

Mission

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As it pertains to religion, the term mission (Latin: missio = to send) usually describes the communication of one's own beliefs and practices to people and groups with other religious traditions or world views. It occurs by means of various practices and media. Additionally, mission is often understood in terms of altruistic and caring service towards fellow human beings and the environment. While the term is often used both colloquially and in scholarship exclusively in relation to the Christian faith,[i] researchers on religion also apply it to other religious traditions. When viewed from the perspective of the history of religion, mission is, however, not a feature of all religious traditions.[ii]

[i] Cf. Bürkle, Horst, Art. Mission. I. Religionsgeschichtlich, in: LThK 7 ([Sonderdruck] ³2009), 288–289, 288.

[ii] Cf. Sundermeier, Theo, Art. Mission. I. Religionsgeschichtlich, in: RGG⁴ 5 (2002), 1272–1273.

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1. Biblical-Theological References

The term mission is found in neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament. As ultimately a *terminus technicus* within systematic theology, it emerged later in Christian theology as a summary of various other terms within the biblical texts that describe the act of mission itself. These texts recount missionary processes, commissions for service,

and corresponding persons, such as apostles. They form the biblical reference points for a Christian concept of mission.

Various places within the Hebrew Bible refer to the role of Israel as a people chosen for the sake of the other nations – for example, through the mediation of blessing or in the idea of the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion. From the 18th century onwards, the so-called “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:16–20 and Jesus’ words of mission in John 20:21 became particularly important in the history of reception. Large portions of the Acts of the Apostles also describe the missionary practice of the early Church as well as the theological questions that emerged from it. Furthermore, many of the New Testament Epistles – especially in the *Corpus Paulinum* – have their origins in the context of Christian mission.

2. Setting in Church History

Throughout its history, Christian mission has been subject to constant change, interacting with historical (time) and cultural (space) conditions. When periodizing the history of Christian mission, a distinction is usually made between three phases:^[1] antiquity, the Middle Ages and modernity, with developments in the 19th and 20th centuries often analysed separately as part of modernity.^[2] This enables us, on the one hand, to give due attention to Christian mission’s entanglement with colonialism (especially in the long 19th century) and, on the other hand, to do justice to the polycentric structure of Christianity^[3] (especially from the middle of the 20th century onward). When it comes to a global history of Christianity, the problems connected to a Eurocentric historiography and periodization of mission have been pointed out. In response, scholars have elaborated on the entangled history^[4] of Christian missions as well as the significance of migration for the spread and development of Christianity.^[5]

1. In addition to the professionalized forms of mission carried out by early Christian missionaries such as Paul , there were a large number of Jews and Gentiles converts to Christianity who contributed to the spread of the Gospel through their everyday way of life. The various forms of voluntary and forced migration were key factors here and are aptly described as the “capillary spread”^[6] of Christianity.

The biblical texts recount the mission of Christianity within the Roman Empire. In antiquity, there were also Christian missions to the Arab and African regions, as well as eastwards to Armenia, India, and even as far as China. The first Christian states emerged in the 3rd century in Armenia, the Roman Empire, Georgia, and Aksum.^[7] As a result, some concluded that the missionary mandate to the Apostles (Matthew 28:16–20) had come to an end.

2. Due to various cultural, theological and political power factors, different forms of Christianity developed during the European Middle Ages. During this period, we can discern different understandings and forms of mission as well as different challenges that mission faced within the Latin Western Church, the Orthodox churches of the East, and Oriental Christianity. Questions that are still relevant today regarding the relationship between mission and culture, power, and interreligious encounters thereby become clear. The Church itself primarily carried out missionary work after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and in the centuries that followed. Along with the capillary mission within the respective local church structures, those in religious orders in particular played an important role. In the period of transition between the early and the high Middle Ages, military conquest began to be used as a means to spread Christianity. Mission in the form of the expansion of Christian territorial dominion (Latin: *corpus christianum*) thereby became a topos that, in a modified form in colonialism, remained a dimension of Christian mission until the beginning of the 20th century. It was not until the end of European colonial rule in the middle of the 20th century that this mode of mission was replaced.^[8]

3. In the early modern period, the mission of the Western Church globalized. A central cause of this was the permission granted by the Pope for the conquering and exploitation of explored lands on the condition that the latter were Christianized. Mission in Latin America and Africa therefore often occurred by means of coercion. In Asia, there was a greater attempt at adaptation (accommodation) to the local cultures, partly because these cultures were not

consistently devalued in racial terms.^[9] Protestants became actors in globalized mission only with the emergence of continental European pietism and British Puritanism, long after the Reformation itself.

The 19th century has repeatedly been described as the century of Protestant world mission. It is characterized by the now dominant global character of mission. This period united the comprehensive imperialism of Western superpowers, the opening up of large parts of the world through technology and trade, and new models of professionalized mission through non-governmental missionary societies. Circles of supporters sustained the latter via prayers, donations, and vocations. In large parts of Protestant missionary work, this model continues to this day. A re-reading of what was then known as the Great Commission in Matthew 28 also motivated the new impetus for mission within this period.

After the two world wars and in light of the ending of colonialism, this close connection within the colonial era between Western imperialism and its pursuit of hegemony and Christian missionary activity ushered in a mission crisis in the middle of the 20th century. Christian mission entered into an ecumenical age that had to deal with an identity crisis from the beginning. This theological struggle led, on the one hand, to the integration of Christian mission into the World Council of Churches and, on the other hand, to the emergence of a new paradigm for the theological justification of mission.

The systematic-theological concept of God's mission into the world (Latin: *missio dei*) began to establish itself from the middle of the 20th century onwards as the central narrative used to justify Christian mission in all denominations. While the perception of a mission crisis dominated Christianity during large periods of the 20th century, empirical evidence showed that, against all expectations, Christianity in fact grew in the 20th century. Accordingly, the missionary historian Scott W. Sunquist ^{GND} speaks of an "unexpected Christian century."^[10] The explanations for this expansion ultimately lie in the missionary effectiveness of contextual^[11] Christianities^[12] in the global South, the rise of global Pentecostalism, and the missionary impulses of evangelicalism.^[13] In the first half of the 21st century, Christianity has continued to globalize, establishing itself in large numbers on all continents. In the process, it has multiplied into a wide variety of denominational and contextual forms. The number of missionaries sent abroad reached an all-time high of 450,000 in 2025.^[14]

3. Theological Profile

By the end of the 20th century, the notion of the *missio dei*^[15] functioned as the foundational theological framework for Christian mission. Borrowing from Trinitarian theology, this framework characterizes God's mission to the world – whereby God goes beyond himself – as the basis and content of Christian mission. Individual and ecclesial missionary activity is, accordingly, understood as both subordinated and responsive to God's *missio*. Mission thereby retains its central importance for the theology and practice of the Christian faith and can be understood, as Eberhard Jüngel ^{GND} puts it, as the "rhythm of the heart of the church" (*Rhythmus des Herzens der Kirche*).^[16] In the assurance of faith and the practice of Christian discipleship, mission combines the promise and claim of the Gospel. "And in this 'intermediate link' between the sovereign indicative of the Gospel on the one hand and the imperatives that challenge our activities on the other, what rightly deserves to be called *mission* and *evangelization* finds its theological place in life."^[17]

In contrast to the central role that Jüngel gives to mission for theology and Christian practice, more recent projects in systematic theology usually do not make explicit their implicit assumptions and conclusions regarding a theology of mission.^[18] A rare exception is Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen ^{GND} whose Christology places the topos of reconciliation at the centre of the Church's mission in the world^[19] and relates it directly to a theological analysis of reconciliation in religion in general.^[20] He also develops his doctrine of revelation^[21] and the Trinity^[22] within the horizon of a theology of religion. By doing so, he addresses questions about the exclusivity of Jewish-Christian revelation and the universality of its understanding of God that are central within mission theology. In his pneumatology and account of redemption, Kärkkäinen articulates a holistic understanding of redemption that enters into dialogue with

contemporary approaches developed by more holistic theologies of mission.^[23] This dialogue is clearest in his ecclesiology where he conceptualizes the Church from the perspective of its missional existence in the world.^[24]

As for its content, Christian mission can be defined in terms of the interplay between Christian witness,^[25] holistic service, and prophetic dialogue in discipleship.^[26] Christian witness includes all intentional forms of communication of the Gospel, whether verbal or non-verbal – for example, preaching, catechesis, liturgy, and symbolic actions. Holistic service encompasses spontaneous and organized forms of care for fellow creatures and focuses on material, social, physical, and psychological needs on both an individual and societal level. Accompanying witness and concrete service, prophetic dialogue participates in social debates and intercedes on behalf of the marginalized. It does so on the basis of a Christian stance (*Haltung*) and with reference to Christian ethics in the sense of public theology.

Most churches and movements of piety have developed and articulated their own mission profiles:

With its documents on mission (*Ad Gentes*) and religion (*Nostra Aetate*), the Second Vatican Council^[27] represents a significantly new approach within the Roman Catholic Church. Currently, the central document on mission is the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*.^[28] Roman Catholic mission is strongly characterized by its self-image as a world church and by missionary orders.

The contemporary mission document of the World Council of Churches is the 2013 declaration *Together Towards Life*.^[29] Global ecumenical negotiations, questions about what weight should be given to witness, service and advocacy, and a thematically broad understanding of mission are characteristic of this discursive formation of Christianity.

With its resulting *Lausanne Covenant* document,^[30] the Lausanne Congress of 1974 and the subsequent congresses and declarations (Manila 1989, Cape Town 2010, Seoul 2024) are points of reference for global evangelicalism. The relationship within missionary work between evangelization and social action has here become an especially central issue.^[31] In the 1980s, the South African theologian David Bosch  developed the concept of transformation as a conceptual mediator.^[32] A specific feature of many evangelical and Pentecostal mission theologies is an emphasis on personal faith and the pneumatic dimension.

The proclamation of the Gospel, baptism and discipleship, service to others, commitment to a just society, and the integrity of creation constitute the Anglican Community's *Five Marks of Mission*.^[33] They indicate a broader understanding of mission in contemporary Christianity.

The various Christian churches are united by the fact that the nature of mission arises from its object. Drafted by the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, the 2011 document *The Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*^[34] serves as a central point of convergence among the churches for an ethic of mission.

4. Setting in the Lifeworld and Contemporary Themes

Within globalized, post-migrant, and multi-religious contexts, the practices and media of mission found in different religions intermingle in areas of society such as education, politics, law, migration, and media. Because of this, reflection on Christian mission finds points of contact with various fields of discourse in cultural studies and theology. Among some of the currently central themes are mission and interreligious encounters and dialogue^[35] combined with a hermeneutics of the foreign^[36] and questions about proselytism^[37] as well as mission and colonialism^[38] combined with the phenomena of post- and neocolonialism.^[39] Theologically speaking, the question concerning freedom of religion and belief as well as the protection of other human rights is closely linked to mission.

^[40] Especially since the 1970s, discourses have emerged within mission theology that focus on the relationship between evangelization and social action and, since the 1980s, on the relationship between mission and the environment,^[41] with the latter being linked to questions pertaining to the cosmological dimension of salvation.

From these life-world settings and contemporary topics emerge various points of contact with classical and contemporary discourses on Christian ethics. These are worked on in the respective theological and ecclesial traditions as well as in ecumenical dialogue where the independent profiles of the various theologies of mission are also deployed.

Recommended Literature

Bosch, David J., Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Maryknoll 1991.

This is the South African theologian's seminal work that remains internationally acclaimed today. It draws on the paradigm theory introduced to theology by Hans Küng ^{GND}. In the first main section, the mission paradigm of the early church is developed as a New Testament theology of mission. The second main section provides an overview of historical paradigms as the history of mission. The third part develops an ecumenical paradigm for the 21st century.

Kim, Kirsteen et al. (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies, Oxford 2022.

As essential English handbook on the subject, this work provides introduction and guidance on key aspects of Christian mission in the past and present.

Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World (Volume 1-5), Grand Rapids 2013-2017.

The five-volume dogmatics of the Lutheran and Pentecostal theologian is consistently developed within the horizon of a theology of religions. It offers the most profound examination of topics of mission theology within contemporary systematic theology.

Robert, Dana L., Christian Mission. How Christianity Became a World Religion, Chichester 2009.

As a standard work in English, this book provides an introduction to the history of Christian mission, focusing on developments from the year 1500 onwards.

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- ³ Cf. Koschorke, Klaus, Grundzüge der Außereuropäischen Christentumsgeschichte. Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika 1450–2000, Tübingen 2022, XV–XVI.
- ⁴ See in particular the anthology edited by Ratschiller, Linda/Wetjen, Karolin (Eds.), Verflochtene Mission. Perspektiven auf eine neue Missionsgeschichte, Köln 2018.
- ⁵ For a comprehensive approach to a global history of Christian mission under the aspect of migration, see Hanciles, Jehu H., Migration and the Making of Global Christianity, Grand Rapids 2021.
- ⁶ Sievernich, Michael, Die christliche Mission. Geschichte und Gegenwart, Darmstadt 2009, 28, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ⁷ Cf. Feldtkeller, Mission, 1276.
- ⁸ On the changes in the neo-colonial era in the second half of the 20th century and the differences between colonialism and imperialism in their relationship to mission see Ahn, Kyo Seong, Christian Mission and Colonialism, in: Kim, Kirsteen et al. (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies, Oxford 2022, 330–347, 331.
- ⁹ For the image of China created by Christian missionaries, cf. Maier, Bernhard, Die Bekehrung der Welt. Eine Geschichte der christlichen Mission in der Neuzeit, München 2021, 167–170.
- ¹⁰ Sunquist, Scott W., The Unexpected Christian Century. The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000, Grand Rapids 2015.

- ¹¹ Cf. Vellguth, Klaus, Art. Kontextuelle Theologien, in: Handbuch Interkulturelle Theologie, 25.07.2024 (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-66324-0_45-1), accessed on 07.04.2026.
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- ¹⁴ The data is taken from the statistics on global Christianity that have been published annually since 1985 and that are now also available on the World Christian Database. See Zurlo, Gina A./Johnson, Todd (Eds.), Status of Global Christianity, 2025, in the Context of 1900–2050, Leiden/Boston (PDF-Dokument, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2025/01/Status-of-Global-Christianity-2025.pdf>), accessed on 07.04.2026, 1–2, 1.
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- ¹⁶ Jüngel, Eberhard, Mission und Evangelisation, in: Jüngel, Eberhard (Ed.), Ganz werden. Theologische Erörterungen V, Tübingen 2003, 115–136, 115.
- ¹⁷ Jüngel, Mission, 122, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ¹⁸ Even the decidedly conservative dogmatics of Wayne Grudem  from within Anglo-Saxon evangelicalism only develops mission on a brief page in the ecclesiology under the tasks of the churches. Cf. Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Nottingham ⁷2000, 867–868.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, Christ and Reconciliation. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 1, Grand Rapids 2013, 364–380.
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- ²¹ Cf. Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, Trinity and Revelation. A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 2, Grand Rapids 2014, 123–178.
- ²² Cf. Kärkkäinen, Trinity, 363–417.
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- ²⁷ Cf. Schelhas, Johannes, Art. Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil, kirchengeschichtsdidaktisch, in: WiReLex (<https://bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/201102/>), accessed on 07.04.2026.
- ²⁸ Cf. Papst Franziskus, Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolisches Schreiben über die Verkündigung des Evangeliums in der Welt von heute, 24.11.2013 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), accessed on 07.04.2026.
- ²⁹ Cf. World Council of Churches, Together towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, 2013 (PDF, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf), accessed on 07.04.2026.
- ³⁰ Cf. Lausanne Movement (Ed.), Die Lausanner Verpflichtung, 1974 (<https://lausanne.org/de/statement/lausanner-verpflichtung>), accessed on 07.04.2026.
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- ³² The term is first reflected prominently in a document of Christian missionary movements in Lausanne Movement (Ed.), Transformation. The Church in Response to Human Need, 12.06.1983 (<https://lausanne.org/content/statement/transformation-the-church-in-response-to-human-need>), accessed on 07.04.2026. The term became influential for missionary theology at the end of the 20th century, particularly through the monograph by Bosch, David J., published in 1992, Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Maryknoll ¹⁰1996.
- ³³ Cf. <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>, accessed on 07.04.2026.
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- ³⁷ For an introductory definition of the term “proselytism” from the perspective of religious studies and intercultural theology, see Robert, Marie-Hélène, Proselytism in Christian Churches. Insights from the European Scene, in: Kim, Kirsteen et al. (Eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies, Oxford 2022, 219–237, 220–221.
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