Editorial

Practising the Social Sciences on a Religious Object: ssm at Twenty

ssm celebrates twenty years of existence this year and eight years with Brill. It has been twenty years of steady growth, and eight years of significant internationalisation and expansion. The journal has reached maturity, but the editorial team still expects to do more and better in the years to come. Below are some elements of where the journal comes from and what we hope to achieve in the future.

ssm was born in 1995 at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. It developed from being a small irregular publication on missionary topics, under the informal editorship of Professor Klauspeter Blaser and a group of theology and political science graduate students, to become a regular social sciences journal with an international editorial board in the 2000s and soon after to become a solidly established journal published by Brill in 2007.

At first the journal gathered a series of diverse scholars, from theology and the social sciences, who thought missionary topics were fascinating and their archives were unique, under-researched and in need of serious investigation. By the very nature of the topic, these scholars were interested in the international dimension of the subject – missionaries abroad (in Africa in particular) as well as their work and impact “at home” (in European societies).

The journal emerged during the “cultural turn”, when progressive scholars shifted from materialism to cultural Marxism; at a time when transnationalism gained ground as an approach, breaking with national divisions and topics; and when religion began to regain currency as a topic in the social sciences, under the impulse, in African studies, of scholars such as the Comaroffs, John Peel, Patrick Harries, Paul Landau, Derek Peterson, David Maxwell, and Dorothy Hodgson.

Many authors and members of the journal’s editorial team favoured the new cultural and transnational approaches. Tellingly the journal was originally entitled Le Fait Missionnaire (LFM), i.e. “the mission as an object of study”, a title very carefully chosen to distinguish the publication from classic missiological publications. With the help of mentors such as Jean-François Bayart and Patrick Harries, the editorial team laboured to make the journal a platform of new research and novel perspectives on the subject of missions and missionaries.
LFM did not reject “missionary history” or “mission studies”. On the contrary, it published quite a few articles doing classic histories of a mission station, of a missionary hospital or a missionary life. It also published several theological and missiological works. What LFM tried to do, at this stage, was to support the field at large while promoting articles which explored new areas and new approaches to the topic.

While LFM grew steadily in the 1990s, the journal made a qualitative jump around the year 2000. First the composition of the editorial team changed and the journal became increasingly a social sciences publication. In 2003 the journal changed its name to LFM. Social Sciences and Mission. Second the new editorial team transformed the occasional papers into a full academic journal, with a proper editorial board, and a double-blind peer-review system.

The move to the publisher Brill in 2007 led to an additional, and possibly final, qualitative jump. Aside from a further professionalisation of the journal and the reformulation of the journal’s title to Social Sciences and Missions (without LFM), the publisher and the editors agreed to increase the geographical coverage of the articles and broaden the geographical spread of the editorial board. Members from the United States, Latin America and soon Asia joined our team and several most stimulating special issues ensued on Latin America, China, and the Middle East.

The challenges for the journal today are three. First we need to keep the publication bilingual. Bilingualism is part of the journal’s identity – we firmly believe that it is important intellectually to communicate across cultures to develop richer ideas and approaches, if not theories. Besides this is how the journal started and it was accepted as such by Brill. Our difficulty is the “market” which pushes us towards the Anglophone world since this is where our sales grow fastest. But we want to keep ssm bilingual, so we will put in the extra effort to make this happen.

The statistics below show that the number of articles in English has grown exponentially in the last eight years. This has not only to do with our joining Brill and with the “market”, but also with the fact that both editors were based in Anglophone universities and the guest-editors of our special issues were in their majority Anglophone. The editorial team will need to be more attentive to these factors in the future. A measure we have also decided to take is to promote book reviews in English of books written in French and, conversely, book reviews in French of volumes written in English.

Our second challenge is to make ssm more encompassing. One issue is regional: we need to have more authors from, and more readership in Asia, Latin America, and certain European countries (such as Italy and Spain).