

# **My Pilgrimage**

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I have lived much of my life in the company of pilgrims. My grandparents and parents were godly people, deeply committed to missions. My childhood community was made up largely of missionaries who were “uncles” and “aunties,” and “people,” who were brown. Later Frances and our three children joined this pilgrimage in missions.

### **Intellectual Pilgrimage**

We scratch where it itches. I believe the same is true intellectually. Three ‘itches’ in particular have shaped my life..

### **Missionary Kid [M.K.]**

I was born and raised in India, the son of Mennonite Brethren missionaries—an outsider/insider. The culture inside which I was raised was that of my parents and seven sisters, with short visits by other missionary families. I had to wear a topee, because white people died if they were out in the midday Indian sun for more than an hour. Outside home my friends were Indians—I was the only bleached boy in twenty miles. I played soccer poorly, but because I was the missionary’s son, my friends occasionally allowed me to make a goal, and then went back to the real game. I was an outsider, a privileged outsider, but an outsider none the less.

Like most M.K.s, I struggled with my culture and identity. I was not a native India nor a native North American. I felt most at home in bicultural communities with other bicultural kids who enjoyed participating in different cultures while remaining observers, not identifying fully with any one of them--a form of cultural schizophrenia. This identity as outsider/insider shaped much of my life. It made me aware of cultural differences, and, therefore, of cultures themselves.

I am sure that in part this led me to become an anthropologist, a professional outsider-insider. It also shaped my understanding and practice as a missionary, a vocational outsider-insider.

My life has been lived between the U.S. and India, seeking to understand the social and cultural systems of both, and make them intelligible to each other. What is the nature of caste and class and how do these relate to one another in each of these cultures? What is the difference between patron-client and market economies? What are the religious beliefs of the ordinary Indian villagers, not the philosophers, theologians and priests in religious establishments?

Eventually this search led me to look at the deep structures underlying these worlds, their worldviews: at realism and radical idealism, equality and hierarchy, digital and analogical sets, algorithmic and fuzzy [precisely fuzzy] logics, and living and driving by rule of law and transactional living and driving. India's cultures and worldviews are profound and complex, and offer some of the deepest challenges to the worldviews of modernity, and of Christianity. They also raise questions of how can the Gospel can be contextualized in traditional Indian village settings so that it is a transforming power of God unto salvation, and not become captive to to the local cultures. This raised the question of whether Christianity has been overcontextualized in America, and become captive to modernity.

### **Mennonite Brethren [M. B.]**

My second intellectual tension was theological. I was raised in a Mennonite Brethren home and church. One of the M. B. roots was the radical Anabaptist movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which stressed Jesus Christ as only Savior and Lord, adult conversion and baptism, and faith as radical obedience to Christ leading to transformed lives. It had an outside-inside view of

the church. The church is a counter-cultural covenant community of believers that live in the world, but are not of it. Believers are resident aliens who are to manifest to the world the nature of the Kingdom of God in worship, fellowship and mission.

The term 'Brethren' emerged out of a pietistic revival that swept the Mennonite churches in Southern Russia. This renewed the Anabaptist doctrines of personal conversion, discipleship and the church as a fellowship of believers, and added an emphasis on holiness.

I studied Bible and theology at Tabor College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary at a time when these were influenced by fundamentalism and dispensationalism. I value deeply the foundations they helped lay in my thinking, but during my early years in missionary service, their theological rigidity which allowed for no contextualization, and my growing conviction that young churches should do their own theological reflections in their historical and sociocultural contexts led to a change in my understanding of the nature of theological reflections. While strongly reaffirming my evangelical roots, I rediscovered my Anabaptist heritage with its emphasis on Christ and his Kingdom, and on the church as a sign and outpost of the Kingdom, as the interpreter of the Gospel, and as the mission agency bearing witness to a lost and needy world.

This rediscovery led me to reflect on the nature of theology, and on meta-theology--a theology of how to do theology: based on Scripture as divine revelation and our final authority, on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and on the church as a hermeneutical community in which experts provided input, but the final decisions are made by the church seeking to understand God's Word to it in its historical and sociocultural context. Influenced by Arthur Glasser, I began to see mission as God's mission, beginning in Genesis 1:1, to create a great kingdom of

righteousness and peace. When sin entered the world, God initiated his mission-within-the-mission, to redeem those who responded to his invitation of salvation and, through them, to create his body made up of people from every society, tongue and nation. It is this church that God sends as a sign and witness to the world.

### **Missionary-Anthropologist [M. A.]**

My third intellectual 'itch' [some would call it schizophrenia] is professional. I am a missionary and an anthropologist. After seminary I completed my graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Minnesota. Having grown up in India in a 20<sup>th</sup> century mission setting, I was convinced that in mission we needed not only to understand the Gospel, but also the people we serve so that the Gospel might take root in individuals, societies and cultures, and transform them.

Frances and I went to India as missionaries, where we were involved for six years in training village pastors/evangelists and church leaders in the Bible school, and in evangelism and church planting. I also completed two years of anthropological field research living in an remote Indian village.

On our furlough, I took a temporary job in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Kansas State University, and completed my dissertation. When we were not able to return to India, I was appointed at K. S. U. in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. In 1972 I was appointed Associate Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle where I served five years. During that time I taught for one year at Osmania University in Hyderabad as a Fulbright professor.

For eleven years I was part of the world of academic anthropology. These were formative years for us, but Frances and I kept missions central to our thinking. When Fuller Theological Seminary invited us to join them, we moved to Pasadena, and later to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield.

Living between the worlds of anthropology and missions left me again an outsider-insider. I felt at home and had friends in both worlds, but both sides were suspicious of me—my anthropology friends because of my interest in missions, and my missionary friends because of my anthropological identity.

### **Triologue**

My interest in theology, anthropology and mission has led to a triologue that shaped my thinking. My interest in theology and in anthropology raised critical questions regarding their integration, and ultimately to an examination of the epistemological foundations of both. This led me to a study of positivism, instrumentalism and critical realism.

Looking at the relationship of theology and anthropology to missions raised further questions and reflections. One set had to do with the entry of a missionary into a new community: with learning to study and understand the social and cultural systems, with identifying with the people as much as conscience and human limitations allow, with incarnational ministries.

A second set of issues had to do with contextualizing the message in the cultural system. This raised question of translation, critical contextualization, and missional theology, and with self theologizing and a metatheology of how to do theology in human contexts. It eventually led

to reflections on the nature of conversion of individuals and communities, the transformation of cultures and worldviews. This led to reflections on the relationship between evangelism, mission, church, Kingdom of God, and Christ the King.

My experiences in India shaped the specific context of these reflections. I studied philosophical Hinduism to share the Gospel with villagers, and found that I had to teach them Hinduism because they knew little of the formal doctrines and philosophical debates. This made little sense, so I started to study the religious beliefs and practices of the common people using the methods of anthropology. The result was a study of folk religions, split-level Christianity, and the problem western missionaries often face of the 'excluded middle.' This led to biblical reflections on healing, spirit possession, spiritual warfare, guidance, and other existential questions, which are at the heart of folk religions.

A third set of issues centered around the contextualization of the church in local social systems. How can we contextualize methods of evangelism and church planting? How far can we contextualize leadership styles and church polity?

### **Spiritual Pilgrimage**

Under my intellectual journey has been a spiritual pilgrimage. It is not easy to write about because it hard to see beneath the self-serving rationalizations that justify me, and because honesty is often too painful to bear. It has been a wandered with wrong turns and dead ends, but it has been led by a desire to follow and know the Jesus Christ of Scripture. My experience is that spirituality—what ever we mean by that— is not a road can be engineered, measured and traversed. We see it only through peripheral vision as we look at other things. Like faith, hope

and love, when we analyze it we kill it. Like modern scientists we catch it like a rare butterfly, pin it to the board and examine it in great deal. When we glue it together and throw it in the air, it falls to the ground—we have studied a dead carcass, not a living butterfly. Spirituality is about being, not doing. Moreover, we cannot our engineer spiritual life—it is what happens in the living. We can nurture and exercise it, but not make it happen, because it has to do with who we are, not what we do.

As the only boy in a large family, I often traveled with my father touring the villages in India and on evangelistic crusades in North America. His life and many of his sermons are recorded on tapes of tungsten steel in my mind and have shaped much of my life. It was under his ministry that I decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Later in high school I rededicated myself to Christ and felt an early call to missions.

One of the lessons I learned had anabaptist roots. We were taught to ask ‘What would Jesus do in this situation?’ Faith was not simply giving mental assent to the truth of of the Gospel. The gospel was ultimately a call to be transformed. So prayer and reading Scripture were dangerous. When I prayed, I learned God might choose me to be a part of the answer to my prayers. And when I read scripture I was accountable for its call to a new life.

ES Jones, Paul Tournier,

Leslie Newbigin

In my life there have been the ‘normal’ stages (Is. ). In youth I was enthusiastic and active in doing spiritual things. In my middle years with the responsibilities of life I had to learn to persist, even when God seemed nowhere in sight. In my last years I am learning the great value of meditation. Enroute E. S. Jones, Paul Tournier, Eugene Peterson, Henri Nouwen, and

many others have pointed me the way.

The pilgrimage has been for doing to being. from action to waiting. Not so in Haste my heart. Meditation, lexio divina, contemplative life. Cook.

From self to other centeredness. I am God's first work, he can't do anything through me unless he first gets me in shape. Live out of control. See bigger picture of world in which I am only a small player—God's story is much bigger than I. Frog's in the bottom of a well. I started my life at the bottom of the well—had the privilege of seeing the greatness of God's work.

Messy and suffering, setbacks etc. but growth

From triumphalism to God's presence in suffering— from crown to cross.

Prayer is dangerous—give God permission to use you as an answer.

Anabaptist reading of Scripture. It is dangerous—call to obedience, not to know but to act. Seriously What would Jesus do in this situation? Live out of control.

I am more a sinner now than before, less dogmatic about surface beliefs and more sure about deep realities such as Christ, mission, revelation.

## INFLUENCES

In 189# two couples decided to go to Liberia as missionaries. Their decision was to have a profound effect on the Hiebert clan. The couples sailed to Africa in 189#. In two years, three of them were dead for diseases. Word of their deaths spread through the M.B. churches in Minnesota and with it a call for more volunteers. One young man, Nicholas Hiebert, was in the pews and deeply convicted of the need to minister to a world in need.

- India one year
- Home mission board
- JNC and Anna Hiebert to Africa --> India.
- we are all bicultural people because of those early influences.

YOU LEARN GO GET TO CHURCH EARLY TO GET A BACK SEAT. IN SPORTS YOU LEARN TO GO EARLY TO GET A FRONT SEAT.