It is impossible to predict the full impact of David Barrett’s massive encyclopedia on the field of missiology in the coming decades. Some things are obvious. It will become a standard reference work in academic circles and will provide scholars with the most comprehensive survey of the status and growth of the church around the world now available. The extensive country by country reviews will stimulate further studies and, in some cases, deeper commitments on the part of some to the mission of the church. The encyclopedia will be widely quoted in sermons to make one point or another, and there will be arguments over the accuracy over details. Of greater consequence is the fact that it presents a comprehensive picture that will mold the strategies of mission and church agencies alike.

My concern here is a narrow one. What will the impact of the encyclopedia be on future research in missiology, particularly my own. Certainly it will stimulate research and suggest new lines of investigation, but its importance lies even deeper.

Establishing a Base Line

Basic research begins with descriptions of a single field of information — whether this be a person, a tribe, a nation or some other unit of analysis. On the basis of this data theoretical explanations are built. For example, historians may describe the conditions of a country at a given period in time, anthropologists write ethnographies of specific tribes, and sociologists analyse the nature of a city.

Higher level theories build upon these basic studies and seek to provide systems of explanation that are comparative in nature and general in scope. They can be applied to many settings and times. For instance, historians analyse conditions in a country at different times to understand change and
compare histories to find general trends. Anthropologists compare different cultures to investigate human similarities and dissimilarities.

The primary value of Barrett's work is its contribution to a broad comparative understanding of Christianity in the world and to general theories. Other studies will give more detail and accurate data on Christianity in specific countries or societies. But Barrett has drawn together a wealth of data that for once gives us a reliable overview of the state of the church and missions around the world today. The data lends itself to comparative studies both synchronically between different parts of the world, and diachronically over periods of time. Such studies will serve as the basis of many a class room assignment. Moreover, the overview will provide important additions, updates and corrections to earlier works such as Glover's *The Progress of World-wide Missions* (1939) and the *Mission Handbook* (1973) on which many of us were reared, and which served as the basis for much mission planning. In this sense the Encyclopedia provides us with a new benchmark from which future changes can be measured.

**Determining the Categories**

When we study single bodies of information, the categories used can be context specific. For examples, anthropologists studying a particular tribe often use the categories of the tribe itself to analyse its culture. The use of native categories (sometimes referred to as "emic" categories) is helpful in seeing the world as the natives themselves see it. However, emic categories are not suitable in comparative studies. The latter require categories that can be applied to many different contexts with a minimum of distortion of each. Such categories must be above any one context and provide a basis for comparing them all in order that valid comparisons may be made. Moreover, they must be effective tools in helping us to understand more general patterns and trends.

Barrett is aware of the problems inherent in creating categories for organizing data, and he provides us with explicit information on most of those he uses. Less explicit is the fact that the definitions of key terms are determined by theories, and that those who control the definitions can specify the particular theory within which further discussion will take place. In choosing some categories and not others, and in defining them explicitly, Barrett gives expression to his own theoretical framework. Probably nowhere is this more obvious in the Encyclopedia than in his definitions of such terms as "evangelized," "unreached" and "hidden." These terms have been the center of some current theoretical debate. Using his own carefully drawn scale (pp. 120-121) but without clarifying exactly how the measurements are calculated, Barrett concludes that 1,381 million of the world's people are unevangelized, and less than one half of these are unreached. He notes that only 309 million, or 636 people groups, are truely "hidden" (p. 19). These figures differ markedly from figures cited by others in the field, but the differences, to a considerable extent, reflect differences in theoretical
positions rather than in data. Barrett’s findings do not undermine the urgency of the missionary task as some will undoubtedly suggest. Rather it provides us with a better basis for planning a diversity of mission strategies that are responsive to the complex realities of the modern world. The goal of missions is not that people hear the Gospel, but that they also believe and grow to Christian maturity within the context of living churches.

Barrett’s scale of evangelism takes into account many more variables than have been considered in scales used in the past. It orders the extent to which countries are evangelized along a continuum. The result is a more powerful and refined tool for analyzing the spread of Christianity. Unfortunately, the details of the scale and its methods of calculation have not been included in the Encyclopedia but are promised in a companion volume.

Closely related to Barrett’s taxonomy of evangelism is his classification of religions. Here the divisions are relatively straightforward, although as the author points out, in reality things are often more fuzzy. Some claim to belong to more than one religion, and all are involved in different religions in varying degrees. The author deals with the former problem by assigning all people to a single category except in a few specific instances. He deals with the latter, as it applies to Christianity, by drawing up a second taxonomy that runs from profession of Christianity to affiliation and then to practicing. The latter is further divided according to levels of commitment. This scale of commitment is an improvement over earlier taxonomies that often tended to be dichotomous in character. However, again the methods used to evaluate commitment are not clearly spelled out. At best any scale must of necessity be based on phenomenological observations for we cannot know the commitments of people in their hearts. In one sense the scale is an improvement over the Engel Scale\(^1\) in that it does not reduce Christian commitment to a purely cognitive dimension.

The major set of categories in the Encyclopedia is nations. This makes the data comparable with large bodies of economic, social and political data such as the United Nations statistical tables which are organized on the basis of nation states. This should stimulate multivariant studies of considerable sophistication.

Another cluster of categories has to do with races, ethnolinguistic families, peoples and cultures. Here Barrett is influenced by British Structural Functionalist theories which dominated a large part of anthropological thought in the English speaking world from the 1930s to the 1960s. These theories saw societies as neatly bounded groups of people of the same race, occupying the same territory, speaking the same language and sharing the same culture. They were developed from research carried out in tribal societies in sub-Saharan Africa and the South Sea Islands. Later attempts to apply it to other parts of the world, particularly to peasant and urban societies, have called this view of cultures as neatly bounded homogeneous groups into question, and race, culture, language and geography have come to be seen as different dimensions of human organization related to each other in complex
ways. In grouping them into a single taxonomy, Barrett overlooks the fact that linguistic, cultural and racial groups rarely coincide with one another or with geographic and racial groups.

The weakest categories in the Encyclopedia are those of "race." Attempts to define race scientifically in phenomenological terms such as color, hair shape, prognathism, head shape and the shape of lips and eyes show that there are no clear boundaries dividing races, nor any consistent set of characteristics by which they can be distinguished. The continued intermixing of so-called races makes any such phenomenological classification highly suspect. Consequently such classifications, particularly the old divisions of Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasoid, Australoid and Capoid, which are far too simplistic, have been dropped from contemporary scientific literature. Unfortunately Barrett resurrects these terms and thereby reinforces the myths surrounding the concept of "race" that have plagued western Christian and missionary thought. Modern studies of race deal with it in terms of genotypes measured by variables such as blood types and gene strings, and the racial divisions that emerge from these have little correspondence with the phenomenological categories we have in our heads.

While we must reject the concept of race as an objective taxonomy for classifying people on the basis of stock, geography and color — the three criteria Barrett uses in his taxonomy — the concept is useful when it is defined in sociological terms. Races are categories people use to divide human beings on the basis of their perceptions of biological affinities and differences. Because people think in terms of these folk categories, these become important in understanding the people's behavior. For example, while many so-called "blacks" in the U.S. are more than half "white" in genetic terms, they are socially classed as blacks by most Caucasians.

Barrett's ethnolinguistic categories are more useful for they draw heavily upon the well developed taxonomies developed by linguists. The equation of culture with linguistic groupings is less useful and is a reflection of the Structural Functionalist equation of the two. It presents a distorted picture of the modern national scene in which migration, urbanization, wars and other forces have precipitated mass movements of people. In such a context a more dynamic model of social organization is needed for planning mission strategy.

The use of cultural distance scales, too, raises serious methodological problems. At best the differences can be measured only by very subjective assessments. It would probably be more useful to use measures such as the "openness" or "closedness" of a society developed by Edgerton in his study of ethnocentrism. Greater cultural differences do not necessarily mean greater resistance to change. Here it might be more useful to define "culture" as do the American Historicists such as Kroeber and Linton and by their successors who studied cultural diffusion, planned change and acculturation. Among the latter, Barnett (1953), Goodenough (1963), and their missionary counterparts, Tippett (1971) and Loewen (1975), have made significant
contributions to our understanding of the bridges and barriers to introducing changes in other societies.

Other categories used in the Encyclopedia such as denominations and the political status of geographic regions are less problematic and are based on contemporary research in the fields of religion and political science.

It is important to look at the categories Barrett uses, for as has been noted, the definition of terms often determines which paradigm will be used in the analysis. The debate is important, for many mission agencies are being influenced in their strategy planning by one or another of the current theories being advanced.

Findings

There is no way to review briefly the critical findings of the Encyclopedia. Many of them will surface only as further calculations are performed on the massive data base. However, a few important points can be made.

One encouraging finding is the rapid growth of the church around the world (p. 4) showing that Christianity has grown two hundred and sixty percent in the past eighty years. Even at this pace, the church has not quite kept up with the population explosion that has occurred in the less developed countries in the last century. Much of the growth has been in countries once largely hidden from the gospel. The result has been a massive shift of the center of Christianity from the west. Christians in the two-thirds world made up only seventeen percent of world Christianity in 1900 A.D. Today they make up forty-nine percent. Barrett projects that by the end of this century they will make up sixty percent of the world’s Christians.

A discouraging note has to do with the spread of nominalism and secularism in the west. The vitality of young churches around the world stands in sharp contrast to the complacency of many of the western churches where institutionalization and secularism have taken their toll. Nearly three million church attenders in Europe and North America cease to be practicing Christians each year (p. 7). Some have gone so far as to claim that Christian missions have been one of the great secularizing forces in the modern world. The figures are sobering for North American churches have often exported their world views. Has western Christianity adopted a modern materialist world view and is it in danger of becoming a civil religion (cf. Linder and Pierard 1978)? Or can renewal take place in churches that once served as the center of God’s mission activity?

Another great concern is the rapid growth of Islam in the last century. While other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have undergone renewal movements in response to the challenge of Christianity, Islam has expanded its frontiers by migration, missions and political control. If Islam and Christianity continue to grow at the rates they have since the beginning of the twentieth century, the former will overtake the latter by the year 2150 A.D. If they grow at the rates Barrett projects for the last two decades of this century, Muslims will outnumber Christians by 2090 A.D.
One of the great needs highlighted by the study is that of leadership in the young churches. A comparison of the statistics (pp. 4, 782, 798, 803) shows that there is one Christian worker (national and foreign) for every 346 Christians and 54 non-Christians (3 of whom are unevangelized) in North America and Europe; one for every 677 Christians and 2581 non-Christians (of whom 1254 are unevangelized) in the two-thirds world; and one for every 1593 Christians and 2822 non-Christians (of whom 1280 are unevangelized) in the USSR. This would suggest that while the churches in the developing world show vitality and growth, they face a leadership crisis that may lead to a lack of spiritual maturity and growth in the churches in the long run.

Conclusion

Barrett's work will stimulate and mold research and theoretical debate in the years to come. It will also influence those involved in the work of the church and in missions. Because of this we need to take both the findings and the theoretical foundations seriously and test them further so that the consequences may be to the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Note

1. Dr. Jim Engle has developed much more sophisticated models of conversion. Unfortunately these are often overlooked in favor of the early scale that measured steps to conversion on the basis of cognitive knowledge.

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