. For this issue of SSM, Reeves-Ellington provides a historiographical assessment of twenty years of scholarship on American Protestant women missionaries in a global context, noting the ways that missions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries interacted with the complex dynamics of American global expansion – as seen particularly in the work of the women associated with those missions. The second is by Derek Peterson, a leading historian working on East Africa. His article offers a critical reflection on the impact of the Comaroffs’ work and proposes a new way to look at how Africans engaged with missions. Against the idea of an “encounter”,