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Paper proposal for the 15th Assembly of IAMS in Sydney

“Accounting for Missionary Initiative and Indigenous Agency in the History of Modern Missions”

I propose to focus on the historiography of modern-era Christian missions. A long-standing master narrative of mission history puts foreign missionaries and their sending bodies in the lead. They are the post-Enlightenment knowing subjects who evangelize religious others after critically evaluating their faith commitments and social circumstances. A second set of stories about modern missions diminishes the importance of foreign actors, while emphasizing the agency of non-Westerners, who participate in and subtly direct the complex processes of evangelization. In this master narrative, the concept of contextualization looms large, bolstered by Sanneh’s notion of translation. Most recently, mission history has been subordinated to one of its outcomes, the emergence of World Christianity. Methodologically, it has become nearly impossible to do justice to all three of these master narratives of mission history, leading to a situation in which researchers tend to be guided by personal preferences based on their social location.

An alternative approach to be sketched out here borrows from speech-act theory, in order to balance concern for missionary initiative and indigenous agency. A key insight from speech-act theory points to the difference between what a speaker might intend to communicate and what actually results from what is said or actions taken. Speech-act theorists also expect multiple publics to interpret the meaning of consequential actions and locutions. In a preliminary way, I will consider the relevance of this approach to our analysis of evangelizing motives and performances of mission in which many different actors participate and interpret what has taken place.

This paper is potentially related to the work of DABOH.