

BOOK REVIEW
Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues
by Paul G. Hiebert
(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994)

For most of the history of missions, we Westerners have naively indulged in cultural superiority and epistemological positivism. We, and the world, know better now. Most missionaries now understand (as do anthropologists) that the receiving culture must be painstakingly exegeted and our communications and forms must be authentically contextualized. At the same time, the faithful missionary is theologically driven—he must be faithful to the Scriptures. There are great divine truths which are not culturally negotiable. But does the missionary have a correct understanding of the Scriptures. Every person seeking to interpret the Bible has cultural blinders on that will distort the pure meaning of the text. The goal of the wise missionary is to honestly face that hermeneutical vulnerability and do all that is possible to minimize its distortion.

The author begins an overview of epistemological options, which is surprisingly practical, indeed essential, in finding one's stance regarding what one "knows for sure," if anything! On one extreme is "absolute idealism" and on the other extreme is "determinism." After reviewing the six main options, the author expresses decided preference for the mid-position of "critical realism." Critical realism acknowledges the authority of Scripture, but also has the humility to admit that our theologies are tainted with human understanding and interpretation of that Scripture. Since we distort our understanding of the Scriptures, is there any hope of us apprehending theological truth? Hiebert affirms that there is with three checks: 1) our theology is rooted in the Scripture, 2) the Holy Spirit is involved in the process, and 3) there is a world-wide community of God's people contributing to this work and holding one another accountable.

Each one approaches the Scripture with a paradigmatic worldview which heavily colors our perceptions. These big cultural paradigms die hard. But this must be confronted because the biblical worldview is often in conflict with a particular cultural worldview. However, there may be *less* real conflict in a receiving culture than the missionary suspects. The perceived conflict may be more with Western culture than with a true biblical worldview. The challenge in this assessment is to leave the culture alone as much as possible, but not to the extent of genuine compromise of Scripture and not to the extent of unbiblical syncretism.

A culturally-savvy missionary may have gotten to the point of encouraging such values as entho-hymnody and may embrace the "three-self movement" values of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches. However, the most persistent holdout on the part of Western missionary theological colonialism is a needed fourth dimension, viz., "self-theologizing." In anticipation of the fears of heresy, the author calls for an international understanding of the church as an international hermeneutical community.

The rest of the book explores such issues as how we define a Christian via an exploration of “sets” theory. The book prefers the “center set” option because it rightly focuses on the central place of Jesus Christ as the attractor, allows a distinction between who’s clearly “in” and “out,” and respects the degrees of maturity of those within the set. However there is also some fascinating material in this chapter on “fuzzy” sets that is very helpful in understanding the dynamics of seekers within the Christian church and how we should speak of and treat them.

The book also interacts with 1) issues of leadership style in the churches, especially in reference to charismatic leaders who leverage their position by unconscionable promises to the listeners about healing, wealth and well-being, 2) periodic transformational change in established churches to keep them prevailing, and 3) making sense of the “excluded middle” which we Westerners have ignored in our Christianized forms of modern secularism.

I resonate strongly with this author for two reasons: 1) I agree with his theological orientation, and 2) I have studied missions for many years and long wrestled through many of the contextual issues he addresses. I congratulate the author on the breadth of research he brings to this study. He refreshingly integrates sociology, epistemology, philosophy, scientific philosophy, institutional theory, ecclesiology, theology and missiology. That is a remarkable achievement. This confluence of all these disciplines is well-managed into clear and helpful insights. His treatment of fuzzy sets is helpful to this pastor in understanding and including seekers in the context of our church. He is correct in recognizing that there is a deadening exclusivity in bounded sets which are too hardened at the margins to embrace the “half” or “three-quarter” Christian. These seekers are very likely expressions of the wooing grace of God and ought to be embraced and encouraged.

I support the author’s optimism that an international hermeneutical community is sufficient reassurance to help Western missionaries relax their paternalistic grip on the theological rudder. If we don’t relax our grip, the increasingly sophisticated global-South young theologians will pry our fingers off, and in the process we will see wounded relationships of resentment and distrust instead of a warm brotherhood.

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