I am pleased to be able to introduce a special issue of Encounters. When we started Encounters it was with an aim to be able to hear new voices, voicing their reflections on mission and missiology. In particular we wanted to allow British and wider European voices to be heard commenting on and wrestling with global missiological issues as well as with our own Europe specific "stuff". In doing so we hoped to hear new voices that were not being heard before.

To some extent we have achieved that aim. But just as the last edition of Encounters highlighted that there are many more issues for us to be looking at, I believe there are many more voices to be heard. How do we encourage new voices to speak, to raise their heads above the parapet and say something?

This issue is an attempt to give a platform to some new voices. All of the papers you will find in this issue are written by students studying mission/missiology in UK colleges. We wanted to hear what students were wrestling with and what they were saying. I found the results encouraging. We see new things, we see traditional assumptions being challenged and we see familiar things approached in new ways. Some of the papers are longer ones so we have provided abstracts where this is the case, but I would ask you to pick one that piques your interest and engage with it generously. I have specifically tried to include students at different levels of study not just opting for the postgraduate level, believing that those that combine the reflection on and practice of mission are often those best placed to recognise wisdom. My paper shares some of my own reflections as I heard these new voices and may give you some places to start your engagement with them.

Do bear in mind that most of these students are exposing themselves in print for the first time so if there is an absence in places of the smooth prose of experienced writers I hope too you will find the absence of some of the assumptions and blind spots that are often the downside of experience.

My heartfelt thanks to colleagues at All Nations Christian College, Mattersey Hall and Redcliffe College who have submitted the work of their students. (An additional thank you to colleagues at International Christian College (Glasgow) who also submitted a paper which, due to the subject matter, we hope to publish in a forthcoming issue.)

Rob
• **Editorial**: Blind Spots, Bias and Encouragements - Engaging with new writers on familiar themes  
  (Rob Hay, 2461 words)

• **Article 1**: Friend or Foe? An evangelical engaging Latin American Liberation Theology.  
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• **Article 2**: Islamic Feminism as articulated by Fatima Mernissi and its Implications for Christian Mission.  
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• **Article 3**: Pioneer Missions: With today's emphasis on unreached peoples and frontier missions is there still any justification for missions outside such categories?  
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• **Article 4**: Raising Awareness of the Bible in Contemporary British Society A case study of young adults who are not involved in a faith community.  
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• **Book Review 1**: Audrey Featherstone, I Presume.  
  (by Tim Shenton; Evangelical Press)

• **Book Review 2**: Invisible Servant.  
  (by Richard Welch; Authentic)

Go to the Encounters website at [www.redcliffe.org/encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) to read what others are thinking on the Discussion Board. Use the Voice your comments form to add to the debate.

*Please Note: The views expressed in articles are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.*
Blind spots, bias and encouragements
An editorial - Engaging with new writers on familiar themes

Author: Rob Hay

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)\footnote{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.}

...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?

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\footnote{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).}. 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\footnote{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).}; 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]

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 question 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]

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
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.

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\(^9\) 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.\(^10\) If they were to read it, it would be “a bit like reading the works of Shakespeare or the dictionary\(^11\) 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]

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10 See section 3.4.2
11 Ben, interview
I would argue, as I have done elsewhere, that it is this simplistic approach to missions that Grohner 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 ideology*\(^{12}\) (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).
Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website (www.redcliffe.org/encounters). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.
Friend or Foe?
An evangelical engaging Latin American Liberation Theology

Author: James Clarke.

In recent decades, effort has been made by Latin American theologians to move away from the traditional Roman Catholic orthodoxy that has shaped and influenced so much of their society, and move towards a contextualised understanding of Christianity in the light of the contemporary needs and issues faced by Latin American communities. One guise that this contextualisation has taken is that of Liberation Theology\(^1\). In this essay, I will offer a critical evaluation of the main characteristics of this theology from an evangelical point of view. I will not be dealing in detail with the historical progress and development of liberation theology, neither will I be focussing on the writings of any particular theologians; rather I will be concentrating my evaluation on the major beliefs and practices of this way of thinking, its strengths and weaknesses. Although there are different types of liberation theology\(^2\), I will be exclusively addressing its Latin American contextualisation. I recognise that my essay will be offering an evaluation based upon my own personal evangelical bias, and it is from this position that I will approach the theories encompassed within Latin American liberation theology.

Gustavo Gutiérrez was the first to present an outline of liberation theology\(^3\), primarily as a response to what he perceived to be the major flaws in the way the Church\(^4\) was operating in Latin America. It was perceived as being an institution that served the affluent\(^5\), with priests and monks being found predominantly in large cities, in rich Catholic schools (Berryman 1987, 13)\(^6\). Liberation theology seeks to redress this imbalance by presenting a theological perspective from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed in Latin American society. To do this, it presents two overarching methodologies that differ from those of conventional European theologies\(^7\). Firstly, 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)\(^8\). Secondly, in looking to approach theology with the needs of the oppressed in mind, liberationism has said\(^9\) that there is a ‘need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral\(^10\) liberation’ (Gibellini 1987, 3). It is this ‘preferential option for

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\(^1\) In this essay, I will refer to this concept as liberation theology, the theology of liberation and liberationism.

\(^2\) For instance, those of a black or feminist concern.

\(^3\) Gutiérrez introduced it to a conference held in Chimbote, Peru, in July 1968 (Gibellini 1987, 2).

\(^4\) The capitalised ‘Church’ that I refer to in the essay will be referring to the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America.

\(^5\) Some liberation theologians even went as far as raising the question of ‘whether the Eucharist celebrated in a wealthy congregation might seem to endorse extravagant consumption that reduced others to inhuman poverty’ (Berryman 1987, 26).

\(^6\) Robert McAfee Brown has explained that ‘even though many bishops, priests, and religious are actually poor, the prevailing image is of an affluent church in lockstep with the affluent portion of society,’ (1990, 58).

\(^7\) Gutiérrez has said that ‘theology is of necessity both spirituality, and rational knowledge’ (Gibellini 1987, 34).

\(^8\) 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.

\(^9\) As a result of the influence that the theology of liberation was having on the Latin American church, this statement was included in the closing document of the Third conference of the Latin American episcopate at Puebla from 27th January to 13th February 1969 (Gibellini 1987, 3).

\(^10\) Integral liberation in this sense means freedom from sin as well as economic and social oppressions (Gibellini 1987, 4).
the poor’ that shapes much of the doctrines and practices of liberation theology that I will be evaluating here.

The major concern of liberation theology is that ‘theologians are not to be mere theoreticians, but practitioners who participate in the ongoing struggle to liberate the oppressed’ (Rhodes 1991, 3). This gives much of what they believe a distinctly political focus. Stephen Pattison has observed that ‘[liberation theology] claims to be a way of approaching the whole of theology which must be recast from the standpoint of the poor… All the major doctrines, ideas and texts of the Christian tradition must be re-examined and evaluated from the viewpoint of the oppressed,’ (1997, 40). There has been centuries of Latin American churches teaching that just as Christ accepted the suffering and role that God had for him at death, so each person should accept their lot as the will of God. However, it is claimed by liberationists that this theological position benefits the rich and the powerful far more than the oppressed (Brown 1990, 5), and that God’s will is for people to live in harmony and solidarity, across all of society (Berryman 1987, 93). They argue that Jesus died in order to bring change, an end to injustice and the promotion of love. Those who oppress followers of Christ are effectively crucifying Christ again and again. It is the aim of liberationists to create a society free of this oppression (Brown 1990, 5), and that is what drives the practices of liberation theology. Liberationists have a doctrine of the church that is explicit in how they operate. They enforce that the church should be outward-looking (Berryman 1987, 54), and it must identify in poverty with the poor. Liberation theology is clear that the Church’s main mission should no longer be that of salvation or evangelism, but rather a prophetic activism for justice (Rhodes 1991, 4).

Liberation theologians regard sin not as personal, but as social evil; all personal sin is considered to be a product of social injustice. As a result, salvation is viewed in terms of the restoration of a correct social order, so that the phrase ‘Kingdom of God’ is interpreted as the earthly realisation of God’s intended social order: that of equality and harmony. Liberation theology offers a complete rethink of the doctrine of God. It claims that historically, God has been portrayed and theologised to show support for capitalist ideologies, and has been given the guise of a transcendent and distant deity, contrary to their belief that God is ‘dynamically involved in behalf of the poor and downtrodden’ (Rhodes 1991, 4). This conveys a Christology of liberation ‘in which the Father is the ultimate horizon, the Son the definitive example of how to correspond to the Father, and life in the Spirit of Jesus the specific form of being a Christian’ (Gibellini 1987, 24). The theology of liberation emphasises his saving work as being through his fight against the oppressive powers of his day, and his love and support for those that were victims of social injustice. They see Christ’s crucifixion as being primarily

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11 The argument being that the suffering, poverty, injustice and oppression of the world are nothing compared to the joys and glorious life found in an eternal salvation (Brown 1990, 5).
12 Liberationists use such passages as Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."; and Matthew 25:44-45, "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"
13 '[the church] must denounce the injustice manifest in all the inequities between rich and poor, and bind itself to a life of poverty among the poor, following the example of Christ' (Brown 1990, 58)
14 J. Andrew Kirk shows that ‘Gutiérrez believes that the Church’s hierarchy should go even further, throwing all of its influence, still considerable in many parts of the continent, against every dehumanising situation. Its denunciation should not be partial (individual acts of injustice), but global (the entire system of dependence)’ (1979, 29). This deeply political comment on the nature of injustice colours much of the doctrinal foundations of liberation theology.
15 Liberation theology regards capitalist nations are the most guilty exponents of these injustices (Rhodes 1991, 3).
a social comment that led the way for an uprising against the dominating classes (Rhodes 1991, 4).

In summary, Gustavo Gutiérrez has explained liberation theology as being ‘a critical reflection on praxis’ in the light of the Word (Pattison 1997, 32). Its focus on the practical responsibilities of Christian faith have led it to be described as a ‘historical theology’, principally concerned with identifying and cooperating with God’s salvific acts in the Bible of the present (Pattison 1997, 38), through the preferential option for the poor.

Liberation theology has become known as a controversial theology for a number of reasons, and none have been as prevalent as its standpoint on certain doctrinal points. 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).

There are a number of other biblical challenges to liberation theology, some of which stem from the methodologies described earlier. In relation to the primacy of praxis over theological understanding, Ron Rhodes declares that ‘evangelicals reject any suggestion that “we must do in order to know, and hope that orthodoxy will arise from orthopraxis [right action]”, pointing out that Jesus made theological interpretation primary and objective, not social praxis; and putting praxis above theology means that there is no controlling exegetical criteria – the final authority has transferred from Scripture to the reader’s own interpretation.

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16 In this context, and throughout this essay, the word ‘praxis’ is referring to the practical response of people to the injustices and oppressions of the world.
17 Fellow liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, expands this definition, saying ‘the theology of liberation therefore means critical reflection on human praxis (of human beings generally, and Christians in particular) in the light of the praxis of Jesus and the demands of the faith’ (in Gibellini 1987, 5).
18 ‘The description of liberation theology as a historical theology denotes not a preoccupation with the past, but a dominant concern for God’s action in the world at present’ (Pattison 1997, 36).
19 Liberation theology uses the ‘bottom-up’ theory that if you start by working to alleviate the social injustice perpetrated towards the poor, the social reform and transformation will eventually work upward to include the rich (Brown 1990, 60).
20 All Scriptural references in this essay are taken from the New International Version.
21 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).
22 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).
23 It is in regard to the Scriptural challenges against liberation theology that Phillip Berryman makes the almost embarrassingly humorous defence that ‘liberation theology is quite biblical, but it is not literalist or fundamentalist’ (1987, 61). One can only guess at what he meant, or who he was trying to convince with the description, ‘quite biblical’.
Rhodes also argues against the deliberately biased perspective of a preferential option for the poor, saying that Scripture is clear that the preferential option is for the fallen, whether they are rich or poor. However, Brown (1990, 60) points out that ‘to speak of “a preferential option for the poor” is not to speak of an “exclusive option for the poor,” as though God loved only the poor and hated everybody else, especially the rich… [moreover,] to the degree that the cries of the poor are heard, and are given priority over the complaints of the rich, there can be movement toward a more just society’. Liberationists are extremely effective in subscribing to Scriptures such as Matthew 25:31-46, which condemns those who are not involved in improving social conditions, and the three major reasons they give for their preferential option for the poor are Christ’s example, Christ’s instructions to his people, and the idea that the connection between the gospel and poverty should translate to a connection between the Church and the poor.

Phillip Berryman has said that ‘liberation theology is often accused of being an unwarranted mixing of religion and politics’; and Harold S. Martin has said that ‘it is quite evident that there is among liberationists a deliberate twisting of biblical concepts to suit a set of theoretical political principles’. Both are correct in observing the dangers of valuing practice over theological understanding, and evangelicals have accused liberation theologians of compromising faith in favour of works. Criticisms of relativity and postmodernism are not unfounded, and liberationists themselves admit that ‘it is an evolving, changing theology that sees itself as only partly reflecting the totality of God’s word and truth. It has no desire to standardise, to gain conformity, or to reflect the concerns of those outside Latin America… it predicts its own passing – and welcomes the prospect!’, (Pattison 1997, 39). 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 ideology; and perhaps in this sense it is more aware than other theologies of its bias in interpretation. This relativity is largely a political response; in that liberation theologians’ suspicion is that all ideologically based theologies are distorted and dictated by existing social situations. As a result, liberation theology denies any claim to absolute truth. It recognises its own contextual bias, and accepts that as such, it cannot have any eternal or universal validity. This has also extended to an acceptance of universalist thought, so as ‘there is no separate, distinct, or privileged “church history”’ or

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24 ‘The emphasis on concrete historical praxis as the starting point for theological understanding means that liberation theologians frequently have scant respect for the apparently academic theologies found in the Northern hemisphere,’ saying that they are too concerned with classical texts, philosophy and orthodoxy – rather than grappling with real-life issues.

25 Ron Rhodes (1991, 9) has been explicit in affirming that there is a strong Scriptural basis for helping the poor.

26 ‘those who see liberation theology as a threat typically view the theological and pastoral workers infecting the church with Marxism under the guise of theology’ (Berryman 1987, 81).

27 ‘While rigid Marxist orthodoxy, dogmatism and ultimate solutions are largely rejected, the categories and tools of Marxist class analysis are those selected as best suited to understanding the situation of the poor in Latin America’ (Pattison 1997, 35).

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

29 Despite the claim that it doesn’t have all the answers, liberation theology is explicit in claiming to be a ‘complete theology’, as opposed to a theology of society or a theology of politics. J. L. Segundo instead says that ‘liberation theology is meant to designate and cover theology as a whole’, and rather than being an application of a dogmatic theology, ‘[it claims to be] the only authentic and privileged standpoint for arriving at a full and complete understanding of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ’ (Pattison 1997, 39).
salvation history which excludes people who are not Christians’ (Pattison 1997, 43). In liberation theology, ‘the criterion [of a just life] is not whether one considers oneself Christian or not – one might even be atheist – but whether one has served the needs of others’ (Berryman 1987, 55).

It cannot be denied however, that the political involvement of liberation theology is a form of contextualisation. As Pattison (1997, 31) says, ‘the theology of liberation receives its challenge not from atheism, rationalism or secularisation [as with the European Church], but from the dehumanisation of ordinary people in Latin America’. Liberation theology looks to avoid the insular Church on which it is itself a comment; ‘in Latin America it is not the church which is the focus of attention, but human beings, whom it is called to raise up and humanise’ (Gibellini 1987, 20). One product of liberation theology are ecclesial base communities; groups of poor Christians working to affect social and political issues in their contexts (Rhodes 1991, 4). These are relevant, contextualised and effective products of liberation theology, showing Christ’s concern for the poor in a way that is active and contrary to the normal practice of the Latin American Church.

In conclusion, the theology of liberation appreciates the political, communal and social nature of humanity, and is aware of the affect this has on life (Pattison 1997, 42). It profoundly claims for itself the call of church to be prophetic in the historical present, and understands the concern of God for the welfare of his people. As Ron Rhodes (1991, 9) has summed up, ‘Certainly, evangelicals have little right to criticise the theology of liberation if they are not prepared to criticise possible deficiencies in their own theology in regard to caring for the poor and oppressed of our world’, ‘[however], a legitimate and commendable concern for the poor and oppressed must never be used to justify a theological methodology that leads to a gross distortion of Christianity’ (Rhodes 1991, 12). Finally, as a caution to the postmodernist relativity of its claims on truth, ‘liberation theology must, therefore, find a way of affirming the worldly liberation struggle while preserving some Christian distinctiveness’ (Pattison 1997, 45).

(2,154 words)
Bibliography


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Abstract

This paper seeks to evaluate missiological approaches to Muslim women in the light of the analysis of Moroccan Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi. The Christian perspective on women’s status and role in Islamic societies is essentially etic and mission thinkers have been criticised for misunderstanding Islamic cultures, particularly in their view of women. In studying the emic approach of Fatima Mernissi, the paper aims to gain an “outsider's inside” perspective and to use this as a benchmark by which to evaluate current missionary approaches to Muslim women.

Section one summarises and analyses Mernissi’s central arguments in regard to the situation for women in Islam, the roots of the problem and the solution needed. She identifies the understanding of female sexuality and laws in regard to marriage as two of the major issues.

Section two provides an etic view by summarising the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of current missionaries, using Fran Love’s Longing to Call Them Sisters as an example, followed by an analysis of the commonalities and divergences between the two perspectives. This serves to reveal in what ways the missionary (etic) understanding might assume Mernissi’s (emic) insights in its approach to Muslim women. This leads into the final section where the consequent implications for mission will be discussed and suggestions made.
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D. Implications for Mission
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Introduction

The aim of this study is to evaluate missiological approaches to Muslim women in the light of the analysis of Moroccan Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi. A Christian understanding of Muslim women is by nature an etic one and Western missionaries have been subject to heavy criticism for their alleged misunderstanding of Islamic cultures and in particular their misunderstanding of the role of women. This forms part of a wider critique of Western understanding of Islam. According to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), profound misreadings are long-held and deeply embedded in Western readings of Arab-Islamic peoples. In studying the emic approach of Fatima Mernissi, the paper aims to gain an "outsider's inside" perspective and to use this as a benchmark by which to evaluate current missionary approaches to Muslim women.

Mernissi's voice is respected and influential, arguably having a key role in creating the pressure needed for the change to Moroccan law in regard to women's rights in 2004. The study's aim is not to critique Mernissi's perspective. However it must be acknowledged that she stands outside an orthodox Muslim position and can be best categorised as a liberal feminist. Moreover, it is important to note that challenges to Mernissi come from within the Muslim feminist movement as well as from outside it. Probably the most extensive critique of Mernissi's arguments comes from Katherine Bullock who, like fellow feminist Leila Ahmed, disputes the notion that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression. Bullock accuses Mernissi of failing to contextualise how people enact Islam differently in different times and places and of being reductive by not recognising the multiplicity of discourses around veiling.

Bullock is right that to make generalisations about the state of women in Islam that are universally true is a flawed enterprise: Islam is not monolithic. Mernissi's cultural, personal and religious position must be acknowledged. Mernissi's writing is focused on and shaped by her home land of Morocco where her sociological research is based. It is further shaped by the School of Maliki jurisprudence in operation there. Mernissi makes it clear that her motivation is informed by her own negative experience of growing up in a harem and her search for the source and remedy of her powerlessness. At the same time, these experiences, and Mernissi's considerable research provide an authentic, emic perspective. If, as Bullock suggests, the Islam that Mernissi presents is harsh, it is helpful to remember that Morocco's representation of Islam assumes a moderate political expression compared to many others.

The basis for the Christian approach to Muslim women is the publication arising from a Consultation on Ministry to Muslim Women, 1999, *Longing to Call Them Sisters* (edited by Fran Love and Jeleta Eckhert.) The consultation, meeting in Mesa, Arizona, involved forty participants representing sixteen different mission agencies. As a record of the presentations and discussion of current mission practitioners, it provides an authentic insight to contemporary approaches in mission to Muslim women. At the same time, it is heavily anecdotal, with different contributors sharing their experience from different parts of the Muslim world, and although there is a strong agreement on many issues, it does not contain a fully unified perspective.

Section one provides an emic view by summarising Mernissi's central arguments. It will analyse what Mernissi describes as the situation for women in Islam, the roots of the problem and the solution needed. Three main publications form the basis for this outline: *Beyond the Veil* (1985), *Women and Islam* (1991) and *Women and Islamic Memory* (1996.) Section two

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1 A good discussion of this appears in Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*, 1992: 150-55.
2 Bullock, Katherine, *Rethinking Muslim Women and The Veil*, 2003: 139
3 Mernissi, Fatima, *The Harem Within: Tales of a Moroccan Girlhood*, 1997: 3
provides an etic view by summarising the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of current missionaries. It uses *Longing to Call Them Sisters* as its basis. It will be followed by an analysis of the commonalities and divergences between the two perspectives which will be suggest how well the etic missionary approaches understand and take into account the emic view. This will lead into the final section where the consequent implications for mission will be discussed.

**Fatima Mernissi's Analysis:**

1. **The Situation of Women in Islam**

The primary issue for women in Muslim societies, according to Mernissi, is a set of laws and customs that ensure women's status remains one of subjugation. Primary amongst these are the family laws based on male authority. Numerous Muslim states, including Morocco, have signed the U.N. Declaration for Human Rights. This states that men and women have equal rights in relation to marriage. Yet traditional Muslim law (shari'a) does not grant these rights. Thus a conflict exists between modern demands for equality and traditional Islamic patriarchy. Moreover, modernisation is frequently seen as synonymous with Westernisation. Because Islamic identity, particularly that of radical groups, is often defined in antithetical relationship to the West, the traditional status of women is constantly being reaffirmed as an important marker of authentic Islam. Mernissi acknowledges the negative impact of colonialism in creating this situation: “The psychological result of foreign powers' intervention into Muslim legislation was to transform shari’a into a symbol of Muslim identity and the integrity of the umma.”

Female Sexuality

Mernissi suggests the significant difference between the struggle for women's liberation in the Arab Muslim world and that same struggle in the Western world is rooted in differing perceptions of sexuality. Where traditional Western patriarchy has seen women as passive and inferior, female sexuality within Islam is understood as active and dangerous. The struggle within the Islamic world is not focused on proving that women have equal capacities to men but on the mode of relatedness within the sexes. Indeed, belief in the abilities of women can be seen clearly in the fact that feminism within Morocco has been led by men seeking a more effective economy: The solution to Morocco's economic weakness is the education of women and their contribution in the workplace.

In traditional Muslim perception, it is the threat of *fitna* (chaos) posed by women's powerful sexuality that has resulted in the need for strategies to contain their power. Heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah's order. Women's unrestrained sexuality distracts men from their social and religious duties. The rebellion intrinsic to female sexuality manifests itself in two central ways. The first is that of *quaid*, meaning premeditated and carefully conceived cunning. In the Quran (Sura of Yusuf) it refers to a woman's decision to commit adultery.

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4 Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil*, 1985: 21
5 Ibid: 14. Here Mernissi is particularly focusing on the writings of Qasim Amin.
6 Ibid: 19
7 *Woman's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, 1996: 56
This notion of woman's de-stabilising power is invoked in daily situations, from everyday market haggling to ministerial meetings, whenever a woman negotiates subtly or makes a well-judged remark. The second is that of nushuz, meaning rebellion against male authority. In the Quran this specifically refers to women refusing to obey their husband in the matter of the sex act. It is considered so serious that it entitles men to use violence against women when "all violence between believers is formally forbidden."

Consequently, society can only survive by controlling women and fostering male dominance via the institutions of polygamy, repudiation and sexual segregation. These were evident in the working of shari'a into the Code du Statut Personnel, the modern Moroccan Personal Status Law (PSL), which was moderated to give greater rights to women only as recently as 2004.

**Polygamy**

Polygamy highlights the discrepancy between the control of male and female sexuality. Fornication (zina) is a crime under Islam. Yet the institution of polygamy, while “civilising” female sexuality, allows male sexuality to remain promiscuous. It entitles man to satisfy his sexuality and indulge it to saturation; women are simply agents in the process.

The psychological impact of polygamy is twofold: Firstly, it enhances men's perception of themselves as primarily sexual beings and the sexual nature of the conjugal unit. Secondly, it is a way for a man to humiliate the woman. In bringing in another woman, he is proclaiming that his current wife is unable to satisfy him.

Whilst in Morocco, statistically, polygamy is decreasing, its assumptions are still at work even within monogamous households for example through threats levied by husbands at their wives.

**Repudiation**

By repudiation, Mernissi is referring to the right of a man to divorce his wife immediately and without having to provide justification. Morocco is typical of Islamic states in re-enacting this seventh century Islamic law. The role of the judge is not to review the husband's decision but limited simply to registering it. Conversely, women do not have the same rights. A woman's decision to end her marriage is subjugated to the judge's decision and approval.

The laws on divorce, therefore, ensure the dominance of the man over the woman. Moreover, the basis for repudiation, argues Mernissi is similar to that of polygamy:

Whereas polygamy deals with the intensity of the male's sexual drive, repudiation deals with its instability. Repudiation prevents the man from losing his sexual appetite through boredom. It aims at supplying a new set of sexual objects, within the framework of marriage, to protect him against the temptation of zina.
In a similar way to polygamy, what is perceived as male need is placed above consideration of the woman. Moreover, the institution encourages a view of woman as primarily a sexual (and reproductive) agent. Yet at the same time, Mernissi argues, because men are socialised to expect a thorough satisfaction of their sexual desires, any restriction on that fulfilment results in a high psychological price. This is not the case for women who from an early age are socialised to accept their sexual limitations. In this sense, she suggests, the self fulfilment of men is just as impaired and limited as that of women. 15

Segregation of the sexes

Segregation of the sexes refers to the systematic prevention of interaction between men and women not related by blood or marriage. In the traditional Islamic mind, the world is clearly divided into male and female space. With a few exceptions, for example, visits to saints' shrines, female space is limited to the domestic domain. The use of the *hijab* ensures that when women enter a male space they are “invisible.” 16

Sexual segregation provides one of the main pillars that control sexual behaviour. Yet in modern Arab societies this distinction, particularly in urban areas is breaking down, with more women entering traditionally male space for education and work, rejecting the veil and determining their own lives. Mernissi argues that in Morocco this has lead to a period of anomie – deep confusion and absence of norms. 17 This anomie is created by a gap between ideology and reality. The result is a high level of generational conflict particularly over the issue of love marriage. For deeply embedded in Muslim consciousness is the notion that love between men and women, and particularly between a husband and wife, is a deadly enemy of the Muslim order.

Marriage

Mernissi argues that Islamic society encourages men to assume the role of master rather than lover within a marriage relationship. 18 Indeed, a husband has religious duty to command his wife and this is embodied in his right to correct her by physical beating. 19 Moreover, a wife cannot legally demand respect or love. In Morocco, until very recently, the PSL included in the list of a wife's duties in marriage, fidelity, obedience and deference towards the parents of her husband and his close relatives. In contrast, no moral duties were required of the husband. 20

In addition, there are many ways in which intimacy is prevented from developing between husband and wife. The sexual act is considered polluting and regulated by ceremonies and incantations: The couple must face away from Mecca, the direction of God and at various points during intercourse, God's presence should be invoked by the man. 21 The wife's mother-in-law also provides a crucial function as a barrier to intimacy in marriage. She usually plays a decisive role in the choice of bride for her son, lives with the couple and acts as friend and teacher of the bride. Importantly, argues Mernissi, for a Muslim man, his mother is the only woman he is permitted to love. 22 This love takes the form of lifelong gratitude. Muslim marriage does not represent a point in time when a son relinquishes ties to

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15 Ibid: 173  
16 Ibid: 143  
17 Ibid: 97  
18 Ibid: 113  
19 Ibid: 111  
20 Ibid: 109-10  
21 Ibid: 113-4  
22 Ibid: 121
his mother’s “apron strings” as in many societies. Instead, the bond between son and mother is strengthened through the son's marriage.  

Mernissi does not simply argue women are subjugated because man’s devotion to Allah is threatened by temptation to commit *zina* (have sexual relations outside of marriage). Rather, she argues the ultimate threat to devotion comes from erotic love *within* marriage, which has potential to rival the emotional attachment due to God alone.

**Conflict with Modernisation**

Despite shifting patterns in Arab societies which have seen an increasing number of women in the workplace, the attitudes of men to women at work are still shaped by Medieval laws and values. Women are not seen as having an economic dimension. This is the privilege and monopoly of masculinity. Many Moroccan males see women who work outside the home as potential whores and their husbands as economic failures. Thus there is once again a schism between ideology and reality.

On another level, Mernissi highlights the fact that the education and autonomy of women is essential to the development of a country. Her comments resonate with the considerable research that shows women's education leads to lower birth rates, lower child mortality and successful micro-enterprise development:

> Until we arrive at the conception of woman as an equal and responsible citizen...as a resource to be managed and as a talent to be developed, every development project in the Arab world will be doomed to failure.  

**2. The Roots of the Problem**

Ultimately, the roots of female subjugation in Islam do not lie in the Koran, in the example of Muhammed, or in Islamic history, but in the conflict between women's rights and the interests of the male elite.

**The Politics of Subjugation**

Mernissi makes frequent reference to the contemporary appropriation of the seventh century law system, largely codified under Abassid rule, and the way it is understood to be the only authentic interpretation of Islam: indisputably *God’s* law. She, like many other Islamic reformers, rejects this view in favour of an understanding of Islam that recognises the Medieval system as the culturally conditioned product of a human process of debate and reasoning (*ijtihad*) and thus legitimately subject to constant revision and re-examination through *fiqh* (the science of Islamic law). In fact, she notes, many other aspects of Medieval *shari’a* have either never been properly implemented by Islamic rulers or by now have been

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23 Ibid: 122  
24 Mernissi 1996: 64  
25 See Meyers, *Walking With the Poor*, 1999: 65  
26 Mernissi 1996: 55  
considerably reformed, with family law as the glaring exception. Moreover, the “fossilization of the family model and reference basis is a deliberate political choice.” 28

Today the issue, at root, is still one of democracy. 29 Indeed, Mernissi describes the systematic funding of conservative movements, that were launched as a pan-Arab state programme in the 1980s, as a “counter-democracy offensive” 30 and a means by which leaders diverted attention from over-population and soaring unemployment. 31 The campaigns to order women to veil were:

at the same time the medium and the message as Macluhan would say, ie shut up and stay invisible. And the message was for both sexes, although only one was used as a passive actor in the political theatre scene. 32

Women, she claims, are an easy group to manipulate, in part because of the rich tradition of misogyny within Islamic history. It is this misogyny rather than the egalitarian message and practice of Muhammed that has been revived and technologically backed by oil-rich emirs and shaykhs in recent decades. 33 In other words, there is plenty of material within the religious scriptures and classical history to sustain human rights but this is not within the interests of the ruling male elite who use those vast resources to serve their own ends.

The Example of Muhammed

Using a range of Islamic sources, Mernissi paints a picture of Muhammed as a man who lived humbly and transparently among his people in the city of Medina. Physically, his home adjoined the mosque with no clear division between domestic, public and religious space. His wives moved through these spaces freely, had public roles and accompanied him to war. 34 For example his first wife Khadija, far from not having an economic dimension to her person, was a wealthy business woman and Muhammed frequently sought her wisdom and advice; 35 Similarly, Umm Salama, a member of the Quraysh aristocracy, was consulted as an authority on matters of vital concern to her community. 36 Muhammed’s youngest wife, A’isha, held political power, leading an important uprising after his death. 37

The Muslim women of Medina, like men, had the status of Companions (sahabi) of the prophet and could speak freely with him. Yet the egalitarian aims of Muhammed faced strong opposition, 38 and these aims ultimately threatened the survival of Islam. Muhammed’s relationship with his wives was a particular target for attack:

His desire to live his relationship with women as a constant and privileged experience was used by his political enemies to attack him, to wound him, to humiliate him, and finally to make him give up his aims for equality of the sexes. 39

28 Mernissi 1996: 73
29 Ibid: vii
30 Ibid: viii
31 Ibid: ix
32 Ibid: xii
33 Ibid
34 Mernissi 1991: 104
35 Ibid: 102
36 Ibid: 116
38 Mernissi 1991: 150
39 Ibid: 163
Mernissi characterises Umar, the close Companion of Muhammed and later Caliph, as a fiery misogynist who led the men of Medina in their resistance to Muhammed’s egalitarian project.

The process of the confinement of women began with the imposition of veiling for women when on the streets. It was a practice encouraged by Muhammed as a concession to Umar when there was much disorder and violence in the city. For Muhammed, it “represented the exact opposite of what he had wanted to bring about. It was the incarnation of the absence of internal control.” 40 Yet, claims Mernissi, this hijab “that hides women instead of changing attitudes” 41 was to cut short a brief burst of freedom and overshadow Islam for the next fourteen centuries. 42

The Hadith and Quran

After the death of Muhammed a systematic collection of his sayings, (hadith), was begun in the context of political violence, interminable civil wars and schisms. 43 There was an increase in fabricated hadith as men sought to justify themselves and gain the upper hand through recourse to alleged words or actions of the dead prophet. Alongside the desire of male politicians to manipulate the sacred, was the fierce determination of scholars to oppose them through the elaboration of the fiqh – a “science of religion” entailing concepts and methods of verification and counter-verification. 44

What results is numerous hadith with varying levels of authenticity. Among the most reliable hadith are those verified by Al-Bukhari who collected 600,000 hadith and after meticulous research, retained only 7,257 as authentic. Yet, claims Mernissi, the scientific scepticism he employed has all but “disappeared today.” 45 Even hadith classified as authentic (sahih) are open to question and must be “examined with a magnifying glass” for “only God is infallible.” 46 With this rationale in place, Mernissi launches into an examination of misogynistic hadith. Using criteria for the reliability of hadith from Malik (founder of the school of jurisprudence followed in Morocco) she dismisses hadith that are frequently used to marginalise women and calls into question the integrity of those to whom these hadith are attributed.

Mernissi’s arguments also rely on her questioning of some traditional Quranic interpretation. She insists that interpretation must be done in the light of historical context: particular rulings are only valid in particular situations. Mernissi uses the method of asbab al-nuzul (the occasion of a verse’s revelation) to explore the reasons why a verse was revealed and the implications for application. Her understanding of the splitting into two of the Muslim concept of space through hijab (curtain) is heavily dependent on the context she argues for its origin in surah 33:53. According to Mernissi, the hijab was originally meant as a barrier between two men, not between a man and a woman. It was only later made a dividing line between the sexes under the influence of Umar.

40 Ibid: 185
41 Ibid: 188
42 Ibid: 188
43 Ibid: 39
44 Ibid: 43
45 Ibid: 45
3. The Solution

Mernissi concludes that women’s aims are not equality with men but a “global rejection of established sexual patterns” for both genders. In achieving this revolution, perhaps the greatest barrier to change is that women are seen to embody dangerous individualism or bid’a (innovation.) Innovation alters the laws, the sacred order – which is seen as eternal. A believer can only reinterpret, he cannot create, for creation is the monopoly of God. Thus when a woman asserts her individual freedom, she challenges the whole community and sacred order. Moreover her individualism is associated with Western capitalist, consumerist individualism and dissenting women are thereby labelled as Western agents.

The solution lies in the Muslim world’s relationship with the past which needs to be carefully re-examined. It is “the most painful wound devouring Arab creative energies.” The past is read selectively and egalitarianism is wrongly seen as an import from the West rather than a true part of the Muslim tradition. Mernissi bitterly asks her fellow Muslims “Why is it that ‘our Arab past’ stops in the ninth century?” Once again she accuses the male elite: “Those who claim the only ‘authentic’ cultural heritage comes from the Medieval period...have a vested interest in repudiating all the newer models and cultural frames of reference that appeared in later centuries.”

Historical argument therefore is crucial to the rights of women. Modern Muslims need to be reminded of the precedent set by women in the past. Early Muslim historians gave considerable exposure to women in their writings. These writings show women as active participants and fully involved partners in historic events, including the crucial emergence of Islam.

Analysis of Missiological Approaches:

Christian Approaches to Ministry Among Muslim Women

This section will examine the outcome of the Christian Consultation on Ministry to Muslim Women (1999). With the exception of one, the contributors are all active in ministry to women in various places in the Islamic world. Therefore the material forms a good basis for exploring current Christian approaches in mission to Muslim women. I will firstly summarise the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of these contributors and then evaluate commonalities and divergences with the emic perspective of Fatima Mernissi.

C.M. Amal suggests that the felt needs of Muslim women are not those that hit the headlines, but like women anywhere, they are those that affect the home. For “Muslims, Christians and

47 Mernissi 1985: 176
48 Mernissi 1996: 119
49 Ibid: 110
50 Mernissi 1991: viii
51 Ibid
52 Mernissi 1996: 73
53 Ibid
54 Ibid: 92
55 Diane Colby does not describe herself as a missionary but as “a researcher in the social sciences with experience among Muslims.” (Love and Eckheart, eds., Longing to Call Them Sisters, 2000: 64)
all other women are concerned about the stuff of daily life. Women think and act and react like women.” 56 Feelings of insecurity, fear and powerlessness expressed by Middle Eastern Muslim women in the survey carried out by Amal are not necessarily the result of those women being Muslim, 57 but are mainly due to their political situation. 58 For different reasons, these feelings are also common, if not more widespread, among women in the West. 59 Debi Bartlotti’s experience in medical work on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan gives her a different perspective. She focuses on women in crisis and identifies abuse, divorce, polygamy, displacement and refugee life as issues. The common thread in these is threefold: Women experience a sense of powerlessness, fear, and an identity that is derivative; that is, it not based on their essential self as created by God. As symbols and representatives of honour and of Islam, women “pose the greatest risk to Muslim men and culture.” 60

Julia Colgate, speaking from experience amongst lower class women in S.E. Asia, claims that Muslim women commonly have a feeling of vulnerability. This is evident because they confess they are fearful, they confess they feel powerless and they actively seek spiritual power through the practices of folk Islam to meet their felt needs. 61 Diane Colby argues that Muslim women are dominated by the fact that they bear the honour of the household and patrilineage. 62 Moreover, in reformed Islam, there is renewed emphasis on the whole Quran and Hadith, both of which are “full of passages that denigrate women.” 63 Finally, Lea Ruth, from an East Asian context, identifies fear as that which characterises the heart of Muslim women. 64 She breaks this into three types: fear of the shame; fear of powerlessness, particularly against spiritual forces; and fear of rejection “by a male-ego-focused community.” 65 Women have a secondary place in the practices of formal Islam, and find power in the “animistic issues in life,” particularly in roles such as healers, midwives and diviners. 66

The writers almost all identify both powerlessness and fear as key experiences of Islamic women. The root reasons suggested for these vary but women's political and social situation is a common factor. A number of contributors comment on the role of women as bearers of honour and in consequence also often bearers of shame. Their fears are related to this role in society, for example, fear of gossip that may tarnish their reputation. Also asserted by the majority of writers is that women seek power through the practices of folk Islam. The contributors generally focus on women's emotional and spiritual needs. Their ministries emphasise the role of prayer and of friendship evangelism between women, with the ultimate goal that Muslim women would receive freedom in Christ from all that confines them.

57 Ibid
58 Ibid: 15
59 Ibid: 16
60 Bartlotti, Debi, “Muslim Women In Crisis,” in Love and Eckheart, 2000: 27
61 Colgate, Julia, “Muslim Women and The Occult,” in 37
62 Ibid: 69
63 Ibid: 71
64 Ruth, Lea, “Understanding the Spiritual Hunger,” in Love and Eckheart: 81
65 Ibid
66 Ibid: 91
Commonalities and Divergences

Gender Relations
Many of the experiences of Muslim women documented in the missionary material resonate with Mernissi's theory of female sexuality in Islam and with her claims that women are institutionally confined because they pose a corrupting threat to men. The missionary material focuses on the emotional and psychological impact of this on women. There is little overt comment about the impact on men although there are a number of places where it is inferred that men enjoy their privileged position in the social structure. Mernissi, in contrast, emphasises that traditional sex models are damaging for both sexes. She identifies ways in which they emasculate men, enforcing expectations of masculinity that men are unable to meet (or have met by others) in a modern world. The ensuing gap between traditional ideology and present reality makes men victims as well as women. In addition, socialisation that fosters distrust between the sexes is degrading for both men and women and thwarts the development of the whole of society.

In a similar way to Mernissi, Amal acknowledges the process of change taking place in many Muslim countries and its impact on women's patterns of work. Mernissi however argues that although the confusion and anxiety triggered by change has damaging results in the short-term, modernisation will ultimately serve to benefit women because traditional systems are breaking down and reopening the issue of female rights in Islam.

The Role of Folk Islam
Perhaps the greatest area of commonality between Mernissi and the missionary material is in the recognition that women seek solutions to their powerlessness through folk Islam. “A visit to a saint's tomb, an ongoing relation with a supernatural creature, can be a genuine attempt to mediate one's place in the material world” 67 argues Mernissi. Drawing on Weber's definition of power as the chance of a person to realize their own will in a communal action, she concludes that women's collaboration with saints is “definitely a power operation.” 68

In line with Ruth and Colgate, Mernissi argues that one area in which women seek almost total control is reproduction and sexuality. This is not surprising since they are central to the patriarchal system's definition of women. Significantly, pregnancy and childbirth are uniquely female experiences. The exclusion of men provides space for women's power and autonomy to flourish. At the same time, whereas Mernissi suggests women's involvement with the supernatural has an entirely therapeutic emotional impact, the Christian view argues that Muslim women ultimately become controlled by the rites and demands of the supernatural system and they fear the consequences of getting ritual details wrong.

Mernissi's analysis is focused on activities centred around saints' tombs. She argues that they have less of a magical role than a sociological one. Both male and female saints were frequently of humble origin and resisted hierarchical knowledge, as such, they are figures with whom illiterate and marginalised women easily relate. 69 Indeed, “sanctuaries which are the locus of anti-establishment, anti-patriarchal mythical figures, provide women with space where complaint and verbal vituperations against the system's injustices are allowed and encouraged.” 70 The saint becomes the medium through which resentments are channelled

67 Mernissi, Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory, 1996: 27
68 Ibid
69 Mernissi 1996: 30
70 Ibid: 31
and solutions sought. Consequently, women's anger is not directed at challenging the source of their resentment: the structural injustice in the outside world.

The danger of women's involvement with saints and intermediaries is therefore not a spiritual one, as suggested by the missionaries, but a political one. Mernissi uses a Marxist argument to suggest that the saint in the sanctuary helps women adjust to the oppression of the system. Saints act as the neutraliser of discontent, depriving it of its potential to combat the formal power structure.

**Inadequacy of the Etic Approach**

Finally, there are places where the missionary material suggests too superficial a reading of Islam. It is inadequate to simplistically assert, as Diane Colby does, that the Quran and Hadith are "full of passages that denigrate women." This view does not take into account any distinction between these two authorities or the interpretive approaches of Mernissi and other liberal Muslims. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that meaning drawn from Christian scriptures is dependent on hermeneutical principles and that passages in the Bible can be read as "denigrating women." Indeed, it ignores the fact that Bible and Christian tradition have been used to do this – as Mernissi is not slow to point out. 71

The missionary material aims to present an empathetic presentation of women's situation in Islam, however, it also highlights the inadequacy of an etic perspective. In places, it is evident that the stereotyped notion of Muslim women as victims undergirds some of the material. This is implied particularly in the Thinking Through the Issues sections, for example: "How our hearts weep for the abused women in Islam! There are so many more incidents of abuse among them than in the West!" 72 The comment makes a sweeping statement that assumes the supremacy of the West in regard to an issue that is notoriously difficult to analyse statistically. On the other hand, in an effort to avoid presenting Muslim women as victims, Amal can be accused of treating the impact of Muslim family law too glibly. In stating that in countries where polygamy is banned, men take mistresses instead, she suggests that outlawing polygamy has no benefit. 73 Yet, Mernissi argues that polygamy institutionalises humiliation of women whereas adultery is always seen as transgression. While Amal is right that changing the law cannot change men's hearts and actions, she fails to acknowledge the way law legitimises and reinforces modes of thinking and acting.

**Implications for Mission:**

**The Role of Folk Islam**

Missionary practice needs to take account not only of the spiritual powers working through the system of folk Islam but the sociological role that it plays in providing a space for women. Rick Love estimates that while seventy percent of men are influenced by folk Islam, that figure for women is more like ninety-five percent. 74 It is certainly true that the power women seek through the intervention of saints and mediums can be found in the experience of Christian faith. Interestingly, it is possible to argue that the Pentecostal church flourishes in

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71 Ibid: 75
72 Love and Eckherat 2000: 30
73 Amal 2000: 17
marginalised and dis-empowered communities in Latin America because the spiritual power found there meets the need for control over their lives that people have not experienced in society at large. Moreover, as Chesnut argues, it is possible for the power that "lies at the experiential core of Pentecostalism" 75 to be experienced alongside oppressive leadership structures.

Musk similarly asserts that Muslim women can find solutions to their vulnerability through security in Christ and through their influence as prayer warriors. 76 The relationship with the Holy Spirit is immediately accessible. Like folk practices, it is not dependent on hierarchical knowledge. Yet, unlike folk practices, neither is it dependent on religious specialists: "Even the most uneducated Christian woman can know the mysteries of the universe because she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit." 77

On the other hand, individual women are often themselves religious specialists. Many women hold specific positions in Muslim communities which give them authority in matters pertaining to folk religion. 78 These positions, as Mernissi suggests, are usually in relation to sexuality and reproduction. Midwives and sorceresses specialising in love magic are two important examples. 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.

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. 79

One issue here is likely to be that of women taking leadership roles in Muslim background believer churches. Women need to be released and trained to teach other women in a way that reflects the reality of gender relations in the Muslim world. Implementing a traditional Western ecclesiology of males only as elders, reinforces the patriarchal system already in place and is also inadequate in a context where men and women are not used to meeting in religious gatherings. Fran Love acknowledges that although discipling and beginning the church is the most crucial phase to establishing the church,"we have done very little strategic thinking about how our women fit in to all of this." 80

The second challenge Mernissi's scholarship presents is that Christian faith cannot simply replace folk practices as the opium for women's ills. 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.

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75 Chesnut, Andrew, *Born Again In Brazil*, 1997: 170
76 Musk, Bill, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 1989: 76
78 Musk 1989: 118
80 Love, Fran, “Church Planting That Includes Muslim Women”, *Seedbed* XV No 2, 2000: 13
Gender Relations

Missionaries need to be honest about the history of misogyny in the church and the way that the Bible, like the sacred texts of Islam, has been used to oppress women. Rather than becoming a stumbling block in mission, this acknowledgement can be used as a bridge to explore the root causes of men's oppression of women. Indeed, it is here that we find Mernissi's analysis congruent with that of the Bible. Both trace the problem of male oppression to a human desire for power. For Mernissi, those who confine women are the male elite – that is, those who have power and do not want to lose it. In addition, the central problem in Muslim societies is the mode of relatedness between the sexes. In both of these conclusions, Mernissi echoes the narrative of Genesis 3.

Genesis 3 not only reveals the very act of wanting to take power and be "like God," as the root cause of sin but teaches that the distorted relations between the sexes are the direct result of the fall and curse. The Eden narrative shows "the first signs of mutual estrangement and the brutalising of sexual love." 81 In Genesis 3:16, we see how God's original plans for men and women are now profoundly disfigured. "To love and cherish' becomes 'to desire and to dominate." 82 Far from being ordained in God's original plan for creation, women are subject to male domination as a result of sin. These distorted power relations are damaging to both genders. It is therefore no wonder that Mernissi identifies the mode of relatedness between the sexes as the primary problem of society. Moreover, she also refers to the need for inner change. Her argument is that rather than women being hidden by the hijab, men should take hold of the original Islamic ideal and practice internal control.

Missionaries need to emphasise biblical teaching on this essential issue and allow their own lives to reveal the healing of this pattern. The gospel begins to redeem this relationship between men and women. The power for internal change is possible only through new life in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Both sexes are fully unified in Christ (Galatians 3) and called not to seek control but to submit and love (Ephesians 5.) The self-sacrificial love shown by Christ for the church becomes the model for a man's love for his wife. This is a radically different understanding of marriage to that presented by Mernissi as the traditional Muslim view.

In Christian understanding, heterosexual love is not a threat to man's love for God but an expression of it and intrinsically linked to the love between humans and God. For this reason, intimacy between the sexes is fostered by instruction that the man must leave his father and mother to be united with his wife (Matthew 19:5.) The bond between a husband and wife is not easily dissolved either by a woman or a man:

Marriage is to be forever, and it is not dependent on the wife remaining young and healthy, or even bearing children. Jesus did not teach things that were practical for the needs of men: he spoke of God's perfect intentions for both man and woman. 83

The implication is that a redeemed marriage is one of the most powerful tools available in ministry to Muslim women. Whilst missionaries may fall short of Christ's ideal in marriage, their marriages, and the gender relations within the church at large, have the potential to speak powerfully of God's love. This is not an area explored at all in Longing to Call Them Sisters which focuses exclusively on individual women witnessing to other women. It raises a number of practical issues. Firstly, it suggests that married people are extremely important in the mission and that the quality of their marriages are a primary part of their ministry.

81 Kidner, Derek, Genesis, 1967: 67
82 Ibid
83 Glaser and John, Partners or Prisoners? Christians Thinking About Women and Islam, 1998: 247
Secondly, it suggests that Muslim women need to be able to witness the difference between these unions and the model of marriage with which they have been socialised. How possible this is when missionaries only minister to their own gender is questionable.

On the other hand, in countries where segregation of the sexes is practised, the notion of men witnessing to Muslim women is problematic. It tests the boundaries of contextualisation. Yet, while the testimonies of missionary women are important, the implications of Mernissi’s work are that the conduct of Christian men towards women is likely to be a more powerful witness. The patterns of work in an urban setting may provide an appropriate context for this. Moreover, in some Muslim cultures, there is likely to be scope for a married couple to witness as a team to other married couples. Where this is not possible, ways for men to witness to Muslim women without involving face-to-face meetings should be explored. Examples of this might be recorded testimonies of men or the circulation of contemporary stories that focus on men working out their relationships with women in a way that is faithful to Christ's teaching.

Reducing Barriers

Finally, strong resistance to Western influence in the Islamic world suggests that significant - though not insurmountable - barriers to the gospel are unavoidably created by Western missionaries because of their colonial history. Mernissi states that any challenge to the traditional order, particularly by women, is associated with the dangerous individualism of the West. The global church needs to think strategically about the kind of missionaries that are best suited to minister in this context. Missionaries from countries that have a greater community focus in their culture and that do not have the recent colonial history of the West should be encouraged and equipped for mission. The Chinese church, for example, would be well placed to understand and to encourage converts accused of betraying their people and disturbing social harmony.

Recommendations

Good missionary practice requires living with the consciousness that our understanding as outsiders will only ever be approximate. It calls for humility that resists any notion of being an expert and continuously returns to emic perspectives so that people are allowed to tell the own story of their lives. This requires recognition of the plurality of expressions of Islam. Missionaries need to acknowledge the distinction between the ideal of Islam and its practice in the reality of people's everyday lives. In this, we need to be honest and recognise the commonalities of Islam and Christianity, seeing also the gap between the teaching of Christ and the practice of the church, particularly in regard to women.

Taking on board the emic view of Mernissi means recognising the centrality of the mode of relatedness between the genders as a key to mission. More thinking needs to be done about how the biblical model of marriage is communicated. Possible means for men to witness to women in a way that is culturally appropriate need to be pursued. In addition, the sociological function of folk Islam in the lives of women should be reflected in mission practice and strategic thinking done about the role of women in Muslim background believer churches, particularly in regard to leadership.

Finally, research into the comparative impact on Muslim women of missionaries from Western and non-Western cultures is recommended. The emic view suggests that the worldwide church needs to think globally not only about unreached peoples but the global patterns of sending nations. This may well necessitate rethinking the allocation of resources. If missionaries from non-Western nations are found to be less inhibited in establishing the Kingdom of God in Muslim countries, richer Western nations may need to support them through the commitment of financial resources.
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Pioneer Missions
With today’s emphasis on unreached peoples and frontier missions is there still any justification for missions outside such categories?

Abstract
Siegmar Göhner is a missionary working in northern Uganda in the area of pioneer groups and discipleship; his wife is a medical doctor. The essay examines the matter of imbalance regarding the emphasis of most missions when it comes to involvement in reaching out to new and ‘unreached’ peoples. He questions our understanding of ‘unreached’ and the sufficiency of pioneer missions alone. Any engagement in missions requires a clear understanding of the mandate of The Great Commission the fulfilment of which he sees as a process which we have attempted to oversimplify. The whole world remains the domain of missions in Göhner’s thinking. He goes on to look at Paul’s strategies and practices in the light of today’s emphases in mission and believes that we have tended to misinterpret many of his procedures and goals.

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Introduction

Missions is not merely a continuous cross-cultural process of witnessing about Jesus. According to Matt. 24:14, missions has the definite goal of preaching the gospel globally ‘as a testimony to all nations’. Completion of this task is conjoined with the dramatic climax of world history, the Return of Christ.  

Understandably, preoccupation with ‘finishing the task’ seems natural to Christians. Add to that the near magical attraction of ending a millennium, proposing a popular time-frame for closure, and it comes as no surprise to see invigorated mission efforts around each of the two millennial transitions since the Great Commission was given.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this found expression in ‘the “incredible whirl of activities” relating to the A.D. 2000 movement’. The central idea underlying this ‘whirl’ as well as an assessment of this movement’s impact is succinctly expressed in ‘Introduction to World Missions’. Moreau, Corwin and McGee write, ‘the priority of reaching unreached peoples’ … ‘as opposed to unreached people’ … ‘has been established in global mission strategy to the position of primacy’. Today, the official website of the Joshua Project speaks of 6,547 unreached peoples groups out of a total of 15,935 peoples. These unreached peoples constitute the major missions frontier of this movement.

I attempt to examine this question: With today’s emphasis on unreached peoples and frontier missions is there still any justification for missions outside such categories?

The practical relevance of this question was impressed upon me shortly before being commissioned for missionary work to Uganda, where 66% of the population adhere to Christianity. A member of my sending church in Germany asked, ‘But why Uganda, when there are so many unreached areas elsewhere?’ Revisiting this question today, after almost 14 years of service in Uganda, bears some semblance to the Apostle Paul’s experience when he presented his gospel to the Jerusalem leaders, fearing he ‘was running or had run his race in vain’ (Gal. 2:2).

This essay consists of two main sections, plus one practical application.

- The first section deals with core presuppositions of Frontier Missions, leading to an assessment of the validity of its singular focus on the frontier of unreached peoples.
- The second section examines the biblical roots of missions in order to establish whether there remain genuine justifications for missions at other frontiers.
- The third part consists of subject-related impressions from missions in a country with a ‘Need-for-Pioneer-Missionaries-Rating’ of 0.03.

2 D.J. Hesselgrave, Paradigms in Conflict, p. 290.
Despite being personally involved, I wish to approach this subject solely as a quest for truth. Hopefully, the findings will be of value to some of the 448,000 foreign missionaries presently serving world-wide.

The Mandate of Frontier Missions

It is not the objective of this essay to explain or even mention the many concepts, strategies, terms or agencies that have been created and discussed in more than three decades of Frontier Missions. A concise presentation of the central ideas will suffice to demonstrate the compelling logic of this strategy as it builds up towards one conclusive goal, namely the concentration of mission efforts on the remaining unreached people groups. At the same time, Frontier Missions raises questions, which need to be faced squarely to ensure our missions' philosophy remains true to the realities of the world we desire to reach.

The Compelling Logic of this Concept

This is understood best against the backdrop of two major problems. Paradoxically, it was the apparent success of world evangelisation which obscured the realization of these obstacles hindering the completion of the missionary task.

Obstacle 1: Two Billion ‘cut off’ despite Christianity’s Growth

The following figures, established by the Lausanne Statistical Task Force, show an acceleration of Bible-believing Christians in relation to the total world population.

- It took 18 centuries for dedicated believers to grow from 0% of the world’s population to 2.5% in 1900, only 70 years to grow from 2.5% to 5% in 1970, and just the last 30 years to grow from 5% to 11.2% of the world population.
- Now for the first time in history, there is one believer for every nine people worldwide who aren’t believers.

This historical perspective demonstrates an encouraging trend! However, if these figures are understood as proof of the missionary task nearing completion, they may, in the final analysis, only prove dreadfully misleading.

A closer look reveals that the Christian world population constitutes growth mainly in regions, countries and among peoples where the Church was already present. This means, almost one third of the world’s population still remains cut off, because no relevant churches exist within this segment. Should the Church fail to find ways to reach these unreached people groups, this positive trend may eventually come to a halt.

The reasoning behind this concern is rooted in the following observations:

- The gospel’s greatest potential for growth is within communities bound together by the same language and culture.

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For the gospel to spread between different people groups, it encounters cultural-linguistic boundaries.

If such boundaries are reinforced by prejudice and hatred, the extension of the gospel will be complicated even further.

And since such negative attitudes most commonly exist between immediate neighbours, natural progression from one people group to the next may not readily occur.

Previous mission strategies with their focus on the millions of people still living in spiritual darkness failed to realise this problem. An emphasis on people groups, coupled with a growing readiness to apply social sciences including cross-cultural dynamics to missions, was needed to shed light on this predicament.

What is the proposed solution?

A host of well trained, highly motivated, cross-culturally sensitive Christian workers who consciously aim at penetrating these frontiers! Nothing short of the creation of viable indigenous church planting movements can count as a missiological breakthrough. Such congregations will then effectively evangelise their own people, free from cultural and linguistic encumbrances. This is the logic of Frontier Missions! However, at this point realisation of problem No. 2 sets in.

Obstacle 2: The Scandalous Imbalance

Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch speak of ‘The Great Imbalance’ while David Barrett and Todd Johnson call it ‘The Scandal of World A’. The following quotes explain what they mean:

Only an estimated 10,000 of the global foreign mission force 7 [their footnote number] are working within the 10,000 unreached groups, while 41 times that number of foreign missionaries continue to work within people groups already reached. What an imbalance! 10

Presently, more than 70% of Christian effort and ministry is directed at people who already profess to be Christians, while less than 5% of our total missionary activity is focused on those who have never once had a chance to hear about the good news of the Gospel. This is the scandal of World A. 11

Of course, such scandalous imbalances call for a radical redistribution of all Christian resources.

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Proposed Solution

Barrett and Johnson appeal to Christians, ‘to ensure that the resources which are under their own direct control’ … ‘get properly shared with all’.  

Moreover, they do not confine themselves to call for a far greater concentration on World A, they candidly suggest a ‘significant’ and ‘deliberate’ restriction of resources to the other two worlds, B and C.

While many Christians will applaud this as appropriate, it also appears like jumping to conclusions and solutions before all the necessary questions are answered or even asked. I propose to ask and attempt to answer some of these questions now.

Answering the Tough Questions

‘Imbalance’ is not a morally charged word; it may simply state facts without seeking blame. ‘Scandal’ is associated with wrongdoing, guilt and shame. So, is the Christian world guilty? Or is this uneven distribution of mission resources the result of factors outside and beyond the Church? In other words, is it simply an imbalance or is it a scandal? Finding answers must be relevant to our quest - for reasons we shall soon discover.

Complex realities involving different nations and numerous peoples on the one hand and a multitude of denominations, mission agencies and individual missionaries on the other, would call for a nuanced treatise. The nature of this essay restricts us to merely pinpoint two major options.

Option 1: The ‘Unreached’ are ‘Unreachable’

Writing about the 10/40 Window, where the majority of the least reached peoples are located, Robertson McQuilkin, author of ‘The Great Omission’, states, ‘These are not only the least reached, they are the least reachable, the most resistant. In fact, because of religious, political, and cultural barriers, they are also the least accessible’.

Winter and Koch dislike such terms. They insist, ‘when a people seems “resistant” it may only mean our approach has been defective.’ As proof, they point to the ‘Muslim block’ which is full of people with ‘very favourable attitudes towards Jesus Christ’. Of course, maintaining this positive outlook is imperative for advocates of Frontier Missions, and, we readily admit, Muslim’s esteem for Jesus can be a stepping stone. However, this high regard is directed to ‘their Jesus’, the second greatest prophet, not to the unique Son of God and dying Saviour whom Christian missionaries preach. This biblical Jesus remains a ‘skandalon’ and ‘stumbling block’ (1 Cor. 1:23)!

Theological differences are not the only cause for Muslim hostility; the West’s pursuit of dominance, as well as the moral and ethical breakdown of ‘Christian civilisation’ are other well established factors. Similar factors constitute seemingly insurmountable obstacles for the gospel in more than one place and beyond the Islamic context. Avery T. Willis, Jr., Vice President of the International Mission Board and missionary to Indonesia writes, ‘Any time a

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13 Since definitions of Word A, B, C give room for more than the singular frontier identified by Frontier Missions, this call becomes more acceptable. Nevertheless, because of their close relation, especially in popular perception and influence, they are taken together here.
major religion aligns with a political power or has the support of a political system, it resists the gospel and does not allow its people freedom to choose Christianity.\textsuperscript{18}

In view of this, terms like ‘resistant’ or ‘inaccessible’ seem to be valid descriptions of the world in which missions is carried out. Such factors cannot be ignored, when it comes to thinking about the great imbalance in the distribution of missionary personnel and finances! They should not be taken as excuses, but they do offer one genuine explanation. And should this situation not change considerably, it remains questionable whether a radical reversal in the distribution of missions-resources will lead to the desired success.

Of course, alternative mission strategies like creative access platforms and non-residential missionaries constitute options to bypass ‘religious and political gatekeepers’,\textsuperscript{17} leading to previously barred but ripe harvest fields. Also the rising missionary force of the Two-Thirds World, which does not wear the negative ethical, political and historical sticker of the West, offers genuine hope.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, the existence of resistance to the gospel is a reality that cannot be denied!

Given the case then that the unreached peoples are still not easily reachable, we may ask, ‘Why should millions of unconverted people who are accessible and perhaps even receptive be ignored?’ To simply state, ‘They do not qualify, because they do not live between the designated latitudes or they belong to the wrong ethnic group’, will not be satisfactory! We readily agree to give special attention to unreached people groups, yet it remains questionable whether it is helpful to the cause of missions to deliberately restrict human and financial resources toward any mission field that does not lie in these frontiers. The legitimacy of such considerations is consolidated by the fact that the missionary capacity of today’s Church seems big enough to accomplish both.\textsuperscript{19}

**Option 2: Missions has fallen into the Trap of Ease and Success**

The writers of ‘Introducing World Missions’ make no attempt to be pleasing. To them it is indisputable,

> many of the least-reached peoples remain that way because when choices need to be made, other avenues of service appear much more fruitful and attractive. Reaching the least reached requires so much energy and focus that it rarely fares well when more immediate and receptive competitors have a stake in the missionary’s time.\textsuperscript{20}

This may simply appear like the other side of the same coin; yet in my view, it is an altogether different currency of unacceptably low value. The reason is this: The reality of ‘resistance’ and ‘inaccessibility’ locates the root cause for insufficient missionary involvement beyond the missionary community’s influence. Missionaries could still be blamed for lack of ingenuity, fear, or feelings of inability … attributes and emotions which may be unnecessary, unfounded and at times they may carry an element of moral wrong. Yet, generally, they are understandable and human, but not evil.


\textsuperscript{17} A.T. Willis, Jr., ‘The Unfinished Task’, p. 675.


On the other hand, negligence of hard places based on considerations such as personal success or comfort, reflect motivations strongly condemned by biblical values. For this there is no excuse!

To conclude, I state the obvious: The uneven distribution of missionary resources is both an imbalance and a scandal. The reality of ‘resistance’ and ‘inaccessibility’ calls for continued prayer, ingenuity and courage. At the same time it seems to justify a missions’ perspective which makes allowance for frontiers other than the frontier of unreached people groups. Wherever wrong aspirations and sinful motivations have contributed to the predicament of the remaining unreached peoples, a return to high ethical standards is necessary. This would do a lot on account of both, correcting the imbalance and reducing the scandal. Whether it is realistic to expect this to happen on a major scale is another tough question. We will not attempt to answer it now. There is, however, one further question that needs to be asked.

**How compelling are the concepts of Frontier Missions in reality?**

Since these concepts are rooted to no small extent in the field of human sciences, rather then divine revelation, it may not only be permissible but necessary to question their authority for missions. Science, by definition, excludes the supernatural which is so essential to biblical missions. What about God’s own initiative and ingenuity to overcome obstacles for the gospel? And then, is it really so easy - almost manageable - to plant a church that becomes a viable church planting movement?

Also, the many uncertainties related to constantly developing definitions and changing qualifications underlying the huge amount of statistical data that is so basic to Frontier Missions, constitute another aspect that calls for caution. Yet, despite evidence of awareness in missiological circles, a great proportion of the Christian community seems to have succumbed to the compelling rhetoric of Frontier Missions, unquestioningly so! And it is here, I propose, where harm may have been caused by the justified, yet sometimes undifferentiated and too radical calls for redistribution of missionary resources.

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.

**Christ’s Mandate for Missions**

While scrutinising different motives employed to challenge the Church for missions, David Hesselgrave, cautions against ‘human invention’ which ‘can obscure divine intention’ and proposes ‘a missionary motivation that holds more potential and promise.’

To the Word of God we will now turn! Does Frontier Missions rightly reflect Christ’s Mandate?

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**Justification from the Great Commission**

The five versions of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) define various facets of missions. At least four arguments, in favour of missionary service in areas other than those defined by Frontier Missions can be drawn from this.

**Discipleship Demands Time**

The ‘finite imperative’ from Matthew’s commission is ‘make disciples’.\(^{24}\) Obviously, this points to work beyond the proclamation of Good News. ‘Go’ in the context of ‘all nations’ is a directive for crossing borders and prohibits ‘settling down’. Yet, how long are missionaries allowed to stay? When does discipling end?

The difficulty lies with interpreting ‘teaching them to obey everything …’ George Peters assigns ample time, ‘Discipleship is a perpetual school which may lead from one degree to another but does not graduate its scholars.’\(^{25}\) This apt remark holds certainly true in a general sense, but is it appropriate in the context of the Great Commission? In the final analysis, our finest churches would qualify as mission fields! R. Garret, Professor of Missions, offers helpful advice, ‘the specific content of missionary teaching is to develop the skill of “observing whatever Jesus commanded.”’\(^{26}\) Rather than teaching ‘all things’, a focus on what ‘produces stronger Christians’ is necessary. Understood in this way, ‘teaching’ suggests a longer yet by no means unlimited process.

Since it is impossible to find a definite timetable, we simply constitute the time-consuming nature of this imperative and note that Christ’s mandate obviously lacks the ‘precise definitions’ and ‘neatness’ so apparent with Frontier Missions.

**The Gospel is for ‘All People’ not just for ‘All Peoples’**

Matthew’s and Luke’s *panta ta ethnē* is the preferred lens for Frontier Missions to view the world. It would be unfair to suggest its proponents deny that ultimately ‘all people’ should be given a chance to respond to the gospel. However, this comes more like an afterthought. It took 15 years for Thomas Wang’s 1980 theme ‘A Church for Every People by the Year 2000’ to be enlarged to include ‘… and the Gospel for Every Person’.\(^{27}\) The missionary’s task is predominantly a church-planting focus on unreached peoples. Reaching people is shifted away from ‘missions’ to ‘ordinary evangelism’.

Strategically this makes sense! And surely it is not unbiblical. But is it binding? And, does it reflect the biblical ideal?

The ‘whoever believes’ in Mark’s commission puts focus on individuals. While those who have no access to the gospel are in a disadvantaged position, they are not more ‘lost’ than those who have a church nearby. But in the end it will be individual people ‘from every nation, tribe, people and language’ who will stand before the heavenly throne (Rev. 7:9 [my emphasis]).


\(^{27}\) D.J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, p. 289.
The fact is: The Great Commission includes both! It is the command to take the gospel to ‘all peoples’ and to ‘all people’. Therefore, unconverted people constitute a valid mission field, even if they do not belong to unreached people groups.

The Whole World constitutes the ‘Arena for Missions’

‘Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ are geographical rather than ethnic descriptions and do not stop short of complete coverage. The ‘and’ of Acts 1:8 binds the whole world together! Therefore, missions - according to Acts - is mission at the frontiers of unreached peoples living in the 10/40 window ‘and’ unreached people everywhere! The word ‘all’ (in connection with Judea and Samaria) gives saturation evangelism an integral place in the missionary task. Of course, this stands in contradistinction to the concepts of Frontier Missions. Additionally, because the Great Commission places responsibility on all Christians – regardless of nationality -, missions is truly and increasingly ‘from everywhere to everywhere’.

Fulfilling the ‘Complete Process’ of Missions

The Gospels and Acts present us with ‘five versions’ of ‘one commission’. Therefore the missionary task is best understood as one package! Going, evangelising and discipling belong together. Only ‘together’ do they constitute the complete process of missions.

This view would question the practise of aspiring mission-agencies entering areas of an already established church. Yet it would certainly justify the continued ministry of the initial missionaries and their respective agencies, for some time, after the initial period of conversion and baptism has passed. I want to recommend this as a rule for healthy missions practise! The benefits could be tremendous!

Mission-fields, oversaturated with personnel of different agencies, often suffer from competition. Such problems would be limited if the influx of aspiring mission agencies could be redirected to contemplate new and unreached mission fields. Instead of intensifying the scandal of missionary imbalance such practice would gradually help to reduce it. Targeting new frontiers as well as teaching disciples would be taken care of in a fair and healthy manner.

Considerations from Paul's Missionary Practice

If there is a pattern of missionary ministry in the New Testament, it must be found in the life and work of the Apostle Paul. What can we learn? Herbert Kane, formerly professor of missions at Trinity Evangelical School, suggests,

Like every good missionary, Paul had two goals in mind. His immediate goal was the speedy evangelization of the world. His ultimate goal was the establishing of local churches. The latter could not be accomplished by a ten-day crusade; so Paul made a practice of remaining in each city long enough to establish a church.

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Two important questions: ‘What was Paul's strategy for “the speedy evangelization of the world”?’ And, ‘How long is “long enough to establish a church”?’ These questions relate to the heart of missions in general and to Frontier Missions in particular.

What was Paul's Strategy for World Evangelization?

Paul’s method of evangelizing the world through planting churches is not under dispute here. However, three questions deserve attention.

Did Paul's Churches constitute Church Planting Movements?

Kane is enthusiastic, Paul planted ‘mission-minded churches’ … “in the major centers of population and they in turn engaged in “saturation evangelism”, making ‘themselves responsible for the total evangelization of their own regions’. Sounds wonderful! Is it true?

We do not need to insist that Paul personally and literally ventured into every town and village to spread the gospel. Yet to create the impression, that the indigenous church readily accepted and executed this responsibility, unaided by missionary support, plainly runs contrary to the biblical account. For example, Acts 18:23 indicates an extensive regional involvement on the part of the Apostle. Secondly, Pisidian Antioch and Ephesus are two locations from where the gospel spread throughout their respective regions (Acts 13:49; Acts 19:10, 20). However, the expansion originating from Antioch was the concurrent by-product of the missionaries’ city-wide crusade (Acts 13:44). The regional expansion from Ephesus is directly linked with extraordinary miracles and exorcism (Acts 19:20). Again, God’s primary instrument was the missionary (Acts 19:11)! Further, F.F. Bruce’s suggestion, that a number of Paul’s colleagues founded the churches in the nearby Lycus valley during this same period, would explain Paul’s relative ‘lack of personal acquaintance’ without excluding his missionary supervision (cf. Col. 2:1; 4:12-13). These are the scriptural factors leading to the extensive evangelisation of these regions; and they were all part and parcel of Paul’s missionary involvement, not a post-missionary indigenousendeavour!

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.

Did Paul think in Terms of Ethno-Linguistic People Groups?

Most references to Paul’s apostolic calling mention ‘Gentiles’ and ‘Jews’ alike (e.g. Acts 9:15). During New Testament times, ‘Jew’ was a primarily religious designation, whereas ‘Gentiles’ pointed to the entire non-Jewish world. Galatians 2:7-9 assigns strategic priorities along these lines. Additionally, Paul’s calling was ‘to all men’ (Acts 22:15). Other scriptures include geographical details (Acts 22:21; 26:20) or point to the spiritual frontier between ‘darkness’ and ‘light’, i.e. the dominion of Satan versus God’s rule (Acts 26:17-18). Terms like ‘regions’ and ‘no more place’ in Romans 15:18-24 confirm that Paul’s strategic thinking was along geographic rather then ethnic lines.

31 H.J. Kane, Christian Missions, p. 82.
Closest, perhaps, to a missionary awareness along ethnic lines are phrases like ‘all the Gentiles’ (Rom. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:17), because they highlight the plurality of nations. But New Testament commentator, Leon Morris, interprets Paul’s fondness of the word ‘all’ simply as ‘largeness of vision’, as opposed to provincialism. 34 Whether Paul understood his vocation to include literally ‘every’ people group remains doubtful. Because of the statement ‘by the command of the eternal God’ in Romans 16:26, some missiologists see a direct link to the Great Commission. 35 Again, Morris thinks the additional Greek preposition ‘eis’ before ‘panta ta ethnè’ gives it the more likely meaning “as far as” the Gentiles; i.e., it reaches throughout the world. 36 The distinction between gentile nations in Romans 1:13-15 indicate broad categories like ‘civilised’ and ‘educated’ as opposed to ‘savage’ and ‘ignorant’, not separate ethnicities. 37

If at all present, ‘people group thinking’ - in the sense of Frontier Missions - seemed to be very faint in Paul’s call and theology. The frontier of unbelief, strategically viewed in geographical and broad cultural blocks, was paramount! In comparison, ever finer definitions like ‘unimax people’ appear quite particular! Did Paul have a conscious missiological reason for placing strategic emphasis on geography rather then ethnicity?

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? Whatever is planted into newly tilled ground is what we should expect to grow and harvest later. The future will show whether an almost singularly ethnic outlook in missions will bring forth an entirely good crop.

Did Paul have a Concept of Closure?

Commenting on Romans 15:18-24 Howard Marshall deliberates:

Paul saw himself as entrusted with at least part of the major task of proclaiming the gospel to all nations as the necessary condition for the parousia of the Lord Jesus. His aim therefore was to hasten that coming by getting round the world as quickly as possible. It was sufficient for this purpose that he preached the gospel ‘representatively’ in each area of the world rather than that he literally reached every person. 38

However, Marshall then concedes, ‘there is nothing of this consciousness in Romans 15’ and suggests to best understand this passage as ‘a strategic endeavour to found churches as centres of continuing Christian work’. 39

Instead of involving ourselves in speculations, we can safely draw these conclusions: Paul’s statement, ‘there is no more place for me to work in these regions’ (v. 23) points to the possible end of a missionary era in a particular region. Combining Paul’s claim, to ‘have fully

36 L. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 547.
37 L. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 61-65.
proclaimed the gospel’ (v. 19) with our earlier findings about apostolic involvement in regional expansion, we might feel confident to define (only from the strategic point of view!) what may constitute the end of the missionary era for any particular region. I propose two factors: Pioneer church-planting should have covered a considerable area and the gospel should have spread widely. Only then may we turn our eyes to new fields! And as we do, we should be mindful, not to duplicate or exploit other missionaries’ efforts (v. 20). In such a way, there is hope for our present mission fields, hope for regions yet unreached, and finally there is hope for closure!

How long does it take to establish a church?
Kane rightly reports that Paul's church-planting activities were often cut short by the fierce hostility of religious opponents. Nevertheless, Paul ‘usually managed to remain at least two or three months. In some cases, such as Corinth and Ephesus, he stayed much longer.’
What about the results? Kane claims, ‘in every city’ … Paul ‘left behind a strong and growing church that could carry on after his departure.’
I suggest filling in a few details will create a scenario, more faithful to history, and more helpful for missionaries aspiring to follow the biblical pattern.

A Case Study: Ephesus
Ephesus seems suitable, first because a detailed record is available and secondly, it was one locality Paul left voluntarily. Ephesus, therefore, constitutes a ‘complete’ pattern of missionary church-planting, not an aborted one. Here are some relevant details:

- Three years seem like a reasonable time-frame (The time Jesus needed to disciple the Twelve). Teaching was comprehensive and of highest intensity (Acts 20:27, 31). Extraordinary miracles and power encounters were expediting factors (Acts 19:10-20).


- Paul spoke persuasively in the synagogue for three months (Acts 19:8) before increasing opposition forced them to assemble in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). Here, Paul continued this arduous ministry for two years.

- And – as if all of this was not enough - Paul later called for the elders to meet him on the way for further encouragement, warning and instruction (Acts 20:16-38). Finally, Paul had to ‘tear’ himself away from these elders (Acts 21:1). Was his awareness that they would not meet again the only reason for this? Or, did he consider these three

40 H.J. Kane, Christian Missions, p. 82.
41 A riot put pressure on Paul (Acts 19:23-20:1); however, the Apostle had already decided to leave earlier (Acts 19:21).
intense years still not sufficient to detach himself without reservation? The content of Paul’s instructions supports both.

Such details from the original mission’s script do not only paint a more colourful picture than the faint black and white strokes of some more current writers; they raise concern. Will missionaries, with their minds full of task-oriented mission concepts, have equal space in their heart for the spirit of people-concern so forcefully exemplified by Paul? Failing to balance the urgency of world-missions with a deep commitment to spiritual growth and consolidation, would definitely prevent even the best of our efforts to ever reach the standard of Paul’s.

What about Paul’s efforts which suggest a shorter time?

After re-examining the chronological information of Paul’s three mission journeys (e.g. Acts 14:3), I agree with Howard Marshall’s suggestion, the “journey” motif needs considerable qualification.\(^\text{42}\) To interpret these trips as ‘a kind of whistle-stop tour, stopping in each place only long enough to establish a small group of believers and then dashing on to the next place’ is a misconception. In order to maintain a truthful context, I submit the following - more general - principles:

To consolidate initial church planting efforts, Paul paid personal follow-up visits (Acts 14:21-22; 15:36; 18:23), sent delegates (e.g. 2 Cor. 8:16-18) and engaged in extensive writing ministry. Also, the important interconnectedness between local churches - creating an awareness of the universal church - was ascertained (Acts 16:4; 1 Cor. 16:3; Eph. 3:6). Preaching, teaching and prayer constituted intense struggles for the high goal of presenting every convert perfect in Christ (Col. 1:28-29; cf. Phil. 1:3-11). Despite putting these churches under local leadership and committing them to God’s grace (Acts 14:23), his apostolic concern never ceased (2 Cor. 11:28).

I conclude: For Paul, leaving didn’t mean forgetting, nor did it mean the end of apostolic supervision. Missions, after all, is not a programme; it is winning people and leading them to maturity in Christ. This can only be achieved by genuine love expressed in an unrelenting commitment to their well-being. Yet, such qualities, once allowed into the heart, are hard to get rid of.

Additionally, next to the structural and doctrinal maturity of the church, the missionary’s responsibility includes safeguarding her from ‘indigenous isolation’ by assuring regional and international relations develop. These need to be added to our previous list of qualifying factors for the possible closure of particular mission fields.

Considering these truths together, one cannot avoid the impression of immense tension between the conflicting demands of reaching out to the regions beyond and the taxing and time-consuming task of establishing the church. Neither the Great Commission nor the practice of the Apostle Paul provides exact data to determine the perfect point of departure for a missionary force. Such lines cannot be as easily determined as some missiological concepts appear to suggest. The biblical record is more flexible; and therefore – in my judgement - more realistic.

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Impressions from the Perspective of a 0.03 N-Formula Country

According to Marten Visser’s N-Formula, Uganda ranks at place 160 out of 187. ‘N’ represents the need for pioneer missionaries, which is determined by ‘the strength of the existing church’ and ‘the number of missionaries’ already present. Consequently, Uganda’s ‘N’ is a low figure of 0.03. This puts Uganda among the fifty-one countries of ‘Category Four’ with sufficient missionaries, possibly having an over representation. True? Yes! And No!

Are all ‘Missionaries’ Missionaries?

David Garrard’s contribution to ‘The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements’ may shed some light on this ambiguity. Pointing at Uganda’s poverty status and the AIDS epidemic, he explains, ‘The majority of the larger pentecostal denominations are involved in some form of relief’ … ‘Many missionaries and mission agencies are involved in relief alone.’

Marten Visser admits, the range of his results would have been ‘slightly narrower’, if statistics of pioneer missionaries had been available. Since they were not, ‘the many missionaries and mission agencies’ … ‘involved in relief alone’ - as mentioned by Garrard - seem to have tarnished Visser’s results. Obviously, Visser is aware of this problem. The explanation of his N-Formula is punctuated with a detailed treatise on possible limitations and he needs to be commended for this conscientiousness! However, who bothers to consider all these qualifying remarks, when a glance at his table can gather ‘facts’ so easily?

So, here I am - a missionary in a country of ‘0.03 N’. Should I not better pack my bags and go to … Poland perhaps? Or, should I simply stop calling myself ‘missionary’?

Why am I here? And what am I doing?

I am here because God called me! I am doing what I perceive to be his will! God’s guiding hand is obvious – at least to me, my family, our leaders and home-churches and – I trust - also to our partner church in Uganda.

Christian Relief Work

The problems created by AIDS and 20 years of civil war in Northern Uganda demand a visible demonstration of God’s love. Therefore, our mission includes ‘some form of relief’. Yet, if this was the only work we were doing - however valuable and important - the ‘Foreign Missions’ on our letter-heads should perhaps be replaced by ‘Christian Charity’ or something along that line.

When it comes to church-work, I would classify my work in at least four different categories.

Maintaining International Fellowship and Partnering in Missions

There are occasional visits to regions of former pioneer involvement of our mission. The church in these areas is fully established now and generational transition in leadership and pastoral taskforce bring about a natural phase-out. Can these visits legitimately be called...
missions? Perhaps not! Even our evangelistic preaching should best be described as ‘foreign participation in E-1’.\textsuperscript{46} because it would be carried out just as well without my involvement.

On the other hand, severing these historical ties prematurely would not only have deprived the national church of much needed assistance in more than one area; I, the foreign missionary, would have been robbed of valuable friendships leading to fruitful partnerships for outreaches to newer mission fields. If I was to speak about ‘success’ in our mission, I would consider this partnership between foreign missionaries, mission minded pastors and home-missionaries as key.

**Participation in Consolidating ‘Evangelistic Districts’**

Districts with a limited network of churches and unconsolidated leadership are designated ‘evangelistic districts’ within the Pentecostal Assemblies of God Uganda. There might be truth in the statement, ‘If it was not for the involvement of the Volksmission from Germany, the churches in some of these areas would exist no longer!’\textsuperscript{47} Personally, I would want to emphasise the role of other district leaders and the national executive in this! Today, most of these districts have leadership representation on the national executive.

**Evangelism and Church Planting in Neglected Areas**

From the very first visit to Karamoja, this most neglected and dangerous region captured the centre of my interest. If there is an overrepresentation of missionaries in Uganda, then it is certainly not felt here. Resistance against Christianity has been registered officially.\textsuperscript{48} Initial objections against missions in this area stated: ‘According to the law of missions we should concentrate on the receptive!’ Today, the growth of the church in this unreceptive region is the pride of the fellowship.

Would I consider the last two areas ‘mission work’? According to my understanding of New Testament definitions: Yes, definitely!

**Looking to New Frontiers**

In 2006 we made our way to the small mountain tribe of the Ik in the furthest north-eastern corner of Uganda. The Ik do not live in the 10/40 Window and, according to the Joshua Project, they are not classified as ‘least reached’. A Catholic Father used to visit these people, but since he was killed many years ago, the fruit of his efforts has mostly subsided. Certain websites give reports of what appear to be more recent ‘hit and run’ missions, claiming big results but leaving little evidence behind. Now, God has given us an open door to a conglomeration of four small villages. We believe to have detected God’s guiding hand and are praying, working and worrying for our first converts to grow and for a church to be established.

And there, standing on these mountains we see Sudan; a country with 141 ‘least reached people groups’ out of a total of 244!\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46} E-1 is part Ralph Winter’s popular concept delineating three kinds of evangelism. E-1 represents ‘evangelism among people of the evangelist’s own culture’.

\textsuperscript{47} Statement made by the Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God to the Foreign Missions Director of the Volksmission during a visit in 1998.

\textsuperscript{48} Karamoja Data Centre, \texttt{<http://www.karamojadata.org/ethnicgrouping.htm>} [accessed 1.11.2005].

\textsuperscript{49} Joshua Project, \texttt{<http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php>} [accessed 30/12/2006].
**Do we think of closure?**

Yes! At least in the sense of coming to the end of the missionary era in Uganda! But as we think, we continue to work and care, giving priority to areas without a church, struggling to reach these hundreds of thousands of people with a very limited knowledge of the gospel. And in that process we are teamed up with mostly younger people, adept at learning and culturally close to these least reached peoples beyond the mountains.

David Garrard comments about East Africa:

> There is still much to be done in terms of evangelism and teaching, but it is most likely that missions in this region need to reappraise their role, as needs have changed greatly during the last 100 years. If East Africa is going to be reached for Christ, it will not be the missions that will make the difference – it will be East Africans.\(^{50}\)

I agree, wholeheartedly! To help to inspire and equip some of these African Christians seems like another good reason to stay just a little longer. May God help us not to pass on mere concepts, but also the right spirit that is so vital for missions!

**Conclusion**

I want to reaffirm that it is not my intent to minimise Frontier Missions’ important contributions to world-missions, most notably their renewed focus on the least reached peoples. This may indeed be a much needed emphasis for our time! Only, the exclusiveness of their focus, leading to a disregard of other valuable contributions towards the same cause, is not the registered trademark of New Testament Missiology! Respect should be mutual!

In the process of writing this essay, a delayed copy of ‘Today’s Pentecostal Evangel’ was placed in my Post Box. One article caught my attention.\(^{51}\) Familiar names like ‘Corinth, Berea, Thessalonica …’ are mentioned; but also terms like ‘barriers’ and ‘resistant’. The report claims, ‘fervent Christianity can be hard to find’ … ‘Pentecostal leaders lament the loss of nearly an entire generation …’ The article is interspersed with repeated calls for missionaries to be sent to this ‘truly needy mission field’! Was there not someone, somewhere, who said, ‘I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ …’ and ‘there is no more place for me to work in these regions’?

**Appendix**

**Definitions of World A, B, C**

**World A** is the unevangelized world, or those individuals who have not yet heard of Christ, Christianity or the Gospel. **World B** constitutes those who have heard the Gospel, but have not yet responded. **World C** speaks of those who are professed members of a Christian church. In the case of countries, peoples, cities provinces, and other large segments, World A is those that are less than half evangelized; World B, over 50% evangelised but less than 60% Christian, and World C, over 60% Christian or over 95% evangelized.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{51}\) K. Horn, “’Also to the Greeks’: An ancient nation at a spiritual crossroads’ in *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House (May 07, 2006), pp. 18-25.


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Raising Awareness of the Bible in Contemporary British Society
A Case Study of Young Adults Who are Not Involved in a Faith Community

Author: F. Morgan.

Abstract
This paper explores attitudes to the Bible among non-churchgoers in the UK. It focuses on a case study of young professionals, examining their familiarity with the Bible and their opinions of it. It evaluates the ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible and asks how culturally relevant these approaches are to the people represented in the case study.

The participants had been exposed to the Bible to varying degrees in childhood but rarely read it as adults. They acknowledged that it was an important cultural document and some believed its moral messages were helpful, but it had little or no relevance to their daily lives. They expressed doubts about its historicity and viewed fundamentalist interpretations as dangerous.

The challenge to the Church in contemporary society is to encourage sceptical people to explore the text for themselves. Young professionals who are dismissive of Christianity may still be interested in the Bible as a literary or cultural text. Its publication in an accessible form, as a work of literature rather than as a religious text, may appeal more to such groups than the use of the Bible in sermons, on Christian websites or in discussion groups. The Church may need to be open to new ways of reading the Bible and be less possessive about its interpretation if it wants to broaden the readership, trusting that a divinely inspired text can speak for itself in contemporary society.

1 Introduction
In many flourishing British churches the Bible is seen as central to the Christian faith. It is believed to be God's message to humanity, revealing his character and his saving action in human history. In an era of declining church attendance, it is churches with a more conservative view of the Bible that are most likely to be growing. This view is, however, at odds with a society where religious texts, organised religion and absolutes of any kind are increasingly regarded with suspicion. This case study aims to discover more about the attitudes of young, professional people in Britain towards the Bible, examining both their familiarity with the text and their opinions of it. The paper also discusses some of the ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible and will consider whether these strategies are culturally relevant to the group represented in the case study.

1 Gledhill, “Churchgoing on its Knees as Christianity Falls Out of Favour”, Times Online Comment, 2008 [Website]
2 Methodology

I collected most of my data through interviews using my own circle of friends as a case study. I interviewed 11 people, all of whom were British, university educated professionals, aged between 30 and 34. I selected people who do not regularly attend church and who know me well enough to discuss a subject which is sometimes considered taboo in British society. Complete strangers might have felt freer to criticise the Bible without fear of offending me but it is unlikely that they would have given the project their time and consideration so willingly. I encouraged interviewees to be as frank as possible and provided assurances of anonymity.

One-to-one interviews seemed the best way of eliciting information on a subject to which many people had given little prior thought. It enabled me to clarify questions that people did not understand and to ask follow-up questions where necessary. I transcribed all the interviews and allowed the participants to review the transcripts before using them in my research. Several of them chose to clarify or expand on their comments at this stage.

I began the interviews with factual questions about whether or not people owned a Bible and how much of it they had read. In the second half of the interview I encouraged people to share their opinions about its relevance and usefulness. This format allowed people to build up gradually to sharing some of their more deeply held views. I kept my own interjections to a minimum in order to give the interviewees space to respond. A focus group might have generated livelier discussion and elicited stronger opinions but it would have been difficult to transcribe in the time available.

I have given an overview of the participants’ opinions though I recognise that my summary may overlook the subtleties of some of their views. I am also conscious that the centrality of the Bible in my own faith is likely to have influenced the research at every stage, including my analysis of the answers. I have tried to allow the research to speak for itself by quoting directly wherever possible and have included transcripts of the interviews in the appendices.

The case study is a qualitative piece of research, involving only a small number of participants from a limited sector of British society. It is therefore not possible to make generalisations about contemporary Britain based on the findings of this case study. However, the responses do give an insight into some of the views of the Bible current amongst well educated professionals and suggest themes which could be followed up in a wider scale study.

I have attempted to place the responses in a wider context by examining literature which discusses the place of the Bible in contemporary society and by comparing my findings with those of larger scale studies. There have been few recent surveys of attitudes to the Bible amongst people who do not attend church and the three most significant studies differ from my own in a number of ways. Hay and Hunt gathered data from four focus groups covering a wider age range (25-60) and including only people who described themselves as either “spiritual” or “religious”. Spencer’s research, Beyond Belief, and Beyond the Fringe, was limited to agnostics and included people from a wider range of social groups than were represented in this case study. These studies did not focus exclusively on the Bible but

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2 Appendix 2: Profile of Participants
4 Appendix 3: Consent Form
5 Appendix 1: Interview Questions
6 Appendix 9: Abridged Interview Transcripts
7 Hay and Hunt, “Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Do Not Go to Church”, Church of Scotland, 2000: 6 [Website]
8 Spencer, Beyond Belief, 2003: 10
9 Spencer, Beyond the Fringe, 2005: 15
investigated attitudes to spirituality and the Church in general. The information on participants' opinions of the Bible is consequently limited, but some similar themes emerge.

In the light of the case study I have evaluated a number of ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible. Section 4 examines the Church's approach to hermeneutics and preaching, the use of discussion groups and internet resources and the way in which the Bible is published. Since it is not possible to survey all the available resources a small sample has been selected including the Alpha Course10, the rejesus website11 and the Revelations series.12

3 Findings of the Case Study

3.1 Background of Participants

The participants were asked at the outset to describe their own beliefs. Two described themselves as atheists, two as Christians and seven as agnostic or agnostic in combination with other categories. For example, Katharine13 and Daniel used both “atheist” and “agnostic” to describe their beliefs while Lewis said, “I’ll have a bit of agnostic. Throw in a bit of Buddhist/Christian”.14 Thus most participants were not committed to a particular belief system but some acknowledged a leaning either towards or away from faith. Lewis' eclectic spirituality reflects an increasing tendency for individuals to “be more inventive with their spiritual lives”, assembling private faith from a range of religious sources.15 The participants were selected because they did not attend church regularly and it is therefore not surprising that they were less religious than the general population, approximately 70% of whom described themselves as Christian in the 2001 census.16 However, since only 6.3% of the population attend church on an average Sunday,17 it also seems that a lower proportion of the participants identified themselves as Christian than would be expected amongst non-churchgoers in England and Wales.

The descriptions of participants' parents' beliefs are an indication of the extent to which Christianity impacted on their upbringing. A few of the participants had at least one parent who was active in a church community,18 while two identified their grandmothers as significant Christian influences.19 With the exception of Daniel's father (anti religious), Lewis' mother (non-observant Hindu) and Emma's parents (both atheist), all parents were described as having at least nominal Christian beliefs or a belief in God. Occasionally cynicism was expressed about the sincerity of their parents' views. Michael, for example, described his father as “agnostic with occasional twinges of familial C of Eness”.20

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10 Alpha International, The Alpha Course, 2008 [Website]
11 Jenkins and Stanley, eds., rejesus, 2007a [Website]
12 Revelations, 2005
13 Pseudonyms have been used by agreement with participants
14 Appendix 4: Beliefs of Participants and Their Parents
15 Percy, The Salt of the Earth, 2001: 65
17 Brierley Peter and Heather Wraight, “Pulling Out of the Nosedive”, Christian Research, 2006 [Website]
20 Appendix 4: Beliefs of Participants and Their Parents
3.2 Familiarity with Religious Texts

Three participants did not own copies of the Bible but most had a copy "somewhere". This reflects a recent ICM poll showing that 65% of adults in the UK own a Bible. The extent to which participants had read it or heard it read varied widely from between "a few verses and chapters" to "half to three quarters" and depended largely on whether they had attended church, Sunday school or a church primary school as a child. No one in the group claimed to have read the Bible or heard it read more than three or four times in the last year. In Hay and Hunt's research "not one of the participants mentioned reading the Bible".

Most participants found it difficult to quote directly from the Bible although they were aware that there are "lots of sayings that are in common parlance". Six were able to provide at least three quotations and most felt that they knew several but could not think of them under pressure. The most common themes were quotations from the creation story ("Let there be light" was suggested four times) and the saying "an eye for an eye" (also quoted four times). Out of the 30 examples given, more than half were from the Old Testament, in spite of the fact that interviewees generally felt they were more familiar with the New Testament.

Participants were asked to list the two Bible stories with which they were most familiar. All were able to list at least two and some mentioned five or six. The birth of Jesus was mentioned by eight people and elements of the Easter story by six. It is likely that both these stories were familiar to all the participants but that in some cases they did not mention them as only two examples were requested. Again, the creation was a common theme as well as the Wedding at Cana, presumably because of its prominence in the marriage ceremony.

Spencer's research also indicated that "the early Genesis stories were often the most familiar".

In a wider scale study it would be interesting to assess how well people knew these stories as they were sometimes remembered from childhood. Michael stated that "primary school was probably the point at which I heard most of the Bible in assemblies...and going to the local church" and Daniel acknowledged that he could not remember much of what he learnt as a child. Knowledge of the Bible in Hay and Hunt's research also tended to be "limited to vague memories of Sunday school, catechism, or RE classes". Three of the participants had been exposed extensively to the Bible as children or teenagers. Jenny by her grandmother, Ben at Catholic church services and Hannah through regular attendance at youth group.

"What kinds of writings do you think are included in the Bible?" elicited a wide variety of responses, covering most of the genres of biblical literature. However, it was most commonly
understood to include history and narrative, including stories with a moral point.\(^\text{36}\) Participants in Beyond the Fringe tended to describe the Bible as “an advice or rulebook”, “a biography or history book”\(^\text{37}\) or a “storybook”.\(^\text{38}\) As might be expected from a highly educated cohort the overall level of biblical literacy in this case study was significantly higher than that reported in Spencer's research where “any idea that it was 66 or so books rather than one (or at the most two), or that it was written over a time frame of centuries, was absent.”\(^\text{39}\)

Participants were asked briefly about their knowledge of other religious texts. None had an extensive knowledge, but some had read portions as adults\(^\text{40}\) or had some exposure to religious texts at school.\(^\text{41}\) Michael expressed an interest in reading the Qur’an\(^\text{42}\) while Jenny was considering reading about Buddhism.\(^\text{43}\)

### 3.3 Influences on views of the Bible

All the participants in the case study had heard the Bible read at weddings or, less commonly, funerals or christenings, in the last year. Four had attended other church services and five had heard it on the radio.\(^\text{44}\) However, sermons heard at weddings or on the radio were not generally identified as an influence on their views of the Bible.\(^\text{45}\) Indeed most participants struggled to give any examples of a time when they had heard a Bible passage explained.\(^\text{46}\)

School, Sunday school or youth group, family and Christian friends all emerged as significant influences on participants' views of the Bible. The media had also had an impact, particularly on attitudes towards its historicity.\(^\text{47}\) Participants tended to have learnt Bible stories at primary school or Sunday school but to have learnt more about comparative religion and the history of the documents at secondary school. It was here that people applied “more scepticism or critical thought”,\(^\text{48}\) moving on from the childhood assumption that it was simply the Word of God.\(^\text{49}\)

The influence of family was variable with both religious fervour and antipathy to religion proving off-putting. Jenny observed that her grandmother's interpretation of the Bible tended to imply “that you weren't good enough or you weren't doing well enough or you weren't being holy enough”,\(^\text{50}\) whereas Daniel believed he had been influenced by his father's negativity about religion.\(^\text{51}\)

\(^{36}\) Ben, interview; Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview with author, London, 29 April 2008

\(^{37}\) Spencer 2005: 144

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 145

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 142

\(^{40}\) Chris, interview; Lewis, interview

\(^{41}\) Katharine, interview

\(^{42}\) Michael, interview

\(^{43}\) Jenny, interview

\(^{44}\) Appendix 5: Familiarity with Bible

\(^{45}\) Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible

\(^{46}\) Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview

\(^{47}\) Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible

\(^{48}\) Lewis, interview

\(^{49}\) Michael, interview

\(^{50}\) Jenny, interview

\(^{51}\) Daniel, interview
Christian friends were mentioned by six of the participants. In this respect the atheists and agnostics are unlikely to be typical since my circle of friends from university (from whom eight of the participants were selected) includes an unusually high number of Christians, whereas most social networks are made up of individuals who share like-minded beliefs. Moreover, since I was the interviewer, references to Christian friends were perhaps inclined to be positive. According to the participants, friends had helped them to understand the role of the Bible in the life of Christians, had taught them something about the history of the biblical documents, and had made them think about their own beliefs. They had also played an important role in discussions about the Bible at youth group.

3.4 Attitudes to the Bible

3.4.1 The Message of the Bible

Participants believed the Bible is important to Christians because it records the details of Jesus' life and sets out the basis of their beliefs. It shows Christians how to live their lives and provides support in difficult times. More specifically, it was suggested that it is used “in finding out...God's will” and that it shows Christians “how they can be saved". Daniel expressed reservations about its being used as a "dogmatic...instruction manual" although he acknowledged its usefulness to Christians in providing support. Interestingly, these responses accurately reflect the main reasons given by Christians for reading the Bible, according to a recent survey. Christians listed their top three reasons for reading the Bible as "to find out about God", "to seek guidance or inspiration" and "to find comfort". As discussed, several participants had extensive contact with Christians, which has undoubtedly contributed to their understanding of Christian attitudes.

Responses about the main message of the Bible fell into two main categories: those which emphasised the moral teaching of the Bible and those which described it in terms of the Christian's relationship with God. In the first category it was suggested that the Bible teaches people about humility and not being judgemental, greedy or selfish. Its message was described as one of “tolerance, forgiveness, kindness, generosity.” In the second category, Lewis suggested an updated version of the first commandment: “Whatever happens stick to your God, it pays off in the long run”. The most complex response, theologically, was “that there is one God who created man, the world and everything. In order to be saved, forgiven

52 Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible
53 Hirst 2003: 90
54 Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
55 Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview
56 Daniel, interview; Chris, interview
57 Hannah, interview
58 Chris, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
59 Emma, interview; Lewis, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
60 Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Paul, interview
61 Daniel, interview; Katharine, interview; Rachel, interview
62 Hannah, interview
63 Chris, interview
64 Daniel, interview
66 Paul, interview
67 Rachel, interview
68 Lewis, e-mail message to author, 15 May 2008
of sin and become closer to God, man needs to accept that Jesus was God's son and follow his example.\textsuperscript{69}

In some cases participants alluded to both moral teaching and a relationship with God. Hannah, for example, summarised the message as "to know Jesus, to know God and to live with the Holy Spirit in your life," adding that "the main purpose of the Bible is to be a good person."\textsuperscript{70} Arguably Emma's suggestion that the ten commandments are "a sort of summary"\textsuperscript{71} also covers the twin themes of relationship with God and one's neighbour. Michael acknowledges both aspects of the Bible's message but suggests that only Christians can relate to the message about God;

\begin{quote}
I think the main message of the Bible is 'God loves you, whatever'... Obviously that's not the main message for me because I don't believe in the first word [ie God]. So the main message for me is... the Christian morality I have bought into.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Two participants questioned whether the Bible has a main message. Ben noted that "you could take different sections of it and come up with completely different conclusions... I don't think there is a single, unifying story."\textsuperscript{73} Similarly Katharine observed that it is difficult to identify a single message in the New Testament because it is "a narrative of somebody's life" rather than a list of rules.\textsuperscript{74}

3.4.2 The Relevance of the Bible

Participants were unanimous in believing that the Bible still has relevance in today's society. Primarily this was because of its influence on Britain historically\textsuperscript{75} and because it still provides the foundations of our morality\textsuperscript{76} such that "consciously or not a lot of our behaviour will be being influenced by that."\textsuperscript{77} It was seen as culturally, legally and politically significant. Participants also believed it was relevant because it is still important to so many people and provides them with comfort and guidance.\textsuperscript{78}

Some participants highlighted ways in which the Bible's impact on society continues to be positive. Some of the ten commandments were seen as providing a helpful foundation, summarised as "basically, 'Be decent'"\textsuperscript{79} and it was suggested that "society can benefit from people acting in a respectful...generous...kind and ...forgiving manner".\textsuperscript{80} The Bible was described as "a very valid and wise and successful philosophy"\textsuperscript{81} and "a beautiful and historic work of world literature."\textsuperscript{82} Ben suggested that the Bible "tackles issues that are still very relevant today" and might serve as a "launching point to...discussion of philosophy".\textsuperscript{83}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{69} Chris, e-mail message to author, 9 May 2008
\item\textsuperscript{70} Hannah, interview
\item\textsuperscript{71} Emma, interview
\item\textsuperscript{72} Michael, e-mail message to author, 9 May 2008
\item\textsuperscript{73} Ben, interview
\item\textsuperscript{74} Katharine, interview
\item\textsuperscript{75} Chris, interview; Emma, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview
\item\textsuperscript{76} Ben, interview, Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview
\item\textsuperscript{77} Michael, interview
\item\textsuperscript{78} Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview
\item\textsuperscript{79} Hannah, interview
\item\textsuperscript{80} Rachel, interview
\item\textsuperscript{81} Lewis, interview
\item\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{83} Ben, interview
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
might also be used as a tool to communicate “peace messages and understanding and compassion”,\textsuperscript{84} though Jenny cautioned that “stories can be misinterpreted”.

The Bible’s relevance was seen as a separate issue from whether or not it was a reliable or divine document. It has value as literature “whether fiction or fact”\textsuperscript{85}, the stories have “good messages...regardless of whether you believe in the actual religious side of it”.\textsuperscript{86} As Katharine said, “just because I don’t believe in God, it’s not that I don’t think the stories are useful to teach you how to behave”.\textsuperscript{87} 

The Bible’s status as an important cultural text generally justified its use in education, according to the participants. However, they emphasised that it should be introduced alongside other religious texts\textsuperscript{88} and not given special status.\textsuperscript{89} Crucially, children should “have a right to choose”.\textsuperscript{90} Four participants expressed objections to faith schools,\textsuperscript{91} believing “that religion and education shouldn’t be together in any form”.\textsuperscript{92} Daniel suggested that the teaching of the Bible might be best left “to families or church groups” on a voluntary basis.\textsuperscript{93} Similar reservations about faith schools and the risk of breeding intolerance emerged in Spencer’s research.\textsuperscript{94}

Participants did not usually describe the Bible’s relevance to their own lives and in some cases explicitly stated that it was not relevant to them personally.\textsuperscript{95} The extent of its relevance was seen as limited in a number of ways. Hannah suggested that it was probably irrelevant to people who did not attend church or were of another religion, although she acknowledged that people unconnected with the Church sometimes found comfort at events such as funerals.\textsuperscript{96} Some parts of the Bible were viewed as “not necessarily relevant or helpful to us in today’s society”\textsuperscript{97} and Jenny believed that “there are a lot of issues, in particular personal understanding that cannot be helped by the Bible”.\textsuperscript{98} Similarly, Hay and Hunt found that the Bible was often seen “in the same light as Shakespeare; part of our cultural heritage, but hardly relevant to daily life”.\textsuperscript{99}

\subsection{3.4.3 The Dangers of Studying the Bible}

Studying the Bible per se was not seen as dangerous but participants raised a number of concerns about its interpretation. In particular, a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, or any other religious text, was seen as dangerous.\textsuperscript{100} There was a “potential danger in any kind of organised religion”\textsuperscript{101}, in “taking things too literally”\textsuperscript{102} and “not questioning things”,\textsuperscript{103}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{84} Jenny, interview
\item \textsuperscript{85} Lewis, interview
\item \textsuperscript{86} Emma, interview; Paul, interview
\item \textsuperscript{87} Katharine, interview
\item \textsuperscript{88} Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview
\item \textsuperscript{89} Emma, interview
\item \textsuperscript{90} Lewis, interview
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ben, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
\item \textsuperscript{92} Hannah, interview
\item \textsuperscript{93} Daniel, interview
\item \textsuperscript{94} Spencer 2003: 20
\item \textsuperscript{95} Paul, interview
\item \textsuperscript{96} Hannah, interview
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Jenny, e-mail message to author, 15 April 2008
\item \textsuperscript{99} Hay and Hunt 2000: 22 [Website]
\item \textsuperscript{100} Ben, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Paul, interview
\item \textsuperscript{101} Emma, interview
\item \textsuperscript{102} Katharine, interview
\item \textsuperscript{103} Paul, interview
\end{itemize}
although Michael noted that “the Bible and Christianity is the faith that is the most criticised...which I think is a good thing”. 104 Lewis believed that teaching the Bible “as authoritative truth”105 is dangerous and Michael agreed that “studying it is fine, as long as it's ...not taken as gospel!”106 Daniel noted that there were risks in the Bible being used to justify “something that the rest of society might not think is acceptable”107 and drew attention to the challenge of deciding which parts of the Bible are still relevant today and which “may no longer apply”.108

It was further suggested that an exclusive focus on the Bible might blind you to the “realities of every day life” and make it difficult to connect with people who had different beliefs.109 Jenny raised concerns about the disruption of “existing belief systems and cultures through an insensitive introduction of the Bible”,110 a view echoed by Emma who felt that “teaching other cultures and religions about the Bible...can have a negative impact on ...communities where those teachings cut across what they believe”.111

3.4.4 The Historicity of the Bible

All the participants admitted that their knowledge of the history and authorship of the biblical documents was somewhat limited.112 However they made reference to a number of significant issues including the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls,113 the compilation of the canon114 and the difficulty of being certain about the authorship.115 It was recognised that different authors had different perspectives116 and suggested that “there have been translations and mistranslations” as the New Testament passed through different languages.117 Doubts were raised about the historicity of the documents118 and their reliability was understood to have been affected by a period of oral transmission.119 Daniel estimated that the New Testament books might have been written “a few hundred years” after the time of Jesus.120

Participants in Spencer's research also questioned the Bible's reliability, believing that its contents had been disproved or were contradictory.121 In Beyond Belief he observes that there was little idea that different genres of writing should be treated differently. Consequently, “the historicity of Adam, Eve and Noah determined the historical credibility of Jesus, Peter and Paul”.122 The questions in my case study did not explore this distinction

104 Michael, interview
105 Lewis, interview
106 Michael, interview
107 Daniel, interview
108 Ibid.
109 Jenny, interview
110 Jenny, e-mail message to author, 15 April 2008
111 Emma, e-mail message to author, 30 April 2008
112 Ben, interview; Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
113 Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview
114 Chris, interview; Jenny, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview
115 Ben, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview
116 Hannah, interview; Rachel, interview
117 Lewis, interview
118 Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview
119 Jenny, interview; Lewis, interview
120 Daniel, interview
121 Spencer 2005: 147
122 Spencer 2003: 32-3
although Lewis suggested that there “may be more significant aspects of mythology for the earlier phases.”

3.4.5 Personal Responses to the Bible

The most common reason given for not reading the Bible more often was that there were many other books participants would like to read if they had the time. The two Christians interviewed both stated that it simply did not occur to them to pick up the Bible while others saw it as unreliable or irrelevant to them personally. The historic language of the Bible and “the gender structures that were in place” at the time of writing were a distraction. In some cases participants had negative experiences of reading the Bible as a child. Daniel had found it boring whereas Jenny “used to struggle because it made me angry to feel lectured by the Bible when 'it' ... didn't understand how I felt, and didn't seem to care.” There was some interest amongst participants in reading the Bible “at some point”. Michael, for example, suggested that believing the Bible to be unreliable was “an interesting reason for reading it” and felt that he “should probably read it again as an adult.”

Some participants struggled initially to suggest a question that they would like answered about the Bible. Rachel admitted “I don’t think it’s ever occurred to me to ask a question about the Bible.” Several of the questions related to the history or authorship of the documents including an interest in finding out about the Bible’s sources and historical accuracy, seeing the original versions of the texts and learning “which bits were written when and by...whom.” Michael questioned how Christians who were aware of the controversies surrounding the Bible could take it so seriously. Jenny asked why the historicity of the Bible mattered and why it could not simply be considered “a really useful set of teachings which you can believe in for their own sake”.

Participants also asked questions about the authority and inspiration of the Bible, such as whether or not the Bible was true and how Christians could know it was the Word of God since God did not write it. Lewis asked why Jesus did not write the Bible himself. Emma questioned why the Bible “should take precedence over any other historical or fictional...
Rachel's question about the Church's stance on abortion was the only ethical issue raised.144

4. Raising Awareness of the Bible in Contemporary British Society

4.1 The Use of the Bible in Church

The participants in the case study did not dismiss the Bible out of hand. People who are ambivalent about, or even hostile to Christianity, may be interested in understanding the Bible better and in making up their own mind about a text they believe to be culturally significant.145 The Church has a role to play in making the text available and in encouraging people to explore it for themselves. Beaudoin notes that Generation X (born between the early 1960s and the late 1970s)146 are “very suspicious of institutions,”147 a view was echoed by Emma who highlighted an inherent danger in “any kind of...organised belief system”.148 Nonetheless, most people attend church services occasionally149 and it is one of the places where they are most likely to hear the Bible read.150 If the Church wants to encourage people to engage with the Bible it needs to consider the way in which it interprets and discusses biblical texts in its services.

The Church needs to recognise the changing intellectual climate in which it is communicating. It is common to describe contemporary culture as “postmodern”, a term that has been somewhat emptied of meaning through overuse. Here it will be understood to refer to a “general distrust of grand theories and ideologies”.151 Postmodernism tends to reject any attempt to explain the destiny and purpose of human history through a single metanarrative152 and regards claims to universal truth as oppressive.153 These concerns were reflected in the case study by participants who challenged the Bible's superiority to other religious texts154 and its impact on non-Christian cultures.155 It is no longer acceptable to assert what “the Bible teaches” and assume that people will accept its authority.156 However, it is simplistic to claim that postmodern society is not interested in truth. Rather, McLaren suggests that people “care about truth so much that they don't want to pretend a subjective opinion...is more than it really is”.157

The Church cannot expect postmodernism to go away; it is the “inescapable context in which we live and interpret”158 and is better regarded as an opportunity than a threat.159

A new cultural context opens up new approaches to interpretation. The systematic theology which developed in the post-Enlightenment era tends to overlook the parts of the Bible that

143 Emma, interview
144 Rachel, interview
145 Michael, interview
147 Ibid., 52
148 Emma, interview
149 Hirst, 2003: 93
150 Appendix 5: Familiarity with the Bible
152 Bauckham, Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World, 2003: 4
153 Ibid. 98
154 See sections 3.3.2; 3.3.3; 3.3.5
155 Emma, interview; Jenny interview
157 McLaren, The Church on the Other Side, 2000: 167
158 Brueggemann, The Bible and Postmodern Imagination, 1993: ix
159 Ibid., vii
are not easily assimilated. Postmodernity, on the other hand, encourages us to recognise the
variety of biblical genres, the plurality of perspectives, the “sheer untidiness of the narrative
materials” and the “proliferation of little stories within the larger ones”.\(^{160}\) Ben and Katharine
were right to question the unity of the Bible’s message\(^{161}\) since the Bible itself “offers no
summary of the whole story from beginning to end”.\(^{162}\) 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”.\(^{163}\) Reducing the Bible to a list
of rules and regulations or propositional truths\(^{164}\) and trying to fit it into our own preconceived
structure makes it boring and predictable.\(^{165}\)

The parts of the Bible that are sometimes overlooked by systematic theology may turn out to
be those that are most of interest to people who do not go to church. Jenny described the
way in which a friend had introduced her to the Song of Songs, pointing out “This is actually
quite raunchy, this is quite different, there’s all kinds of stuff in the Bible. I didn’t know about
that at all before and I thought that was interesting”.\(^{166}\) 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\(^{167}\) and may therefore find the Psalms or wisdom literature a helpful starting
point. Narrative may also be an appropriate genre in a postmodern society that values
stories, even when it doubts their historicity.\(^{168}\) This was reflected by participants in the case
study who displayed an openness to some of the Bible’s messages, in spite of their
questions about its factual accuracy.\(^{169}\)

The challenge for the Church is to remain true to its belief that the Bible is divinely inspired
while recognising that its own interpretation is not necessarily inspired or final.\(^{170}\) Theology
should never be considered finished,\(^{171}\) instead it should be a continuing search for meaning
in which the Church participates with humility rather than dogmatism.\(^{172}\) Preaching should not
be seen as an opportunity to tell people what to believe but should be part of the process of
inviting people into a “counterstory”, a different way of looking at the world and ourselves.\(^{173}\)
It is an invitation to people “to see this story as their story”.\(^{174}\)

The traditional sermon may not be the best way of involving people in the process of
interpreting the text, since it leaves little space for questions or discussion. Most participants
in the case study struggled to remember an example of a time when they had heard a
passage explained to them.\(^{175}\) Lewis regarded the exercise as “a little bit pointless”\(^{176}\) and
Hannah noted that “they just read from the Bible and a lot of it doesn’t feel relevant”.\(^{177}\)

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\(^{160}\) Bauckham 2003: 92
\(^{161}\) Ben, interview; Katharine, interview
\(^{162}\) Bauckham 2003: 93
\(^{163}\) Brueggemann 1993: 58
\(^{164}\) Wright, “How can the Bible be Authoritative”, *Vox Evangelica*, 21 1991: 9
\(^{165}\) Wright 1991: 24
\(^{166}\) Jenny, interview
\(^{167}\) Percy, *The Salt of the Earth*, 2001: 165
\(^{168}\) McLaren 2000: 178
\(^{169}\) See section 3.3.2
\(^{170}\) McLaren 2000: 68
\(^{171}\) Ibid., 66
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 65
\(^{173}\) Brueggemann 1993: 25
\(^{174}\) Wright 1991: 24
\(^{175}\) Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael,
interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
\(^{176}\) Lewis, interview
\(^{177}\) Hannah, interview
Preachers need to build in opportunities for the congregation to feed back on and challenge their interpretation if they want to be taken seriously.

4.2 The Use of Discussion Groups

Informal discussion groups are one way in which people who do not usually attend church can begin to explore the Bible for themselves. The best known example is the Alpha Course, which has been attended by over 2 million people in the UK. The course is marketed as “an opportunity to explore the meaning of life” and is aimed at people interested in finding out more about Christianity. Alpha is not without its critics, among both conservative evangelicals and those with a more liberal churchmanship. The intention here, however, is not to assess the theology of the course but to consider the relevance of its presentation of the Bible to people such as the participants in the case study.

Alpha is usually run in an informal setting, sometimes in people's homes. It is “local and relational” and may therefore be accessible to people who are suspicious of the Church as an institution. Each session begins with a talk which sets the agenda for the evening and is then followed by an opportunity for discussion. Unlike a traditional sermon, the format makes room for different perspectives and interpretations to be aired.

The Bible is central to the second session of Alpha, “Who is Jesus”, which discusses the historicity of the Gospels. The questions raised in the case study suggest that there is still a place for defending the historicity of the Bible. However, discussions about the factualness of the biblical story also need to address the question of why historicity matters. Many Christians would argue that the factualness of the biblical story is integral to its message but this is not self-evident. Alpha makes a good case for the reliability of the New Testament, discussing the dating of the documents and the extent of the manuscript evidence for their accurate transmission. It also attempts to answer the question of why the accuracy of the documents matters by focusing on the person, death and resurrection of Jesus as central to the Christian faith.

The “Why and How Should I Read the Bible?” session focuses more on the importance of the Bible in the Christian life and deals with the issue raised by Hannah of what it means to describe the Bible as “the Word of God”. Gumbel acknowledges some of the difficulties inherent in reading and interpreting the Bible without offering dogmatic answers. However, this session assumes that people are interested in the Bible's relevance to their own lives, which was not the case for most participants in the case study. Alpha is aimed explicitly at people who are interested in the Christian faith and it is unlikely to appeal to those who perceive the Bible's value to be purely cultural or literary.

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178 Alpha International, “Ever Wondered What It’s All About?”, The Alpha Course, 2008 [Website]
180 Percy 2001: 179
181 Hunt, 2001: 42
182 Ibid., 44
183 Gumbel, “Who is Jesus?”, The Alpha Course, 2007a [CD-ROM]
184 Jenny, interview
185 Newbiggin 1989: 66
186 Gumbel 2007a: 2
187 Ibid., 4 - 14
189 Hannah, interview
190 Gumbel 2007b: 3
191 Ibid., 4-5
The participants in the case study were more likely to discuss the Bible with their Christian friends than attend a group for exploring Christianity, however informal. According to Tidball, most people start reading the Bible because they are personally invited to do so. It is therefore important that Christians are equipped to answer challenging questions about the Bible. Orr-Ewing's book, Why Trust the Bible? Is a helpful resource born out of the experience of discussing the Bible with people who are not Christians. She observes that in spite of the assumption that people in postmodern society are not interested in authoritative texts she repeatedly encounters questions about the Bible. Orr-Ewing addresses most of the issues which emerged in the course of the case study including questions about the reliability of the biblical manuscripts, issues of interpretation, the way in which the canon was put together and the status of the Bible in comparison with other holy books.

4.3 The Use of the Internet

Beaudoin suggests that the Internet is a safe place for Generation X to explore religion. The rejesus website, aimed at “people who have little previous knowledge of Jesus or the Christian faith” is one example of the way in which Christian organisations are using the Internet to make Christianity accessible to this age group. Although some of the participants in the case study already had considerable exposure to Christianity, there are a number of features of the website which might appeal to them.

Rejesus offers users the opportunity to download one of the Gospels which is helpful in a context where not everyone has a personal copy of the Bible. It might also overcome the reticence of people who feel that they do not have time to read the whole Bible. Extracts from the Bible are also available on a visual timeline of Jesus' life which helps to put familiar stories into context. The website includes a link to “Everyday Sayings” which builds on users' latent Bible knowledge by explaining the background to well known quotations. As discussed, the participants in the case study knew that there were many sayings in everyday use but could not easily identify them.

Like the Alpha course, rejesus offers background information on the historicity of the biblical documents and seeks to answer questions such as, “Did Jesus ever live?” and “What records of Jesus are there outside the Bible?” The responses are brief but include suggestions for further reading that might appeal to a more academic audience, such as the case study participants. The tone of the website is not dogmatic and acknowledges the breadth of opinion on the subject of the Gospels “between those who accept every word ... and those who say they are so full of fantasy and propaganda it's impossible to know what really happened”.

192 Tidball, Using the Bible in Evangelism, 1993: 52
193 Orr-Ewing, Why Trust the Bible?, 2005: 13
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid., 5
196 Beaudoin 1998: 90
197 Jenkins and Bruce, eds., “About Us: Credits”, rejesus, 2007b [Website]
198 Jenkins and Bruce, eds., “The Story”, rejesus, 2007c [Website]
199 See section 3.2
200 Lewis, interview
201 Jenkins and Bruce, rejesus, 2007b [Website]
202 Ibid.
203 See section 3.2
204 Tomkins, “The Story; Question and Answer”, rejesus, 2007 [Website]
205 Ibid.
It is debatable, however, whether the participants in the case study would be likely to seek out information about the Bible on the Internet. Lewis was the only participant to mention the Internet as a place where he had read the Bible in the last year. Hirst's research indicated that people tended to use the media to support their beliefs after they became involved in church, rather than using it to explore Christianity beforehand.

4.4 Publishing the Bible

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. The Church has sometimes approached the Bible as a textbook, without discussing the role of the human author or exploring its literary value. It is possible that people who do not go to church would be more inclined to read the Bible if it were marketed as a work of literature. This was the conviction of the creators of Revelations, a series of books from the Bible published as separate volumes.

The publishers of Revelations observed that most editions of the Bible looked thoroughly unappealing and that its "daunting length...added to its inaccessibility". They therefore decided to publish the Bible in its constituent parts, using eye-catching jacket designs to attract a new readership. The publishers did not have a Christian agenda and commissioned introductions to each volume from people as diverse as Bono, Ruth Rendell and the Dalai Lama. The project regarded the Bible as "a work of literature" and was concerned with "celebrating language, encouraging dialogue and respecting the individual".

The Revelations series is perhaps the most culturally appropriate way of marketing the Bible to people who feel there is too little time to read all the books that interest them. The varied perspectives of the people who introduce the volumes demonstrate that the Bible is not only of interest to Christians and encourage the reader to engage personally with the text without anticipating a response of faith. The use of the King James Version is likely to appeal to people who regard the Bible as literature. It also appeared to be familiar to case study participants who sometimes quoted it in their responses.

Revelations does, however, have a number of limitations. Holloway argues that the use of the King James Version is helpful in reminding people that the Bible is an archaic text that cannot be easily doctored to accommodate the values of contemporary society. While it is true that the Bible spoke into particular cultures at particular times in history, the use of an old English version gives the impression that it was always an outdated and scholarly document. It does not communicate the fact that, unlike many of their contemporaries, most of the authors of the New Testament used common koine Greek, rather than classical language. They were not primarily interested in producing works of literature but in drawing up "an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses" (Luke 1:1-2).

206 Lewis, interview
207 Hirst, 2003: 93
208 See section 3.4.2
209 Ben, interview
210 McLaren 2000: 76
212 Ibid.
213 See section 3.4.5
214 Appendix 6: Familiar Bible Verses
215 Holloway, “Introduction” in Revelations, 2005: 4
An insistence on the use of the King James Version and the dismissal of “the banalities of modern translation”\textsuperscript{217} is reminiscent of the resistance to translating the Bible into English in the sixteenth century\textsuperscript{218} and suggests that only ancient language is appropriate for communicating sacred teaching. However, research carried out by the Bible Society a generation ago found that people believed that “a change in the language or format of the Bible” might make it more appealing\textsuperscript{219}. There was also evidence in the case study that historic language is a distraction to readers.\textsuperscript{220} The King James Version may reinforce assumptions about the Bible’s irrelevance.

Some of the authors of the introductions to Revelations are hostile to Christianity and, though able to bring challenging and original perspectives to the text, leave little room for the possibility that it might be a dynamic text through which God continues to speak into people’s lives today. The series may inspire people to read the Bible, but may not encourage them to consider its relevance to their own lives or to explore the Christian faith further. This is undoubtedly part of the appeal of the series, since it does not make personal demands on the reader, but it may not serve the purposes of the Church.

5 Conclusion

It should not be assumed that the Bible is of no interest in contemporary British society. Attitudes to the Bible expressed in the case study were remarkably uniform, regardless of whether people described themselves as Christians, agnostics or atheists. They tended to view the Bible as a significant cultural text that included some helpful moral teaching but which was vulnerable to misinterpretation by fundamentalists. Familiarity with the Bible depended largely on the participants’ exposure to Christianity as children at home, school or Sunday school. Reading the Bible, or any other religious text, as an adult was not high on anyone’s agenda but nor was it absolutely rejected.

People who do not attend church are rightly suspicious of literal interpretations and unquestioning dogmatism but may be interested in exploring the Bible for themselves. Christians need to be prepared to grapple with difficult questions about the history and authorship of the Bible and its application in the twenty first century in conversation with non-churchgoers. Resources such as Alpha or the rejesus website may prove helpful to people who have a wider interest in the Christian faith, particularly in answering questions about the historicity of the biblical documents. However, it is more likely that well educated, young professionals will read the Bible as literature, if at all.

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.

All approaches to interpreting the Bible are culture bound, including the systematic theologies of modernity.\textsuperscript{221} The Church needs to be open to new ways of reading the Bible and should encourage people to interpret texts for themselves by adopting a more interactive approach to preaching. A divinely inspired text must be capable of speaking into

\textsuperscript{217} Holloway 2005: 4  
\textsuperscript{218} Crim, “Translating the Bible into English”, The Bible Translator, 25/2 1974: 219  
\textsuperscript{219} Harrison, Attitudes to the Bible, God and Church, 1983: 23  
\textsuperscript{220} See section 3.4.5  
\textsuperscript{221} Brueggemann 1993: 1
postmodernity just as effectively as it has done in the past. The Church should embrace the openness of non-churchgoers to the Bible’s wisdom, moral values and powerful prose while attempting to communicate that the text is more dynamic, surprising, challenging and relevant than society assumes.

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Audrey Featherstone, I Presume?

by Tim Shenton

Review by Paul Tanner, Researcher, Redcliffe College.

This is the true story of Audrey Featherstone, who, inspired by the great pioneer missionaries, acted upon God's calling to serve as a missionary in the Congo from 1946 for 25 years with the 'Regions Beyond Missionary Union'.

Audrey, a product of a broken home and difficult family circumstances, lived through the blitz years during which she became a Christian. Having little or no close family or friendship support as a young lady she struggled to grow in her faith in post-war London. Despite this we read how God brought her through these trials and equipped her to become a 'great' Congo missionary who, amongst many other difficulties, remained in Congo for much of the Simba uprisings (a backlash against all things western that led to thousands of deaths including many Christian missionaries in the country).

This biography was penned by Tim Shenton, based on his interviews with Audrey (now in her late eighties). It will greatly challenge younger generations of church goers, who may have relegated the more elderly Christians into the bracket of 'relics' who are not at the challenging and cutting edge of life in the church or mission. Audrey clearly demonstrates this is not the case as not only is she still an active worker for God but in her youth had been a pioneer, right on the sharp end of that cutting edge. She has faced many of the same challenges that today's overseas missionaries face, and then some.

Whilst a fairly thorough yet brief account I found myself wanting greater insight into Audrey's feelings, especially once she had arrived in Congo. From giving a good depth of detail around Audrey's feelings and personal struggles prior to Congo, once she arrives the account has more of a superficial narrative focus, lacking that depth of insight into her thoughts, feelings and struggles. I feel the biography is poorer as a result; it becomes harder for the reader to relate to her, and there is a danger that readers may feel inadequate, perceiving her as a 'superwoman' beyond our hopes to emulate.

Despite this the book is a good read that will be enjoyed by young and old alike. It is a great way to learn more about the challenges of Christian mission and the Congo. It will also greatly encourage and challenge readers, especially by how God can take even the most unlikely of people, in the most difficult of circumstances, and use them powerfully in the work of His Kingdom… if they are prepared to give over their all to Him.

Buy Audrey Featherstone, I Presume? from St Andrew's Bookshop.

Author: Tim Shenton
Publisher: Evangelical Press
ISBN 13: 9780852346785

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Invisible Servant

by Richard Welch

Author: Tim Davy, Reviews editor for Encounters and Assistant Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Redcliffe College.

Missionary biographies are often approached with caution. At their best they can inspire, challenge, encourage and inform. At their worst the reader is left feeling intimidated and inadequate as they make their way through a rose-tinted hagiography. Perhaps this is a generational thing but too often missionary biographies feed the myth that cross-cultural workers are a special class of Christian, the likes of which me might aspire but ultimately fail to live up to.

Invisible Servant is the autobiographical account of a pioneer missionary's life and ministry in Albania during the 1990s and early 2000s. Having grown in his heart for the country and its people, Richard Welch left his job as a civil servant and moved to Albania as part of a project set up by a UK church.

The book is primarily Welch's personal recollections and reflections. As such it succeeds wonderfully in illustrating the day-to-day living of a very patient man working towards the acceptance of a community. Indeed, the majority of Invisible Servant (and this, I would suggest, is its main strength) concentrates on this process of gradual integration into the community in which he lived and worked.

While the author admits that his book is not an exhaustive account, I would have liked a little more detail on the lead up to his settling in Albania. For example, although he had visited the country a couple of times prior to moving there, he makes no mention of receiving any form of training or preparation. Was this really the case?

Overall, though, many would profit from reading Invisible Servant, not least supporters who would like to get some insight into the nitty-gritty of living and working in another context. Perhaps best of all, the book captures something of the frustration, sadness, joy and humanity encountered when living cross-culturally.

The author makes an interesting point near the end of the book, reflecting on the often unglamorous nature of mission: "In terms of mission life, it's been our experience that significant developments have only come about as a result of perseverance and mundane duty" (pp.201-203). Richard Welch is an example of just such a patient approach.

Buy Invisible Servant from St Andrew's Bookshop.

Editor: Richard Welch
Publisher: Authentic
ISBN 13 9781860245329

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