
Culture and Evangelism: A Model for Missiological Strategy

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This article applies the three-cultures model to the evangelistic distance model developed by McGavran and expanded by Wagner and Winter. Using cultural difference as the criterion for evangelistic distance, a cross-cultural strategy is developed. This strategy places the responsibility for effective evangelism on those who are culturally most similar to the recipients. This leads to the conclusion that cross-cultural missionaries should focus on enabling and equipping local people. So equipped, cultural insiders can then communicate more effectively the gospel message in ways that will match receptor needs.

We had just completed translating the Lord's Prayer and I was eager for the Samo¹ to appreciate the importance of the kingdom of God both on earth and in heaven. As I read the passage, I watched heads nod. Suddenly, an older woman sitting at the edge of the group blurted out, "You mean God will provide our food?" My first reaction was to think, "That's only one small part of the prayer." But for her, that was life. This woman had literally spent her life producing food for members of her community: gardening on the slopes below the longhouse, processing sago in the swamps, and cooking. This was no small part of the prayer: for her it was the focus.

This generated a discussion during which I gained a perspective of the Lord's Prayer that I could never have received from my culture. I learned about the importance of relationships for the Samo and how that applied to this passage for them. For God's will to be done, people must be in right relationship with him, and that depends on their relationships with each other. As long as men and women are interacting within the bounds of their social responsibility, they could be receptive to a right relationship with God

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and his kingdom here on earth and also in heaven. Central to right human relationships are the roles of women who produce food, and men who protect them from spiritual attack.

The Samo heard the Lord's Prayer and automatically read their cultural experience and understanding into it. By so doing they assumed the centrality of right relationships to the nature of God's kingdom. Although that had not been my focus, I recognized how right they were and I gained a new perspective on Scripture. I also learned to appreciate more fully cultural differences and their impact on communicating the gospel.

This paper seeks to address these concepts from an anthropological perspective and, in so doing, attempts to present a model that redefines McGavran's "chasms" of difference (1980:64). The cultural distance between communicator and receptor must somehow be bridged. While most missiologists accept this basic statement, the focus here is on developing a model that can help in training missionaries and nationals alike to interact in ways that will make a difference as they present the gospel of Christ.

The Three-Cultures Model

Anthropologists have long recognized a wide variety of culture types ranging from simple bands of wandering nomads to sophisticated modern city dwellers. These types have been organized and sub-categorized using a variety of criteria. In surveying this literature, however, it appears that all these typings can be incorporated into a simple model that focuses on three broad culture types: dependent, face-to-face **kinship cultures** (sometimes called tribal); intra-dependent **peasant cultures**; and inter-dependent **industrial cultures**.

Drawing on a wide body of anthropological literature, Dye (1980) has detailed this **three-cultures model**. The model maintains that the cultural diversity we find around the world can be organized by recognizing the importance of "**levels of socio-economic adaptation**," to borrow a term from Service (1962). Dye uses these criteria to establish a continuum of the three culture types (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Major Types on the Cultural Continuum

KINSHIP PEASANT INDUSTRIAL

A society may appear at any point on the continuum.

Each culture type depends on a different economic base, and this lays the groundwork for our discussion. Economics, however, can never be isolated from other cultural factors. The social aspect establishes the nature of interpersonal relationships while the economic base identifies the primary source

TABLE 1
Contrastive Features of Three Broad Culture Types

BASIC CONTRASTS	KINSHIP	PEASANT (with elite)	INDUSTRIAL
1. Government	Mono-cultural independent groups	States, regional inter-dependence	Interdependent nations
2. Dominant institution	Clan, kin group	Lord-Servant	Corporation
3. Economic base	Gardening, hunting	Farming, crafts	Industrial (agro-business)
4. Occupations	Generalists	Specialized occupations	Multiplied roles
ECONOMY	SUBSISTENCE	MARKET	COMMERCIAL
1. Land	Group owned, shared	Individually owned by elite	Individual, less important
2. Land value	Valuable for corporate use, available	Valuable to elite for use by peasants, scarce	Monetary value
3. Source of energy	Human, animal, simple tools	Human, animal	Fuel-powered machinery
4. Food produced	Used by "family"	Sell part, eat part	Raise for sale, buy food
5. Goods produced	Few goods, generalists, for personal use	Many goods, artisans, for trade	Vast number of goods, laborers, for money
6. Hard times	Dependent on nature and family cohesiveness	Dependent on nature and elite	Locally independent, internationally dependent
7. Dominant economic relationships	Egalitarian	Competitive, unequal	Commercial
8. Education	Informal	Apprenticeship, special schools for elite	Extensive, formal, specialized
9. Goal of education	Control supernatural	Maintain social structure	Technological knowledge
10. Ideal life style	Village people	Idealized behavior of elite	Upper middle class
11. Time orientation	Timeless	Busy, but not time-oriented	Focal value on time
12. Leisure	Varies, often considerably	For elite only	Regulated and organized
IDEOLOGY	ANIMISM	ANIMISM + NATIONAL RELIGION	MANY RELIGIONS
1. Importance of religion	Permeates all life, no sacred/secular distinction	Important sacred/secular sometimes distinguished	Unimportant, sacred/secular sharply separated
2. Ancestors	Ghosts nurtured, placated	Respected	Forgotten
3. Function for society	Unity	Acceptance of roles in society	Obedience to law

for deriving a living. The energy source relates closely to the economic system and influences the level of technology. This is summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Levels of Socio-Economic Adaptation

<i>SOCIAL LEVEL</i>	<i>ECONOMIC BASE</i>	<i>ENERGY SOURCE</i>
Kinship/Familial Focus on group	Subsistence	Human power
Peasant/Hierarchical Focus on status	Market	Animal power
Industrial/Impersonal Focus on individual	Commercial	Machine power

This interplay between social and economic factors establishes many of the peculiarities of each culture type and leads to the concerns that motivate the people who live in these contexts. For example, ownership is seen as a group matter in kinship societies: what belongs to one belongs to all. In peasant societies ownership is often an indication of status, with conspicuous consumption a life style for the elite. Land is usually owned by the elite who dictate its use and, to some degree, the life style of the people who live upon and develop it. In industrial societies, ownership is an individual matter that is determined by personal status and wealth whether ascribed or achieved.

Obviously there is a wide variety of cultural differences represented by societies within the range of each of these major categories. The theory upon which this model rests, however, maintains that societies encompassed by one of these ranges must deal with similar concerns and solve similar types of problems, regardless of where they live. Thus, at the risk of being simplistic, all societies of the industrial type must solve problems of development and urbanization, such as crime, congestion, independence while being interdependent, loneliness, pollution, and rapid change. Unless these concerns are handled and individual needs met, the society runs the risk of collapse. This is true in Western Europe as well as in the United States and Japan, not to mention the rapid urban expansion taking place in many so-called Third World nations.²

Table 1 highlights the contrastive features of each major culture type with respect to the primary cultural sub-systems. These differences provide a conceptual starting point for interaction with the people of specific societies. Knowing something of the character of each culture type, cross-cultural missionaries can develop some expectations about the circumstances under which they may be working and do whatever research is necessary to develop an empathy and attitude for learning even before entering the society. *

TABLE 1 (continued)

IDEOLOGY	ANIMISM	ANIMISM + NATIONAL RELIGION	MANY RELIGIONS
4. Function for individuals	Control environment, establish individual's place	Comfort, reaffirm personal worth	Sense of belonging, identification
5. Religious buildings	None, or not elaborate	Extensive temples sponsored by elite	Equal to other buildings
6. Religious specialists	Part time	Full time, important	Full time, less important
7. Importance of mythology	Sacred tales which validate the belief system	Tales which relate to the past, thereby revealing a heritage	Fairy tales with no relevance to present (science provides functional substitute)
SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	FAMILIAL	HIERARCHICAL	IMPERSONAL
1. Kinship	Is everything	Extra means of coping	Unimportant
2. Type of family	Extended family	Varies widely	Nuclear (old, sick, excluded)
3. Marriage function	Build kinship ties, trade ties, labor force, etc.	Economically helpful	Meet personal needs, basic unit of society
4. Polygamy	Functional	Recreational	Dysfunctional
5. Dominant dyads	Brother-brother, father-son	Parent-child, patron-worker	Husband-wife, friend-friend
6. Old, sick, jobless	Cared for in home	Old respected, all cared for	Institutionalized
POLITICAL ORGANIZATION	COMMUNITY	KINGDOM	REPUBLIC
1. Structure	Small independent units	National, regional autonomy	National and international
2. Internal control (law)	Negative sanctions shame/restitution	Shame, gossip, civil law	Civil/criminal law
3. External control (government)	Non-kin relations, warfare between locally defined groups	Regional inter-dependence, warfare within region, interest groups, etc., religious sanctions	International politics, warfare between nations
4. Participation by common people	Alliance/defiance, community in control, full rights	Alien control, limited rights	Politics at all levels, citizens control
Leadership	Local leaders, achieved	Hereditary rules from elite	Politicians
6. Power of rulers	Weak	Very great (lords)	Power divided among many specialists

For example, missionaries who anticipate involvement with people living in kinship societies should place high value on developing relationships with the local "kin" group and may need to join that group in order to gain acceptance, much as we did among the Samo.

Individuals who become immersed in a peasant society should be aware of the specialized roles people have and choose carefully the roles they adopt in order to develop relationships that will most benefit their communication. They can be sure they should not adopt roles associated with the elite if they seek to identify with the peasantry and vice versa. At the very least they must choose to minister to the elite or the peasantry, not both. Perhaps the failure to do this partly explains the greater difficulty missionaries to peasant peoples have had and the lesser response to the gospel.

Those involved in an industrial context will need to be aware of the multitude of potential roles and not assume that those roles are the same in each society. For example, although both societies are highly commercial, Americans view commercialism differently than the Japanese do.

At this point in the computer age, we need to add another culture type: post-industrial culture, characterized by Naisbitt's (1982) "megatrends" of high technology, high touch, and rapid culture change.

While these are generalizations from which specific cases vary considerably, they provide a framework for understanding that can be a great help when missionaries interact cross-culturally. If those from industrial nations know the importance of group interaction in a kinship society, or the stress of family and social status in a peasant society, personal interests and concerns can be laid aside in favor of the need to develop interaction patterns that will establish credibility in the new context. Without this credibility, communication of the gospel (in whatever form) may mean very little because receptors have not seen (from their perspective) meaning in the life of the communicator.

This points to the wisdom of the bonding principle popularized by the Brewsters (1982). Missionaries need to build trust and live at the level of those they seek to reach in order to be viewed as authentic. Christ did it; so must we who are his servants today.

Missionaries must not consider only the cross-cultural situation. They should also pay attention to their own background and the cultural influences that have shaped their understanding of how things are and how they ought to be. In a growing body of literature this understanding of basic assumptions is called *worldview* (Kraft 1979, Kearney 1984, Hiebert 1985). Worldview strongly affects all that goes on in any cultural context or cross-cultural contact situation. These influences need to be brought to a conscious level so that missionaries can compare their own values and concerns with those of the people whom they serve. Lingenfelter and Mayers' Basic Values Test (1986) is well suited to helping cross-cultural workers understand themselves and note how their value systems contrast with those of the people they seek to reach. Where their values are vastly different vis-à-vis time, crisis, holism, life goals, prestige, and vulnerability, they will need to make adjustments in order not to appear unconcerned or even

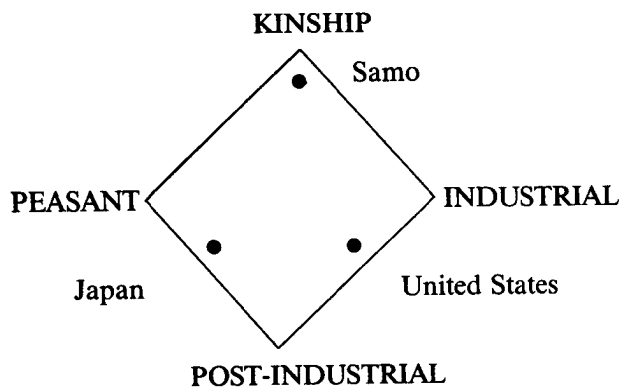
unchristian. A caring witness must communicate in life style as well as in word whether in a mono-cultural or a cross-cultural context (Aldrich 1981).

Interactive Cultures

No society is an isolated entity alone in its "world." Even a group like the Samo relate to administrative officers, missionaries, schoolteachers, and oil company laborers and officials. Today, the societies of the world are in interaction with each other. Each is affected by the culture type of the other. I recently conducted a seminar in an Asian nation and observed considerable anxiety among the participants. I listened as they discussed the kinship group contexts in which they worked. At the same time, however, they were also interacting with officials who came from peasant cultural backgrounds and were concerned about the development of the people for whom they were responsible. They expressed this concern by forcing external changes that led the kinship societies into a "development" cycle that resembled a peasantry, performing basic tasks and providing goods for the politically elite officialdom. The missionaries, who represented the industrial cultural type, felt torn by the social and political dynamics of this changed situation. At least three culture types were represented, and each felt it had an understanding of "reality" not shared by the others.

Such complex relationships can be depicted on an interactive space diagram (Figure 3), where at any point any society can be affected by any other, regardless of culture type. The nature of that type, however, will affect the interaction, and each will push and pull the other in ways that reflect areas of contrast vs. similarity, worldview themes (not specifically discussed here), and basic values. Such interaction, whether at the national level, or with individual missionaries relating to people in villages, slums, or high-

Figure 3
Interactive Cultural Types



rise apartments, will result in socio-cultural and worldview change. In the case of cross-cultural mission, the change should be a reflection of interaction between the gospel and the culture, not the impact of an outside culture brought by missionaries. I turn now, to a discussion of applying the three-cultures model to evangelism.

Cross-Cultural Evangelism

Missiologists (Winter 1975, McGavran 1980, Wagner 1983) have used the idea of cultural distance to distinguish between communicator and receptor contexts. Thus, communicators can be described as presenting the gospel (evangelizing) mono-culturally, E₁ (evangelism within the society of the communicator), or cross-culturally either in a "somewhat similar" society, E₂, or a society "which is a great deal different from the missionary's own," E₃ (Wagner 1983:170).³ Inasmuch as "somewhat similar" and "great deal different" are imprecise terms, I attempt here an application of the three-cultures model to this evangelistic-distance model in the hope that it may become a more effective tool for understanding cultural-evangelistic distance and for assisting communication.

Applying the three-cultures model to this material results in the following definitions:

- E₁ - Mono-cultural evangelism, i.e., within one's own society.
- E₂ - Cross-cultural evangelism to societies of the same culture type, i.e., industrial to industrial, peasant to peasant, kinship to kinship.
- E₃ - Cross-cultural evangelism to societies representing cultural types other than the communicator's, i.e., industrial type to peasant or kinship types, peasant to kinship or industrial, and kinship to peasant or industrial.

What is important in making these distinctions is the impact of crossing into contexts where different cultural orientations pervade. As already noted, each culture type operates with different presuppositions and is concerned with very different kinds of questions about life and what is considered to be important. Those involved in cross-cultural witness, then, must understand the interactive nature of culture and its effect on any evangelism that may take place as a result of that interaction.⁴ Effective evangelism should result from a dynamic awareness of worldview differences and an identification of needs within the context.

I recall the lack of success in translating the Four Spiritual Laws into *Tok Pisin* in Papua New Guinea some years ago. This effective tool for witnessing to an American audience was designed to reach people who felt unfulfilled as they lived in a highly individualistic society. For such people to learn that "God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life" is a significant attention grabber. That, however, is not too exciting to a Papua New Guinea villager who focuses on close interpersonal relationships. If this

affirmation is taken to its logical conclusion, it implies removing the individual from group to personal identity, a process which could result in isolation and loneliness. This is precisely what the first law attempts to avoid. Translation was not the appropriate methodology. Eventually, a group-oriented tract was developed, but it too had severe limitations because Papua New Guineans are more interested in developing relationships with people who can live out the gospel message than they are in simply listening to someone they do not know tell them how wonderful Jesus is—demonstration is more important than proclamation.

Those communicating within their own society will do so, assuming that individuals receiving the message will share their worldview. Jokes, illustrations, and local applications of the gospel will generally be understood. One communicates out of a shared culture; the message is intuitively contextualized.

Missionaries who communicate cross-culturally (whether in an E₂ or E₃ context) do so at greater cultural distance. It stands to reason that the more distant a society is from the communicator's, the more difficult communication becomes. Thus, missionaries from an industrial background will share a perspective with individuals of other industrial societies regardless of their continent of residence. They will be most dissimilar with people living in a kinship or peasant-type culture, even if that is geographically nearby.⁵ Though application to specific contexts will vary, it appears that the cultural gap is greatest when people operate beyond the boundaries that are created by culture, beyond the basic assumptions and expectations that are so much a part of a worldview. Preparation for these differences is essential in missionary training programs.

Interaction within a culture type leads to a greater ease of communication based on common interests and concerns. This can also affect identification with biblical ideas. Hence industrial and post-industrial peoples tend to focus on New Testament passages that follow a logic and argumentation that appeals to individualism and personal success. The issues addressed by the expository and hortatory style of language use in the New Testament Epistles come out of the more urban and commercial setting of the Greco-Roman world (Meeks 1983). This identification, however, may not be the interest of people with whom missionaries of this predisposition seek to communicate. People who focus on kinship or peasant concerns will probably be more interested in origins, group survival, and relationship with God as well as other human beings. These are all more obvious in the Old Testament and in Jesus' interaction with people in need.

In short, a people's ability to identify with the message they hear is essential for response. What they hear, then, should relate to the way in which they live. The responsibility to do this falls upon the one communicating the message, and the decision of what to communicate should relate to the cultural foci of the receptors. As we translated for the Samo, our approach was to ask what Scripture said to the Samo in their culture; what would Jesus have said to them? To answer this we had to know (1) what Jesus said and did, (2) what the Samo say and do, and (3) how the latter *

might be affected by the former. By translating the Lord's Prayer, we discovered the centrality of right relationships to spiritual and physical success, a concept quite alien to our worldview, but essential to the Samo. Showing how Jesus interacted with spiritual power, dealt with people's physical needs, and identified with people, all spoke to Samo needs: counteracting supernatural power, healing the sick, providing food, and interacting with a variety of socially defined people. This is probably closer to what Jesus had in mind than the manifestations of highly individualized and mechanized societies.

With this knowledge of broad cultural concerns cross-cultural missionaries can more effectively present the gospel to fit people's interests and needs (Shaw 1988:177ff.) and to help people mold a relevant theology (Schreiter 1985: 20). I move now to a discussion of the implications of this model and its relationship to evangelistic distance for training cross-cultural communicators.

Developing a Cross-Cultural Strategy

Given this understanding of cultural distance, it seems fairly obvious that the most effective witnessing should be done by those who have the least cultural distance from the receptors. Put another way, the best communication should take place when there is the least cultural distance to bridge between a communicator and the intended audience, i.e., there is the least "noise" in the communication process. This places expatriate missionaries working among peoples of different cultural types at a considerable disadvantage communicationally. Western industrial missionaries, then, should be trained in such a way that they make every effort to know and to understand the total context in which they work (wherever that may be). To the extent possible, they should strive to identify with the situation and relate the gospel within that context to meet peoples' cultural and spiritual needs. This is no small task! The task begins with training that will enable communicators to appreciate and to analyze their hosts' culture in order to maximize the cultural relevance of the message.

To accomplish this, missionaries should begin with general principles about culture types and use that knowledge to develop an awareness of the specific manifestations of those principles within the people group they seek to evangelize. What is the cultural base, its values, presuppositions, and assumed structure? How does that socio-cultural system differ from that of the communicators? Understanding a people's worldview as the starting point for effective communication is essential when building a cross-cultural relationship (Shaw 1988:149ff.).

Recognizing the cultural differences between communicators and their receptors can be a first step in developing an effective communication strategy. The three-cultures model applied to evangelism suggests that the best strategy is to equip people to reach out within their own communities. For missionaries, this means the task consists of establishing rapport, communicating as effectively as possible, and then training those who respond to reach others within the cultural context they know best. In many

cases nationals are requesting training assistance that will allow them to be more effective.⁶

Cross-cultural missionaries from the Third World are an exciting new missiological development. However, they need training in order to avoid repeating many of the cross-cultural mistakes made to date. Training pastors, lay leaders, mother-tongue translators, and others enables them to explain more effectively the meaning of the gospel message within their own society. It allows them to use understandable communication styles and to build on established relationships more productively than outsiders can do. They know their context, they know what is meaningful, for it is theirs!

The missionary role is changing. We have a new job: providing local people with the information and encouragement they need to utilize their gifts most effectively (Fernando 1988). Implementing that job will vary from one context to another, but it is our responsibility to assist those with the least cultural distance by equipping them with the tools they need to communicate most effectively. Often that means training local people in ways that may be very different from a more traditional approach (e.g., teaching in overseas contexts in exactly the same way as in home countries through Bible schools and extension courses). Indigenous needs, interests, concerns, and ministries are all different because they serve a different cultural context.

As equal members of a team, God's team, we are working together to make disciples within all societies. As we discover new ways to disciple in a cross-cultural context, we should equip others to disciple effectively within their own mono-cultural context. It is far better for local people to minister at an E₁ level than for expatriates to communicate at a culturally distant E₂ or E₃ level; each culture type requires a basically distinct strategy, and each society within that broad range will manifest that strategy in very different ways. Culture must be taken seriously!

This in no way eliminates cross-cultural missionaries, but it suggests very different roles: training, encouraging, enabling. The job is to equip those who know the context to maximize their knowledge by developing a strategy in which cultural issues are central and their awareness enables those best equipped to communicate the wonderful good news that can fulfill people within their culture (John 10:10). Applying this cultural model, understanding its application to evangelism, and developing a strategy can greatly assist in reaching the world for Christ in our day. Methodology is the key to develop a strategy that communicates in ways that can encourage a response that will bring people into God's kingdom, here on earth and also in heaven.

Notes

1. Two thousand Samo live in the dense rain forest of Western Province in Papua New Guinea. My family and I were privileged to spend 12 years living with them, analyzing their language (Shaw and Shaw 1973, 1977, Shaw 1986) and culture (Shaw 1974, 1976, 1990) and translating Scripture upon which a church has grown. For a brief description of how the gospel impacted their concept of shamanism see *Missiology* 9(3):359-365.

2. Even within an apparent culture type, vast differences exist. Each type contains

a broad continuum of cultural variation affected by worldview and a people's history. For example, the Japanese are undeniably a post-industrial society. However, their socio-economic history is based on a peasant-feudal system that produces a worldview emphasizing strong family ties, worship patterns, and a hierarchical political system that reflects the family structure and a high propensity for work (Aoki and Dardess 1981). Americans, on the other hand, come out of a pioneering, frontier mentality, fed by the Puritan work ethic. This encourages self-reliance, a sense of personal property, and materialism (Bellah, et al. 1985). Hence very different worldviews emerge despite the sharing of technological achievement common to those within the culture type. In fact, interaction between societies within a culture type may initially produce more stress than interaction with another type because of the expected similarities. When these expectations are not realized, disillusionment and frustration result. This could help explain the difficulties experienced by American missionaries in Europe.

3. I do not include E₀ (evangelism to nominal Christians within a society) here. My focus is not on the detail of the evangelistic model. Rather, I seek to refine the concept to apply it further to the mission of the church today.

4. The three-cultures model must not be simplistically applied to cross-cultural witness. Anthropologists have made us aware of the wide cultural diversity that separates the ethnic groups of the world. This model is designed to help missionaries organize those differences and apply them to more effective evangelism. It is this understanding of cultural differences, based on a worldview, that gives life meaning within a specific context. This is critical to the communication process.

5. Hunter (1980) has developed a typology based on social distance within a group (E₁, A-D) and geographical distance beyond a cultural group (E₂, peoples of the "same continental family" and E₃, peoples of "different" continental families. The variation within E₁ can be tabulated as follows:

E₁-A: Evangelizing family and friends.

E₁-B: Evangelizing people of the same culture or sub-culture.

E₁-C: Evangelizing people within a culture but of a different sub-culture, e.g., socio-economic or class differences.

E₁-D: Evangelizing people of a hyphenated cultural identity, e.g., Mexican-Americans (now called Hispanics) or Asian-Americans.

While "A" and "B" represent different levels of communication, "C" may be quite distinct, as in a peasant society where interaction between the elite and the peasantry is culturally defined or caste distinctions are clear. "D," however, is plainly geographical in nature, dealing largely with immigrant groups that often prefer to retain a measure of their own cultural identity. For example, I find myself very much engaged in cross-cultural communication (at least E₂ and perhaps E₃) when my Hungarian housekeeper walks through the front door—despite her Americanization. Geographical issues should not be in focus, especially in the complex microcosm of burgeoning urban centers all over the world, but cultural issues are crucial to effective communication. The intent of applying the three-cultures model is to avoid cultural skewing within a sphere of evangelistic influence, however that may be defined.

6. The many national Bible translation organizations that are now developing translation training programs are a good example. These groups need assistance in areas of expertise—not in their purview. They are requesting assistance in areas of biblical background, exegesis, and consulting. Of greatest need is materials in key trade languages of the world for translators to use in preparing translations for the many vernaculars still without God's Word (Shaw 1988: 241ff.).

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