

Missions and Anthropology

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The primary organizing principle for the modern mission movement in the nineteenth century was geography. Missionaries went to India, Africa, China, the South Sea Islands and other regions of the earth. They divided these by agreements of comity, and subdivided their regions into 'fields.' Since the mid-twentieth century, anthropology has come to shape much of mission thought.

The relationship between anthropology and Christian mission has been one of ambivalence. On the one hand they share a common interest in people around the world, and anthropologists have often sought the assistance of missionaries who have lived for long periods of time on the field. On the other hand, they have often been suspicious of each other's activities.

Anthropology in Britain had its origins in the broad Christian humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century of which the missionary movement was a part. After slavery was abolished, those concerned with social reform turned their attention to questions of the welfare of the native peoples in the colonies. In 1843 a split occurred on how to protect the rights of the natives. One faction, including most missionaries, wanted to grant them immediately the full "privileges" of western civilization. They sought to convert people to Christianity and to civilize them through schools and hospitals. The others wanted to study them before "raising and protecting them." The latter formed the Anthropological Society of London in 1863, and eventually found their home in the universities studying natives and developing theories of human organization.¹ Unfortunately, the missionaries and reformers too often pursued programs of

¹ C. C. Reining. 1970. A lost period of applied anthropology. *In* J. A. Clifton, ed. Applied Anthropology. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. pp. 3-11.

planned change without perceiving the cultural contexts in which this change took place. There were many who made significant contributions to anthropological knowledge and theory--R. H. Codrington of Melanesia, M. Leenhardt of New Caledonia, H. Junod and E. Smith of Africa, the Wisers in India and Father W. Schmidt and the Vienna School of Anthropology, to name only a few--but they were the exceptions. Anthropologists, on the other hand, often undertook to study the people with little thought to how this knowledge could benefit the people.

Cultural Evolution and Colonialism

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries anthropologists and missionaries were deeply influenced by the theory of cultural evolution. Western scholars postulated the evolution of culture from savagery to civilization, and attributed this to the growth of human rationality from prelogical to logical. This justified western colonization of the rest of the world. In the university this gave rise to the new discipline of anthropology--the study of others and otherness. Anthropologists worked closely with missionaries during this period to chart the global progress of human history. The theory of evolution justified the colonial expansion of western governments, science and technology, and a paternalistic form of mission outreach.

Missionaries, too, were influenced by the theory of evolution. Many assumed the superiority of western civilization and saw it their task to Civilize and Christianize the people they served. Most saw traditional religions with their fear of spirits, witchcraft and magical powers as animistic superstitions, and assumed that these would die out as people accepted Christianity and science. They built schools and hospitals alongside churches, and saw science as essential a part of the curriculum as the Gospel. Many western theologians argued that theology itself was a

branch of science. This equation of the gospel with western culture made the Gospel unnecessarily foreign in other cultures.

By the mid-twentieth century beliefs in cultural evolution, colonialism and civilization were under attack. In politics colonies were demanding their independence. In anthropology, after a fierce battle, the term 'civilization' was displaced by 'culture.' Cultures were assumed to be *sui generis*, and their preservation an unquestioned good. All attempts to change them from outside were seen as imperialistic and colonial. In missions there was a growing stress on the need to plant 'indigenous churches' and on working with them as equal partners in ministry.

The relationship between anthropology and missions changed after nineteen thirty. Increasingly anthropologists accused missionaries of perpetuating the colonial past, and saw themselves as defenders of the natives. Missionaries grew suspicious of the cultural and moral relativity of anthropologists, and accused them of preserving the natives as human reserves which they could study. They found, however, that their assumption that traditional religious beliefs would die out did not take place. Many Christians attended church on Sunday, but went to the shaman and witch doctor during the week because the church did not address many of the problems they faced such as spirits and witchcraft. The result was a 'split-level' Christianity. Moreover, other converts adopted the science taught in mission schools, but rejected Christianity, leading to a growing secularism in many countries.

After the Second World War, many mission leaders, influenced by the spirit of anticolonialism, cultural pluralism and cultural fundamentalism, argued for the end of missions and affirmed the validity of all religions as paths to God.

Anthropology and Contemporary Missions

Since World War II anthropology has played an increasing role in shaping mission thought. Earlier missionaries studied the language and religions of the people they served, but not their cultures. Today anthropology, with its theories and methods for studying human cultures, is an important subject in most missiological curriculum. This shift can be seen in two areas of thought.

Social Anthropology

From the beginning missions have been aware of the need to plant self-sustaining churches. In the mid-nineteenth century, this led to the 'Three Selves' movement: young churches needed to be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. There was less awareness how local social systems influenced the response to and growth of Christianity.

The concept of social structure developed by sociologists and social anthropologists opened an important new door for the analysis of the mission process. They argued that social phenomena are the foundation for human life, and that these, like natural phenomena, obey laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason. Understanding these laws could help us introduce change that is beneficial and less disruptive.

Social anthropology has had a deep impact on missions. Donald McGavran, Allen Tippet and the Church Growth movement called attention to the importance of understanding social barriers and bridges for the communication of the Gospel, and sought to show how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church. They introduced concepts such as homogeneous groups, people movements and receptivity/resistance to the

languages rapidly and accurately where no written materials exist. Learning how to analyze and speak a new language fluently and accurately became an essential part of most missionary training programs.

The second contribution of linguistics had to do with Bible translation. Prior to World War II, most translators used formal method of translation based on the assumption that words refer to realities, and that accurate translations can be made if the translator finds the right words in different languages that refer to the same things. As missionaries and anthropologists studied the nature and structure of languages, they came to the conclusion that languages are shaped by cultures, not be external realities. People in different cultures organize and see the world differently. This awareness of the power of cultures to shape languages led missionary and anthropology linguists developed modern theories of language that led to dynamic equivalent Bible translations which sought to preserve the meanings of words within their own cultural contexts. H. A. Gleason at the Kennedy School of Missions, Eugene Nida with the American Bible Society, Kenneth L. Pike with the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators, and their colleagues were among the pioneers in modern descriptive linguistics.

Contextualization

Another early concern mission strategists faced was the set of problems that arose out of cultural differences. People in other societies speak different languages, have different beliefs and different concepts of morality. As missionaries move into new societies they face culture shock, misunderstandings and ethnocentric attitudes. It became clear that they need to learn the local cultures just as they learned the local languages. Cultural learning and identification became an

Gospel in the planning of mission outreach. More recently the growing awareness of the importance of social dynamics has led in some circles to the emphasis on evangelizing people groups. In others the awareness of oppressive social structures has led to different forms of liberation theology.

Cultural Anthropology

The second major influence of anthropology on missions has been the introduction of the concept of 'culture' in the place of 'civilization.' After World War I anthropologists stressed the importance of understanding cultures as systems of meaning, and of studying the languages, symbols, rituals, myths and beliefs of other cultures. They found that these are not prelogical projections of infantile minds, but sophisticated systems of thought that provided meaning to the people.

Today the concept of culture is fundamental to much missiological theory. Missionary candidates are trained to study the beliefs and practices of the people they serve, to identify with them, and to translate the gospel accurately in local cultural forms. This sensitivity to culture has taken several forms.

Linguistics and Bible Translation

There are a number of areas in which anthropology has helped missionaries understand their work. The first of these is linguistics. Most missionaries learned the language of the people they served using language experts and written texts. As they moved beyond India, China and other literate societies, however, they encountered oral cultures with no written texts and no language teachers. Missionary and anthropology linguists developed methods for learning

important part in the training of mission candidates.

Cultural differences also raised the question of the cultural relevancy of worship forms, church polity, and evangelistic methods introduced from the west, and the need to deal with old cultural customs. This led to the concept of contextualization--of making the Gospel a living reality in each culture.

In recent years the realization that the Gospel must both be understood and challenge existing cultures has led missiologists to examine how the gospel has been contextualized in western cultures, and what the missiological challenges are in these lands.

Local Theologies

It is increasingly clear that contextualization cannot stop with worship forms and the use of local church polities. At core it has to do with theology. There is a growing recognition that local churches must do theology in their own historical and cultural contexts. Many of these theologies are informed by the findings of anthropology, particular in the areas of traditional religions, social systems and worldviews. There is also an awareness that while anthropology has and can contribute much to Christian mission, anthropology cannot replace biblical reflection as the basis for its calling and nature.

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