“Missional Intertextuality as a Missiological Discipline”

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Abstract

Roland Barthes writes that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”

In the past, missiology as an academic discipline has served primarily as a theological discipline in relation to biblio-historico-theological academics (often Western in context) and only secondarily related to cultural anthropology, sociology, economic/political issues.

In reality, missiology must become, in effect, “a tissue of [experiential] quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” True missional engagement on the practical or academic level must be a study and pursuit in intertextuality, i.e. mission as critical mediation/translation. Recently in 2012, Chowan University added a new area of study through introducing a minor to its curriculum which focuses on an interdisciplinary approach to missional studies. One of the first ventures was a course taught within the Critical Thinking program on African Christology. Other missional studies were periodically added through the University’s Critical Thinking program and Religion/Philosophy program.

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And we agree also in what you call the ‘mystery’ of the Church, namely that ‘the Church lives by forgiveness not by perfection.’ I think you will agree when I say: the Church is not realized by institution but by the preached Word. And therefore we can say: the ‘mystery’ is also this, the Church is always an event which happens in preaching and hearing the Word: I may say: an eschatological event.

“We are all mediators, translators.” Jacques Derrida

We each are living out a narrative; for some this narrative is a unified, purposeful, yet complex life-story, while for others it is a bricolage of diverse encounters and experiences. Regardless, each personal narrative is a multi-layered and multi-faceted language - a language derived from those encounters/experiences which demands mediation/translation into understandable discourse-this one narrative engaging (an) other narrative(s).

2 Ibid.
3 Stephen Sondheim- “George” from Stephen Sondheim, Sunday in the Park with George, 1983.
Derrida writes that “experience is translation.” The student that enters the university milieu is faced not only with challenge of acquiring a plethora of general knowledge and personal knowledge but also of translating that knowledge into resourceful action and viable experience. Thus the challenge for the university professor and staff is to open those students to the possibilities of translation/transformation of all perspectival knowledge. Furthermore, on the missional level, the professor can be liberated by what St. Augustine wrote in his On Doctrine, that “Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord’s.”

**Archeology of a Concept**

In confronting the challenges of millennial missional engagement and postmodern reasoning, it is necessary to examine briefly “mission” as expressed and experienced in nascence of the early church.

The term itself, cannot be found in the biblical materials. According to David Bosch, it was not until the sixteenth century that it became a term among the Jesuits for reaching the non-Catholic world with the gospel. The term “mission” is derived from the Latin word *mittere*, meaning “to send.” The Catholic Church first used the term “exclusively with a reference to the doctrine of the trinity, that is, the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.” One does see the use of two particular terms within the TaNaK and New Testament materials- *salah* in the Hebrew and *apostello* in the Greek, which came to be understood as “mission.” According to William J. Larkin, both terms emphasized “the authoritative, commissioning relationship involved” in the act of sending.

The biblical concept (among evangelicals) has been described as a sending out of “intermediaries, whether supernatural or human, to speak or do God’s will so that his purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered.” Further, it “comprehends the authority of the one who sends; the obedience of the one sent; a task to be accomplished; the power to accomplish the task; and a purpose within the moral framework of God’s covenantal working of judgment or redemption.” As a result the concept took upon itself an authoritative and technological air; i.e., one must be an apostle commissioned to a special task framed within the divine milieu of God’s

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
salvation history. One reads of the exploits of the original “Twelve” or the original “Apostles” or individuals like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, etc. within the New Testament writings and sees early church “missionaries” spreading the gospel and planting churches. But, were they alone in those endeavors?

An examination of the foundational materials, in particular the Acts of the Apostles, reveals a different story. In Acts 8:1, one reads that “(O)n that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”13 With that scattering, unnamed believers circulated throughout the empire and house churches sprang up. Later when Paul traveled to Corinth, he meets a couple, Priscilla and Aquila and a young man named Apollos, who were each already believers and active in sharing the gospel.

When Paul writes to the believers of Rome, he makes reference to the fact that a church was already in existence there and functioning enough to be in a position of aiding him in his continued mission to Spain— “I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me...It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation... But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.”14

Michael Green describes the missional model for the early period of the Christian era. “They were scattered from their base in Jerusalem and they went everywhere spreading the good news which had brought joy, release, and a new life to themselves. This must often have been not formal preaching, but the informal chattering to friends and chance acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls. They were everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing. Consequently, they were taken seriously, and the movement spread, notably among the lower classes.”15

The spreading of the good news and the planting of numerous, new house churches were accomplished not only by the paid experts and theological technicians, but by

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unknown, untrained, passionate men and women who worked at their jobs, believers who simply “gossiped the gospel” as they circulated across the world.

The church moved throughout the Roman Empire and is well-documented in Church history, but it also moved east following the routes such as the Silk Road and beyond. That story is not as well-known. Probably the least documented story during this period of history is that of the many Christian traders, physicians, slaves, and other unnamed individuals who traveled and lived throughout Asia, the “true witnesses of the gospel.” These were the influential believers involved in the secular affairs of the area as well as the numerous refugees. T.V. Phillip writes, “Wherever they went, whether merchants or artisans, clergy or laity, they carried the gospel with them. Supporting themselves by the labor of their own hands, or filling appointments as secretaries, physicians or stewards in the households of the nobles and princes of those lands to which they went, they were one and all missionaries of the cross.” 16

Quietly and deeply these unidentified believers carried on the task across the centuries and world.

The Present Context

Recently, two students attended a course entitled “The History of the World Christian Movement” taught by the writer. Both students expressed a deep passion to use their respective University majors (Mathematics and Physical Education) in missional activity. Both stated emphatically that they were not interested in being missionaries- “I don’t feel called to be a missionary. I want to serve others in Jesus’ name.” One student is planning to travel to another nation and teach mathematics; while the other is already engaged in physical education on another university campus (This student had been very active in a sports ministry in the upper New York state area).

Annually student teams have been sent from Chowan University to places such as East St. Louis, Chicago, Ethiopia, El Salvador and South Africa. When they have returned, the same statements are made dismissing “mission” callings and affirming “missional-servant” callings. These students are what are called the Millennials.

According to a TEAM17 blog, “the “standard” approach to global mission is changing, and it’s changing in some ways that nicely complement many millennials’ willingness to shed the traditions of their mothers and fathers. For example, fewer and fewer countries allow foreign workers to live within their borders for purely religious reasons. Simultaneously, many prospective missionaries are now asking how fruitful their presence will be within another culture without a culturally appropriate answer

17 The Evangelical Alliance Mission.
to the question "What are you doing here?" This impulse also fits nicely with the millennial generation's instinct (and the biblical mandate) to couple gospel action with gospel words (e.g., Jeremiah 29:5-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 3:15).\textsuperscript{18}

The TEAM blogger describes a familiar situation in which "missionaries... (were) sent from churches through missions agencies. Their funding has come from churches and individuals committed to their vision, and willing to give sacrificially to sustain it. Often, significant thought hasn't been given to the missionary's platform, or the public face of their presence within a community. Missionaries often entered countries on religious visas that provided legal room for their presence without demanding a corresponding social or cultural justification."\textsuperscript{19} Though this scenario will continue, a change has occurred among many, including millennials.

This change is not a judgment against nor rejection of what has taken place in past missions, but a recognition of a possible new wind of missional possibilities. Perhaps, what is needed is a re-evaluation and re-assessment of the technological language of missions and its program, and the translating of it into a more receptive/responsive event of encounter- i.e., missional intertextuality (mission as critical mediation/translation).

**Missional Intertextuality**

In literary theory, intertextuality is the recognition that no word or text possesses one single meaning but is an encounter of meanings- "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."\textsuperscript{20} Missional intertextuality is the recognition that missional activity is not limited to any particular model or vocabulary of context but the translating of the Divine-human encounter and the diverse context of human-to-human encounter.

Missional intertextuality occurs when the believer recognizes and experiences her/himself as *signa* or *icon* of the divine. The Jewish TaNaK provides a unique portrait of what YHWH intended for the Jewish people as descendants of Abraham. Three specific texts paint a picture of Israel as signa/icon of YHWH to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:3-6; Numbers 6:24-26/Psalm 67). They were called to be a blessing to the nations, serve the nations as priests in blessing and intercession, and to embody that blessing before the nations.

\textsuperscript{18} "3 Ways Millennials See Missions differently," team.org/blog/three-ways-millennial-christians-see-missions-differently-2/.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Barthes, 146.
In light of these passages, Israel's God, the universal God has set aside Israel to be a picture of life under his Lordship and sovereignty. They serve as a type of "icon" or "signa" to his presence and kingdom. That is, they serve to point towards or signal the unenvisageable (rendering visible the invisible). As his signa they must flesh out his character. Because these passages have New Testament parallels (Genesis 12:1-3//Acts 3:25; Galatians 3:8; Exodus 19:3-6//1 Peter 2:5; Numbers 6:24-26/Psalms 67//Acts 10:35) one can surmise that all followers of Christ are also called to be his signa/icons.

In the gospels, Jesus also refers to his followers as salt and light. As salt and light the believer enhances and illumines rather than self-identify. Jesus states, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-18). The Christ-follower points towards the Other and not to her/himself. As signa/icon, the believer translates/mediates the divine Word into whatever context she/he inhabits through spoken word and cultural engagement.

Because of the present negative connotation of religious language and denomination many areas prohibit or limit any missionaries or missionary activity. This situation can provide a more viable opportunity for a true witness to Christ. Like the followers of the past, one can “point towards” through the fleshing out of their experience within the context of non-religious employment. For example, many Christ-followers have enjoyed teaching English, business management, etc. through the Amity Foundation in the Peoples Republic of China. Within that context, they share in an educational setting a specific resource and do it lovingly out of a personal relationship with Christ- a signa of Christ in a Chinese context.

**Chowan University**

According to the university's website “Chowan University is a Christian educational institution founded in 1848 by Baptist families and named Chowan – which means “people of the south” – to honor the Native American Algonquin Chowanook tribe. For over 160 years Chowan has enjoyed a long and distinguished tradition of faith and education in Northeastern NC.” Its mission is described as providing “a caring environment characterized by Christian values and intellectual freedom in which students can gain the knowledge, skills, creativity, and ethical values they need to flourish in a rapidly changing, culturally diverse global society.” It further emphasizes that it does not exist “to indoctrinate anyone, but to show them the Christian way of

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22 In fact, the NET Bible uses the term signal in Isaiah 11:10-11 to describe the character of the Messiah.
life as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Non-Christian students and students from other religious traditions are respected and welcomed here and thrive in this environment.”

As a professor of Chowan, this writer can attest to the university’s openness to all peoples and religions. In fact, a number of non-Christian students and international students attend making it a multi-cultural and multi-lingual community. For many of its students Chowan provides opportunities to engage with the global community on a local setting.

In 2012, Chowan University decided to add to its Religion/Philosophy department a new area of study through introducing a minor to its curriculum which would focus on an interdisciplinary approach to missional studies. This move coincided with this author’s employment as missional specialist for the university. In its beginnings, five classes were added to the curriculum: REL 270 - History of the World Christian Movement (3 credit hours); REL 372 - Global Ministry and Cross Cultural Issues (3 credit hours); REL 374 - Local Church in Mission and Ministry (3 credit hours); REL 470 - Theology of the World Christian Movement (3 credit hours); and REL 290 - Missions Practicum (3 credit hours).

Outside of the Religion designation, other courses have been introduced through the Critical Thinking program on subjects such as African Christology, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology of Religion. Other missional studies are periodically added through the University’s Interdisciplinary Studies program and Religion/Philosophy program. As a result many of the students who have taken these courses were not “Religion” majors, nor envisioning a “mission/ministry” occupation. They represented Business, Education, History, Criminal Justice, Science, etc.

Underlying the missional program is a theory of intertextual engagement. Each course of study consists of three calculi: the calculus of cognition, calculus of compassion, and calculus of connection. The calculus of cognition seeks an awareness of the multi-textual setting for missionality; the calculus of compassion recognizes a sacrificial aptitude within that setting; and the calculus of connection is the action/activity of missionality.

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23 In fact, during the 2014-2015 academic year out of over 1500 students who attended, 67 were international students.
24 Interestingly enough about a third of the members of the International Student Club on campus are not internationals but have parents or extended family members that are from outside the United States.
25 For example, this Fall semester a course entitled IDS 399 - An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion will be offered.
26 According to http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/calculus, calculus is defined as “a system or arrangement of intricate or interrelated parts.”
The individual student experiences these calculi and learns how to respond/assimilate within her/his university context. This is modelled through traditional mission/ministry endeavors and through unique personally created ventures.

The purpose of this minor and its classes is to equip each student with the resources to live out their fiduciary framework in whatever context they find themselves. The response has been very positive and instructive. This writer has heard many comments concerning incredulity toward the possibility of living missionally without being a missionary and the possibilities of serving nationally and internationally through whatever passion the individual student possesses. Many have discovered that there is a place for them to serve globally.

One must not forget that

In 1989-90, while serving as missionaries in Rwanda, Africa, the writer’s wife was asked to replace the English professor at the UEPR’s “Petite Semesnaire”27 until the fall semester, 1990. In order to help the students learn English (at that time they spoke Kinyarwanda, Swahili, and French) they could only use it in class.

This missionary loved all of her students, but felt an especial concern for the female students. Culturally life for them would be difficult and challenging. As a means to invest her life in these young girls’ lives, she invited them to her home every Wednesday afternoon for the building of personal relationships and additional acquisition of non-academic skills (cooking, sewing, etc.).

During these meetings each student was allowed to use whatever language she wished and often through the sharing of individual skills, the student became teacher. This time became very sacred as professor/student shared a significant part of each’s culture and gifts. Rather than impose upon the student a pre-conceived program of assumed information and Western oriented skills-envy, the professor invited the students to direct and facilitate all activity. The focus was not about what the teacher knew, but what the student knew and desired. As a result, lives were changed (this was not how former professors had taught in the past) and through each session’s concluding short Bible study, a number of students made professions of faith and later became more active in the ministries of local churches.

The purpose of these weekly sessions was not for evangelistic success. It was primarily to build relationships between the teacher/students and student/student. It was within that transparent setting that missional living was experienced, not forced. This particular model has been duplicated in other settings and is not limited to a “missionary” style functionary, but to non-missionary individuals and secular settings.

27 Union des Eglises Baptistes au Rwanda; Petite Semesnaire was a high school/pre-university school recognized by the Rwandan Ministry of Education.
In the *Epistle of Diognetus, 7:4b*, it is stated that "God does not work through coercion." Missional intertextuality is not cold, brutal coercion, but savory, illuminating influence. It is not "I will tell you what must be," but "How can I serve you—no strings attached?"

Missional intertextuality is recognition of a God who is present in every context and text; present in each and every multi-dimensional space of the blending and clashing of hidden variables that effect and influence what results in any cultural engagement.

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