Blind spots, bias and encouragements
An editorial - Engaging with new writers on familiar themes

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In his “In Memoriam” in the front of Transforming Mission, Gerald H Anderson, talking of his friend David Bosch concludes by recognising and praising his “bold humility”. I don’t know if I am the only person wondering:

- Why did God allow the Christian world to lose its leading missiologist so soon after publishing his Summa Missiologica?
- Will all of eternity be long enough to chew the fat with Bosch on all those statements he made that raise another hundred questions in my mind?
- And where are the new Bosches now?

Over the last few years as we have seen the concept of postmodernity becoming a reality my admiration of Bosch has continued to grow recognising the foresight he showed particularly in his section on “The Emergence of a Postmodern Paradigm”. The book was published in 91, when much of the Christian world had yet to encounter the word postmodern let alone engage with its implications. Bosch’s scope is still daunting and yet his ability to move between the big picture and the small and simple was perhaps his greatest gift. This is the man who wrote “Mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.”

I am not nominating or suggesting any of the writers here as the new Bosch. However in publishing them I do hope that just as he helped a generation look beyond themselves and discern not just the times they were in but also the times they were entering, so too these writers may help us see things we have not seen to date and recognise some of the changes and changing challenges around us today.

Interestingly, many of the areas raised by contributors in the last issue for tackling in future issues of Encounters are at least touched on in the papers. Let me give you a few thoughts from my own interaction with the writers in this issue:

As an evangelical I sympathised with Clarke in his engagement with Latin American Liberation Theology (LALT). I could almost envisage the frown as he engaged with issues seemingly so much at odds with his evangelical faith. But as I did so I realised I was beginning to see some useful things to apply to myself, my faith and my understanding of my faith contextualised to the here and now. Firstly parallels with postmodernity and the context in which LALT developed! How different was their assumption that...

…”rather than first approaching Scripture, and interpreting life through the glasses of theological understanding; liberation theology asserts that we should first engage with the realities of life, and from there we should seek to understand our response through the light of Scripture, ‘so experience of faith is a first act; theology comes afterwards: theology as a second act’ (Gibellini 1987, 5)1. [CLARKE p1]

…to the experiential approaches of postmoderns for whom experience is 99% of the truth? Does LALT have something to say to us in our approach to postmoderns?

1 Liberation theologians have asserted that whereas classical theology refers to revelation and tradition, liberation theology refers to facts and questions derived from the world and from history.
LALT is also accused of prioritising some parts of scripture and not others to fit their own agenda:

*The liberationist view of sin is contentious, as it suppresses the idea of personal responsibility for sin in favour of social responsibility. This conflicts with the evangelical view that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23), and suggests that without the corruption of society, humans would be sinless*. Harold S. Martin has spoken against the liberationist tendencies to omit biblical themes of justification, sin, sanctification, holiness and the second coming from their teaching (1980, 3). It is certainly true that liberationist doctrines emphasise particular parts of their beliefs to support their socio-political activism: the deity of Christ is downplayed in favour of his humanity and characteristics as a revolutionary; they give little weight to the eternity of salvation, preferring the idea of applying the Kingdom of God to present society; and the biblical miracles of Jesus are often told to emphasise their nature as signs of solidarity with the poor, rather than being told to emphasise the divine power of provision given to Christ (Berryman 1987, 61).

I think Noon would agree with that sentiment but see it in Evangelicals, when she sees a reduction of the gospel to individual salvation as a significant problem in Muslim women coming to faith:

*If all that happens is that women’s anger at structural injustice is neutralised by their Christian faith, then the gospel will have been reduced to a message of individual salvation and hindered from realising its full transforming power. Mission must maintain a holistic focus, addressing the injustices of society and the development of women as an integral part of establishing the kingdom of God.* [NOON p22]

The recognition of the need to transform and “save” communities rings true in postmodern contexts too: The private faith of the late modern age has gone – seen as irrelevant if it cannot affect all of life. As I seek to witness to friends here in UK their identity is rarely an individual one but rather one in which they are a part of something bigger than themselves – if only they will be changed then what point is that?

Another insight for me was seeing parallels between Noon’s description of the loss of status and purpose for Muslim women coming to faith from Folk Islam and men coming into the church in the UK:

*Mission needs to consider how the loss of status for such women will be handled if they choose to follow Christ and how disruption of female power structures will be created by others rejecting their authority. Moreover, it needs to consider the sociological function of holy places. If Mernissi is correct in asserting that these are spaces where women are genuinely free to move and express themselves, the impact of calling women to reject these places must be planned for.* [NOON p22]

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2 Some extreme liberation theologians have said that ‘those who are oppressed can and do sin by acquiescing to their bondage; to go along passively with oppression rather than resisting and attempting to overthrow it – by violent means if necessary – is sin’. Some liberation theologians have gone so far as to claim that violence by oppressors is sinful, but if the oppressed use violence to fight against the oppressors, it is seen as virtuous (Rhodes 1991, 3).

3 Liberation Christology is very Christ-centred, especially focussing on the humanity of Jesus. It seeks to move away from the metaphysical concepts of God to ideas more in-line with human experience (Berryman 1987, 157).
With the increased feminisation of the church in the last few decades written on extensively elsewhere, is this not a similar experience for men joining an evangelical church? Most of my non-Christian male friends find church an alien place and if the pub is the male UK equivalent of the Muslim woman’s holy places, calling them to “reject” these places has a similar destabilising effect.

Overall, Mernissi’s scholarship in this area suggests two challenges for mission. The first is that expressions of Christian faith need to be carefully contextualised not just to fit expressions of orthodox Islam, from which women are marginalised, but to fit expressions of folk Islam, where women occupy a central place. Fear of association with the occult cannot mean that this does not happen. Indeed, where the felt needs of people in regard to prosperity, perpetuity, and power are not addressed adequately by missionaries, folk practices continue alongside a veneer of Christianity as has happened in many mission churches in Africa. [NOON p22]

Much of the content of the papers is about scripture and contextualisation. It seems that often as Evangelicals, in a bid to avoid accusations of syncretism, we have majored on the first (scripture) and been weaker on the second (contextualisation or perhaps more problematically the application of scripture in a locale). A number of reflections in these papers cause me to questions whether in fact we have been more worried about neatness of definition (arguably an enlightenment trait) than accurate interpretation of scripture!

Ben and Katharine were right to question the unity of the Bible’s message since the Bible itself “offers no summary of the whole story from beginning to end”. Brueggemann argues that a synthetic, rational approach has violated “what is most characteristically Jewish in the text” whereas a Jewish (and more postmodern) reading acknowledges the parts that seem “disjointed, ‘irrational’, contradictory, paradoxical, ironic, and scandalous”. Reducing the Bible to a list of rules and regulations or propositional truths and trying to fit it into our own preconceived structure makes it boring and predictable. [MORGAN p18]

The way in which the Bible is promoted as literature may sometimes conflict with the Church’s view of the text as divinely inspired. However, the Church cannot afford to be too possessive about the Bible and its interpretation if it wants to broaden the readership. If Christians believe God’s Word is life transforming, “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12) they should not attempt to dictate the way in which people approach it but should trust that God can speak for himself. [MORGAN p25]

I remember a Spring Harvest theme from a number of years ago “Uncaging the Lion” which set out to help Evangelicals understand that they did not need to ‘protect’ scripture but that it could defend itself. It seems that we are still struggling to learn that lesson. Morgan’s work indicates that whilst in Modern times we perhaps hid the untidiness of scripture in a bid to make a cohesive and seamless argument for the gospel, that very thing which was perhaps such an embarrassment before becomes the key that unlocks postmoderns in their engagement with scripture.

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4 Ben, interview; Katharine, interview
5 Bauckham 2003: 93
6 Brueggemann 1993: 58
7 Wright, “How can the Bible be Authoritative”, Vox Evangelica, 21 1991: 9
8 Wright 1991: 24
People in contemporary Britain may be interested in the Bible as a source of spirituality, rather than as a record of absolute truth or a moral guide and may therefore find the Psalms or wisdom literature a helpful starting point. [MORGAN p18]

Contextualisation, Contextualisation, Contextualisation we say as missiologists! You present the gospel in a way that can be understood by the hearer. This has been an accepted approach in overseas mission for several decades now. For example in parts of Africa using stories of the Good Shepherd is not helpful when a local understanding of shepherd is someone who drives his flock from behind, beating them to keep them moving rather a shepherd leading their flock from the front. Reading Morgan was something of a metaphorical slap in the face! How far have we come in the UK with our evangelism being contextualised? Not very far, I would suggest, is the general picture! A glance through evangelism and discipleship materials turns up stuff based almost entirely on the New Testament with its original context of Hellenic thought. Material based on Jewish-originated scripture seems largely reserved for post-conversion.

Most participants viewed the Bible as a significant cultural text rather than the Word of God. If they were to read it, it would be “a bit like reading the works of Shakespeare or the dictionary” rather than as part of a broader search for meaning. [MORGAN p22]

The neat and tidy approach is not reserved for the British Church context it seems. Gohner, writing about Frontier Missions strongly suggests this same emphasis has clouded our judgement and our efforts.

It is not my intent to empty the concepts of Frontier Missions of all value. In fact, I find many of them rather attractive! In the end, it may be exactly this attractive ‘neatness’ which raises a degree of doubt, whether these concepts can live up to the complex realities in which missions takes place. If they can not, the neglect of all other mission frontiers in favour of unreached people groups would prove disastrous. [GOHNER p12]

I would argue, as I have done elsewhere, that it is this simplistic approach to missions that Gohner is critiquing, that postulates tightly defined and neat categories and sets up a clearly defined finish line, that has contributed to a decreased interest in mission amongst Gen Xers. Gen Xers who think that if mission can be defined for human understanding it is probably too simple to be believed and therefore not worth engaging in to any meaningful degree.

Defining missionary responsibility from the ‘original textbook’ rather than putting popular ideas into it, would assign to missionaries a more comprehensive role than the one assigned by certain recent publications. [GOHNER p18]

A biblical missionary – now there is an idea! Perhaps we should run a competition in Encounters for submissions of a job description on what it means to be a missionary. Certainly in recent years the churches have increasingly being calling into question the idea of a missionary as a professional, funded by the church but distant from it. Grohner’s paper has a number of areas where it could help us be more rigorous in the debate of the issue and move us on from the defensive position many of us have resorted to, to date.

If highlighting the unifying aspects of Christ’s work (Eph. 2:14ff) was Paul’s way to safeguard the fragile unity of the church, would strategies based on ethnic distinction not carry potential danger? Surely, Paul showed cultural sensitivity (Acts 16:3, 1 Cor. 8:13) and willingness for personal adaptation (1 Cor. 9:19-
23). Undoubtedly, there is a place for contextualisation and indigenisation. But if these aspects are elevated to unrestrained heights, will they not soon prove counterproductive to the Church’s universal culture, the new identity in Christ? [GOHNER p19]

Conscious I have sung the praise and emphasised the importance of contextualisation in this paper – something that is generally ‘popular’ to do these days; Grohner raises an interesting caution that too much emphasis on contextualisation or at least over emphasis on difference, can constrain us in what he suggests is a higher calling; namely that our universal identity is in Christ. The implications of this statement are potentially very significant and far reaching.

To its credit, liberation theology tries to expose the true realities of theological-subjectivism, while being explicit in showing the contextual origins of its own ideology12 (Pattison 1997, 33); and perhaps in this sense it is more aware than other theologies of its bias in interpretation. [CLARKE p4]

Perhaps the overall sense I get as I engage in the thoughts of these new writers is a reminder to do the hard thinking and to keep on doing it. They raise difficult issues, (only a few of which I have mentioned here) many of which we will fail to find simple answers to. In his conclusion, Clarke highlights a strength of liberation theology as the self awareness to know its own blind spots and biases. These writers have highlighted in numerous areas a host of blind spots for those of us who call ourselves evangelicals and seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout the world. It has reminded me again of the assumptions we make that shape our thought and therefore direct our actions. I am reminded of a saying of one of my old tutors who used to say that when we point at ‘the other’ and pass comment there are three fingers of our hand pointing back at us.

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12 J. L. Segundo has said ‘liberation theology consciously and explicitly accepts its relationship with politics’ (Pattison 1997, 35).