Thinking Missiologically About the History of Mission

Stanley H. Skreslet

Is there a missiological approach to the history of mission? Prompting this question is the fact that the history of mission is no longer the special preserve of those who support and participate in missionary activities. Now a growing legion of scholars is being drawn to the study of mission history, among whom we find specialists in politics and economics, Marxists, feminists, historical anthropologists and other kinds of social historians, and Americans as well as researchers focused on non-Western societies, not to mention religious historians of every stripe who make it their business to study the world’s burgeoning collection of faith communities and traditions. All these and more have found in the history of Christian mission a virtually inexhaustible supply of data with which to fuel their various research projects. Missiologists who study the history of mission share many overlapping concerns with these other scholars, not the least of which is the requirement to practice good historical technique. Some common aims likewise drive much historical work on missions today, and missiologists may find themselves working alongside other scholars who are also seeking to understand the dynamics of cultural and religious change, the emergence and diffusion of modern ideas, the art of apologetics, and the conduct of interfaith dialogue, plus the nature of the church and its place in the world. Mutual interests are thus a part of what needs to be discussed in connection with the question posed above. But this essay also goes on to address the more difficult issue of particularity: do missiological investigations add anything distinctive to these other scholarly efforts?

Common Concerns

With respect to methods, missiologists have no special set of procedures to apply to the problems of history. They must follow the same rules of evidence that pertain to everyone else who studies the history of mission or indeed any other kind of history. If widely recognized scholarly standards of verification in history are ignored, then accuracy suffers, and what purported to be description or analysis slides instead into the category of mere speculation about the past. Therefore missiologists, like other historians, must be concerned about what (if anything) constitutes an objective fact, about how material evidence can be used to buttress or disprove the claims of texts, about the problems of agency and causation in history, plus the need to differentiate between perceptions of an event and the historical event itself.

No scholar has all the evidence that he or she would like for solving the conundrums of mission history. The data are always fragmentary. The memories we have are faulty and sometimes contradictory. The archives are not only incomplete but skewed. On the matter of archives, missiologists working today who specialize in the history of mission are challenged as scholars by the fact that foreign missionaries dominate the accumulated reserve of texts at our disposal. The documents so avidly produced by missionaries and their sending agencies in the past can assume an inordinate degree of authority for us today simply because they often are the only written sources for this history we now possess. This imbalance in the record is a serious methodological problem to be negotiated and overcome, which explains why investigators of every kind (including missiologists) are eager to recover lost voices and to retrieve the contributions of lesser-known actors in the history of mission. Material evidence of indigenous missionary activity, oral history, and other forms of nonliterary self-representation are among the means available to scholars to recover more of what may otherwise be missing from what we know of the history of mission. Filling in the gaps is not the whole story, however. Equally important is the fact that such techniques can enable the living legacies of earlier missionary efforts, the new communities of faith that came into being as a result of Christian mission, to participate more directly in the writing of what is their history too.

Another area where the requirements of competent historical practice are bound to apply equally to missiologists and their counterparts in related fields concerns the way in which the environment of mission is studied. More and more, missiologists are striving to assemble “thick” descriptions of interfaith encounter and Christian witness, rather than simply transcribing stories of heroic missionary action. As Karl Marx famously put it, individuals may make their own history, but they must do so in circumstances not of their own choosing. This point means taking into account large-scale social patterns of which the missionaries themselves may have been only vaguely aware. It means asking about the ways in which factors like geography, economics, organizational theory, and politics not only influenced missionary choices but also perhaps shaped evangelistic outcomes. It means seeking to understand how missionaries could have been unwitting agents of far-reaching but sometimes subtle changes in cultures not their own by reason of birth. Missiologists as a group continue to resist the urge to explain mission exclusively in secular terms (more on this below), but they are more likely than ever before to pay heed to what the eminent Egyptologist Jan Assmann has called the hidden face of history: “History has two faces, one turned toward us, the other averted. The face turned toward us is the sum total of event and remembrance. It is history recalled by those involved in it, as shapers or witnesses, doers or sufferers. The hidden face of history is not what we have forgotten, but what we have never remembered, those products of imperceptible change, extended duration, and infinitesimal progression that go unnoticed by living contemporaries and only reveal themselves to the analytic gaze of the historian.”

Distance and Perspective

At first glance, missiologists do seem to face at least one special problem of interpretation when functioning as historians of mission. Many more of them, I suspect, will have previous or current missionary service in their résumés than is true for the rest of the history profession. Is this a disability, a reason to discount the scholarly output offered by missiologists who study the history of mission? I would argue that we have here a slightly different

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permutation of a persistent scholarly dilemma. Historians have long argued over whether participants or more detached observers are better placed to write accounts of the past. Participants have the advantage of direct personal experience, which could be a means to access otherwise poorly documented aspects of the events in question or to gain a “feel” for the time and situation one is attempting to describe. But detachment can serve a purpose too, especially if it enables researchers to avoid telling their stories in ways that inflate their own importance.

The larger question at issue here concerns the different ways scholars more generally relate to their subjects. Missiologists are by no means the only ones obliged to examine their motives for writing history. Biases and partisan concerns threaten to intrude every historical questions are posed and answered, since no researcher can begin to work without them. In this respect, sound practice in missiology closely resembles the habits of good history. Confessional commitments must be scrutinized, to be sure, but so must all other forms of personal, institutional, or ideological loyalty. Complete objectivity is certainly beyond our grasp, but a measure of transparency regarding intentions and interests can be achieved. Only so may our historical work hope to earn any degree of lasting respect from present and future generations.

A final common expectation that missiologists necessarily share with other students of mission history concerns the written results of their research. As Robert Frykenberg has demonstrated so well, the discipline of history is exceedingly complex. The science of history not only has a distinctive methodology and largely agreed-upon rules with which to evaluate evidence, but it also is practiced as a form of philosophy insofar as it prompts deliberation over questions of language, perception, human experience, and the nature of social change over time. In addition, history is an art. That is to say, it has a creative element, which leaps to the fore as soon as it becomes time to present to the public or to the profession what one has learned about the past.

In this latter respect, we may mention three requirements of good historiography. First, one’s written account must be coherent, in the sense that a logical interpretive argument is constructed on the basis of plausible data supported by reputable sources of authority. Second, it should be persuasive, which means putting forward a case that is not just credible but that can move readers to agree with the author’s conclusions, even when alternative explanations are given a fair hearing in the presentation. Perhaps the most daunting test of history’s contemporary narratives is posed by the question of significance. At the end of the day will anybody care? Probably not, if the product of one’s labors is presented in dull, uninteresting discourse. Missiologists, no less than any other historian of mission, would do well to reach for prose that sings if they would hope to create and hold an audience for their work.

What Thinking Missiologically Does Not Mean

Before considering what might constitute a missiological perspective on the history of mission, it could be helpful to clarify briefly what I believe is not implied in this way of looking at things. As suggested above, the goal of mission history is not to celebrate missionary heroes. I say this knowing full well that the record is replete with examples of extraordinary dedication and cultural sensitivity, faithfulness, and creativity on the part of Christian missionaries in a variety of very difficult circumstances through the ages. My point is that mission history as a part of the discipline of missiology cannot be fully realized as a form of devotional literature focused on the figure of the missionary. Nor should it be reduced to a kind of cheerleading for “our side” in the global competition of religions.

The reasons for caution here are essentially two. The first, already noted, is that individual missionaries always operate in specific social contexts, and so the circumstances within which they act must be considered in order to appreciate the totality of their effects on others and their surroundings. A too-narrow focus on the person of the missionary may obscure the importance of crucial situational factors. Second, honest missiologists will readily admit that the historical record is full not only of courageous triumphs and self-sacrifice but also of faults, miscalculations, and transgressions—by more than one kind of ethnocentrism and by every manner of unfaithful self-interest. If mission history is made to serve an apologetic purpose, its integrity as a science is undoubtedly put at risk. Put more positively, a mature field of study will reward the investigation of both success and failure, because each of these aspects of missionary experience can shed light on the deepest questions of meaning that mission history inevitably raises. It follows that missiology is not primarily about producing “insider” histories for the purpose of stimulating enthusiasm for contemporary missionary challenges. Nor should practical considerations (e.g., a desire to know “what works” in mission) be allowed to dictate how missiologists approach the history of mission.

Another limitation to be avoided is the misconception that mission history is an unvarying story of missionary initiative followed by indigenous response. Such an assumption—that foreign missionaries acted, but natives could only react—grounded much historical writing on the modern Protestant missionary movement until quite recently, which led to no end of West-centric treatments of mission history. A missiological perspective on the history of mission must be broader. The movements and decisions of expatriate actors are certainly part of what we want to know, especially at the beginning of any new effort to preach Christ where that name is virtually unknown. But no missionary endeavor can be sustained unless indigenous enterprise asserts itself as more than just a reaction to what other, more fully self-aware subjects are doing. As a rule, the earlier a community moves beyond foreign control, the more successful and deeply rooted any new expression of Christian faith is likely to become. Missiologists are accustomed to see in this moment of transition an indispensable act of faith appropriation, on a par with every other attempt to claim the story of God in Jesus as a community’s own, reaching all the way back to the first generation of Gentile Christians.

A missiological reading of mission history also must resist the temptation to affect an omniscient point of view with respect to the processes of world evangelization. In other words, missiologists must admit their inability to attain a God’s-eye perspective on the history of mission. Methodologically, this constraint means

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giving up the use of providential frameworks for interpreting the past, which is not always an easy thing to do, especially if one affirms a biblical mandate for Christian mission and believes, as I do, that the church properly responds to the nature of God’s Word, which wants to be known, by giving forthright witness to its truth in the world. The danger here lies not in having such convictions but in letting them overrule the demands of sound historiographical practice by subordinating one’s account of mission history to a theological point of view. What Andrew Walls has to say about church history applies equally well to missiologists who might hope to write the history of mission: “The church historian cannot present bad history under the plea that it is good theology.”

As Paul Kollman has noted in his just-published dissertation on slave evangelization in East Africa, it is also possible to subject the writing of mission history to a telos that does not claim a divine origin for itself. His example is the postcolonial nation-state in Africa and how, in particular cases, scholars of African Christianity have cast their stories of mission primarily in terms of whether the foreign missionaries involved either helped or hindered the new national entity to come into being. Or the secular end in view could be a conjectured phase of higher development in the history of humankind, such as a post-Christian future for hyperindustrialized societies in the West. In any event, whether religious or secular, it is quite possible for an ideological criterion to undermine the quality of scholarly judgments, especially if ideology is allowed to govern the selection of evidence or in some other way constrict the interpretive freedom of the mission historian. Good missiological technique with respect to mission history will not allow a hoped-for outcome to dominate historical method by guiding the research process to a premature conclusion.

The Missiological Angle on Mission History

What does a missiological approach to the history of mission entail? My argument is that missiologists bring to the study of mission history several important investigative habits or ways of thinking about mission that, when taken together, define a distinctive point of view. I do not propose that missiologists are the only scholars who attend to each of the elements to be discussed. Nevertheless, in the aggregate, I believe we can identify an approach to mission history that grows out of and is intimately related to the field of missiology as it is now conceived and practiced. My essay concludes with a metaphor that suggests how missiologists may be thought to look at the history of mission when it is approached as an integrated whole.

A multivariable approach. We may begin by noting that missiology is, at its heart, relentlessly multivariable. How could this not be the case? Christian mission is a global phenomenon. Given the history of mission over the past two centuries especially, it is now normal for the church to find itself in conversation with the broadest possible array of religious traditions and living cultures. These engagements take place across the full spectrum of human experience, ranging from the cognitive to the material, with the result that the theory and practice of mission are not easily separated. Adding to this complexity is the fact of Christian diversity. Multiple approaches to outreach are to be expected from a worldwide Christian community that has no organizational center or universally shared philosophical framework. In some cases of missionary encounter, competing priorities and disagreements over methods may be traced back to theological differences. In others, the defining issues are more contextual and social.

On the whole, missiologists are not different from other historians when it comes to reckoning with the multifaceted character of Christian mission. The interdisciplinary demands of history weigh equally on all who would hope to study the record of missionary action. As the scholar of comparative religion Eric Sharpe has phrased it, “The ideal missionary historian will be to some extent a social, political, and economic historian; a geographer, ethnologist, and historian of religions; as well as a Christian historian in the more usual sense.” A difference arises, however, in the way matters of faith are typically treated by missiologists when compared with their treatment by other scholars of mission history. Simply put, the ethos of missiology encourages its practitioners to take spiritual realities very seriously, even when the researcher does not share the same worldview as those whose history is being studied. Thus, it is not the custom of missiologists to bracket out of their analyses factors of religious conviction. This is the extra variable that often distinguishes the historical work of missiologists from that produced by many secular historians and most social scientists.

A look at two studies of mission will serve to illustrate the point. The first is a pioneering work of historical anthropology produced in the 1990s by a pair of distinguished University of Chicago ethnologists, John and Jean Comaroff. Their massive study of Nonconformist British missions among the Southern Tswana in the nineteenth century, Of Revelation and Revolution, interprets these activities within a larger effort to colonize much of southern Africa in the name of Great Britain. The professed aim of the authors is to show how agents of the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society functioned as “harbingers of a more invasive European presence” that eventually sought to dominate the Tswana in every possible way. According to the Comaroffs, the missionaries’ special preparative role was to shape the collective consciousness of the natives in advance of direct imperial rule, to colonize their minds, as it were, by contriving a new conceptual reality for them that owed as much or more to post-Enlightenment values as it did to the Christian Gospel. In this way, the missionaries became not only “vanguards of imperialism” but also “human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview,” whose civilizing axioms “they purveyed . . . in everything they said and did.”

Of Revelation and Revolution is a formidable scholarly project that successfully presents a deep, thick study of missionary encounter in a particular time and place, which also sheds considerable light on larger issues, like the relationship of modern missions to European imperialism. Students of nineteenth-century missions ignore this work at their peril. Nevertheless, one can find blind spots in the methodology used. Several anthropologist critics, for example, have taken the Comaroffs to task for reduc-
ing the Southern Tswana to inert victims of colonial schemes by effectively denying them any significant capacity to determine their own historical fate as a people. A related concern arises in the way in which the religious behavior of the Tswana is interpreted. The Comaroffs report that the Southern Tswana began to convert en masse to Christianity by the end of the nineteenth century. But what exactly did conversion mean in this context? Why did the Tswana embrace Christianity? Most of the interpretive choices put before the reader are not very generous. They include religious nominality, an awkward imitation of colonial social behavior, an attempt to appropriate by religious means the practical and pecuniary advantages of a foreign civilization, an inadvertent cooptation into the new economic order, a grasping after the white man’s power. Unqualified respect is reserved for the notion that these African Christians, through

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twentieth-century Independence, eventually came to practice “a humanist faith, a faith centered on inspired social action.” Perhaps. But when none of the proffered explanations seems to match up with what the principals involved had to say about their own motivations, missiologists will want to ask: are these the only options?

For purposes of comparison, a glance at some recent work by Mrinalini Sebastian on nineteenth-century missions in India may prove instructive. As an Indian feminist scholar of religion and culture, with a particular interest in postcolonial literary criticism and subaltern studies, Sebastian wants to read old missionary texts in new ways, just as the Comaroffs have done. Like them, she wants to understand the corruptive influence of colonialism on European missionary action in the modern era. She does not stop there, however, preferring instead to go on to ask what past evangelistic encounters may have meant to the natives whose stories were captured and represented in missionary narratives. In particular, her article on how to read missionary archives from a postcolonial feminist perspective nicely illustrates the kind of methodology that could support or complement a fully missiological approach to the history of mission.

In her essay, Sebastian focuses on the native Bible women who worked for the Basel Mission in India. She shows how their work was obviously shaped, if not distorted, by Victorian-era missionary ideas about “the Christian home” that only partly rested on Gospel values. A commitment to feminist concerns pushes Sebastian to explore the liberative potential of missionary education for women in India, which connects to her primary topic insofar as these native missionaries, that is, the Bible women, promoted literacy through their activities. She also considers the possibility that the Bible women were among the earliest examples of professional women in India, thereby investing their work with emancipatory significance. Up to this point in her essay, about three-quarters of the way through, I see Sebastian tracking very closely with the approach of the Comaroffs, albeit not at the same level of detail. But then a turn in her investigative strategy comes, which Sebastian describes as follows: “In my engagement with the histories of the Bible women so far, I have tried to present a secularized view of their work. I deliberately have not dwelled too much on either their faith or their attempts to convert other women to Christianity. Yet the primary motive for their becoming Bible women, for their inadvertent transgression [across caste boundaries] was their faith. And the primary purpose of their visits to other women’s houses was to communicate the message of the gospel.”

A very personal reason lay behind the decision to introduce the factor of faith into Sebastian’s scholarly discussion of mission history. As she explains, her own grandmother was a Bible woman in India long before this article was conceived and written, and so she asks: what moved my grandmother and so many other native Christian women to share the story of Jesus with their neighbors in the day-to-day context of Indian village life, sometimes over the course of a lifetime? By raising such a question, Sebastian has chosen to pitch her researcher’s tent squarely on missiological ground. Without resorting to a providential framework to explain the workings of history, she has nevertheless allowed the realm of faith to begin to receive a measure of the same consideration so freely given by countless academics to the realm of sight. As historian Mark Noll has observed, this is what missiologists do. They operate somewhere between the “functional atheism of the academy” and the “functional gnosticism of sending churches,” which can blind those churches to historical realities. Thus, to think missiologically about the history of mission means, in part, to practice a form of critical empathy with one’s subject. A degree of empathy makes it possible to resist the strong modern urge to dismiss—with a Comtean wave of the hand—religious convictions as unimportant. At the same time, a willingness to be critical commits one to a methodology that is suitably rigorous and scientific.

A bias toward the dynamic. Related to the persistently variable disposition of missiology is its particular interest in the dynamic character of Christian history. That is to say, there is an inbuilt bias in missiology to concentrate on those points in Christian history where the community acts less like a custodian of tradition or repository of settled answers to familiar questions than as a source of energy for fresh engagements of the Gospel with the world. Missiologists are drawn especially to circumstances of change within Christian history. Efforts to plant the church where it has not previously existed obviously qualify, as would any struggle to understand the Gospel story in new cultural terms. Missiologists also have a special affinity for those parts of the Christian story where conversions into the community, growth, development, and critical self-examination are considered normal aspects of church life rather than the exception.

The effect of these biases on a missiological approach to mission history can be profound. Missiologists have learned, for example, that mission history is not simply a matter of extension and expansion from metropolitan centers to distant peripheries. Thus, they do not expect missionaries to function as mere chutes through which liquid concrete from abroad is poured into forms fashioned out of local materials. Truly missionary encounters in history are intense moments, full of unpredictability but also of promise. Old certainties about what is essential to Christianity may be tested and found wanting in these engagements. New understandings of Gospel truth sometimes emerge out of intercultural and interreligious exchange. In any event, when contemporaneous missiologists reflect on mission history, they are likely to look for evidence of Christianity as a movement rather than as a set of institutions or a collection of fixed doctrines.
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An approach that is both local and global. Next to this interest in the dynamic character of the Christian tradition is a strong tendency within missiology to think about mission history in both local and global terms. The local side of this equation receives attention whenever issues of contextualization are brought into focus. As Werner Usterk has observed, the Christian faith is by nature “fides semper inculturanda,” and nowhere is this quality more apparent than in the history of mission when multiple contemporary contexts are studied side-by-side.19 The idea of translation is another means by which missiologists explore the local dimensions of Christian outreach. By translation I mean not only the rendering of Scripture into new languages but also the creation of vernacular Christianities that make sense within the context of their particular cultural settings.

The global dimension of missiology is expressed in a variety of ways. One thinks here of the geographic development of Christianity into a truly global religion, and also about the birth of a worldwide ecumenical movement in the heyday of modern Protestant missions. Less often appreciated, perhaps, is the way in which the history of mission itself is stamped with the indelible mark of global interconnectivity. Many eighteenth-century churchgoers in the West, for example, eagerly awaited the latest news of their own missionaries but also began to pray fervently for the spread of the Gospel by others.20 Acting on the same impulse, the missionary societies founded just before the turn of the nineteenth century sought new ways to share intelligence gained from around the world among themselves and to inform the public of their activities, hence the creation of the missionary magazine at about the same time.21 Most intriguingly, we find far-flung modern-era missionaries trying to learn from each other despite the challenges of geography, while also thinking about their work in increasingly global terms. Jennifer Selwyn has provided a wonderful example of this phenomenon in her recent study of early modern Jesuit missions in Naples.22

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As she shows, the Kingdom of Naples became a kind of proving ground within the Jesuit system for would-be missionary candidates to the New World. Coincidentally, theorists in the Society of Jesus considered how certain techniques and ideas learned in one place could be adapted for use elsewhere. In a striking conceptual move, Jesuits assigned to Naples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came to refer to their mission field in southern Italy as “our Indies” or the “Indies down here.” This is language that clearly points to a globalized project of evangelization.

Missiology as a scholarly context. Finally, a missiological approach to the history of mission is inevitably affected by and related to everything else that missiologists study. In other words, the rest of what is encompassed by the term “missiology” forms a special scholarly context for studies of mission history undertaken by those who would call themselves missiologists. Missiologists are not unique in this respect. Their situation is parallel, for example, to that which obtains for biblical scholars who study mission in the Scriptures. Should we not expect the exegetes to be influenced by the habits of their guild as they examine the biblical materials pertaining to mission? Likewise for social scientists and other specialists who for one reason or another are drawn to mission-related topics. It would be strange indeed if they went about their work without paying heed to the salient trends and critical research needs that beg for attention in their particular academic patch.

In the case of missiology, the other items on our disciplinary agenda certainly include questions about how Christian mission fits into an increasingly pluralistic world, about the means of outreach most likely to be effective and faithful in our era, about the perennial interface of theology with culture, and about the special vocation of mission service. Missiologists who study the history of mission need not subordinate their investigations to any of these topics, but an awareness of the implications our historical research might have for these and other questions of pressing concern to students of mission is appropriate. When one puts the study of mission history into such an intellectual context, it then becomes possible for the history of mission to function properly, in my view, as a foundation for other work in missiology.23

A Riverine Perspective

To conclude, we may imagine the history of mission as a river, a great flow of ideas, events, personalities, and human encounters taking place over time. Theologically, its headwaters could be identified in the nature of God, the One who sends the Son and the Spirit and in other ways has sought to be known by human-kind. Historically, the beginnings of Christian mission might be traced back to the earthly ministry of Jesus or the occasion of Pentecost, with roots in the story of Israel. Where does the river of mission history end? A natural terminus, the particular body of water into which this rushing confluence empties, lies beyond the power of physical sight. Yet, we do have a scene of cosmic consummation described in the Book of Revelation (7:9–12; 22:1–5), with the river of the water of life flowing unceasingly from God’s heavenly throne, around which persons from every tribe, tongue, and nation stand praising God and the Lamb.

It is our lot to live downstream, but somewhere before the end of the story. This is the only location now available for those who wish to study the history of Christian mission. But where exactly do we stand to engage this history? Missiologists will not be content to helicopter in every now and again to take a bucketful of water to nourish some parched ground of scholarly labor located far away. Nor can we rely on satellite imaging alone, even though a distant point of view can yield valuable insights.

To adopt a missiological perspective on this history implies a choice to live close by one’s subject, taking into account all the elements of approach described earlier. Along the strand one can feel the force of the river, its dynamic aspect, so powerful that it can cut new pathways through rugged and resistant landscape. If a turn is taken at navigating the rapids, direct experience may teach the same lesson, but with greater urgency. A willingness to range far and wide within the watershed will bring to light the rich complexity of a multivariable and extensive riparian environment. En route one can begin to appreciate how various features of the natural world may have shaped the river’s course through time, while also giving thought to the human engineering projects that either succeeded or failed to widen the water’s reach. An enduring interest in the local and global dimensions of mission pushes the missiologist further to think about this river.
as a kind of huge interconnected ecosystem with many different microenvironments. Finally, in our mind’s eye, it is impossible to ignore the lush vegetation and diverse wildlife that crowd the riverbank, with each species finding both strength and vitality in the refreshing water. Evidence of life so abundant cannot fail but to remind one of the fundamental significance of this history, not only for the rest of missionology but also for the present and future of the Christian tradition as a whole.

Notes
1. This essay is based on Stanley H. Skreslet’s inaugural lecture as F. S. Royster Professor of Christian Missions, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia.
2. I wish to thank historian Heather J. Sharkey for her careful reading of an earlier draft of this article.
12. In their introduction to Dialectics of Modernity, pp. 35–53, the Comaroffs offer a spirited rebuttal of their critics.
13. Ibid., p. 107. What follows in the next few sentences is a very compact summary of the argument presented in this second volume of the Comaroffs’ project.
18. On the merits of empathy for the study of religious history more generally, see Richard Elphick, “Writing Religion into History: The Case of South African Christianity,” Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 21 (1995): 1–21. Ogbru Kalu’s comment on the importance of respecting faith commitments when trying to write the global history of Christianity is also pertinent here: “It is difficult to tell the story of the church by rejecting its essence.” See Kalu, “Clio in a Sacred Garb: Telling the Story of Gospel-People Encounters in Our Time,” Fides et Historia 35 (2003): 27–39. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was a French social philosopher who theorized that academic disciplines had to progress through religion and metaphysics before reaching their fulfillment in scientific positivism, at which point knowledge associated with these earlier stages of social development would become irrelevant. Ironically, Comte never completely let go of his own religious sentiments, choosing instead to channel these into a more scientific “religion of humanity” that he thought would one day replace Catholicism.
21. An influential model for this new kind of church periodical was provided by the Evangelical Magazine, published in London from 1793. By 1796 the Missionary Magazine had made its appearance in Edinburgh. The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine and New York Missionary Magazine, the first American examples of this genre, followed in 1800.