"Called to the Mission Field": A Critical Examination of the Role of Vocation in the Construction of the "Mission Field"

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Introduction

This article seeks to clarify the connection between a mission vocation and its geographical implications, using an individual and crosscultural model of mission drawn from predominantly evangelical theology in which personal vocation is generally considered an important motivation for involvement in foreign mission.¹ Indeed, several mission organizations demand that candidates are able to describe such a vocation in order to be accepted into the organization.² This aligns individual and personal mission vocation with the construct of the "mission field", which is, as I attempt to show, an idea with colonial overtones. Meanwhile, vocation in itself is both a contested and polyvalent concept and, with the help of Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age, I unearth the tension between its premodern and modern forms, and the constant negotiations that result.³ The understanding of vocation is directly tied to the nature of God, the character of the church and the role of the individual and, as a polyvalent concept, has generated a plethora of different meanings. The particular theology of vocation that I review here, however, is focused primarily on the individual, in the context of a community oriented towards mission, thereby distinguishing it from theologies

² See for example Wycliffe Bible Translators, who list this aspect first under the header of “evaluate your readiness”: http://www.wycliffe.org/Go/PreparingtoServe/EvaluateyourReadiness.aspx (accessed 10 March 2014).
of vocation which focus upon the clergy or primarily on the vocation of the church as a whole.

Although theologies of vocation are developed on a conceptual and discursive level, they are intricately connected with spatial issues. As Vítor Westhelle asserts: “Our vocation is not only lived out in locations and places, it is about shaping and recreating them, investing in them an intention.” Indeed, the concept of vocation has the ability to invest an intention in specific localities producing results that, rather than being neutral, are translations into praxis of geopolitical visions. Vocational awareness is equivalent to the infusion of certain localities with meaning and emotional attachments. However, research which outlines the geopolitical implications has not been fully developed, given that much study of the agency of missionaries

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has taken a historic perspective. My first goal, therefore, is to contribute to a broader understanding of how geopolitical realities are shaped by the actions of contemporary missionaries by highlighting how theological ideas are enacted. Secondly, my research locates itself within the field of missiology and thereby aims to further discussion about the parameters of a viable theology of vocation.

My assessment of this model of vocation is grounded in my perspective on World Christianity which I interpret as the globalized presence of Christianity in its multiple trajectories and manifestations. I stress the multidimensional aspects of World Christianity in which inequalities abound along with a constant negotiation of meaning in determining its contours, noting that the proposed shift in the center of gravity in World Christianity should not obscure the unequal distribution of wealth and power within it. In company with David Bosch, I suggest that multiple paradigms of mission are acted out on the unequal stage of World Christianity. Meanwhile, I do not consider the contemporary era to be post-missionary on the grounds that missionary zeal and fervor, especially from the United States, is currently not in decline but continues to exercise considerable influence. The framework in which I interpret World Christianity attempts to account for all streams of thought and influences, such as the different forms of Pentecostalism.

### Expansionist Perspective on Mission

In this section, I show how the alignment of vocation with the construction of the “mission field” has enabled an expansionist perspective of mission, beginning with two definitions of mission vocation that assist in this. William

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9 Brickell, ‘Geographies of Contemporary Christian Missionaries’, 726.
13 For a further elaboration on my perspective on World Christianity see my forthcoming article: Eleonora Hof, ‘Re-Imagining World Christianity: Challenging Territorial Essentialism’, *Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, 2014 (forthcoming).
Goff, authoring a chapter in a standard evangelical textbook on missiology, defines vocation as follows: “It is feasible to conclude that the missionary call is a specific role given to some to share Christ with the unreached peoples of the world.”\(^\text{14}\) This definition has a significant overlap with that offered by David Sills who describes the mission vocation as “God’s method for moving His children to intercultural service and sustaining them in the work He designed for them before the creation of the world (Acts 17:26).”\(^\text{15}\) For Sills, the vocation is intricately connected with a conversion-centered approach to mission: “It is a sustained burden to see hell-bound souls around the world redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.”\(^\text{16}\) The mission vocation is clearly distinguished from general involvement in Christian service, thereby becoming connected with a crosscultural dimension.\(^\text{17}\) Sills suggests that the vocation to enter the “mission field” must be properly understood and should not be based merely on perceived needs in the “mission field”. Only when one’s vocation is accurately lived out is it effective in keeping the missionary in the “mission field” while vocations which are merely need-based are not sufficient.\(^\text{18}\) In the work of the two authors I have reviewed, an expansionist perspective on mission has been constructed by virtue of the juxtaposition of vocation with a conversionist and crosscultural approach to mission. I regard the “unreached peoples of the world” as a rhetorical construct which functions in connection with a personal mission vocation as a strong incentive to accept an expansionist view on mission.

I consider the discussions on mission vocation a form of intra-evangelical dialogue and a way of countering and critiquing ingrained grassroots ways of living out the vocation. Vocational awareness is not an abstract theological concept but rather one frequently employed at the grassroots level and, as noted above, some mission organizations request prospective missionaries


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 198.

\(^{17}\) “Many future missionaries were faithfully serving God as deacons, Sunday school teachers, and lay leaders in church positions when God surprised them with a call to missions.” Ibid., 22.

\(^{18}\) Need-based vocations are, according to Sills, grounded in perceived material and spiritual need in the “mission field”. Yet this type of vocation is in his eyes not sufficient because other missionaries and development workers might already be alleviating local needs meaning that the arriving missionary might consider him/herself superfluous. Ibid., 23.
to narrate their personal vocation before accepting them. In addition, deciding to leave one’s country of origin in order to work as foreign missionary is a life-changing decision which is easier to enact if it is backed up by a sense of vocation. Current discussions center, among other subjects, on the means of finding direction in one’s life and the possibility of a vocation for a specific “people group”. Bruce Waltke argues that the way evangelicals often attempt to discover the will of God has close connections to divination, which is, according to him a pagan notion. He posits that many practices of evangelical Christians geared to this purpose, such as looking for signs and casting lots, are actually close to non-Christian practices of seeking the will of a deity, since the will of God is apparently hidden from humans and requires the use of supernatural means to discover. In the search for the will of God, an exchange takes place in the form of offering prayers and committing oneself to God as a warranty for receiving personal guidance. In addition, Walter McConnell is critical about the “standard understanding of a missionary call”, which forges a connection between vocation and a specific ethnic group. According to McConnell, it is indeed possible that people are called by God to serve as missionaries in a particular ethnic group. Yet he has difficulty discerning the foundation in biblical data for this popular opinion.

Although treatments of a mission vocation in evangelical theologies share some characteristics, considerable differences in emphasis and ramifications manifest themselves. I therefore employ the work of McConnell who distinguishes between three perspectives which I have labeled as ranging from maximalist to minimalist versions. With the term maximalist I denote an approach that seeks to include as many people as possible in the missionary enterprise, while the term minimalist designates the tendency to reduce the influence of the mission vocation by considering it on the same level as a vocation for a secular profession. The three perspectives on vocation that McConnell distinguishes are as follows: first, the maximizing position attempts to coax as many people as possible into foreign missionary work.

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20 Ibid., 22-40. Although Waltke treats the tendency to search for the will of God in general, the first example that he cites is of a women who is in the process of deciding whether she should become involved in mission work. Ibid., 3-4.


and therefore reverses the idea of vocation. Instead of linking vocation and foreign mission to each other, vocation and service in one’s home country are connected instead. The logic behind this inversion is that one should experience a vocation to stay in one’s country of origin because involvement in foreign mission is considered the default mode. For practical reasons, this position is difficult to maintain. However, as a rhetorical feature, it could prove to be useful in recruiting people for missionary service. Second, the most frequently advocated position is probably the middle position, which stresses that every person involved in mission work should be able to narrate a personal vocation, the experience of which reduces the risk of missionary attrition. Third, the minimizing position consists in an erasure of a difference between working in a regular profession and involvement in mission. Mission is therefore perceived as a profession which can be chosen in the same fashion as any other job. The first two positions are in one respect opposites of each other because the locus of vocation is opposite. Yet they both discern a direct involvement of God in the form of instilling a person with a specific and concrete vocation. In contrast however, the third position erases the differences between the sacred and the secular and equates the two with each other, although this erasure is only partial since a distinction between mission and secular professions is maintained, if only with regard to the means of entering one sphere or the other.

The first position that McConnell has put forth constructs a mission field by recruiting as many people as possible. By claiming that the default position is on the “mission field” it is, therefore, thoroughly expansive. The second position enables an expansionist position because the awareness of having received a personal vocation is constitutive of crossing borders to further the cause of Christianity. The third position, however, does not provide a particular incentive towards crosscultural boundary crossing since it equates the worth of secular with religious vocations. Two of the three perspectives reviewed, therefore enable an expansionist perspective on mission, comprise powerful constituents of transnationalism and have, thereby, far ranging geographically consequences.

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23 Ibid., 210-211.
Charles Taylor on Vocation

In order to understand the cultural constraints and pressures that constitute the notion of vocation, I turn to the work of Charles Taylor, using *A Secular Age* as a tool to uncover the influences of both the premodern and the modern condition on the conceptualization. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor analyzes the characteristics of the premodern and the modern condition and describes the role of vocation in both. In this section, I outline how these two conditions have determined the way vocation in the missionary movement has been and, to a certain extent, continues to be imagined. The mission vocation differs from Taylor’s broader usage, yet shared characteristics enable a comparison between both concepts.

For Taylor, the premodern condition is characterized by living in an open and enchanted world in which the supernatural and the natural are closely intertwined. In contrast, the modern condition is distinguished by its disenchantment, which produces a buffered self insensitive to being influenced by forces from the non-natural world, and standing, therefore, in opposition to a porous self. Taylor distinguishes between ordinary flourishing on the one hand, and renunciative vocations on the other, defining ordinary flourishing as the life of the laity which is not bound to claims of perfection regarding their moral life. Instead, they were “carried” by the renunciative vocations which are defined by their abnegation of ordinary life and the total dedication to the spiritual life. The clergy, but also wandering saints and hermits, fall into this category. The distinction between the two is sharpened by the awareness that the renunciative vocations are imagined as constituting a higher order. Structure versus anti-structure is a defining feature, whereby ordinary flourishing represents structure, and renunciative vocations, anti-structure. Taylor posits that those societies which are organized around a “higher religion” are also characterized by a distinction between ordinary life and a life of renunciation. He discerns in these societies “a spread between the dedicated and the less committed, between highly demanding forms of devotion and more perfunctory practice, between paths of renunciation

24 Taylor works only with the pair premodern / modern, showing no appreciation for the philosophy of postmodernism, which he degrades to “a certain trendy ‘post-modernism’”. Taylor invalidates postmodernism by asserting that claiming the demise of the grand narratives is in itself a grand narrative. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716-717.
26 Ibid., 61-62.
and those in which religious ritual served more the needs of prosperity and flourishing”. The spread between the two forms of flourishing indicates the presence of distinct speeds in society.

Renunciative vocations challenge the ordinary structures of power and property by pointing towards a greater good that surpasses ordinary life. However, these higher vocations are by their very nature not able to replace the normal order in society for, if they were able to, they would become in their own turn the normal order. Moreover, a society cannot, if only for practical reasons, be grounded solely on the basis of the renunciative vocations. As a consequence, the tension between the two remains and equilibrium should therefore be established in order to obtain a co-existence between them. Two options exist for bridging the gap. In the first place, people who are living an ordinary life could be coaxed into striving towards a greater degree of renunciation. The opposite solution consists of a moderation of the demands of a renunciative life. However, these two solutions will, in the premodern condition, never fully relax the tension between the two. Yet, in Latin Christianity, a growing dissatisfaction with the existence of the two different speeds inherent to the hierarchical and dual system became manifest. Although Taylor has no exact explanation for this, he nevertheless considered it crucial to the abandonment of the enchanted cosmos and the enablement of humanism. In any case, one of the pressures for change seems to have come from within the church and more specifically from below, driven by a Christocentric spirituality in which the desire arose to identify oneself with the Christ event.

In contrast, within the modern condition, the two speeds are altogether abandoned, and as a logical consequence, the tension between them vanishes. The modern condition is characterized by the conviction that “all callings are equal in the sight of God”. All types of vocations are equated because the attribution of a superior ontological status to any form of hierarchy has

27 Ibid., 62.
28 The concept of ‘speed’, as used by Taylor, indicates the effects of structuring society in terms of expectations, role taking and human flourishing. He distinguishes in particular between the renunciative life, associated for example with monasticism, and ordinary walks of life.
29 Taylor, A Secular Age, 49.
30 Ibid., 63.
31 Ibid., 64.
32 Ibid., 165.
disappeared. Any differentiation between types of vocation is therefore functional and temporal, but not ontological. As a result, every member of society is supposed to labour together for the common good.\textsuperscript{33} Although they might engage in different forms of service, the hierarchical distinction between different types is abandoned. In the secular and humanist consequences of these ideals, the two goals of the organization of society are security and prosperity.\textsuperscript{34} Within the organizing humanist grid of the modern condition, Christians are challenged to work out the consequences of the idea of vocation. The abandonment of different speeds leads in this instance to a synchronization of Christian life in which demands are made of all Christians to be completely committed to their Christian identity and lifestyle, the pursuit of which is therefore connected solely with ordinary life.

**Vocation as Negotiation**

With the distinction between the premodern and the modern condition in mind, it is now possible to interpret how these elements are played out in the various scenarios which are highlighted and discussed in the ongoing debate about the role vocation plays in mission, a debate which consists of negotiation between modern and premodern elements. The society model of mission\textsuperscript{35} incorporated elements of the premodern condition since the role of the missionary closely resembled the role of those living out a renunciative vocation, although the theology of the modern missionary movement strongly opposed the idea of different speeds: every Christian was supposed to dedicate her/his life totally to the Christian cause. This inherent tension needed to be resolved. In the modern missionary movement, missionaries gave up their regular jobs, or never even began one, in order to be sustained by the church community in return for performing a common good for the community. In the case where a missionary moved to another country, a profound form of disconnectedness and uprooting took place. I consider, therefore, that the act of someone devoting her/his whole life to the enter-

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 166.
prise of mission resembles the renunciative vocations. Nonconformity to expected patterns in wider society combines in these instances with a religious legitimization for these actions. A life-long involvement in cross-cultural mission therefore amounts to a highly demanding form of vocation.

Meanwhile, tension arises in connection with determining how the Christian life should be lived for those who are not engaged in these highly demanding forms of vocation. Interpreted in terms of engagement in crosscultural mission, one solution is to demand contributions to the missionary endeavor in ordinary life. This entails that one’s involvement in supporting missionaries both financially, spiritually and practically can become a guideline in determining the value of one’s ordinary life. However, an uneasiness attends the assessment of the value of those who are not explicitly involved in crosscultural mission. In the context of the three positions regarding the vocation towards mission as distinguished by McConnell, the maximizing position completely diminishes the value of ordinary flourishing. Involvement in foreign mission becomes the default mode. The tension is hereby partially dissolved, but practical considerations prohibit the intended grand-scale participation in crosscultural missions. The middle position, which holds that every person should be able to report a personal vocation towards crosscultural mission, matches most closely the premodern stance on vocation. The minimalizing position, whereby the vocation for a secular job is considered at the same level as the vocation for mission, mirrors closely the modern condition.

An anonymous book issued in 1984 by OMF International [Overseas Missionary Fellowship], one of the heirs of the modern missionary movement, exemplifies the negotiation between the premodern and the modern. It describes the tension as follows:

36 Lifelong commitment to crosscultural mission has gradually given way to less intense forms of engagement, although the “career-missionary” has not disappeared altogether. Even though the invested time might be shorter than that of “career-missionary”, engagement as missionary still represents a break with cultural expectations. For data regarding short term mission and the interplay between short term mission and “career missionaries” see Robert J. Priest et al., ‘Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement’, Missiology: An International Review 34, no. 4 (2006): 431-50.
37 OMF International is a merger of China Inland Mission and Overseas Missionary Fellowship, which was founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. http://www.omf.org/omf/home/about_omf (accessed 11 March 2014). For the history of the China Inland Mission see Alvyn Austin, China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832-1905 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
By using the word ‘calling’ only for those people who are appointed by God for a special service, we assert that there are two levels of Christians. Moreover, we are then prone to the thought that Christians from the second level can live their lives with less dedication and obedience. Once we realize that if calling consists in the first place in the following of Jesus, then the same conditions for discipleship exist for each of us, and we all will acknowledge that God has the right to ask each of us when he whenever he wants to go where He wants and to do whatever He wants us to do.  

OMF hereby explicitly denies the existence of two different speeds with regard to the vocation towards mission. The distinction between those with a renunciative vocation and those who live out an ordinary life is considered, on theological grounds, untenable, and yet the proposed solution, namely to request complete dedication of all believers, comes close to “demanding too much renunciation from the ordinary person”. The very fact that the multi-speed system is explicitly denounced reveals the necessity to interact with this position and to point out the theological improbability of this viewpoint. From this I infer that at least some of the supporters of OMF adhered to this position. The premodern viewpoint on vocation is in this quotation critiqued and a modern viewpoint on vocation is championed. I detect the same mechanism at work in another account of mission vocation, although the employed strategy differs: “The term missionary call has often been misunderstood as placing the missionary on a superior level of spirituality. Those who have received and lived out that call will quickly confess that such an understanding is spurious.”

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38 I consider the usage of “vocation” and “call” to be nearly synonymous. “Vocation” is used more often in theological discourse, while “call” is employed more frequently as a grassroots term. The debate on the difference between the two in the theology of Karl Barth plays no role in the particular discourse I am reviewing. See for the distinction in Barth: Rhys Kuzmić, ‘Beruf and Berufung in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics: Toward a Subversive Klesiology’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 3 (2005): 262-78.

39 Original in Dutch, translation by author. “Door het woord ‘roeping’ alleen van toepassing te achten op die mensen die door God apart gesteld zijn voor speciaal dienstwerk, zeggen we niet alleen dat er christenen zijn van twee niveaus, maar we zetten bovendien de deur open voor christenen van het ‘tweede niveau’ om te leven met de gedachte, dat ze wel toe kunnen met een mindere mate van toewijding en gehoorzaamheid. Als we ons eenmaal goed realiseren dat de roeping in de eerste plaats bestaat uit het volgen van Jezus, zijn we allemaal onderworpen aan dezelfde voorwaarden voor discipelschap, en zullen we allemaal erkennen, dat God het recht heeft om op elk tijdstip van ons te vragen te gaan waar Hij wil en te doen wat Hij wil.” N.N., *Als God de weg wijst* (Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1984), 9-10.

40 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 81.

41 Goff, ‘Missionary Call and Service’, 334.
is denounced by pointing towards the lack of spirituality on the part of the missionary. The missionary therefore is not set apart from the ordinary life by virtue of her/his spirituality or dedication. Instead, the spirituality of the missionary is diminished in order to level her/his spirituality with the spirituality of the remainder of Christians. As a strategy, this is the opposite of the strategy detected in the former quotation which attempted to raise the spiritual level of all Christians. Yet, the result is the same: the abandonment of the multi-speed system in favour of the equality of all in ordinary life.

I conclude that a missionary vocation, both in the modern and the premodern position, is fraught with tension. In the premodern framework, the vocation of the missionary remains problematic because the hierarchy of vocation clashes with the total dedication requested from every Christian. In the modern mind set, the vocation of the missionary is problematic because this framework does not allow for a hierarchy of vocations. I would suggest, however, that even in the most moderate accounts of a crosscultural missionary, a remnant of the renunciative vocation will always persist, at least on an intuitive level. Because of lingering memories of the renunciative vocation of the missionary, constant negotiations remain ongoing: the role of missionary must either be robbed of its special and spiritual status or total dedication must be expected from all believers.

The Construction of the ”Mission Field”

In this section, I demonstrate the connection between the individual and crosscultural model of vocation and the construction of a discursive “mission field”, outlining how the spatial metaphor is enabled by emphasizing a personal vocation for mission. Unfortunately, not many definitions of the “mission field” are currently given although, according to Rita Smith Kipp, who has conducted research into the development of Dutch mission efforts in North Sumatra, the term field might be defined as follows: “The term field [Dutch zendingsveld, or terrein] denotes the administrative unit encompassing the missionaries who work within the same linguistic group or region.”

The idea of a “mission field” is problematic because it instills a biblical imaginary with colonial ideas, as I outline in what follows. The constituting factors of the construction of the “mission field” should therefore be carefully scrutinized. According to the Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions: “this motivation [vocational awareness, EDH] often is the only anchor that will hold the new missionary steady during the dark testing times of culture shock and other problems on the field.” Other authors have made similar observations: vocational awareness is considered to perform a stabilizing function in the face of problems during missionary service, being regarded as a strengthening factor because it provides a sense of determination to carry on, even in the midst of severe difficulties. The encountered problems could, without a solid sense of vocation, lead to early attrition of the missionary. Yet, because the missionary is positioned “in the field”, she/he is resides in a specific locality infused with meaning. Although the period spent “in the field” might be fraught with emotional upheavals and stress, it nevertheless remains the site of one’s mission vocation. Experience of troubles therefore does not negate the mission vocation, but, rather, strengthens vocational awareness. The connection between vocation and perseverance in the “mission field” is problematic, however, because it robs the missionary of a critical instrument for evaluating her/his endeavors and her/his own suitability.

In this respect, “mission field” is a thoroughly discursive construct and is therefore not a concrete locality that can be visited in a literal way. The “mission field” only presents itself when someone interprets a certain locality as a “mission field”, aiding its construction as a location with dense layers of meaning, both emotional and spiritual. One important layer is the connotation of laying bare and readying a field for cultivation, a way of legitimizing (religious) conquest. Thus construction of the “mission field” has close parallels with the myth of the virgin land that in the colonial period accompanied fantasies of conquest. Yet the land is clearly not

45 “It is only the strong sense of call, most often in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances, that enables the missionary to stay.” James J. Stamoolis, ‘The Nature of the Missionary Calling: A Retrospective Look to the Future’, Missiology 30, no. 1 (2002): 5.
46 Goff, ‘Missionary Call and Service’, 339.
47 Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 2013).
empty, something testified by the people who inhabit it. The visible traces of their past histories belie the thought of a virgin land.48

The act of “discovery” is also deeply problematic and ridden with ambiguities, since the discovery of landmark sites was most often mediated by the help of the native inhabitants of the land, who therefore must have made the discovery before the explorer himself. The colonial explorer marked the site as his discovery, knowing at the same time that the land was neither empty nor undiscovered.49 In the same vein is the “mission field”, which is never a field lying bare and empty and awaiting cultivation by plowing, sowing and reaping. The missionary does not find an empty field, just as the explorer does not find an empty land. The myth of the “mission field” needs, therefore, to be sustained by additional (theological) reasoning that provides a strong impetus for the metaphor and becomes a sustaining factor that helps to convince missionaries to stay in the “mission field”. In the examples offered by Gailey, Stamoolis, Goff and Sills, the connection between vocation, “mission field” and the encountered difficulties is indeed present: because of the ambiguities inherent to the “mission field”, vocation serves as a factor to reinforce the idea even under difficult circumstances.

Use of ”Field” in Anthropology

In this section I further scrutinize the layers of meaning attached to the “field”, by drawing parallels with anthropological studies where it is a defining term. The practice of fieldwork is characteristic of anthropology, distinguishing it from other disciplines that share, to a certain extent, similar subject matter, such as cultural studies. Yet precisely because of the centrality of fieldwork to anthropological research, the very notion has not been much debated. This is still surprising, since anthropology in its present state has turned away from earlier formulations that regarded cultures as stable entities, connected to clearly identifiable territories. The

49 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 28-30.
history of the idea of field is also closely connected with the development of the natural sciences (zoology can be cited as an example), which, in the same vein, studied their objects in a carefully demarcated field. Fieldwork is therefore closely connected to the study of the supposedly “primitive” human in its “natural habitat”. Furthermore, the agrarian connotations of the “field” were plotted in the early phases of the discipline, and contrasted with the city with its concomitant artificial surroundings and estrangement of natural ways of living. Even though contemporary anthropologists also study the landscapes of cities, the connotations of the “field” still signify its close connection with the natural world in which humans live. Consequently, the constructed nature of the “field” is not immediately clear because of the highly naturalized qualities of the “field”. Yet the “field” is the site where difference is produced, visited and researched; indeed, it functions as a demarcation of differences, allocating each culture and ethnic group its own “field”.50

Peter Pels, in the same vein as Gupta and Ferguson, argues that the history of anthropology, including its usage of fieldwork, should be put in its proper historical context in order to research how anthropology has been co-opted by colonial aspirations. The idea of fieldwork oftentimes served as a way of exoticizing the other and turning the other into the object of inquiry.51 To take matters a step further from Pels’ observation, it seems that in the construction of a field, the other becomes instantly othered, if only by the virtue of being located in the field. As such, an “imaginary juxtaposition of home and field” takes place, as Pels has observed.52 The juxtaposition of the home as a site of processing and interpretation of what has been studied in the field, and the field as the site where knowledge is gathered through ob-

52 Pels, ‘The Anthropology of Colonialism’.
The parallels between the usage of “field” in early developments in anthropology and within the missionary enterprise are considerable, something which is not surprising because both draw from the same conceptual wells. For example, the understanding of cultures as bounded, stable wholes which are open to scrutiny / involvement by a knowledgeable outsider is present both within early anthropology and in the modern missionary movement.53 And, in the same way as anthropology is coming to terms with its history and the colonial, supremacist streams in the discipline, so should missiology carefully scrutinize its legacy and note how biblical material has been co-opted in a thoroughly modern scheme of culture and intervention.

It would however be incomplete to explain the usage of the metaphor of field in mission solely by its parallels within anthropology. Another layer of influence that one could indicate lies in the agricultural metaphors employed in the sayings of Jesus in the gospels. Three passages stand out: first, Matthew 9:37-38, an oft-quoted passage in which Jesus remarks that the harvest is plentiful but that there are only a few workers and urges the disciples to pray to the “Lord of the harvest” to send out workers into “his harvest field”.54 A similar passage appears in Luke 10:2. Last, in John 4, Jesus expands upon the relationship between the workers and the harvest. “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe [other translations: white] for harvest!”

As we uncover the layers of meaning that the expression “field” has acquired, it is important to note that agricultural metaphors as they have materialized in the sayings of Jesus are uttered in a context that differed considerably from that of later periods in which they were applied. First and foremost, Jesus was living on the fringes of the Roman Empire and subject to colonial rule himself and, as such, not speaking from a posi-

54 Biblical quotations are taken from the NIV.
tion of superiority but rather from one that was in conflict with both the religious and political powers of the time.\textsuperscript{55} The context in which Jesus found himself of course differs considerably from present contexts of entanglement in the mechanisms of empire and its aftermath. Failure to recognize the different contexts, but rather collapsing them into each other, results in an uncritical appropriation of the sayings of Jesus which opens up the possibility of the terminology derived from the gospels becoming infused with ideas that reinforce territorial notions of mission. Moreover, the sayings of Jesus do not actually refer to empty fields, but rather to fields which are already full and ready for harvest. Arguably, therefore, the full fields of the Synoptic gospels may be contrasted with empty fields which are in dire need of cultivation. This interpretation is advocated, for example, by Jean and John Comaroff, in their 1988 article about the initial missionary encounter in nineteenth-century Southern Africa with the Tswana people. They point out that Africa was considered at the time to be a virgin land that needed to be cultivated, watered and plowed through the acts of evangelization and civilization.\textsuperscript{56}

Although the agricultural aspects of the metaphor come to the forefront in this overview, I briefly want to touch upon the possibility that the notion of the mission field also incorporates something of the character of a military metaphor. Nicholas Thomas, for example, in an article about evangelicals and mission in the early-twentieth century, remarks in passing on the constructed nature of the mission field which he feels is to be regarded as an “agricultural-cum-military metaphor”.\textsuperscript{57} Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that the mission field can be interpreted as having military overtones, which is not surprising given the prevalence in the history of mission of metaphors related to conquest.\textsuperscript{58} In particular,
at the Edinburgh 1910 mission conference, investment in the ‘mission field’ and outspoken ideas on the conquest of Christianity went hand in hand.\(^59\)

Having traced parallels with the development of the discipline of anthropology and outlined the historical usage of the concept of ‘field’, I am now transmitting the call of Gupta and Ferguson “to decenter and defetishize the concept of ‘the field’”.\(^60\) Applied to the discipline of missiology, I propose that the concept as it has functioned in the construction of the “mission field” should be abandoned.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate how the mission vocation as a contested concept is intricately connected with both geographical imaginaries and their material disseminations. Vocation is a powerful constituent of transnationalism that has far-ranging geographical consequences. I have employed the work of Charles Taylor in order to highlight the inbuilt tension in the Christian idea of vocation. In the premodern order of society, a distinction between the higher vocations and ordinary life was an organizing feature of society. Yet the Christian faith demands the total commitment of all believers, thereby nullifying the possibility of the multiple speed system. Interpreting the mission vocation in Taylor’s terms, it follows that the tension between full dedication to the missionary enterprise and the commitment of the other believers warrants constant negotiation.

I have reviewed how vocation within evangelical, crosscultural and individual ways of thinking is intricately bound up with expansive perspectives


\(^{60}\) Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, 5.
on mission which are directly related to the shaping of the idea of the mission field. In this sense, although the subject of vocation is highly theologically charged, it enters the area of geography by infusing specific localities with meaning, namely that represented by a vocation for crosscultural mission; sometimes further specialized by that for a specific region or ethnic group. If vocation becomes connected to the idea of the “mission field”, a colonial fantasy of the empty land, lying bare for cultivation, enters the imagination. Yet the bare land is a fiction since the land is always already rife with history and inhabitation. I suggest therefore a thorough reworking of the concept of vocation in order to disconnect it from colonial fantasies.

**Bibliography**


