

## ► THEME: EMS First Person

### Profile of a Missiologist: Tom Steffen

*Kenneth Nehrbass*

**Tom and Darla Steffen served with New Tribes Mission (now Ethnos 360) from 1969 to 1989.** Tom became interested in the study of missions while he was supporting church planting in the Philippines (from 1972 to 1986). He noticed that missionaries were trained to quickly transfer leadership to locals, but in reality, they often lacked a plan for doing so. Steffen (1997) studied the successful “phase out” aspect of such church planting efforts for his doctoral work at Biola.



Tom Steffen

While in the Philippines, Steffen was an early adopter of Bible story telling methods, where Trevor McIlwain (2005) was developing Chronological Bible Storying. Orality became a focus for Steffen’s publications and for his involvement in professional missionary organizations.

Whereas prolific missiologists can often follow aca-

dem interests that only tangentially serve the church, Steffen’s more than one hundred publications (between books, chapters, articles and reviews) all directly relate to the work of missions. His career more or less tracked with the popular trends in missiology: the shift away from paternalism in missions (Steffen, 2011b), the use of orality and narrative teaching methods (Steffen, 1996, 2014), *Business as Mission* (Steffen, 1999, Rundle & Steffen, 2013), and various conceptualizations of shame and honor (Steffen, 2018).

Steffen was a key influencer at Biola’s School of Intercultural Studies, serving on faculty from 1991 to 2013. But Steffen’s sphere of influence was much broader than his own university. In addition to his publications, which have been translated into Mandarin, Spanish, Tagalog, and Korean, he has taught adjunct at ten universities, and has served on the board of directors for seven mission agencies from 1997 to present. He has also been hired as a consultant for numerous mission agencies.

I recently interviewed Dr. Steffen regarding his career as a missiologist. Below is a transcript of the interview, edited for clarity, but kept in the original conversational style.

**Ken:** So you first had a career as a missionary in the Philippines. What did you do there? What brought you there? Is that where you wish you’d stayed?

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**Ken Nehrbass** (Ph.D Biola University) is Associate Professor in the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University. Ken served in the South Pacific in Tanna, Vanuatu alongside a team that translated the New Testament. He continues to volunteer as a translation and anthropology consultant with SIL and the Seed Company. His research focuses on contextual theology and missiological anthropology.

## From the Desk of EMS President

Christian mission is a divinely initiated and inspired enterprise—God is a missionary God. Mission is also a very human thing. Fallen, broken, and called people carry out God’s missionary plan. In this edition of the *OB*, we step out into the street of global mission and listen to the stories of God’s servants on mission. Through Ken Nehrbass’ interview, we meet veteran missionary and missiologist Tom Steffen and capture some of his journey in mission. Brad Roderick shares the sorrows and joys of transitioning from twenty years on the field in South Asia to a new calling as a mission professor in the USA. Jamie Sanchez relates her story of being a new faculty member in intercultural studies and discusses the missional value of collaboration in the academy. Finally, Shirik Sochangamm, a PhD student from India, reflects on his journey as an Asian theologian pursuing education in a western theological seminary. In this edition of the *OB* that we are calling “EMS First Person,” we celebrate the practical ways that these friends are participating in God’s mission.

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**Dr. Steffen:** Sometimes. We were there for a 15-year period of time in the Philippines. We were with New Tribes Mission, now called Ethnos 360, and our job initially was church planting among the Antipolo Ifugao, which are in central Luzon—one of the five groups of Ifugao.

And so a couple there—actually from my home church—who were with SIL, invited us to do the church planting. That’s how we ended up there. And when we arrived, about one fifth of the New Testament was done. As of last year—almost this time last year—I was back to celebrate roughly 50 years of the coming of Christianity into that Ifugao group. It was great to see, and there are now eleven churches. So eleven churches in the whole area which means the whole area is now church. The entire Bible is translated. They have their own hymnals, they have a lot of commentaries. They also have an association of churches of all the Ifugao. So there’s assistance from outside to help all the different churches as well. Out of those eleven churches, ten of them are pretty strong. The visit was good and it was a fun time.

**Ken:** A success story of missions in the Pacific. There was something about your experience there that set off your career not just as a missionary but as a missiologist. What made you turn that corner, or turn missions into missiology?

**Dr. Steffen:** One of the two training principles we received from New Tribes Mission before we went was the “three selves:” self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting in the whole church area so that they would be able to be on their own. Then the second principle was “work yourself out of a job.” The two are kind of parallel but different. We arrived there 20-some years after the Philippine mission began existence. I started asking questions at their guest home there: “How many of these works have been turned over to the local tribal people?” And there were none. Eventually, we got an interview with the leadership. At our first meeting, the field chairman said, “You know, new people ask a lot of questions when they arrive, and sometimes they just have to learn. You know things take longer over here than they do in other places in the world.” So I thought, “This is not going well.”

But then he followed up with, “You know, new people also make us rethink some of the things we’ve been doing... Your idea of turning works over to the people: We’re not doing it. And we need answers. And I want you to give us an answer at the field meeting [basically in six months].” And I’m thinking *you’re asking a green*

missionary, —other people have been here 15 or 20 years —and you're gonna ask me? And they're gonna listen to me? I don't think so!

But they did! And the field chairman went with me during our breaks from our language and orientation school. He went with me as we walked the entire Ifugao tribe trying to find where we can be placed. And we discussed this whole issue as we were going. I came back and I started asking a lot of questions again with people. And I started realizing they had no exit strategy. It was a piecemeal approach: 1) learn language and culture. Good, that's basic. 2) Start doing evangelism. Great. 3) Okay, community development. Great. 4) And then they get saved. 5) Okay let's gather them. Great 6) And then let's teach them; and let's teach them; and let's teach them.

So basically they exchanged their apostolic robes for pastoral robes. No exit strategy. They never knew when they had reached a place where they thought the work was accomplished. So out of that came my book *Passing the Baton*.

**Ken:** So it's not like you invented the idea of "passing the baton." This has a long tradition in missiology, from Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn, and even New Tribes—what I'm hearing—even New Tribes in the Philippines knew this principle. But the question you were asking was, "How do we from the get-go plan on passing the baton?"

**Dr. Steffen:** Yeah. There was no plan to do it. The need for an exit plan was acknowledged way back in the 1800s. But it's like it just never got implemented. So something had to happen. I was privileged to be in that position and my field chairman protected me all the way through.

**Ken:** I think in "Tom Steffen's career", there's an early Steffen, a middle Steffen, and a late Steffen.

**Dr. Steffen:** And a later Steffen!

**Ken:** Early Steffen is "passing the baton." That was your first academic interest?

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes.

**Ken:** Is that what got you in trouble with the missions world? Or was there some other controversial idea that set a missiologist against a mission board?

**Dr. Steffen:** It was not considered good to write something negative about one's organization. Now, I didn't put the name of the organization in the book, but if anybody knows your background, they can put two and two together. That caused some conflict. Earlier, the book was not ever used; but now it is. So it's like "Okay. It just had to work its way through."

**Ken:** I think you said it's your most successful book so far?

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes.

**Ken:** Has someone passed the baton? Do you know where this strategy has worked out great? What's an example of where this has worked out well?

**Dr. Steffen:** In Ifugao! I know that one! That one worked out really well. There are other case studies within New Tribes Mission—and it's gone outside of New Tribes as well. So it has become kind of an approach: Keeping the end in mind before one starts —many organizations now use that principle.

**Ken:** Okay so would you say mission organizations picked up on the notion: plan from the beginning to phase out? What was the difference, then, between *Passing the Baton* and *The Facilitator Era*? Is that book making the same argument? There was a period of 20 years between those two books.

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes. There would be at least 20 years plus in between those two books. One of the things I started seeing actually when I was teaching at Biola was that in the church planting classes so many of the students were not necessarily *doing church planting*. They were working with local people. It was the nationals that were doing the actual church planting. I started noticing a shift from that pioneer model to—well, at that point I didn't have terms for it—so then I started coming up with the idea of the "facilitator."

I started reading about the "saturation church planting movement." Actually one of our graduates who was working in Europe was writing, "Don't do pioneer church planting. It takes too long! We can do this saturation church planting. It's fast!" And I started asking, "Why is this fast? It's fast because you already have churches!" So my question was, *Why weren't they doing church planting from the beginning? Why are you having to come back in and start saturation church planting?* Did the church planters miss this training in the beginning and not teach it? Did the people reject what they taught? What was going on here? And I said "What you're doing is oranges and apples. You're not doing pioneer church planting over there. You're facilitating something that should have been implemented a long time ago because for some reason—I don't know why—it was missed either by the missionary or missed by the group of locals there.

And so that started me thinking: *I went back to Winter's three eras with William Carey, and then Hudson Taylor going*



*inland, and then McGavran and Townsend. The whole focus there was on unreached people groups. And so then I'm thinking, when you look at who's going where—they're not going so much anymore to the pioneer settings—we're talking Westerners—they're going into already existing national churches and working with them and helping them do it. So that's when I thought, That's the facilitator era. We have changed eras!* That fourth era wasn't appreciated by certain groups: No. There will never be a fourth era, okay? We don't mess with the eras!

**Ken:** Really? The eras were sacrosanct?

**Dr. Steffen:** Oh they were, definitely. This came up at EMS meetings and so forth. "There were only three eras, okay? And you don't need to write on this just to get publicity and so forth, okay?"

But we had moved out of an era. And the reason we moved out of that era is because we've actually been really successful in getting the gospel into all these various places. And all these churches have sprung up and now they're doing it! So actually it's a success—not something we should be critiquing. Yes, we can critique how good those works are that we did start. But now they're doing the work; so the role has changed drastically for the western church planter to move more into a facilitator role. Now, there are remnants of all three of those eras that will continue on. Western Church planters are still going into pioneer settings. But what happens is the numbers now are minimal compared to what they used to be during the McGavran/Townsend era—the third era—so that's when I came up with the fourth era.

**Ken:** Regarding the drastic shift in the way that the missions force is working.

**Dr. Steffen:** Exactly.

**Ken:** And there could be a fifth or sixth era?

**Dr. Steffen:** I'm not claiming there are only four and there will never be five!

**Ken:** Maybe a digital era for instance.

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes there could. In 10 years, what do we know will be in existence and in the digital world?

**Ken:** Now, your academic interests spanned a lot of different areas from phase-out early on to honor/shame of late. So in the mindset of a missiologist, how do you study broadly? How do you tackle a lot of subjects instead of being expert in just one?

**Dr. Steffen:** That is a problem: You may be kind of an

inch deep and a mile wide. Well, the exit strategy became a focus of mine because of an issue that was brought up there on the field.

Just a few years later, Trevor McIlwain started the whole chronological teaching model that would eventually go global under different names. And so the whole narrative thing was something of a very big interest to me. And actually I started in narrative myself—using story with the Ifugao because my propositional approach felt pretty flat. I realized I had to change. "I'm going to try story." I tried it and it worked! But I had no structure for it. So when McIlwain came up with chronological teaching, he had a seven-phase structure that he used. That structure gave me a way of putting into practice—into curriculum—how we could do this. And so the whole thing of understanding story and so forth got me started. Its origin come from my own situation in the Philippines among the Ifugao.

Then when I came to Biola, I said, "We need a course on this." So I put together the first narrative course. And that's been taught now for a long time. And the whole narrative movement very shortly moved into the Southern Baptist Convention. It was Jim Slack—who just passed away a year or so ago—he was friends with Dale Schultz who was with New Tribes. And Dale told him what was going on and Jim said, "We want to get this in IMB." So there was McIlwain who taught about it in conference down in Mindanao somewhere. And IMB picked that concept up and took off with it. They've got the finances; they've got personnel; and they've got the time. They put this orality thing into practice and they really made it go global.

And so I did a book on worldview based storing that tracks the history of that movement. It's almost forty years old now, the orality movement. The book tracks the history from when it began, how it began, and then how it diverged into all these various areas: How people did it, and what they added to it. The creativity of missionaries is just mind-boggling, how they've handled narrative and so forth.

**Ken:** Okay so "phase out," and chronological Bible storying—these came out of your own experience. You were trying to solve problems in the mission field. Maybe honor/shame as well? Was it something you experienced personally and therefore needed to study?

**Dr. Steffen:** I ran into a few problems; I made a few mistakes. And I had no idea that I was shaming people, because even though I understood honor/shame from my point of view, I didn't understand it from an Asian perspective. And it got me into trouble. So I knew that

was an issue. But I didn't know what the answers were. I was too busy studying "exit strategy" and narrative to go into it. But when I got into my professorship at Biola, I started realizing, "We need to get into honor and shame."

And as I look back now, I'd say somewhere around the year 2000 the mission-minded population picked it up and started realizing, "This is an issue that has to be addressed." And so once again I said, "I'm going to put a class together". And faculty said, "OK, give us the syllabus. Make your argument. And we'll see." So I think 2004 or 2005 was the first year that honor/shame was taught as a class at Biola.

**Ken:** Maybe as a professor of missiology you're running into students who are working around the world, and you're having to basically come up with new classes to address their needs and concerns. And that keeps you current, keeps you creative?

**Dr. Steffen:** Definitely. I've always played on the cutting edge, okay? Once something's in play, like "exit strategy," I don't like to go back to it. I figure, "Get it started let people pick it up and refine it."

Only I keep playing in orality—because it keeps going in different directions so I want to keep up with it to find out where it's going. Same with honor/shame. One or two years ago Wheaton College put on their first honor/shame conference. It was big. And what they did in contrast to the International Orality Network was they brought in people in every discipline immediately, at that first conference. There were community development workers, teachers, business—it doesn't matter what you're doing—honor/shame is part of it. And that helped make the movement broad immediately. It wasn't like the orality movement, where just church planters were using their storytelling, thus narrowing the focus. But the orality movement should have been broad too, because orality is also in everything!

**Ken:** Yes. Orality interests educators; it interests development workers. Interesting. Now what about "business as mission"...

**Dr. Steffen:** Business as mission—this is an interesting one. I was hired to teach church planting at Biola, and to create a concentration in church planning. So we already had one class, and I said, "What's the next one going to be?" The next one I created was, "Models and Strategies of Church Planting." Part of those models and strategies has to be, "What are ways we are using to help start new churches?" Back then the term was tentmaking.

So I used that one. Actually we were influential in trying to change the term.

So by that time Crowell's School of Business was started at Biola, and I heard that Steve Rundle was interested in how business would impact missions. We talked together, and I said, "Hey would you come over and give the class an hour at least on business and missions?"

Oh, he was willing to do it! So he came over. And by the third or fourth year, I said, "You know, we ought to write a book on this." And that was it. At the start of the next semester, he handed me this yellow pad—an outline for a book. I'm reading it. "Wow! This is good!" I said, "We've got to submit this." So we went to Intervarsity Press and they bought it. But they said, "Now we want it out in time for Urbana." And we about died, but it did make the deadline; and it showed up for Urbana that year.

**Ken:** So now if we look at the development of orality, the facilitator era, business as mission - are these fads? And if they are, is that good or bad? What do you make of that? That maybe there is a short life, or a peak? You know, a period of interest in these topics and then a wane? And if so, does that matter?

**Dr. Steffen:** To me it wouldn't matter. But definitely when you look at the topic of exit strategy, it has changed. The main thrust has gone from pioneer to facilitator, right? So in a sense the topic of "exit strategies" will go away as fewer and fewer people go toward pioneer church planting from the West.

Orality? That will never cease in importance, because people are moving more and more to the oral plus digital communication now. But we've kind of gone full circle from oral to the literate print book focus, then to the digital, and now we're back to the oral plus digital. So the books are phasing out. Who reads books anymore? And who's stupid enough to keep writing books? I don't know why I keep writing!

Now, business as mission? You know, it's not been that long. So its future is still there to be seen. The whole financing of mission—of the mission enterprise—is an outdated model.

**Ken:** Raising support?

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes, raising support—that type of thing. That concept has been passed on to Latin America—all over again right? And they have problems with it, too. A new model has to come into existence. Business as missions will be part of that model, but it won't be

the only one. But it'll be one of them.

So there's been a learning in business as mission. Too many people got into it who had no clue about business in the beginning. And of course doing business is one thing; doing business overseas is a whole different ball-game. So things have tightened up. Organizations have people now to consult on this. So it'll continue. Latin Americans are sending not just the people that are going to do the church planting, but sending family members with them, because one of the major reasons for attrition for a Latin American is loneliness.

**Ken:** Ok, so a team based approach.

**Dr. Steffen:** A team-based approach—if their members do business—they set up businesses there—it helps fund them as well. But funding is another reason that some come back prematurely.

**Ken:** So, to begin wrapping up, if you look back, what difference has being a missiologist made in the kingdom of God? Do you have a sense of how it makes a difference in missionary work or not?

**Dr. Steffen:** That's a great question. I think one of the things that missiology does is blend the history of missions, the social sciences, anthropology, education and the rest, and a look at theology. The blending of those disciplines drives mission strategy. Too often people start with the mission strategy—and therefore they repeat the same mistakes everybody's made back then—because they don't know the mission history.

So if they can blend those disciplines together, then the mission strategy has a much greater possibility of being successful. But most agencies and most people in those agencies start with the strategy without looking back and letting anthropology, history, and theology impact their work.

**Ken:** They want to shortcut the process.

**Dr. Steffen:** Short cut it. Fast is the name of the game today.

**Ken:** Now, there are only a handful of missiologists who are as productive as you are—with something like 150 publications between the reviews and articles and books. How do you do that?

**Dr. Steffen:** Well, when I applied for the job at Biola, my ploy was to tell them, "If you hire me, I will put you on the map for publications."

**Ken:** So you had to make good on your promise.

**Dr. Steffen:** I had to make good on my promise. But at that point I only had one publication—in EMQ.

**Ken:** Was that the one where you said, "Don't show the Jesus Film?"

**Dr. Steffen:** It was very short and brief, and it was definitely not scholarly, okay? So I told Biola, "OK. I promise to publish." That's why I put a lot of time into that.

**Ken:** What I'm hearing is you were highly motivated for two reasons. One was: you ran into missionary problems you were curious about and wanted solve. That's kind of where we started. But also you needed to do something for the university. And then you had the institutional support to pull it off.

**Dr. Steffen:** Yes. You've got it.

**Ken:** Somehow I don't feel like just being motivated and having the time to do it is going to result in 150 publications for the rest of us.....

**Dr. Steffen:** No. It will take a little discipline on the side!



# Not Getting Lost in Translation:

Sorrow, Loss, and Joy  
in the Transition from Field  
Missionary to Seminary  
Professor

**Brad Roderick**

**The purpose of this article is to describe the transition of a missionary from the field to the academy.**

The original request for this reflection article contained a typo—instead of “transition from field missionary to professor,” it read “translation from field missionary to professor.” I chose the title I have because it seems to me the typo—translation—is a more accurate way to describe my experiences.

Our experiences since returning to the US in many ways, both good and bad, have been like learning a new language, a new culture, a new country, and a new ministry assignment. And, we discovered, we were new people—no longer the same as when we left the United States almost two decades earlier. The process has definitely been more “translation” than “transition.”

The journey began with a surprising announcement from my wife. A beautiful morning had dawned in Thailand, and I had just left the breakfast buffet and gone to find my seat in the auditorium. It was time for our annual mission meeting, and our Bible study speaker for the week was Dr. David Platt.

As I slipped into my seat, my wife leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, “I have a bomb to drop on you. Do you want it now or after the worship service?” Who could possibly worship after hearing a statement like that? We headed for the lobby and a quiet corner to discuss her news.

Over the next half hour, she revealed a strong impression



Twenty years of material possessions, a lifetime of memories

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**Brad Roderick** was born in California and lived in Florida and Mississippi while he was growing up. During the summer between high school and college, he encountered the living Christ. Immediately, he sensed the Father calling him to spend his life telling others about Jesus. After more than 19 years of service in Asia, Brad and his wife Gretchen returned to the United States to continue the same work they were doing overseas—training Christians to pray, share the gospel, make disciples, start churches, and develop leaders. He currently serves as Chairman of the Missions Department at the Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee.

that she had felt during her morning quiet time. Our time in Asia, home for over 19 years, was over. If she had not already promised to help with a meeting in the town where we were living, she said, she would not even bother to go back home and pack. That is how strong the impression was. But I was not quite ready to leave my home, my friends, my work, my adopted country, or her people.

As is our custom, we sought godly counsel to help us process what we needed to do. Our supervisor, a close friend and wise counselor with whom we had worked in one form or another during our entire time overseas, made time to hear our story. At the end of the conversation, and after much prayer, we had what we thought was a good plan. We would finish our current term, return to the USA for our scheduled Stateside Assignment (aka “furlough”) and use that time to transition, hopefully, into a teaching role.

One month later, quite unexpectedly, everyone in our

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organization received an email saying our company was facing a significant financial crisis. One thousand people were needed to voluntarily resign and return to the US in order to avoid disaster. Knowing that we were already anticipating a transition back to America and wanting to be team players for an organization that had treated us so well for so long, we accepted “retirement.”

The next couple of months were a blur—packing up and deciding what to leave and what to keep, saying goodbye to ministry partners, leaving a culture that had gotten into our blood and changed who we were and how we saw the world. And, because so many of us were leaving at the same time, our company requested that there be no “going away” parties, which meant leaving without really feeling closure. Before we knew it, we were back in the US, facing an unknown future, but with the help of a known God.

## The Blessings of Family Time

The first of many surprises upon our return was a fantastic gift of God’s providence. Our oldest son had served

with another missions organization after he graduated from high school. While serving, he met and married a beautiful young woman from another country. After their marriage, they settled in her home country.

When they announced that they were expecting our first grandchild, we had not expected to see him until he was at least six months old, assuming we would still be in Asia. Before learning that we would be returning to the US, our son and his wife had already arranged, for various reasons, to deliver their son in America. Our grandson was born in Tennessee, a month after we came back to the States. We were able to be together as a family for our first Christmas back in America and to be present for the delivery.

Other blessings, expected and otherwise, continued to greet us. We reconnected with both sides of our families through family reunions, attended the internment of my father-in-law, spent time working alongside stateside partners we had not been able to see in almost two decades, and ate a ton of American junk food. I remember being in the grocery store in February, just two months after returning to the US. I tossed three cans of cranberry sauce in the shopping cart so we could save them for Thanksgiving. My wife gently reminded me that groceries were available in American stores year-round, and we could wait and buy them when they were needed. What a concept!

## Time to Get a Job

After we had been in the states a few weeks, we traveled to North Carolina to attend a friend’s graduation (another opportunity we would not have had if we were still on the field). His father, who had also taken the retirement offered by our former organization, commented that I was too young to be retired and that we needed to come up with another word for me. I suggested, “unemployed.” And, for obvious reasons, that was not a condition I wanted to be in for long.

I had graduated in 1993 with a Ph.D. in Missions and had a couple of offers to teach right away. Instead, I determined that I should have more experience in the field before taking a teaching role—especially in such a practical discipline. My wife and I spent three more years planting churches in the Northeast and then were appointed to serve in Asia.

My call to the nations and my call to teach have never been separated in my understanding. During my 11 years as a US church planter, I taught Seminary Extension courses. Every job that I had overseas was fifty percent



church planting and fifty percent training—sometimes in a seminary, sometimes online, but most often in a village. I had been having a great time as a church planter/theological educator in America and South and Southeast Asia, and suddenly, 30 years had passed. So, in 2015, when we transitioned back to the US, it was with the hope of helping to prepare the next generation of field missionaries.

We ran into a huge roadblock, however. The schools I contacted in search of a position teaching missions, some of which had offered me a job before I had any missions experience, would not even consider me. The most common response I heard was, “sorry, we are looking for a teacher, not a missionary.”

At this point, I was surprised to be contacted by an association of churches looking for an administrator to coordinate their work as they sought to start and strengthen churches in their area. Looking back, I see that the Lord was sending me back to school—not as a teacher, but as a student. I had much to learn about what had happened in the US during the two decades we were away.

## **America had Changed . . . and the American Church had Changed**

After a few months, what we knew in our minds began to be felt in our hearts—we were not just visitors to America on furlough. We lived here now, and we needed to start making a life for ourselves in America.

The nation of our birth and upbringing looked nothing like what we remembered. Anger, skepticism, and a deep, unshakeable fear seemed to permeate the culture. Civil discourse was no longer possible. People no longer had different opinions, they either agreed with one’s opinion, or they were the enemy.

The church was also different. Many churches had moved from a model of making disciples to a model of attracting members. The busy-ness of modern American life meant that people no longer had time for multiple church services in a week. It seemed to us that the average Christian had gone from spending an average of three hours a week in church-related activity to spending an average of three hours a month.

In working with churches that were losing membership and at a loss for what to do, we would suggest evangelism and discipleship. We would encourage them to exegete their community and determine the best way to share the gospel in their current context. But we were speaking a foreign language that many American churches did not seem to understand. Even church planters seemed

more interested in attracting a “core group” from existing churches than in sharing the gospel with those outside of the Kingdom.

We slowly began to understand that we were experiencing reverse culture shock. We had changed and needed to put down our assumptions about how to do ministry. Not only were we no longer in Asia, but we were also no longer in the twentieth century, and we needed to learn to adapt to a changing world.

As we reengaged the American cultures (intentional plural) and the American church, we relearned the delicate balance between being faithful to the biblical message while adapting to the local culture. Proper contextualization is not just for overseas ministry.

## **Landing in the Classroom**

When my wife first came to me with the news that we were to return to the US, we made a plan to return in July 2017, and I planned to be in a classroom by January 2018. But, as I said, now that we were in America, no doors had opened. In June of 2017, I told my wife I would never again apply for a teaching job—if the Lord wanted me in the classroom, He would have to do it without my help.

Immediately after that bold pronouncement, I went to Malaysia on a mission trip with our church. While there, I got an email from the president of a seminary that eventually led to a meeting, an interview, and, ultimately, an offer to teach missions, starting in January 2018. And I still have not filled out an application.

One aspect of coming to teach that has surprised and blessed us has been the living situation. During the interview process, we were told that we could stay in student housing if we wanted, even if only temporarily as we got settled. I tried to build up enthusiasm when I told my wife we would be living in the dorm.

As it turned out, campus housing is a very nice apartment complex. We are delighted to be living so close to our “focus group,” a goal we always had while on the mission field. The past two years here on campus have been incredible. I love being in the classroom, hanging out with students, hosting missions related events, and having students in our home regularly.

I cannot think of a way to adequately communicate how much I love teaching missions. Formatting my studies and thirty years of experience into a 50 minute a day, three days a week, PowerPoint lecture (with a correlated online video version) has not been without its challenges. But opening up God’s Word and a map of the world in

a room full of students hungry to be a part of seeing His Kingdom grow is worth the effort.

The classroom has also allowed me the chance to meditate on the experiences I had in school, and we had on the field. And I mean “meditate” in the sense of that proverbial cow chewing the cud over and over again, to get every drop of nourishment from it. What I learned as a theory in seminary is continuously being filtered by the things we experienced on the field as I try to reformulate these theories for the next generation of missionaries.

### Staying Connected to the Field There

Speaking of theory versus reality, as we prepared to leave Asia, we were aware in theory of the pain that would come from leaving friends and national partners who had become family. We greatly underestimated that pain! But in retrospect, we can see that it was time for us to step aside so that they could move forward without looking to us for leadership.

At the same time, we have not been removed entirely from the picture. One of the principles I taught

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**Since returning to America,  
WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED**  
to discover that we have not  
completely left the field.

on the field and continue to teach in the classroom is a modification of the typical “MAWL” approach. MAWL is a popular acronym for a four-step training process in which the missionary Models what needs to be done, Assists the trainee in doing it, Watches the trainee do it, and Leaves. I like the first three but always taught that the Pauline example for the last letter was never “leave.” We should Model, Assist, Watch and Love, or Letter or any other L-word other than abandon!

Since returning to America, we have been blessed to discover that we have not completely left the field. As we approach four years in the states, we are still in regular contact with our ministry family through WhatsApp, return trips, email, and all of the communication processes available to the modern world. I have had the opportunity to continue training national leaders and help them consider the best way to answer difficult situations. Occasionally I am asked to provide direction

as they continue to grow. Most importantly, we have been able to continue to support the work through prayer.

### Staying Connected to the Field Here

Not only have we stayed connected to the work overseas, but here in Memphis, we have an amazing amount of ways to communicate with the world without leaving home. On campus, we have students from over a dozen countries—including the two countries where we lived while overseas.

Of course, being a missions professor allows me multiple ways to get students involved with the work around the globe. This past summer, we had students serving on short term projects on five continents. Every semester we host two international fellowships where we learn about another country, sample their food, discuss the strategies for gospel advance in their context, and pray for the advancing of His Kingdom.

Another opportunity that helps keep us focused on reaching the nations has been teaching English as a Second Language classes through our local church. Two nights a week, we meet with students from Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Japan, Korea, China, Iran, Peru, Honduras, and more. The world truly has come to America.

### Moving Forward

As I write this essay, four years have passed since we began to struggle with the decision to return to the US. Three and a half years have passed since we arrived in America for the first time in almost 20 years without a return ticket. Slowly we are adjusting to the reality that being here is the new normal.

A few months ago, I was visiting family in the Northeast, and someone overheard our conversation. She caught my attention and asked me, “Are you a college professor?” It took me a moment to formulate an answer. My heart said, “No, I am now and always will be a missionary,” but my mind led me to say, “Why yes, yes, I am.”

I am not sure why that was such a hard thing to admit. Teaching is not in any way shameful. Actually, it is what I have always felt called to do. But I must admit I miss being a “missionary.”

In acknowledging that, I think I would also have to confess the sin of pride. Too much of my identity was in a particular role when I know it should only be in Him. What matters most is not being a missionary or being a teacher but being an obedient disciple. With each day that passes, I realize how blessed I was then to serve overseas and how blessed I am now to have the opportunity to teach and to invest in some incredible students.





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# Collaboration as Missional:

## Experiences from a Junior Faculty Member

**Jamie Sanchez**

**When I left my first career in Asia to start my PhD,** I grieved leaving behind a career in which my job and intentional missiological engagement with people were so easily integrated. I knew my job or geographic location were not the only factors that determined my core values; and yet I was aware that a new season of life would include different job responsibilities that may not allow for such seamless integration.

Once I finished my PhD, I started as faculty member in the Graduate Department at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in Southern California. As is true throughout the academy, my faculty role includes the typical responsibilities of teaching, research, and service. My specific department is comprised of three doctoral programs and one master program, all which fall under the umbrella of intercultural studies—a field which includes missiology, anthropology, and cultural studies, among others.

In the first few months of my new career, and even still today, I was overwhelmed with faculty responsibilities: conducting research that resulted in academic presentations and publications, the numerous service responsibilities, teaching graduate students across different modes of course delivery, advising students, etc. The work was rewarding but it also

made for very full days.

It did not take long before I realized I was not the only one trying to “figure it all out.” Through various conversations with other faculty, I began to learn about the plethora of opportunities to collaborate that were available at the university, and across the academy. Through conversations with colleagues I began to understand how collaboration was more than just one way in which I could work with others to accomplish the tasks for which I was responsible. I also began to see that collaboration could be missional. In other words, collaborative projects with other faculty, with my students, and with missiological practitioners, could provide op-



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portunities for me to continue to engage in missiological work in some, albeit limited, capacity.

Reshaping collaboration as missional has shifted the way I think about my job and about missiological engagement. In this article, I will first define the terms collaboration and missional. I will then share my experiences of missional collaboration across different spheres: with faculty, with students, with staff, and with practitioners. As I recount these experiences, I will detail how reframing work as missional collaboration can be effective in weaving together professional job responsibilities with core values.

## Defining Terms

Collaboration is generally understood to be a pooling of resources to accomplish a task. Academic collaboration can include any academic activity done with another faculty member, student, administrator, or practitioner which may include publishing, teaching, grant work, or critical student activities. The term missional, along with missions, can be complicated. In this article, when I refer to the missional aspect of academic collaboration, I am specifically focused on how working with others can connect faculty to missiological engagement, broadly speaking.

## Literature Review

Scholars have long asserted the importance of collaboration throughout different industries (Amey & Brown 2004; Bronstein 2003; Lee & Shipe 2014). In higher education, changes in resources, faculty structures, and faculty demographics has been an impetus for an increased focus on collaboration (Matthias 2019). That is to say that collaboration has been framed as an effective way to share resources, lend expertise, and generate professional networks (Austin and Sorcinelli 2013; Mamiseishvil 2012). There are even “how to” guides for those who want to develop their own collaborative work. Notably the *It Works* series includes *It Works For Us, Collaboratively* (Blythe and Sweet 2006).

Over time, scholars have also asserted that collaboration is essential to the academic and professional development of students and faculty (Cunningham 1998; Hughes 2007; Kezar, Maxey & Eaton 2013). Collaboration as mentoring has been considered an effective way in which senior faculty can develop junior faculty. In my own faculty experience, I have collaborated with (and continue to) various senior faculty members in co-teaching courses, conducting research projects that resulted in conference presentations, and in publishing a collaborative article. In

each case, I learned, or further learned, necessary teaching, research, and publishing skills which are necessary for my professional development.

Faculty are not the only people who can benefit from collaboration. Related to student success, scholars have lauded the importance of mentoring students in their academic pursuits (Davis 2010; Schlosser, Knox, Moskowitz, & Hill 2003; Turner 2015). Over time, scholars have revisited the importance of collaboration between faculty and administrative departments (Banta and Kuh 1998; Roper 2004; Philpott and Strange 2016). Cook-Sather (2014) furthered the discussion about student success by exploring the concept of faculty collaboration with students as partners, not just as passive receivers in the collaborative project.

Finally, faculty and administrators have published about the impact that collaboration has had on their own lives and careers, in both *Inside Higher Education* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Givens 2018; Gose 2017; Palmer 2017).

This brief review of relevant literature on the topic of collaboration is certainly not comprehensive. It does, however, demonstrate that collaboration is a respected mode of work across the academy.

## Context: Christian Higher Education and Intercultural Studies

Put simply, collaboration is important to fulfilling the mission of the university (Matthias 2019). Gould (2014) has asserted that opportunities for missional engagement are different for the professor at a Christian university than they are for those at secular universities. Added to this conversation, in an article about the future of Christian higher education, Dockery (2016) asserted that collaboration is an important factor in helping the university achieve its mission.

I have found this to be true in my role at Biola. The university mission statement is “biblically centered education, scholarship and service—equipping men and women in mind and character to impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ” (Biola University 2019). The way in which each professor may aim to “impact the world of the Lord Jesus Christ” certainly varies depending on academic disciplines. Regardless of how such impact is accomplished, faculty work should align with the mission of the university. Further, collaboration in all its forms can strategically position faculty to work “for the extension of God’s Kingdom on earth” (Dockery 2016, 118). In other words, collaboration can be missional.

## Collaboration Experiences

What follows are my experiences with collaboration with four different groups: faculty, students, administrators, and missions practitioners. I will detail each experience, connecting them to missiological engagement, broadly speaking.

### Research: Collaboration with Faculty

Research can be daunting and isolating. Adding to the pressure of research is the lack of time available to conduct research in the regular school year (Matthias 2019). As a faculty member at a teaching university, which includes a full teaching load, along with doctoral committee work, I have found that focusing on research during the school year is quite challenging.

The types of research projects in which I have been most successful to conduct during the school year has been in collaborative research projects. This may be due to the inherent accountability and the added encouragement scholars have found to be a benefit of collaborating with others (Fink 2003). As mentioned above, in my short academic career, I have collaborated with senior faculty to conduct original research, present at conferences, and co-publish articles. These opportunities equipped me for my most recent academic collaboration: a research grant.

### A Research Grant: Collaboration to Address a Modern-Day Crisis

I recently reconnected with a friend who had started her faculty position about the same time that I did. We are both building research in the area of refugee studies and each of us are at different universities that belong to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU). When we learned that the CCCCU offers various types of research grants, we recruited a third colleague to help us put together the grant application. In Spring 2019, we received a CCCCU planning grant to design an original research project. Our project will be on the topic of the impact of displacement of women refugees in Europe.

The magnitude of the modern-day refugee crisis is well-established (Holmes and Castaneda 2016). Additionally, scholars from various disciplines, including theological studies continue to add to the body of literature in the field of refugee studies, broadly speaking (Houston 2015; George and Adeney 2018). Further, there continues to be a variety of books focused on mobilizing Christians and their churches to address the crisis by engaging refugees and immigrants in their community (Payne 2012; Bauman and Soerens 2016; Wu 2017; Annan 2018).

My interest in refugee studies comes out of a care for marginalized people. Additionally, as a Christian, I wanted to do something that could help address the crisis. It was an opportunity to integrate my academic career and my desire to play a small role in this modern-day crisis.

In sum, collaborating with other faculty on a research grant will allow us to do more than produce excellent scholarship that will result in needed academic currency, i.e. presentations and publications, for tenure and promotion. The collaborative project has provided us with an opportunity to participate meaningfully in refugee work. And, while any of the three of us investigators could have likely conducted a research project about refugees on our own, collaboration allows us to share resources, experiences, contacts, and, to be honest, the conviviality produced in collaboration with others beats the isolation of solo research.

### Beyond Advising: Collaboration with Students

As is true for most faculty in the academy, I work very closely with students in a variety of capacities: as teacher, as advisor, as doctoral committee member, as supervising professor for assistantships, and as collaborator. As Program Director of the PhD in Intercultural Studies, I advise each student in the program on topics like their plans of study. But, academic advising has also come to include opportunities for further academic development to prepare students for their future careers.

Students in our doctoral programs have varied reasons for getting a terminal degree. Some students aim to secure a faculty position. Others are leading their respective organizations, for which research skills would be an added benefit. Still some want to sharpen their intercultural knowledge base in order to further their understanding of their ministry setting. Many of our students work in the missions industry in some capacity. Finally, the students in our doctoral programs are quite international - including students hailing from most of the world's regions. For some, getting a doctoral degree at a reputable higher education institution will provide them with opportunities to transform their home communities. In many situations, students want to engage in extracurricular professional development opportunities.

### Collaboration to Develop Future Missiological Leaders

Because I work with doctoral students, one of the areas of advising generally includes conference presentations and publications. Often discussions about publishing

includes teaching students about the different types of academic journals, what a call for papers entails, or how to find a conference suitable for their specific academic focus. My colleagues and I have had many opportunities, and some success, in collaborating with students on projects that adds to their own professional development.

The first example is a collaboration with a student to publish an academic article. This student wanted to learn how to turn a class term paper into a publishable research article. He was eager, and had already put in a lot of work, so I was glad to work with him.

His article, which addressed the historical shifts of Christianity in his host country, was situated in a part of the world with which I am only vaguely familiar. Collaborating with my student allowed for more than just learning about history of his host country. Collaboration with him was also a way in which I could equip him in his academic development and in missiological engagement in his current context.

Another example of collaboration with students comes out my department. Each year, different faculty members partner with a student (or two) in ongoing research that faculty member is conducting. Every research team (faculty and students) meets throughout the Fall semester to collaborate on everything from applying to respective research conferences to transcribing and coding the research. Finally, each research group presents their work at a conference in the Spring. Over time, we have seen students who were part of a research group go on to present their own work at the same conference the following year. Students and faculty often express how beneficial it was to collaborate on each research project. Students learn the ins and outs of research. Faculty learn how best to lead students in the research process.

These are just two examples of ongoing collaborative work I have done with students. If faculty really believe that students are the future leaders of their respective fields, then it follows that the students of missiology are the future of the discipline. As such, collaboration with them, often beyond what the job officially entails, is essential for their professional development so they can be ready for the opportunities that await them after graduation.

#### **Extracurricular Connections: Collaboration with Staff**

Reframing faculty service requirements as missional collaboration has been key in my faculty experience thus far. All faculty positions include some service responsibilities that can, honestly, be burdensome because of the already taxing faculty load. Yet, I have found that many

service requirements are also opportunities to learn, work with others across the university, and incorporate my skills sets and personal values to help achieve the mission of the university. I have discovered that the many service opportunities afforded to faculty can be life-giving, especially when I am in the throes of other, often isolating, work.

As such, I look for an opportunity or two each academic year outside of my department and school to collaborate with others throughout the university. Because I teach graduate students, I rarely get to interact with the undergrad student population who make up the bulk of students at Biola. Thus, an added bonus to collaboration in some service opportunities is that I get to interact with undergraduate student and I get to understand the context in which most of my colleagues across the university work.

#### **University Programming: Collaboration for FirstGen Students**

One such collaborative opportunity in which I am currently involved is serving as a faculty mentor for the FirstGen Program, which is run by the Office of Student Enrichment and Intercultural Development (SEID) at Biola. Students who are the first in their family to attend college apply to be a part of the program. Research has demonstrated that programming can help first-generation college students succeed in their academic pursuits (Blackwell and Pinder 2014; Petty 2014). As such, SEID has developed a robust FirstGen program that includes financial scholarships, an extended summer orientation, mentorship from peers and faculty, and community building activities throughout the school year (Biola 2019).

Added to the professional commitment and conviction to invest in the next generation of students, is my own personal story of being a first-generation college student. I am the first in my family to attend and graduate from college. I remember the daunting days of trying to figure out those first few weeks of college. I did not have any adults in my life who I could ask for guidance. Gratefully, over time, I developed relationships in my campus ministry group who could fill in some of the void. Yet, it would have been an added benefit to have a built-in person who could help me navigate life as a student.

In some ways, my role as a faculty mentor helps fill in the same void of my first-generation mentee. Over the academic year, once trust is built, meeting with me mentee usually expands to include elements of personal discipleship. Woven into conversations about academic



stress, how to prepare for those first college exams, and how to develop community as a commuter student were discussions about personal spiritual disciplines, developing a trust of God's goodness, and the opportunities we have to live out the Great Commission with the people in our respective communities.

My experience as a faculty mentor aligns with Gould's (2014) assertion that opportunities for professors at Christian universities may differ from opportunities of Christian professors at secular universities. My experience of collaboration with the SEID staff as a FirstGen Program faculty mentor is one way I help support university programming. But, it has also proven to be another way in which my faculty role can be used to live out my missional convictions of discipleship.

### Across the Chasm: Collaboration with the Missiological Practitioners

One of the potential pitfalls of academic work, especially for those in the Social Sciences and Humanities, is to stay inside the proverbial ivory tower conducting research that does not make a difference in the world outside the academy. Even more concerning is the chasm that lies between missiological research and missionary practice (Farrell 2018). Missiological societies like the Evangelical Missiological Society were formed to produce relevant and sound missiological research for the benefit of both academics and practitioners (EMS 2019). In the same vein, as a Christian academic, I also aim to work across the chasm so that my research is relevant and accessible, and even informed by, current missiological practitioners. In this section of the article, I will share about a recent collaborative project with a group of missiological practitioners.

In Fall 2018, I worked as a part of a Transformation Collective Lab, or T.Co.Lab, hosted by Frontier Ventures, in Pasadena, CA. This particular T.Co.Lab came together in response to *Transcending Mission*, by Dr. Michael Stroope, who is Chair of Missions at Truett Seminary at Baylor University in Waco, TX. Together with Frontier Ventures, Stroope gathered a group of missiologists, mostly practitioners working with different churches and missions organizations, to address this guiding question: *How can we work together in specific and tangible ways to deeply change the assumptions and practices of the Western mission industry and expand the church's global witness?*

In our first work session, each member shared their experiences related to the topic. We gathered data related to the topic from current field missionaries via Skype;

then the T.Co.Lab personnel led us in learning activities through which different subthemes emerged. Those themes were organized into workgroups in which each team would choose a few tasks to complete prior to the next work session. I was on the "power in missions" workgroup which gathered current literature on the topic as a resource for the entire group. After a second weekend of work, the group developed a Confession and Plea that represents the hopeful aims of areas of growth in the Western Missions Industry.

This experience was incredibly meaningful for me. As I reflect on the experience, and ongoing connections I have with the group, I think about how global missiological efforts can benefit from collaboration between researchers and practitioners. All of us who were a part of the T.Co.Lab are committed to innovative missiological engagement.

### Summary

I began this article with a reference to some of the fears I had in my career change. During those years of living in Asia, my job and my missiological engagement were so easily interwoven. I was not quite sure how it would all work in my faculty role. As mentioned, it became quickly evident that there were ample opportunities to integrate a missiological focus into my faculty work.

As noted above, I have had ample opportunities to collaborate with others across the academy. I limited what I shared to my experiences of research to engage the world of refugees, of collaborating with students as a way missiological engagement, of collaborating with administrators to support programs that lead to student success, and to collaborate with practitioners of missions.

The benefits of collaboration go beyond connecting faculty to missiological engagement. Working with others can develop trust and humility (Dockery 2016). Collaboration can also extinguish the fear that may have in the face of daunting academic tasks (Hoogstra 2012). For me, collaboration has meant having a host of mentors from whom I can learn: other faculty who have invited me to join in a project which addresses an ongoing humanitarian crises, students who have taught me about their important missiological work, administrators who have educated me about the importance of university programs that equip marginalized student populations, and missions practitioners who, out of decades of experience, have demonstrated how asking critical questions can help better our participation in missions.

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“There are two senses of the term “Asian Theology,” one that emerged as grassroots Christians interact with the authoritative Word of God and the other a theology that is imposed on Asians as distinctly Asian.”

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# What have Global Christians to do with Asian Theologies in this Globalized World?

**Sochanngam Shirik**

**As an Asian Christian educated in both Asia and the West,** I have often pondered on this question: *what have I to do with Asian theology?* I am still on a quest, and this essay is a reflection of my journey. There are two main ways in which people generally use the term “Asian Theology.” In one sense, we use such nomenclature to speak of the theological endeavor Asian Christians engage in—both academicians and laypeople. In this sense, the theologies that arise as a result of the interaction with, and interpretation of, the biblical text from and for the Asian context could be considered as Asian Theology.



Sochanngam Shirik

But there is a second sense that the term has come to be associated with in a certain circle of theologians: Asian Theology not only as a contextual necessity but also as exclusivity. The two can also be closely connected, and the ideas may intersperse. However, they are also different and can be separated. While the first focuses on and *emerges from* the textual-contextual struggles and realities of the Asian people, the second is often *imposed* on the textual-contextual realities of the people. One example of

the first approach would be one demonstrated in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Gener and Pardue 2019). An example of the second version of Asian theology is postcolonial readings of the Bible, at least a certain version of it.

## Asian Theology as Exclusivity

One of the central tenets of postcolonial reading, according to the Sri Lankan-born theologian, R.S.

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Sugirtharajah, an emeritus professor of Biblical Hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham, and one who has popularized the concept, is “to uncover the colonial designs in both biblical texts and their interpretations, and endeavors to read the text from such postcolonial concerns [as opposed to colonial concerns] as identity, hybridity and diaspora” (Sugirtharajah 2003, 4). The assumption is our context always influences and controls our reading to the degree that what we think to be biblical in one location will not be so in another. Therefore, the goal is to read the Scripture contrapuntally.

To be fair, by contrapuntal reading, proponents do not necessarily mean, at least in principle, that they always read the text anti-colonially. The goal is also not to read the text univocally, for the temptation to impose the dominant ideology lurks behind every pretense of uniformity, or so they contend. Instead, it is a reading of the text that takes into consideration the perspective and experiences of the exploited to unmask both the intentional and unintentional interpretation that privileges the strong and the powerful (Said 1993, 66-67). When applied to the biblical text, it fulfills its goal by taking both the experiences of the exploited and the exploiter to “highlight gaps, absences and imbalances” in the reading of the text (Sugirtharajah 2003, 16), so that the dominant reading (often the European or the Western reading) is kept in check. This is done by being “aware simultaneously of the mainstream scholarship and of other scholarship which the dominant discourse tries to domesticate and speaks and acts against” (Sugirtharajah 2004, 281). So far, so good, at least it appears so.

However, in the postcolonial narrative, dominant readings are almost always suspected. Proponents want to engage in a sort of epistemological decolonization, critiquing and challenging “oppressive narratives that desire to maintain the status quo” (Kim 2019, 191-94). In the words of Uriah Y. Kim, postcolonial reading is an approach from a “different epistemological (back) ground” (Kim 2019, 186). Sugirtharajah claims, “Reading practices are ultimately an ongoing struggle for control over text and the monitoring of meanings” (Sugirtharajah 2003, 69). According to him, for example, the so-called Great Commission passage, Matthew 28:19, and the missionary pattern of Paul were invoked “to institutionalize the missionary obligation” as opposed to the first-century missionary activities and successes that came through little institutionalized mission (Sugirtharajah 2003, 17-18). Postcolonial reading comes as “a convenient tool to unmask the past textual production of colonialism and to

dislodge its legitimizing strategies” (Sugirtharajah 2004, 272). For people like Sugirtharajah, Asianness seems to come not only from our contextual lived realities but is embedded in who we are. Remember, although he is an Asian, he is located in the Western Academy. The colonizer, whoever s/he is, will always try to suppress the colonized. Therefore, the colonized must challenge the reading of the colonizer. While the goal of contrapuntal reading is not to read the text anti-colonially, it seems to end up affirming what it denies.

Sugirtharajah is suspicious not only of the Western tendency to read the text colonially but also of the biblical text itself for its inherent colonial disposition. He claims, “The fault lies to some extent in the Bible itself because of the innate colonial impulses enshrined in some of the narratives” (Sugirtharajah 2004, 272). Of the Johannine letters, he avers:

The epistles exhibit intolerance of this sort of situation [intolerance for dissent], and detest any theological contradiction. The author’s hermeneutical device for dealing with theological dissidence is to come up with his own definition of Christianity on the basis of his understanding of the person of Christ. The incarnation and the atoning power of the sacrificed Christ become normative, and are used as a way of excluding those with divergent views or who hold a different interpretation from his. When one reads the epistles, especially the first two, one is struck by their harsh tone and intolerant language (Sugirtharajah 2008, 33).

The solution, therefore, is to read the text through the lens of colonized Christians and corrects it if necessary.

## Does Exclusive Asian Theology Chime with our Evangelical Conviction?

I am arguing that this second approach, as represented by Sugirtharajah, does not chime with the posture of grassroots Asian Christians,<sup>1</sup> most of who consider the Scriptures to be the foundation of their theology. This claim is both audacious and circular; nonetheless, I believe it is valid and evidential.

**Theological Response:** It is valid at least from an evangelical perspective that assumes the primacy and perspicuity of the Scripture. By perspicuity, I mean the Bible is not so ambiguous in addressing many issues, especially those that pertain to the uniqueness of Christ and his atoning work for salvation, the need for repentance and regeneration, the preeminent instrumentality of the church for the *missio dei* in this dispensation, and so on. Another word for this is “clarity.” A definition from my former systematic theology professor, Gregg Allison, whose Ph.D. dissertation centers on the topic, is helpful



here. Echoing The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), he avows, “Perspicuity is a property of Scripture as a whole and of each portion of Scripture whereby it is comprehensible to all believers who possess the normal acquired ability to understand oral communication and/or written discourse, regardless of their gender, age, education, language, or cultural background” (Allison/Trinity Evangelical Divinity School 1995). A simpler and shorter definition is that of Wayne Grudem: “*The clarity of Scripture means that the Scripture is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it*” (Grudem 1994, 108. Italics original). The emphasis on “all believers” and “seeking God’s help” is essential as they remind us of the limitation of natural reason and the need for supernatural empowerment.

Perspicuity also does not teach that everything in the Bible is equally clear. Neither is it a promise that all people will understand the Bible with the same level of

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clarity. But it teaches that the Scripture is clear in much of what it teaches and affirms, sufficient to accomplish its goal. Hence, the clarity of the Bible implies that Christians from all contexts have access to the same truth, albeit from their respective vantage points. The Bible is not like a hidden treasure that only certain contextual groups can illuminate. We cannot but affirm the clarity of the Scripture, considering that it was written to ordinary people with the intent that readers would understand and follow its command. While there are some who are more equipped to handle the Word of God rightly, the principle of clarity tells us that all God-fearing Christians who are willing to study the Word prayerfully, diligently, and ecclesially by depending on the Holy Spirit have the potential to understand much of what the Scripture has to say to us.

Thus, the principle of the perspicuity of the Scripture demands that we listen to Asian voices such as those in *Asian Christian Theology*. The goal of the book is “to offer an approach to Christian theology that is bibli-

cally rooted, historically aware, contextually engaged, and broadly evangelical” (Gener and Pardue 2019, 2). The proponents of the volume rightly affirm, some better than others, the primacy of the Scripture, which must be “*the source against which all other sources must ultimately be measured*” (Gener and Pardue 2019, 2). By primacy, they mean the Scripture occupies the foundational and final authority for all our theologies. It is affirming the principle of *sola scriptura*, “[an explicit principle that] had been implicit for centuries in the early church” (Vanhoozer 2016, 112), not *solo scriptura* or *nuda scriptura*. The latter affirms only a single principle of authority, the Scripture, while the former allows for other authorities—for example, tradition and church—to enlighten our understanding of the text.<sup>2</sup> While peoples’ access to the richness of the Bible may vary depending on their spiritual and theological discipline, such insights are not exclusive to certain historical and contextual groups. The writers, at the same time, acknowledge the implicit scriptural principle of “unified but diverse testimony to the drama of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration in Christ” (Gener and Pardue 2019, 2) necessitating multiple perspectives to enrich the global church. Asian theologian, Ivon Poobalan, rightly observes, our theology “must be both rooted and responsive” (Poobalan 2019, 84)

Our theology must be rooted in the unchanging Word of God and responsive to the changing world of humans. The intricate relationship between text and context calls for a various reading of the Bible. Some passages are relatively easier to understand and apply in our context. Some are more difficult and debatable, and in the latter cases we need to glean the wisdom of our respective context—denominational, theological, traditional, historical, cultural, geographical, etc.—to more fully comprehend the text. For instance, without taking our contextual wisdom, it is almost impossible to settle some theological issues related to baptism, the sovereignty of God and human free will, church polities, the ongoing manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the like.

As I write, today’s Sunday sermon from the pastor was from I Cor. 8. According to the pastor, one of the central messages of the text was that Christians should not use their liberty in Christ for self-gain; instead, they must consider that their actions do not offend the weaker brother and sister in Christ. Let us agree that this is an accurate reading. We must not offend Christians with a weaker conscience. But if we understand theology as both descriptive (theology contained within the Bible) and constructive (theology that is responsive to the

contemporary context), our theology is incomplete until we also understand who the weaker Christians are in our respective context. As an example, for many of my tribal people, dog meat is a delicacy. I will be offending lots of Western Christians if I eat dog meat in front of them, but in my village I will be offending the host if I do not eat since it would have been served with love and sacrifice. To me, understanding the biblical exhortation not to offend the weaker Christians and understanding the weaker party in our contexts are not unrelated issues; they are closely connected. The point seems valid, given the belief that unless we apply God's Word we have not fully understood it. How can we apply it unless we know what it means to us? While the message of the text is the same everywhere, our context also plays a crucial role in grasping the nuances in the text. In this sense, what the text meant and what it means are closely connected, inevitably making theology both a product and process of correlating the text and context (Gener 2019, 16).

The process of correlation gives rise to varieties of theological methods, highlighting diverse nuances of the text. Theologizing does not lie in the method *but the text* (Witherington 2019, 11) and therefore biblical theology (in other words, a theology that is biblical) cannot be confined to a single methodology (Moberly 2013, 2). Yet, all approaches attempt to unpack the message God is communicating to us primarily, although not exclusively, through his written Word (Arnold 2018, 89).<sup>3</sup> What R. W. L. Moberly said about Old Testament, in particular, is also true of theology in general: "There is more than one frame of reference and more than one goal for reading Israel's scriptures [i.e., Old Testament]. But this in no way means that 'anything goes,' for good reading will be alert to, and responsibly constrained by, the text in relation to its various contexts" (Moberly 2013, 282-83). Differences, thus, are bridgeable (not collapsible) since we are trying to communicate what God wants us to hear through his Word, not what we want others to hear. Therefore, whereas theology as an exclusive exercise is not desirable, theology as a grassroots reflection is to be welcomed. While the polarization of the West and the East is to be shunned, the authentic grassroots experiences of the Christians as they wrestle with the authoritative Word of God must be given attention (Chan 2014).

At the same time, while different cultures have different ways of making sense of reality, the Bible is the final epistemological foundation for all Christian theologies. The Bible may not provide a single, well-defined epistemological system (Healy and Parry 2007); but all

procedures must allow the Bible to have the final say. We also must concede that some forms of epistemology are more biblically welcoming than others, thus subjecting all our knowledge claims to the authority of the inspired-infallible Word of God. Therefore, any "epistemological decolonization" must result from grappling with the Scripture. This affirmation does not mean that we utilize only the Bible in our theological construction; but as we have mentioned, it means that all other resources including our reasoning are continually and progressively corrected, refined, and molded by the Scripture. Subordinating other sources to the authority of the Scripture in our theologizing is not a Western import. While we also rely on other external sources including historical and linguistic insights, philosophy, social sciences, anthropology, culture (Frame 2013, 721), and even other religious insights (Gener 2019, 24), to more fully understand the Scripture in our context, we study the Scripture together as God's family by submit-

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ting to the inherent authority in the text.

**Epistemological Response:** My argument also is built on the assumption that the human mind is capable of knowing reality and that our knowledge of things can be an accurate representation of what is out there. In other words, objective truth exists, and we can know it truly, although not exhaustively. Although there are ambiguities and contestations in grasping the objective truth (for example, the duck-rabbit image or the Yanny and Laurel sound), such obscurities are exemptions and not the norm. Because of shared human cognition, experiences of birth, life, death, etc., and other similar existential factors, humanity has more in common than differences. I do not doubt that each individual has a personal insight into reality; one's personal sensory input is different from others. However, I also believe that our common perception of reality allows us to navigate and overcome much of our personal differences.

My vision of reality is not so radically different from

others' perception. All things considered, most people see the same tree or at least a similar one. I can have a normal conversation and mutual understanding with my Western friends. As I continually interact with my Western friends and listen to my professors, I realized that we could have mutual understanding in many areas. Even in an event of disagreement, the primary reason is not because we come from different geographical-contextual locations (although that cannot be totally discounted) but because of our theological background. Even then, our presuppositions could be challenged and corrected by the text. My Western friends are not starkly different from my tribal people in the village. In fact, I can build a closer rapport with some of them than with some of my villagers. Of course, my educational background and life journey have made me who I am today. I also understand that biblical knowing cannot be strictly equated with our

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ordinary perception of reality or scientific knowing. Yet there are also correlations (Johnson 2015, 90-97), ones that cannot be ignored by both fields (Abraham and Aquino 2017, 3; Menssen and Sullivan 2017, 43). The point is clear: cultural differences do not and should not trump our commonality as humans, much less as one body of Christ (Eph 4: 5–6).

But some proponents of Asian Theology, as shown above, are implying that the way Asians view life is unique and exclusive to the point that others cannot see and experience from their perspective. If our perceptions are so unique, there should be as many views as there are Asians. There should be Asian<sub>1</sub> theology, Asian<sub>2</sub> theology, Asian<sub>3</sub> theology, ad infinitum; the term “Asian” becomes redundant.

The question remains: *where does the Asianness of the Asian Theologies arise?* Does it come from the lived realities of the people that are closely tied to the geographical and/or social context of Asia? Or is it inherent in the DNA of people who are born in Asia or born as Asian? The last question raises the question of whether there

is such a thing as the Asian DNA and what actually it is and who defines it? The second question undermines Asian theology/ies that do not arise from those who are immersed in the contextual realities of Asia. The same principle allows non-Asians to reflect on Asian theologies and Asians on Western theologies, bridging both theological and cultural gaps.

While there are admirable elements of postcolonial readings, I believe the overall trajectory is unhelpful. For one, I as an Asian Christian find it hard to believe that my Western Christian friends are out there trying to exegete the text with the intention of suppressing my view or that they are blindly mistaken in their whole hermeneutical exercise. I believe that they may have blind spots and could be mistaken in some areas. I also concede that some Westerners may have misused and misinterpreted the text to suit their agenda. But I do not, for a second, believe that such enterprise characterizes the whole Western interpreting tradition. The Nicene Creed or the Constantinople Creed is not merely a result of some Western theological or political endeavor; they are results of serious biblical reflections on cultural and doctrinal issues that continue to remain relevant for the global church. We cannot simply set aside the Conciliar Christology<sup>4</sup> and replace it with Christological reflections “from below.”<sup>5</sup> Both need to be respected and weighed biblically. I doubt Sugirtharajah and others would disagree with me on this, at least theoretically. But I suspect that they believe that most Westerners are so immersed in their contextual cocoon that their default reading is “colonial,” and such a posture has blinded them. Of course, such a claim goes both ways. To borrow Michael Bird’s language (though a concept he does not embrace), they see our presuppositions as dungeons, not fences, negating the possibility to overcome our prejudices (Bird 2006, 303).

### **A Way Forward: Asian Theology as an Inclusive Endeavor**

Will we come to radically different conclusions by reading the same Bible considering the same Spirit guides us? In my seminary education back in India, I was introduced to such figures as Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, Millard J. Erickson, Wayne Grudem, and many other Western scholars. In fact, Erickson’s and Grudem’s Systematic Theology books were (and are) required theology textbooks in our school. I know of many seminaries in India that still use them as textbooks. Although I struggled (and still struggle) to bridge some of their insights to my context, I did not/do not think their works were/are irrelevant to



the Asian context. Contrarily, and of course regretfully, it was only after coming to the West that I became more familiar with theologies such as Asian theology, African theology, Minjung theology, and so on. I am not saying or implying that the former is to be preferred; I am just stating the fact from my experience. I am also aware that the theological circle that I am part of has a lot to do with the kind of literature I choose and interact with, as is evident even in this writing. I would like to think that the same case applies to all. Nonetheless, my point is clear: many Asian Christians continue to find, both by choice and lack of choice, some of the so-called Western theologies relevant. Are we to say those who continue to do so willingly are in the state of spiritual and academic slumber? Are they less authentically Asian Christian?

Differences are admirable, and they have their place. As long as Christians are composed of multi-ethnic groups, we will have our differences. They are to be celebrated. Yet, our differences take back seat in front of our Lord Savior Jesus Christ and his Word. Our differences are fences that could be torn down and turned to bridges. The Asian is not simply content with her or his Asianness; s/he wants her or his Asianness to complement the unity shared in Christ. As Kevin Vanhoozer rightly puts it, our ethnicity such as Asian, African, or American “should play an adjectival rather than a nominative role” (Vanhoozer 2006, 108) in defining our identity as Christians, and in our theological endeavor.

Shoki Coe is rightly celebrated for popularizing the term “contextual theology.” He reminds us for the need of continually wrestling with the text and context to be relevant to both. He also warns us of the mistaken assumption that contextualization applies only to the so-called Asian or African theologies. While we acknowledge that some contextual theologies are more biblical than others, we agree with Coe that all theologies are contextual theologies. In this aspect, some of our Western Christians still have to learn from the Majority World Christians. I have encountered some theology students and professors who have little clue about addressing issues pertinent to the global context. I belong to one of the tribes in Northeast India. When I once asked my Western systematic theology professor about addressing the issues of what is popularly known as “tribal theology” in Northeast India, he gave me a five-minute lecture on the theology of Israel’s tribes. No doubt, his lesson was valuable. How we think about the biblical tribes of Israel and their theological implications is important. It is also equally important that we think from and apply such

issues to a particular context. Considering that the center of Christianity is shifting from the West to the South and the East, at least numerically, it is necessary that our theology should be more global in perspective. Today, I am in an environment where our Western colleagues not only respect the global perspectives but also have in-depth awareness and concern for the global church. Unfortunately, such is not the case everywhere. Some not only do not know, but they also do not endeavor to know. We need to grow together in this respect.

Coe also reminds us of the danger of overemphasizing the context at the expense of the text. In his words, “This would be contradictory to the intention” (Coe 1973, 239). As Coe puts it, taking context seriously does not mean taking all contexts *equally* seriously (Coe 1973, 241). While some context can enlighten biblical truth,

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others may prevent us from understanding the truth. In discussing theological issues, sometimes I come across statements such as, “according to my context/tradition/denomination,” “we don’t believe that,” “according to my culture,” and so on. I am aware that there are times and places we need to agree to disagree; we cannot solve all theological differences. But there are also times and places we need to discuss, and even debate, to understand what Paul, Peter and John mean rather than what Bob, Kim and Carlos mean. What Bob says and what Peter says should be differentiable. If we say that since Peter is silent, what Bob says is what Peter says, then what I say is also what Peter says, in which case Peter’s voice becomes irrelevant. The possibility of difference suggests the possibility of identity or at least proximity. As Vanhoozer rightly asks, “If there is no hard and fast distinction between what is in the text and what is in the reader, how can different readers of the same text get the same meaning out of it? (Vanhoozer 1998, 384). We cannot put a full stop to a theological discussion by simply imposing what my culture believes. We need to allow the Scripture to become our epistemological lens rather than imposing our contextual lens to shape the Scriptural truth.

When Asian Christians interact with the text allowing the latter to transform their preconceived ideas, there is a possibility of emerging authentic Asian contextual theologies. The doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scripture logically demands that when Bible-believing, born again, God-fearing, Holy Spirit-dependent, holy living Asian Christians read and meditate the Scripture, they will comprehend the meaning and the theology that emerges will be Asian biblical theology.<sup>6</sup> Contrarily, when we impose our pre-conceived ideas to the text, we get an Asian theology or Western theology that is unfaithful to the scriptural intent and disconnected from the lived realities of the Asian or Western people.

## Conclusion

I began by saying that there are two senses of the term “Asian Theology,” one that emerged as grassroots Christians interact with the authoritative Word of God and the other a theology that is imposed on Asians as *distinctly* Asian. But I also mentioned that these ideas could overlap. While many contextual theologies in Asia result as Christians try to make sense of the living Word through their contextual realities, their endeavors (including mine) are also not immune from unwittingly borrowing and imposing ideas that are both alien to the Bible and lived realities of the ordinary people. For example, I examined this issue in the context of Northeast India in my article “Evangelical Contextual Theology in Northeast India and the Origin and Development of Tribal Theology: A Conversation” (Shirik 2018). In it, I argue that while tribal theology started with the intention of making the Bible relevant to the context, it succumbs to making the tribal worldview and tribal context the primary lens to interpret the Bible rather than the other way around. Here is another example: Wati Longchar, a prominent scholar from my own Naga tribal community, writing on Asian contextual theology, sympathizes with the ethos of postcolonial reading:

The central question of Western theological inquiry is to counter the challenges posed by secularism and therefore, it is wrestling with the problem of how to prove the existence of God rationally. Influenced by the patriarchal culture, the God-world-human relationship is perceived hierarchically and dualistically. Instead of perceiving God as liberator, God is perceived as an incomprehensible being, omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent . . . This theological construct holds no value for the poor and the marginalized, and in a pluralistic context (Longchar 2018, 287).

If we read Longchar’s argument carefully, we can detect his desire to make theology relevant. At the same time, his honest intentions are betrayed by his preconceived ideas that “God is organismically related to creation. Creation is not external to God. God is an integral part of creation” (Longchar 1995, 100). While such assumption is part and parcel of our Naga tribal worldview, that is not the biblical view.

Other contextual theologies, including the Western contextual theologies, are also not immune from such danger. It is this possible imposition of extra-biblical ideas that global Christians must guard against as they try to make sense of God’s Word within their given context. What is immediately relevant and important here in the US may not be so in the tribal village in Northeast India, and vice versa. Yet the root issues are connected; as theologians, we try to biblically address how sin is differently infested and manifested in societies. We are called to wrestle with our contextual realities while upholding the Scripture as our final and supreme authority. I believe when we do that there will be a lot more overlapping in our theological concerns and endeavors and our differences can enrich one another; Asian theology will be more American and American theology more Asian.

## Endnotes

1. In one of his essays, Sugirtharajah proposes but does not adequately develop the need for the grassroots readings of the Bible. Even in his cursory treatment, the importance of the primacy of the Scripture is undermined. Such position does not represent the posture of the grassroots Christians who regard the Scripture as the highest authority in theology (Sugirtharajah 2008, 117-130).

2. Sugirtharajah seems to misunderstand the principle of sola Scriptura as Scripture alone. He asserts, “the highly cherished Protestant principle of ‘scripture alone’ has little purchase in Asia.” He continues, “Read in Asia, the Christian Bible needs to be illuminated by other textual traditions in order to gain credibility and relevance.” Considered in the context of his writing, by “illumine” he seems to imply that the meaning of the text obtains its true meaning only when read in conjunction with other religious texts (Sugirtharajah 2013, 258).

3. Bill T. Arnold, an O.T. scholar, observed how, from early on, the focus of the divine revelation has been “on the content of the divine speech...diverting the readers away from” other medium such as the sensory input (Arnold 2018, 89). Similarly, Ben Witherington III argues that this media of revelation now recorded and preserved in the sixty-six books of the Bible is to be the focus for our biblical theology (or theology that is biblical). He states, “God’s word, revealing God’s nature and will, rather than God’s image or talisman or totem, would be the focus of divine revelation. And divine revelation, from the start, is the basis of biblical theology, which is not merely our thoughts about God, but God’s self-disclosure” (Witherington 2019, 22).

4. By Conciliar Christology, I am referring to Timothy Pawl’s definition: “the Christology put forward by the first seven

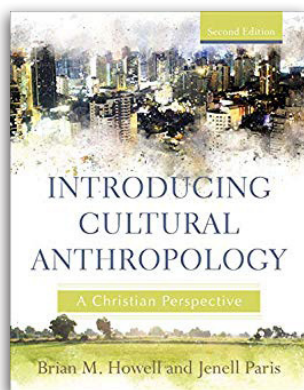
continued on page 27

# Introducing Cultural Anthropology:

## A Christian Perspective, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

Brian M. Howell and Jenell Paris, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 304 pp. \$32.99. 978-1-5409-6101-3

**Reviewed by Marcus W. Dean**, Ph.D. Professor and Chair, Department of Intercultural Studies, Houghton College; former missionary in Colombia and Puerto Rico.



Brian Howell and Jenell Paris have provided an updated edition of their introductory text for cultural anthropology courses for the Christian university setting that is both Christian and Academic. Colleagues and I have used the first edition for several years with good results. It is understandable for students, and covers essential materials. While this textbook does not attempt to do everything that a much larger textbook would, it gives a solid introduction to the field. The authors are post-modern in the way they include themselves in the text by sharing their own learning journeys. This helps to make the field more approachable for students for whom this is their first exposure to cultural anthropology.

I confess that I am often skeptical about newer editions. However, this second edition offers sufficient improvements to merit the slight increase in price.

The most important aspect of this textbook is that it helps the student learn and process cultural anthropology from a solidly Christian perspective, while developing an understanding of the complexity and diversity of the field. Each chapter ends with a section that discusses the topic in relation to a biblical perspective or a connection to Christian life. Along with this, each chapter includes two relevant devotional thoughts that tie key concepts to a biblical text. Together these components start the process of connecting cultural anthropology to the

students' Christian life and service, rather than having cultural anthropology be a threat—as some may see it given common attitudes of many anthropologists towards Christianity.

Well structured for a semester class, each chapter starts with learning outcomes, a chapter outline and a clear introduction to the topic. At the end of each chapter, there is a list of key terms with definitions that are explained in the chapter and found in bold (an improvement from the italics in the first edition). The second edition adds a set of chapter study questions ~~that~~ to help the student process and apply what they are learning. Each chapter also includes a variety of useful charts or reflective readings. Together these helps add a lot of value for the student. The chapters move from an introduction to the field through key topics ranging from what is culture to religion and ritual, finishing with a chapter on using anthropology today.

The one way that I change the structure in my class is to present Chapter 11 (Theory in Cultural Anthropology) earlier in the semester. I know this is a matter of preference and textbooks vary on the placement of this content.

Howell and Paris have chosen to exchange the first edition chapter on globalization for a chapter on medical anthropology. I understand their argument that globalization is interwoven in all that an anthropologist does, but one could argue that for most parts of cultural anthropology. Any division of cultural anthropology is in some way artificial but has to be done to make it possible to approach the whole. As I study the two editions, there appear to be some key concepts about globalization, such as cultural hybridity, that do not make it into the second edition that I will continue to cover. As a positive, the chapter on Medical Anthropology provides a clear example of how cultural anthropology makes a difference in the medical field. Through this, it can help those who are not interested in medicine think about how they can apply anthropology to their area of service. Although Chapter 12 concludes the book with a selection of brief forays into application in different fields, the chapter on medical anthropology is a more extended development of application.

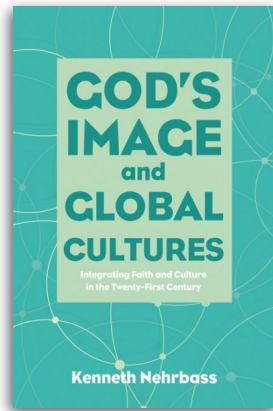
*Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition will undoubtedly continue to be a solid go-to textbook for cultural anthropology classes at Christian universities.



# God's Image and Global Cultures: Integrating Faith and Culture in the Twenty-First Century

Kenneth Nehrbass, Eugene, Oregon:  
Cascade Books, 2016. 229 pgs  
including works cited.

**Reviewed by D. Scott Hildreth,**  
George Liele Director of Lewis  
A. Drummond Center for Great  
Commission Studies and Assistant  
Professor of Global Studies at  
Southeastern Baptist Theological  
Seminary, Wake Forest, NC.



What should missionaries make of cultural differences? Should we view them as obstacles to conquer? Are language differences merely barriers to communication or something more? Should we view culture from a purely utilitarian perspective, seeking bridges and barriers to gospel proclamation and Christian discipleship, or is there perhaps a deeper theological meaning?

These are the types of questions that Kenneth Nehrbass addresses in *God's Image and Global Cultures*. The book is his proposal for a theology of culture that maintains evangelical convictions—the authority of the Scriptures and the necessity of gospel proclamation for salvation—while challenging the cross-cultural worker to view culture from God's perspective, as we respond to social responsibilities as well as spiritual needs around the world. His foundational appeal is rooted in the fact that human beings are created in the Image of God and therefore, culture, as a human creation, also reflects God's image.

The book contains four primary divisions with eleven chapters. In part 1, Nehrbass investigates global trends and how recent political and cultural shifts impact gospel ministry. Part 2, "Understanding Culture and Theology," makes up the bulk of the book and its argument. Here, Nehrbass works out an evangelical theology of culture for the cross-cultural worker. One of the more important discussions addresses the reality of cultural change. Anyone who has worked cross-culturally has experienced the ten-

sion that results from our missionary mandate—making disciples of all nations—and the desire to respect cultural differences. In this section, the author provides a mature response, noting that we often ask the wrong question. It is not, "Should we change cultures?" but rather, "How do we change cultures? We take it as a given that the kingdom of God *will* change cultural values" (118). He also notes that, as we reject ethnocentrism, the cross-cultural worker must also embrace the fact that they, themselves, will be changed by the other culture. The final two parts, 3 and 4, present what he calls "God's Thoughts about Culture," and "Competencies for Cross-cultural Workers" respectively. In these three chapters, Nehrbass shows that culture is not merely an external element of humanity, but a crucial part of God's design for humanity. He concludes with fifteen challenges for evangelical "world changers" as we encounter cultural variables.

Some readers may struggle with some of the social/political conclusions drawn throughout the book. However, before dismissing his conclusions as too progressive, or perhaps even too conservative, the fair-minded reader

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must consider the research and recognize that "business as usual" cannot be the way forward for the serious-minded cross-cultural worker.

In *God's Image and Global Cultures*, Nehrbass has provided a helpful theological and missiological resource for those who are engaging in cross-cultural missions.

Theologically, he has done the heavy lifting of sorting through many of the traditionally accepted theologies of culture—Tillich, Niebuhr—and has provided a way forward that is rooted in the evangelical tradition. He allows the texts of Scripture to inform his theology and maintains the importance of gospel proclamation with its full implications of life change. At the same time, this book is not a mere rehashing of many of the cultural anthropologies that evangelical missionaries are familiar with.

Missiologically, he provides the reader with a way forward as we encounter cultural differences. Culture is not to be treated as an irrelevant abstraction that can be ignored or rejected. Instead, he reminds us, God is not acultural and the work of culture provides a platform for the image of God among a people. Culture is not the ultimate expression of humanity, but at the same time, it is not irrelevant.

In the classroom, this book will be a helpful complement to more traditional anthropology texts. It will also be a welcome addition to any class exploring the missiological challenges of our times.

## Wealth & Piety: Middle Eastern Perspectives for Expat Workers

Karen L. H. Shaw. William Carey Publishing, Littleton, CO, 190 pages.

**Reviewed by Warren Larson,** Senior Research Fellow and Professor, Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies, Columbia International University.

The author begins by stating that for years, as a veteran Christian worker in the Middle East, she has been “vaguely uneasy about money.” The reason is that locals tend to wonder if rich people are all that righteous, including expatriate missionaries who are thought to be well off. She defines rich as those who have “large possessions in comparison to members of the same society.” In the Middle East, pious people are those who love and respect others, and who use their wealth to help the poor. In short, this book sets out to determine what people in the Middle East think about money, and whether a rich person could be considered righteous.

These concerns led Shaw to interview thirty-five individuals from nine different countries in the region—Sunni, Shi’a, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox and Druze. There is some variation on what people think about the topic, but generally the feeling is that theoretically

a wealthy person might be pious, but not likely. One contact said a man of religion always drives a late-model car, so there could be some suspicion as to how these people attain such wealth. Most interviewees felt genuine friendship between the rich and poor is well-nigh impossible. And, interestingly, they also said one hears little about attitudes toward money in the mosque.

The author then looks at Scripture, noting a few individuals who were both rich and righteous. Despite Abraham’s great possessions, he remained faithful to God. When Job lost his wealth, he lost his friends—but not his integrity. In the New Testament, Joseph (Barnabas) was commended for his generosity, but Ananias and Saphira died, due to their deceitful greediness. Amos rails against those who use bribery and extortion for unjust gain, and James suggests that often the poor are despised

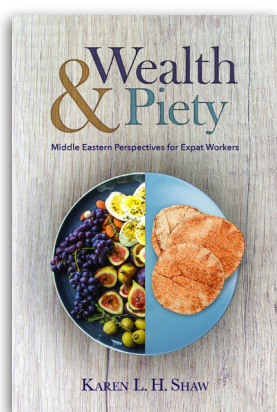
“

**Most interviewees felt  
GENUINE FRIENDSHIP  
between rich and poor  
is well-nigh impossible.**

”

and looked down upon by the rich. Paul warns Timothy that “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Jesus had strong words for religious leaders of his day who “loved money.” At one point, he said it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Of course, Jesus encountered rich people, but it was the poor and downtrodden who flocked to hear him. Shaw makes the valid point that in the Bible, having wealth is not necessarily a sign of piety, but neither is poverty a sign of God’s disfavor.

Given perceptions about wealth and piety in the Middle East, it will not be easy for Christian workers to be accepted and trusted, but this book will do much to prepare them. They will undoubtedly be asked about the amount and source of their income. On the issue of patronage, missionaries must never use their money to buy converts, or attempt to manipulate the poor. To all of us, the author gives this godly advice: be thankful, recognizing that everything we have comes from God; be humble, sincere and generous; above all, be hospitable.



Every Christ-follower should give unconditionally—even joyfully—and be willing to accept gifts from others.

Lastly, I wondered about the author's choice of the word "piety." Shaw herself admits that to many English-speakers, the word piety carries an "archaic rigidity" (xxiii); for this reviewer, the term is also somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps "Wealth and Godliness" as a title might communicate better to the intended audience? "Godliness" is a common way to translate Paul's warning to young Timothy against the snare of riches: "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

That said, this is a valuable manual on how to make choices with our resources that will bring glory to God. Would that I could have read this book before spending twenty-three years as a missionary in South Asia! Karen Shaw presents guidelines that are useful to anyone considering cross-cultural or intercultural ministry.

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ecumenical councils of Christendom: the First Council of Nicaea, 325; the First Council of Constantinople 381; the Council of Ephesus, 431; the Council of Chalcedon, 451; the Second Council of Constantinople, 553; the Third Council of Constantinople, 680–1; and the Second Council of Nicaea, 787" (Pawl 2016, 1).

5. By "from below," I mean beginning the Christological study and reflection from the existential life experiences of ordinary Christians as opposed to starting from the biblical text. Both are not necessarily contradictory, yet our experiential reflections must cohere with the latter.

6. Asian theologian, Simon Chan, makes an interesting observation that "When the Church is left very much to its own without too much outside interferences, over time it tends to take on a form that is broadly orthodox...a position that could best be described as embodying a conservative type of Christianity" (Chan 1999, 8).

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