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**Preliminary Thoughts on Mission  
as a Comparative Category  
in the Study of Religion  
Discussion Paper**

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## 1. Introduction

Today I would like to present the first thoughts on comparing the three religious traditions that made up my thesis topic. In my thesis I analyze the textual traditions of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism asking the question: is there something in these religions which one could name missionary activity and if so, can these activities be compared to each other using the term mission as a comparative category of the study of religion? Unfortunately, I cannot give an in-depth analysis of all the primary and secondary sources used to come to these conclusions as my timeframe is limited. I have presented some in earlier workshops, but of course you can ask questions regarding the origins of these findings in the subsequent discussion. Today I would like to show you firstly, what I found out analyzing terms and definitions for and of missionary activities in the three religions, secondly I would like to talk about the textual sources and how mission is portrayed in them and thirdly I will talk about what this tells us regarding a comparative category of mission. Please keep in mind that these are excerpts of a work in progress and all here presented thoughts are preliminary and open for discussion.

## 2. The terms

Category	Buddhism	Christianity	Islam
<b>Most used</b>	<i>Dharmaduta</i> (ambassador of dharma)	Mission (emissary)	<i>Da'wa</i> (invitation)
<b>Less frequently used</b>	<i>dhammadesana</i> (explaining the dharma), <i>dhammakata</i> (discussing the dharma) <i>upaya</i> (skilful means)	Evangelizing Apostle	<i>Tabligh</i> (transmitting the message)
<b>Derogatory</b>	<i>Mishonary</i>	Proselytism	<i>Tabshir</i>

By analyzing secondary and comparative literature I did indeed find terms for the active propagation of the respective faith in Islam and Buddhism as well as in Christianity. The most common are *dharmaduta* and *da'wa* which are often used as analogues to the Christian mission (cf. WALTERS 1992: 203, CANARD 1986: 168). I used religious texts to analyze these terms in their scope and meaning to find out if they could actually be used just like the Christian concept of mission.

The term *dharmaduta* (translated as “ambassador of *dharma*”) unfortunately does not predate the late 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century and furthermore originated in Sri Lanka, where the Buddhist community actively sought to create a world religion with similar structures to Christianity in order to defend itself against their very active missionary drive. That is why most critical and post-colonial scholars argue that Buddhism does not have a missionary drive, as the term for discussing it cannot be found in canonical scriptures (WALTERS 1992:

204). The interesting thing is that the same goes for the Christian concept of mission which, as a term, was only coined in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Catholic monks and was furthermore not used as an exclusive term for religious missions until the 18<sup>th</sup> century (SIEVERNICH 2009: 11). So both these frequently used terms for missionary activity cannot be found in the canonical source materials of the respective tradition. On the other hand, as I argue in my thesis, the absence of these modern terms used by comparative studies of today does not mean that the *concept* of religious propagation is missing. As the second line of the table above shows, other, though less frequently used terms can be found in the scriptures such as *dhammadhesana* (explaining the *dharma*), *dhammadkata* (discussing the *dharma*) and many more. The same goes for the Christian mission which also means “ambassador” or “emissary”. Additional terms such as evangelizing or apostle denote the spreading of the faith in biblical scriptures and, thus, clearly show that there was a discourse about spreading the faith. Unfortunately, the term mission, despite its fairly young coinage as the exclusive term for Christian propagation, is used invariably for all forms of Christian propagation even for those of the biblical times that did not use this term (cf. SIEVERNICH 2009). Thus it is more of a discursive category and less of a clearly defined term, thereby making it difficult to outline the semantic field it covers.

Islam and the term *da'wa* are quite different in this regard. *Da'wa* (unlike mission and *dharmaduta*) does appear in the Qur'an, but, as with most terms from Qur'anic literature, the semantic field of the word remains obscure. Technically it means “to invite someone” which contains worldly invitations (such as to a feast), but also the invitation to join the religion of Islam (WROGEMANN 2006: 20-21). It is hard to isolate the meaning of the term from Qur'anic verses alone. It is used as an imperative toward Muslims to invite people to Islam although it is hard to isolate if this imperative means to invite people to the religion of Islam or the Islamic political sphere, which at this time were very much intertwined (POSTON 1992: 70). As the Qur'an also speaks of “false *da'wa*” for example by Satan one can carefully speculate that it at least also means a religious invitation.

However, *da'wa* conveys so many different meanings through history and simultaneously in modern times that it is hardly useful as a category for Muslim missionary activity. The more analogue term to the Christian mission is *tabligh*. *Tabligh*, though less frequently used by Muslims or scientists, is very often regarded as synonym of *da'wa* (RACIUS 2004: 35), but sometimes it is also used to differentiate between *da'wa* as a passive invitation to Islam and a more organized and goal driven approach (WALKER 1995: 345). I argue that *da'wa* should be used to denote preaching and other forms of informing people about Islam while *tabligh* should be used as the organized mission which the comparison with Christian mission implies. *Dharmaduta* means “ambassador of *dharma*” which is, as my analysis has shown, the same semantic field denoted by the Christian missionary, who is an emissary (of Christ) in its original meaning. This shows that the term was coined in Sri Lanka by modelling the Buddhist revival and subsequent mission decidedly on Christian ideals. Therefore *dharmaduta* is a useful term for Buddhist mission (KEMPER 2005: 26). But one has to keep in mind that the form of planful and organized mission it denotes does not have canonical antecedents, although the concept of preaching the *dharma* to people has.

One of the questions my thesis endeavours to answer is how the ideal of the Christian missionary endeavour influenced the other two religions. By coining the terms *tabligh* and

*dharmaduta* to denote organized missionary activity, the influence of Christianity is clearly visible. The situation of the religious economy, in which Christian missionary activity increasingly threatened the self-understanding of Buddhists and Muslims alike, triggered the search for methods of consolidation and organization of which a discourse on mission was a part. Thus, new forms of organized mission and terms to designate these were coined using the Christian example as a guide. But keep in mind: I am not saying that Buddhists and Muslims merely copied the Christian missionary concept. Just as the Protestant Christians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century copied Catholic missionary methods while still distancing themselves from Catholicism (WALTERS 1992: 45), Buddhist missionaries also tried to establish their mission as something different and better. That is why both Buddhism and Islam have their own terms to denominate the vile, wrong and sneaky form of mission, which the Christians practice according to their worldview.

Another somewhat difficult term in this schematic is the concept of *upaya* (generally translated as skilful means). It is the central concept for promoting Buddhist teaching in a *mahayana*-scripture – known famously as the Lotus Sutra. This concept states that every person can achieve Buddhahood in this life, regardless of mental capabilities, status and possibly even gender (PEACH 2002: 444). But in order for everyone to understand the teaching the preacher has to employ methods of teaching that take into account the specific mental capabilities of the people he preaches to. Therefore he must learn to use metaphors and stories to explain the teaching specifically crafted to his audience (PYE 1978: 11). Although *upaya* is a concept of Mahayana Buddhism and appears therefore much later than the canonical Pali sources it is extremely important as one of the first missiological texts in Buddhism. Here we find not only the widening of the Buddha concept to incorporate all human beings, but also systematic thoughts on how to guide them onto this path.

### 3. The Sources

Category	Buddhism	Christianity	Islam
<b>Most used</b>	Buddha’s “great commission”	The “great commission”	Qur’an 16:125
<b>Less frequently used</b>	Brahma cycle Lotus Sutra	Pre-crucifixion- Jesus Acts of the Apostles Paul’s Letters	Qur’an 3:104, 10:25; Hadith literature
<b>Non-canonical</b>	Legends of Ashoka	Apostolic apocrypha	Sufi-legends
<b>Missiological commentaries</b>	Not before 18 <sup>th</sup> century (unless counting Lotus Sutra)	Canonical and immediately after	Not before 20 <sup>th</sup> century

Canonical textual sources that (allegedly) show the missionary endeavour of important persons of the respective traditions have been compared extensively in scientific literature over the centuries. The most frequently used are Buddha’s so called great commission, Jesus’ great commission and Qur’an 16:125 respectively. The first tells the story of the

historical Buddha, who sends the first *arhats* (monks) out to wander through the lands and preach the dharma. Thus it is often read as a Buddhist analogue to the Christian version, in which post-crucifixion-Jesus appears in front of his disciples to send them out into the world to baptize People (cf. Mahavagga Vinayapitaka, Math. 18:16-20). Post-colonial buddhologists argue that Buddha's great commission is not an imperative toward the monks to preach the dharma, but most likely part of the texts that regulate life in the monasteries. Thus he would *allow* the monks to wander and preach and not *command* them to, as Jesus did (WALTERS 1992: 229). I argue that this is most likely the case and that reading Buddha's great commission as a commission is most certainly an Orientalist construct but that it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because Jesus' great commission and several other biblical references to missionary activity are most likely constructed as such in post-canonical times as well. Islam here again is more difficult to grasp: Qur'an 16:125 states that one should call people to Islam by using appealing speech and good arguments. This can be read as a missionary commission either from god to Mohammed or from Mohammed to the Islamic community. This issue has been discussed by Islamic scholars from the beginning, although no consensus was reached (cf. RACIUS 2004: 79). What matters is that all these sources show there was a discourse about mission in all three traditions.

The scientific trope of Christian mission being the only valid form of missionary activity can thus not be explained by the lack of missionary discourse in the other two religions. My studies indicate the real reason may be the lack of missiological discourse. Missiology that is the extrapolation of methods and modes of conduct for mission from the canon is *actually* the one thing that Christianity can claim to have from the beginning, which Buddhism and Islam lack. The Bible itself contains the first missiological musings in the letters and speeches of the apostle Paul, who used acculturative means to make the Christian message more appealing to the different audiences he spoke before (SIEVERNICH 2009: 33). For example, when he preached to Jews he emphasized Jesus' Jewish heritage (Acts 13:14-52), when he preached to polytheists he emphasized the power of the monotheistic God by rendering the story of Genesis (Acts 14:15). Furthermore, Paul *already* modelled his mission on interpretations of Jesus and the disciples. He had been converted after the death and resurrection of Jesus and had thus himself not been part of the first Christian missionary endeavour. If he wanted to work in the name of these first missionaries, he had to interpret the source material to extrapolate how they preached and worked.

In Buddhism and Islam on the other hand, there is no missiological musings on how Buddha, Ashoka, Mohammed or Sufi preachers actually conducted their dispersion of the faith. These two religions did not establish missiological discourses until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. And even today most Islamic literature on this topic is more concerned with the aspects of religious law that should govern missionary endeavours than actually establishing missionary methods and strategies using the Qur'an and Hadith literature (RACIUS 2004: 96). 19<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism in Sri Lanka, for example, started to incorporate lesser aspects of practice such as meditation into everyday religious conduct as it was believed that this would make the religion more marketable to westerners (GOMBRICH / OBEYESEKERE 1988: 237-240). In my thesis I strongly argue that the lack of missiology, not the lack of mission is the reason for the trope of Christianity as the only missionary religion.

## 4. The Methods

<b>Method</b>	<b>Related methods</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Preaching/ oral mission/ teaching</b>	Preaching in certain locations, travelling, translating, print, explaining, dialogue, new media	Protestant missionary societies Ahmadiyya Tablighi Jamaat
<b>Acculturation/ skilful means</b>	Language, philosophical / religious / cultural metaphors, examples from everyday life, translating, targeting special group, special methods for special situations	Paul's letters Catholic missions (Rites Controversy)
<b>Organized mission</b>	Institutionalization, financing, training	Protestant missionary societies Maha Bodhi Society
<b>Professionalization</b>	Traditional religious professionals, professionally trained laymen (sometimes all members of the community)	Buddhist monks, Mormons, Pentecostal churches
<b>Disputation/ discussion/ dialogue</b>	Aggressive attack on other faiths, proving them wrong, logical argumentation in favour of own faith, applying faith to social situation	Punjab in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka
<b>Lifestyle evangelism/ capillary mission</b>	Witness, good lifestyle, friendliness, presence	Early Christianity Modern Islam

In my comparative study I have isolated six types of missionary activity that are used by all three religions albeit at different respective times. The method denoted by most of the terms I found in the sources is some form of oral transmission or preaching. It seems that the conveyance of the respective religious teachings and stories lies at the core of a comparative definition of mission, which my thesis is trying to find. And it is only logical: to make people curious about the teaching, it has to be brought to them. This conveying of the message can take different shapes and overlaps with other methods that I have denoted here, but at the core it always has as its goal to get the message across to the people. This can be achieved by preaching orally (e.g. in public places), by distributing literature, by translating, by engaging in debates or dialogues or by question and answer sessions. From what I gathered every missionary religion that enters a religious economy today sets up systems to communicate thusly before anything else e.g. by setting up a website in the local language for example.

The second group of methods is more highly contested within the respective communities. It revolves around the question if the religious message can and should be adapted according to the audience and cultural setting in which it is preached. Although

many groups favour to keep the message somewhat pure and claim not to make excuses for special circumstances, in reality some form of skilful preaching and acculturation always takes place, as the success of mission cannot be guaranteed otherwise. Although one should keep in mind that there is always the chance of a fundamentalist return to the “purity” of the faith, such as was the case in the Catholic Rites Controversy for example (cf. MUNGELLO 1994: 5). Methods used in this context try to take the economic, political, cultural, religious, etc. situation of the subjects into account and thus highlight certain aspects of the faith or deemphasize others. The most famous example of this type of Mission are the speeches and letters of the Apostle Paul, who used a different approach to preaching for every audience.

Thirdly, there is a tendency, especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for missionary endeavours to be a highly organized affair. Most comparative studies on mission state that organizational structures are a prerequisite of calling a movement missionary in the first place (cf. BOCHINGER 1997: 180). I strongly argue that this is not the case. Many missionary endeavours in all three religions were not backed by an organized framework or they were *nominally*, but in reality the institution was far away from and little involved in the actual fieldwork of the missionaries. The Protestant missionary societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were so well organized, funded and hierarchically structured, that many religions that shared a religious economy with them became very scared that their own religions which were highly decentralized and still operated on a village to village basis would not be able to compete and thus die out. So they started to establish their own structures of hierarchy and organization to better coordinate their endeavours to protect themselves from Christian influence. That is probably why, to this day, most missionary endeavours are strongly modelled after the Protestant missionary societies. The Buddhism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented by the Maha Bodhi Society and other newly founded institutions operate like this till today. Islam again is special in this context. While the focus of most Buddhist societies active in the west today is to make westerners familiar with Buddhism and also gain adherents among them, the focus of newly founded Islamic groups are actually other Muslims. Prominent examples from every Islamic spectrum range from the conservative Muslim Brotherhood to Sufi-like movements like the Jamaat i-islami or Tablighi Jamaat. Their self-proclaimed goal is to seek out Muslims who have allegedly distanced themselves from Islam – either by adapting to western societies or by practising elements of folk-religion – and reconvert them into the fold of the proper Islamic way of life (cf. GUGLER 2009: 4). Because these movements work primarily with people already belonging to Islam, most comparative studies do not consider their endeavours mission in the sense of my definition of the term. But I argue in my text that this is a trope influenced by reading Muslim mission through a Christian lens.

If you look again at the derogatory terms used by the religions to denote the missionary methods of competitors you will see that Christians use the term proselytism. During Jesus’ lifetime this term denoted Jewish endeavours to convert polytheists of the Hellenistic world to the Israeli religion (ALBRECHT 2009: 19). But after the reformation and especially when both the Protestant and the Catholic church were sending missionaries out into the colonies the term came to denote methods to convert someone from one Christian faith to another. This was sometimes termed “sheep stealing” and was seen as highly negative by all denominations and thus resented. That is why over the course of several missionary

conferences the Catholic Church and most of the large Protestant denominations agreed to discontinue the practice. The only Christian group actively practising proselytism today are the Pentecostal churches who have no qualms about converting other Christians and are thus viewed as a nuisance by the other groups (GRUNDMANN 1999: 1719). This negative view towards inter-denominational mission must also have influenced the (primarily Christian) students of religious studies when they first systematized missionary methods. That is most likely why this type of mission in Islam is usually not termed mission, and thus Islam is often not seen as a missionary religion at all. I argue that these efforts do constitute mission as these groups try to get other Muslims to adhere to their specific version of Islam. Therefore, Islam is also a missionary religion.

The fourth group of methods I isolated is the tendency to professionalize the spreading of the faith if it was not in professional hands from the beginning. Groups in all three religions have established training programmes, schools and lists of talents which a missionary should acquire before or during his term of propagating the faith. The Catholic orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans for example recognized the need for language and intercultural training as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century and coached the monks accordingly before sending them into the field (SIEVERNICH 2009: 62-63). Buddhist mission, at least as far as the scarce sources allow us to speculate, was firmly in the hands of monks up until the “protestantization” of the religion from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward (GOMBRICH / OBEYESEKERE 1988: 202-240). Most missionary movements of contemporary times though do not send religious professionals, but educated laymen into the field. The degree and type of education varies between the different groups, but generally includes the canon and theology of the sending religion plus those of the specific denomination or tradition, intercultural training or cultural studies, foreign languages and sometimes also courses on comparative religion. Most groups provide this training internally within their own education system, only few have such strong ties to a federal government as to offer their training within the formal education system. In Germany the Protestant and the Catholic churches have university programmes for missionary training and several Islamic countries (such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia) also have universities with a *da’wa* program (RACIUS 2004: 104-106). Of course there are teachings and methods which compel ordinary adherents of the religion to be active missionaries “in the world”, but we will look at those later. Sometimes it is mandatory for all members of the community to be active missionaries for at least a short period of time and therefore they all have to receive some training. The Mormon Church, for example, requires a missionary tour from all young men in the community before which they are compelled to visit a Bible Camp to prepare for their work in the field.

The next method which I found in all three religions is the argumentative presentation of the faith. This can range from polemical attacks which try to disprove the faith of the missionary subjects to interreligious dialogues in which faith-related topics are discussed comparatively with only a slight chance of conversion at the end. These of course can take place in oral face-to-face settings but may also use impersonal channels such as letter columns in magazines and newspapers, books and pamphlets, and of course discussion panels on the internet. While I was researching the Ahmadiyya movement in the Punjab of the 19<sup>th</sup> century I came across the highly competitive conditions under which all religions there wrote about and publicly discussed each other’s faiths (VAN DER LINDEN 2008).

Ghulam Ahmad as one example wrote several books discrediting competing faiths such as Christianity by discrediting Jesus' moral character or by logical argumentation depicting Islam as a purer form of monotheism (LAVAN 1971: 329).

Another interesting style of argumentative disputation uses logic, as learned from western schools of thinking, and sometimes even scientific logic to prove the superiority of one faith over the other. Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu thinkers all have written analytical studies to show that for example the discoveries of western natural science are predated in their canonical source material, whereas the legends surrounding Jesus and his disciples have no logical foothold. Some even use modes of historical-critical textual analysis to prove that their respective texts have been transmitted purely, unlike the other scriptures which are shown to have been corrupted over time (RACIUS 2004: 92).

Lastly, there are missionary methods that are specifically designed to be used by the ordinary adherents and require no specific training. These are often termed lifestyle evangelism or capillary mission. They basically denote that sometimes the presence of a group of faithful can be enough to attract interested subjects to the otherwise unknown faith who might even learn to accept it as a consequence. Methodically this mission is governed by certain rules of conduct which are designed to cast a favourable light on the religious community in question. Modern Islamic thinkers publish rules for capillary mission with amazing regularity highlighting hospitality, being devout and modest, not showing negative behaviour in public and to always take time to explain the religious customs to guests and to answer all questions they might have (POSTON 1992: 117-122). Early Christianity from apostolic times onward is said to have been spread primarily by this method through prominent citizens with large estates who converted along with their servants and slaves (SIEVERNICH 2009: 68).

By analyzing the source material and the terms therein for missionary activity I have come to the following conclusions: All three religions have a drive for missionary activity that can be based on canonical material. All three have through the duration of their existence had a discourse about the propagation and explanation of the faith, although sometimes other discourses dominated and the missionary discourse became quieter. Buddhism and Islam learned many missionary methods and the reading of missionary concepts into source material from Christianity, also many students of comparative religion read missionary discourses into source material looking for similarities. This created many scientific tropes. Postmodern study tried to uncover these tropes by proving that there was no mission in Buddhism and Islam at all. I say we have to go beyond this postmodern reconstruction. There clearly are missionary discourses but we have to reconstruct them again, not by negating them, but by comparing them to each other and thus highlighting the specifics of each discourse. Up to the colonial contact with Christianity the missionary discourses in Buddhism and Islam have a unique makeup which has to be studied in greater depth by analyzing specific situations of religious contact with a focus on discursive methods that make use of the languages of *dhamaduta* and *da'wa* or *dharmadesana* and *tabligh* respectively. As I have shown there are many sources and historical ideals which could have been, and probably were, invoked in such situations.

## 5. Conclusion

In my thesis I wanted to present a first tentative definition of the term mission, deconstructed and reconstructed by postmodern discourses that might be used as a comparative term for religious studies. As I have shown *da'wa* and the Christian mission are discursive fields more than they are clearly defined terms. That is why I reject the use of *da'wa* as a comparative term to mission in religious dialogue or otherwise. Mission being such a broad field also is mostly used to describe organized missionary endeavours by missionary societies from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. If one clearly denotes the semantic field of mission meaning organized mission then it can be used as comparative with *dharmaduta* and *tabligh*. Christian mission before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the *da'wa* discourse of Islam and the early Buddhist preaching should be studied in greater depth to show which semantic fields and terms are used and which methods these imply. One thing that I can say for certain is that examples or precedents for the propagation of faith are very important to missionaries in all three traditions. If mission is carried out it has to be modelled after an exemplary personage from canon or tradition as there is always a right and a wrong way to do mission. This is also seen by the derogatory terms for wrong mission that I have found in all three religions.

From my careful first overview I can only offer a broad definition of what a comparative category mission might consist of, if it tries to take into account the pre-modern and the modern mission: "Mission is the endeavour to make one's faith known to others by using certain methods of propagation which are modelled on precedents and examples within the religious tradition." This is then carried out by the methods and organizational forms indicated.

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