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Published online: 22 Mar 2022.

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Non-liberal Internationalism: The Field of International Mission Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the variegated ties established across national borders by non-state actors by offering an account of the field of international mission agencies. Noting agencies' specific goal to promote the gospel, we ask how mission agencies shape where missionaries go, whom they are trying to reach and what activities they engage in. Based on in-depth interviews with managers, we discuss the historical focus on the individual person or family as the unit through which ties are established, and analyse the broad set of practices, which are considered legitimate as part of mission work. To the extent that managers see themselves as engaged in rationalisation, rationalisation is understood as reform towards distinctively mission-related outcomes. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of considering the work of mission agencies for our understanding of the "international" and for the study of social change in global society.

Introduction

International Mission agencies provide services to individuals who want to serve God abroad through screening, training, placement, and ongoing support and supervision in the field. They have tight links to local churches, which may contribute to sending a missionary financially, on the one hand, and to receiving contexts on the other hand. But they are also oriented towards each other as mission agencies and are at the centre of a social field that includes training providers, think tanks, conferences and other gatherings, and journals, such as *Missiology*, *Journal of Asian Missions*, or the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

Most research specifically focused on international mission agencies has examined their historical role. Even though mission agencies today command a significant amount of resources and are an important player in many of the contexts that humanitarian and development NGOs also inhabit, they have only rarely featured in discussions of contemporary global civil society. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding

of the variegated ties established across national borders by non-state actors by offering an account of the field of mission agencies on their own terms.

With a range of interpretations and emphases, mission agencies aim, broadly speaking, to promote the Christian gospel. Noting this goal and noting the universalist ambition of Christianity, we research this field by asking how mission agencies shape where specifically missionaries go, whom they try to reach and which kind of activities they engage in. We draw on interviews with managers in agencies based in Germany, Finland, Peru, the Philippines, the UK and the US, and an analysis of reports and other published materials. How do managers in mission agencies know and see the world? What kind of information matters to them? How do they construe "candidates" (Zuckerman 1994) for a response and how do they decide between these candidates? What do they see as legitimate options for a missionary response and how do they choose between these options? What are shared practices among mission agencies? What are the differences among agencies?

In discussing our findings, we note the historical focus on the person as the unit through which ties are established, and we discuss missionaries' "repertoire of practice", the very broad set of practices, which are considered legitimate as part of mission work on the ground. This repertoire includes a significant overlap with the repertoire of humanitarian and development agencies, as well as church building, bible translation and ordinary professional activities in the tradition of "tent-making" mission work.

In view of the individual callings of applicants and their life-style preferences, some managers in mission agencies see themselves as agents in a process of rationalisation, trying to ensure a strategic orientation to their work. They are engaged with discussions of impact and measurement that are similar to discussions within other kinds of international NGOs. This type of rationalisation does not mean secularisation, however: rationalisation in mission agencies is reform towards distinctively mission-related goals and outcomes.

We suggest that the social sciences would benefit from taking seriously the kind of space shared by mission agencies and the kind of infrastructure and the kind of relationships – international but not liberal, multidirectional and globalist but inclusionary on its own terms, oriented towards the marginal but not formally democratic – enacted by mission practices and mission measurements in their analysis of the international and of social change in global societies.

Mission work in the literature on global civil society

Most research specifically focused on international mission agencies has examined their role in the past. Scholars have paid particular attention to missionaries' complex entanglement with projects of conquest and colonisation in the period up until the 1950s and 1960s (Bogner, Holtwick, and Tyrell 1998; Clossey 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Cox 2008; Petzke 2018).

In the conversation on contemporary international affairs, mission agencies are largely absent. The role of religion in international politics, in general, had been relatively neglected in the decades following the Second World War (Snyder 2011). This general neglect of religion changed in the late 1990s, partly occasioned by the resurgence of religious political movements in the wake of the end of the Cold War, highlighted by 9/11

(Mead 2006; Petito and Hatzopoulos 2003; Sandal and Fox 2013; Snyder 2011; Warner and Walker 2011). In response, scholars have challenged the equation of the international with the secular (see Hallward 2008; Hurd 2008) and asked how religion influenced foreign policy and international institutions (Hunter 2016) and NGOs (Carrette and Miall 2017).

Scholars have also drawn attention to the quasi-religious dimension in the motivations and cultural style of ostensibly secular movements and organisations and the diffuse and often unnoticed impact of Christianity on western secular organisations (Ager and Ager 2011; Moyn 2015; Paras and Stein 2012). In this conversation, metaphorical references to "missionaries" and "evangelical" are not uncommon. With some notable exceptions, which we build on below (Brickell 2012; Dittmer and Sturm 2010; Han 2010; 2018; Kim 2015; Ngô 2016; Williams 2016; Wuthnow 2009), this scholarly interest in religion in international affairs has not resulted in empirical research on mission agencies from outside the sector itself.

It should be noted that individual missionaries and mission agencies do feature in the literature on global civil society and NGOs. But this discussion is selective in the way in which it does or does not highlight missionaries as missionaries (Fountain 2015). Scholars have studied religious humanitarian NGOs (Ager and Ager 2011; Barnett and Stein 2012; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Curtis 2018; De Cordier 2009; King 2019; Thaut 2009), religious development organisations and religious organisations at the UN (Carrette and Miall 2017; Lehmann 2016). But when organisations which have a missionary dimension to their work are included under such headings they are often discussed with regard to their contribution or lack thereof to aims shared with secular actors. This is true to some extent even in contributions, which start from an in-depth examination of the practices of religious NGO in order to rethink the category of "development," for example (Bornstein 2003, 2006; Freeman 2012, Fountain 2015; Rui 2018). These contributions have tended not to study agencies, which see themselves primarily as mission agencies and have not focused on the space shared by international mission agencies.

Discussions of global civil society, defined e.g. by Mary Kaldor as a "platform inhabited by activists (or post-Marxists), NGOs and neoliberals, as well as national and religious groups, where they argue about, campaign for (or against), negotiate about, or lobby for the arrangements that shape global developments" (Kaldor 2003, 590), can include religious actors but tend to make them of scholarly interest mostly when they engage in debates with non-religious actors. As a result, these actors rarely feature in discussions with a focus of their explicit, overarching goal, which is, for Christian agencies, a version of promoting the gospel.

The field of international mission agencies

In focusing on mission agencies on a global level rather than on evangelical Christians as voters or activists, we build on work that highlights organisational aspect of religious life (Dererath et al. 1998; Petzke and Tyrell 2012; Tracey, Phillips, and Lounsbury 2014). Organisational practices and routines have been shown to shape social life relatively independently of individual or shared values (Becker 1982; Cohen, March, and Olsen

1972; Desmond 2007; Fishman 1978; Lynch 1985; Medvetz 2012; Molotch and Lester 1975; Scheffer 2010; Vaughan 1996).

Anthropological work has traced the practices of particular organisations at the intersection of faith and development in a range of settings (Bornstein 2001, 2003; Fountain 2015; Freeman 2012, 2019; Kim 2018; Ngô 2016). An ethnographic focus affords a unique depth of insight, following practices as they link different locales, and provides an analysis of the complex entanglements of faith and its others.

By contrast, our study focuses on the meso-level of a field of organisations, asking about the social space shared by mission agencies. Field theory offers a range of hypothesis about spaces constituted by actors who are oriented towards others, which they consider relevant as peers (Fligstein 2001; Dimaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977) and with whom they share an interest in field-specific stakes (Bourdieu 1996). We expect that members of a field share some taken-for-granted assumptions. We expect that organisations share a "repertoire" of practices, which are considered plausible and recognisable in spite of their differences (Lamont 1992; 1995; Silber 2003; Swidler 1986; 2001). We are also interested in differences among organisations, which in field-theoretical terms are thought to be at least partly shaped by relationships among actors in a shared space (Bourdieu 1996).

We argue that the aim of making the word of Christ available - however, defined and operationalised, is at the centre of a global social field centred on mission agencies, who see each other as relevant peers. This claim can be clarified by contrasting this social space to the space of humanitarian relief agencies. In previous work on humanitarian relief NGOs, one of us has argued that the distinction between secular and religious organisations is a distinction drawn mostly by secular organisations (Krause 2014; see also Fountain 2015; Ager and Ager 2011). Among actors who identify primarily as humanitarian actors, the unique goals and aspirations of mission work appear as potential sources of external influence or "pollution" that might distract from purely humanitarian values, in the same way as political aspirations (be they left or right, donor-driven or movement-oriented). Organisations that are not explicitly aligned with organised religion often suspect religious organisations of using humanitarian work as a front for missionary activities. Many humanitarian NGOs with an explicit religious identification are ready to defend against this suspicion in order to be able to lay claim to legitimacy as professional humanitarian actors.

In this context, we note that the symbolic order centred on humanitarian values co-exists with a symbolic order centred on mission work. In this parallel world, there is an explicit focus on the highest value of sharing the word of Christ. There are symbolic differences among mission agencies – some are evangelical, a few are ecumenical, some are more aligned with mainstream Protestant churches, others less so (see Moore 2018), some are conservative, some progressive, some adapt to local cultural styles, others less so (Cavalcanti 2005), some emphasise proclamation, i.e. church building, and some demonstration. Yet even those actors embracing demonstration, namely the demonstration of Jesus' values through serving people in what could be described as humanitarian ways, would guard against the tendency of betraying the highest vales of mission work by doing "only" humanitarian work. It should be noted that a rejection of "proselytization" as the forceful conversion of others is widely shared among these actors, a rejection that also allows some organisations to be active in institutionally funded development aid and humanitarianism and in mission work at the same time.

Data and methods

Mission agencies aim, broadly speaking, to make the word of Christ available. Noting the range of possible interpretations and the universalist ambitions of mission agencies, we ask how mission agencies shape where missionaries go, whom they are trying to reach and which kind of activities they engage in. In order to answer this research question, we conducted in-depth interviews with middle managers about their work. Our respondents ($n = 40$) were responsible for a specific geographical or thematic area.

We stand in a particular tradition of interviewing experts, influenced by the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Gläser and Laudel 2010; Pfadenhauer 2009). In this tradition,

> the expert is not interviewed to give information about a subject area that he or she is knowledgeable about as an observer; rather his or her practical knowledge of organizational processes he or she is involved in is the target of the investigation. (Krause 2019, 171–172)

The interviews are targeting knowledge that has consequences in the world, trying to understand how the routines and practices of experienced professionals shape the allocation of resources. We tried to speak to "middle managers" rather than the most senior leaders in these organisations, because they hold the most detailed knowledge of practical work in the organisation (see Littig 2009, 103).

The interviewing process in this tradition is designed also to verify that the examined community of experts does indeed share common frames of reference. In addition aims to explore the boundaries of that community. The research design, research concerns and questions made sense to respondents in evangelical mission agencies, who were not surprised to be approached as pursuing missionary aims and facing the issue of allocating scarce resources on a global scale.[1]

We have to expect our respondents to be selective in the observations they share with us. But our interpretation does not place as much weight on the factual correctness of specific claims as is common in work using survey-style interviews about income or attitudes, for example (for a critique, see Jerolmack and Khan 2014). We are asking respondents for stories about concrete instances of their everyday work life, targeting frames of reference, which should remain intact even as respondents omit details, which they worry might be damaging to them or their organisations.

We draw on the evidence provided by our interviews in conjunction with evidence provided by published accounts from agencies and individuals. In selecting organisations, we are seeking to include large and prominent organisations and organisations that are different in terms of country of origin, denomination, size, organisational age and activities. Respondents work for organisations including Allnations, Asian School of Development and Cross-Cultural Studies, BMS World Mission, Church Mission Society, Crosslinks, Council for World Mission, DMB, ECM, Frontier Ventures, Greater Europe Mission, Interserve, Latin Link, Missio Nexus, National Bible Societies, OM (Operation Mobilisation), OMF International, MECO, Pioneers, SIM (Serving in Mission), SIL International, TEAM, and Wycliffe and were based in Germany, Finland, Peru, the Philippines, Peru, the UK and the US. We have also conducted

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[1]This was not the case, for example, for respondents working with what we thought were some of the most mission-oriented arms of the Catholic Church as we discovered early on in the study.

interviews among Catholic mission agencies ($n = 9$), but these are not included in the current analysis.

Respondents come from a variety of backgrounds, as do missionaries themselves. The range of backgrounds stands in contrast to the backgrounds of managers in other NGOs, who have increasingly professionalised in their own right, drawing on sector-specific qualifications (Clark and Wacheke 2009; Mosse 2011; Roth 2015). Rooted in an aspect of private life, mission work allows people from a range of professional backgrounds to engage in international work.

Mission agencies' repertoire of practice

Mission work has historically been organised around the missionary or missionary family as a unit that is sent from one place to another. As one respondent put it: "As an organisation we are certainly very person-oriented. That means we primarily have envoys ('Entsandte'), who work in these countries in a broad variety of activities." Another respondent explained, "Our history was, we were a people-sending agency [….]. We've used an expression, 'With people as our primary agents of change'."

People can be sent on short-trips (see Adler and Ruiz 2018) or longer engagements. The focus on people as the unit of distribution co-exists with the project work that is the mainstay of development work and humanitarian relief (Krause 2014). As one respondent explains it: "We also have what we call projects … projects are then certain, relatively narrowly defined activities which are to be done within a specific time-frame." Projects are separate from the job description of a specific person.

The activities that individuals engage in as part of mission work and that projects are composed of having a very large range. They include mission-specific activities such as church planting in a range of liturgical and organisational styles, and bible translations. They also include the full range of activities covered by international and domestic social service providers.

Missionaries provide healthcare by building hospitals and by delivering immunisations, maternal health interventions and palliative care. Missionaries provide education by building schools, teaching in schools, running after-school clubs, holiday programmes, or programming in children's homes. Missionaries are also engaged in adult education, training people to repair computers or provide IT training to others, for example. Missionaries provide legal aid, clean water, and disaster relief. They do this themselves or with local partners.

In principle, any activity can be part of a missionary project. Some missionaries carry out "business as mission", communicating Christian ideas through the example they set (see Steffen and Barnett 2016). One respondent, for example, described a couple who,

> went to a very difficult city […] They are running a business now, […] teaching people to sew, run a business, to manage one, all of that and in the process of that they are having conversations about who Jesus is. They are able to pray for people about specific things.

The combination of a life devoted to missionary activity and a range of "day jobs" is often traced to St Paul, who is said to have supported himself by making tents. For some of our respondents, this is a programmatic statement. As one respondent explained to us:

"Consistent Christian life expresses itself, or asserts itself, also by just engaging in regular professional activities" (see also Malone 2013).

The idea of "tent-making" also allows missionaries to circumvent restrictions on Christian missionary activity in some contexts. Missionaries working in Muslim countries with restrictions on Christian missionary activities, for example, aim to meet local people in and through setting up small businesses. The notion of tent-making allows missionaries to follow common visa-routes for work migration and add a spiritual dimension to their journey (see also Kim 2015).

Individual calling and organisational rationalisation

Mission agencies work with missionaries and missionary families, who have their own preferences for where they wish to go and sometimes add a missionary dimension to an existing plan for migration or travel. Some managers in mission agencies described themselves as reformers, working towards a more strategic approach to mission activity. As one respondent explained:

> But – and sometimes our people come through the door here, and say, "Lara, I want to go and work in – " the Caribbean, usually, that's the place people tend to feel a call to. So, we say, "We won't work there." Not just because we like people to work from grim places, but the Church is relatively strong, the economies are stronger there."

Another said:

> There has been a shift, I would suggest in the last, say, 20 years, where we are saying much more, not just – where we still see people as the vehicle that is used in bringing about transformation, but we look much more at the context that we're going to now, and say, "What is the change, what is the outcome that we would like to see in this setting?" And then we look backwards, and then say, "And what inputs would enable that to happen?" So, we will have much more, now, strategic roles that we recruit people for, rather than, here's Charlie who's come through the door, let's find something for Charlie to do with her skills, that could be very random. But we'd say, "Actually, what we need is lawyers to work in sub-Saharan Africa".

Accounts of decisions among respondents accord an important place to individual and joint prayers, to processes where individuals can discover their calling. Yet, as we shall discuss in the following sections, we can observe logics of rationalisation that insert themselves into the dialogue between missionaries and God (Luhrmann 2012; Winchester and Guhin 2019). As mission work has a long history, rationalisation also operates on previous decisions made by mission agencies themselves.

The histories of strategy in mission work

Contemporary evangelicals have a range of international engagements discussed in scholarship (Amstutz 2013; Bouwman 2018; den Dulk 2006; 2007; Galli 2006; Green and Viane 2012; Guth 2016; Hastings 2003; Hoover 2009; Joustra 2019; McAlister 2019; Miller and Yamamori 2007; Rowe 2019; Thompson 2015). Missionary work itself is said to have received important impetus by the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lausanne during which attendees were urged to think more strategically about how they pursue their specific goals.

The Presbyterian minister and anthropologist, Ralph Winter distinguished between different phases of evangelisation. In this account, missionaries first focused on coasts, then they focused on the interior. The problem with both of these strategies, according to Winter, was that they started from existing contacts. For maximum impact, missionaries needed to focus on "unreached people groups" and think strategically about where to find them (Steffen 2011).

Quantification and mapping have a long association with missionary organisations (Brickell 2012; Bridges 2008; Petzke 2018). With an explicit turn to strategy since Lausanne, demographic and statistical efforts have played an increasingly influential role. The pastor Luis Bush coined the term, "10/40 Window" in the late 1980s (Han 2010). The term refers to the geographical region between 10–40 degrees latitude, which suffers from "the greatest degrees of poverty, illiteracy, disease and suffering", and the "least exposure to Christianity" (Johnstone, Hanna, and Smith 1996). According to the Joshua Project, a mapping and information gathering project to serve mission work, the 10/40 window is home to the majority of the world's unevangelised countries, the top 50 least evangelised megacities, the majority of the world's poor, and the "majority of the followers of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well as the Non-Religious block" (Joshua Project n.d.).

Another way of mapping the world for missionary activity, developed by the authors of the World Christian Encyclopaedia, distinguishes between world A ("living in an area of the world that is less than half evangelised"), world B ("over 50 percent evangelised but less than 60 percent Christian") and world C ("areas that are over 95 percent evangelised, with over 60 percent of the population being Christian") (Han 2010, 195). According to these metrics, Catholics and other non-evangelical Christian groups count as not evangelised.

Making a difference

When considering where to go and what to do, agencies engaged in rationalisation consider where they as an individual organisation can "make a difference". As one respondent said,

> It sometimes also has to do a bit with strategic considerations, that is: where are areas where we can make a difference, where there are not already other organisations, where there are people who can't know about the Christian message.

The 10/40 window is defined in geographic terms, with reference to degrees of latitude. As Han notes, the idea of "unreached people groups" refers to ethnic, not political groupings (Han 2010). Indeed, in his presentation at Lausanne, Winter explicitly criticised missionaries for being too oriented by political boundaries.

National boundaries are thus not at the centre of these mapping exercises, nor are they an important category of faith, but they do play an important role in structuring the work of mission agencies. Operational leadership teams of international mission agencies comprise roles defined by functional expertise – for finance, personnel and strategy, say – and officers with regional operational responsibility. One respondent told us, "My area is Europe, and western Africa. Besides me, there are three other people who have

geographic responsibility. The two Americas belong together geographically; [there is] Asia-Pacific, and southern and eastern Africa."

Agencies make decisions about which countries they are operating in. Considering the mantra to focus on the least evangelised and most marginalised, where the Church is least present and where people are poorest, a country could qualify in either one of the two categories. One respondent explained:

> So, like, Afghanistan, for example; very negligible expression of Christian community there, and also people experiencing abject poverty. So, we would say that that calls us doubly. But there would be a country like France, where people are hardly poor – in general terms, you know, that's not to say there's no poverty there- … But if you were to have an index, it would be way up the top of that. But actually, there would be a very small expression of a vibrant church in that setting, we would say. Whereas, on the other end, in sub-Saharan Africa, looking at my map here- … Uganda … statistically the Church is very strong, but actually, people live in significant poverty, and so we would say that would call us to go there. So, we work not just where people are least evangelised and most marginalised, but some places where people are not marginalised, but they're very lacking in terms of expression of vibrant church. And equally on the other end, where, so, people are – the Church may be strong, so they're very evangelised, but actually they're very marginalised. And so, we literally plot a graph with those two axes on there.

National boundaries also shape the way possible destinations are considered, as in the following example. One respondent explained:

> But in India, you know, you get – I suppose if you take statistics ruling you completely, you would end up working in, say, Mali, where there is actually a very small population. Whereas there are more people living in India than in the whole of Africa. So, you've got to look at population size.

Here, work in India is valued more highly because of how many people live there, when presumably the agency would be working with a similar number of people.

Respondents discuss that some places are easier to work in than others. One respondent explained that the criteria of marginalisation and lack of evangelisation can be in tension with other factors:

> Having said that, to work where those graphs intersect will take us into Afghanistan and Chad, where we work at present. These are the hardest places in the world in which to work, physically and security-wise […]. So, the partner we work with in Afghanistan will have had two people shot dead last year, ten people two years before that. We've had one person die there. [… .] So, it's easier for us to work in Nepal, which isn't quite – I mean, it's still a very poor country. Our largest team today is in Nepal. […] So while that [poverty, lack of evangelization] dictates where we work […] we apply some degree of pragmatic realism to it, and say, we could not send everyone to work in Chad, Mali, Niger, those countries.

Countries are a unit for reflecting on and reviewing current practice. Like aid agencies, some mission agencies do not want to have too many or too few focus countries:

> So there is a relational side, but also that's run alongside, I suppose, a rationale. But we are trying to rationalise our work, because I think we have spread – we talked about working in 35 countries. In 1950, we worked in three countries: China, India, and Congo. And we almost celebrated our diversity to a wrong extreme, I think. … We're now looking at working in about 20 countries in the next 12 months, so pulling back from places, saying, "Let's not spread ourselves so thinly, we end up doing lots of things not so well".

Where agencies are working now is to a significant extent path-dependent, shaped by historical ties between agencies and places. One respondent told us: "Our work started in western Africa, so the whole organisation started in Africa, in Nigeria … and I would say the main reason that it spread into neighbouring countries, this usually has to do with relationships." Another thought their agency, "had a unique capacity to bring people together in India because of historical ties."

Countries are also a unit of retreat and for shifts in attention, as in the following account:

> If you came to [Name of Organization] 20 years ago- … our biggest team would have been in Brazil, in South America. But now, we would say, "Actually, the Church is very strong in South America, and the economies are growing." … And so, we would say – so, we have gradually been, therefore, pulling back from Brazil, and at Christmas, our last people left Brazil. So, in 20 years, we've gone from our largest team to no team.

The organisation also moved out of South Africa and shifted from Uganda into Mozambique: "So we have a bigger team in Mozambique, now, which will be a poorer country."

Agencies can and do rationalise their geographical engagements; they also rationalise the activities they engage in. One respondent said, "we're looking at rationalising, pulling our work in geographically, but also in terms of saying, 'We do this well, but don't ask us to do, I don't know, some other form of work that really isn't our speciality.'" Another respondent said:

> We have this broad portfolio of work people talk about. … . So, we've got to be able to respond in some meaningful way to all sorts, to a whole range of things. So, we have this breadth of work, which is exciting and great; but it's actually a weakness as well, because we end up doing – the danger is we end up doing lots of things not so well, rather than a few things well. So, we are also trying to say, "Are there a few things that we can do well?"

Measurements and results

Managers in mission agencies are to some extent engaging with questions about results and measurement. Results-based management has provided a language of reform in organisations, since at least the time of Robert McNamara in the US Department of Defence (Krause 2014; Chwastiak 2001). Results-based management encourages a shift from inputs to outputs. In the case of mission agencies, this means a shift away from people as the primary input. Some managers feel under pressure from the board to name results. Other managers lead their boards in this direction. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> We're not good at articulating [success], because I think, if I look – when I go to the trustees, the key performance indicators that I have to report against currently, at our board, are the number of people we send, and the number of people we support overseas. […] So, it's very easy for me to say, "I'll send 125 people overseas." They could be doing totally irrelevant stuff. … Particularly when we talk about the least evangelized. It's easier to define success if we go to our hospitals or development work, where you can say, how many people treated, how many banana trees planted. But I would personally be far happier if I could say, not just what the people [are], the number who have gone, but what is the change that has been effected by their being there?

The outcomes considered range widely; they include bible translation, as in the following account given to us:

> We also have been able to complete bible translations. This is an important success, when we see that people have a sense of self-esteem, that they have a book in their own language, this is often a big event, that people celebrate in their group.

Churches are also counted. As one respondent told us, "So, in India, for example, the […] Church of West Bengal has probably got about 100 […] churches in 200 years. Our big church planting partner there has [added] 12–14,000 churches in the last 12 years."

There is a hesitation about the limits of quantitative measurements, which is also present in some other fields. Like professionals in human rights work and development work, our respondents explore the use of stories to counter a demand for numbers. Reservations are also expressed in terms specific within mission agencies:

> I mean, I think, again, some people have criticised Christianity in Africa, saying it's a mile wide and an inch deep. […] So, I wouldn't want to be simplistic and say it's just about the number of people who sign up and say, "I'm a Christian." But it's – you've got to say, "Well, what depth does it go to", and that becomes more complex, I suppose.

As another respondent shared:

> Yes, it is always a question, what do you call a result? Of course, it is the case that we are happy when churches grow, when lives are changed. And we value qualitative growth and quantitative growth equally. To put it differently: when churches are very big and people are lying to each other, we don't like it.

Conclusion

We have examined the work of contemporary mission agencies, starting from their stated aims. When responding to the world, missionaries draw on a repertoire of practices that has a very broad range. It includes mission-specific activities such as church planting and bible translations. It also includes the full range of activities covered by international and domestic social service providers and, in principle, all types of business activities.

We have discussed the symbolic space that provides the context for these practices as missionary activities, a space that is structured around differences in emphasis as to how the purity of evangelical faith can best be expressed; some actors prioritise the proclamation of faith in a way that is adapted to local institutional and legal contexts, others its demonstration through a range of practical activities: Often a practice is part of the field of organised missionary activity and other fields simultaneously, such as when a mission agency places volunteers in a hospital funded by a development donor, or when a nurse or a migrant business person link their trajectory of migration with a missionary purpose.

Some managers in mission agencies describe themselves as engaged in a project of rationalisation. This rationalisation is not the same as secularisation: Mission maps of the world uniquely work with data on evangelisation as well as marginalisation. Mission agencies are engaging with discussions about impact and measurement but retain distinctive measures, such as the number of new congregations or the number of bible translations completed.

In conclusion, we take this account of the social world of mission agencies as a starting point for re-examining the assumptions of the literature on international global civil society. We also discuss implications of our empirical account of the field of mission agencies for the analysis of social change in a transnational context.

Some mission agencies are also engaged in the field of development, but mission agencies form a space of their own. A juxtaposition of the field of mission agencies and the discussion on global civil society highlights that despite the critiques of the equation of the international with the secular, religious actors have been included on selective terms.

Mission agencies are international non-governmental actors. Indeed, the professionals and volunteers associated with them are internationalist, an orientation, which they vocally advocate for also inside their respective evangelical communities, which are often as concerned with a range of more local engagements. Yet, they have not been included in the discussion on international non-state actors with a view to their explicit aims and the social space they share.

Scholars have largely discussed international non-state, not-for-profit actors in the context of liberal hopes rooted in formal participation in public debate based on a thin consensus and on provision that is assumed to end up being spiritually neutral. This equation of the international with the liberal has shaped research questions and case selection in the literature also in the critical literature, when it was argued that NGOs did not deliver on liberal ideals, or showed a dark side of liberalism. This equation of the international with the liberal is also found in the literature on evangelicals themselves, for example, when scholars ask whether evangelicals are "internationalist" or "populist" (Hoover 2019).

Mission agencies' practices and measurements enact an infrastructure that is international, multidirectional and globalist but inclusionary on its own, much stronger terms, oriented towards the marginalised but not formally democratic.

Missionary practices create and enact particular kinds of transnational ties, which should be considered in future research in international political sociology and in conversation about global social change.

Considering mission agencies as a group of actors in transnational politics highlights the need to ask open questions about the changes they bring about. Mission agencies engage in their own research on change by measuring outcomes, and it is clear that their work does have effects. These might not be captured by inherited scholarly notions of "social change," which have tended to inquire about change as "yes", or "no" questions in terms of the changes that liberal, secular observers like to see.

The role of the infrastructure established by mission agencies should be considered on a meso-level and in all places that are sites of mission activity. This includes Europe and North America, which is the target of significant mission activity both by actors from within Europe and North America, and by actors from Asia, Africa and Latin America (Adogame 2013; Adogame and Shankar 2012; Cato 2013; Freston 2010; Kim 2011; Offutt 2015; Udotong 2010). The work of the latter is also partly facilitated by mission agencies, which link a range of migrants' projects to the propagation of faith (Han 2018).

The role of mission organisations should be considered in particular for our understanding of those places that mission strategists value most highly, which are highlighted by our analysis. This includes majority Muslim or Hindu countries, countries associated

with the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe and Asia and particular groups considered linguistically and geographically remote from the perspective of evangelical Christians.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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