
Charles E. Van Engen, ed. *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

This book is a telling testimony to the enduring innovations of Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission—now School of Intercultural Studies—in the field of mission. On the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of the school, it is fitting that this volume looking back at its history while encouraging future missiology should be published. It is also quite understandable that Charles Van Engen was chosen to lead this work.

If missiology is a vast, complex, rich, and exciting field, the School of Intercultural Studies has presented and promoted numerous advances under the leadership of Donald McGavran, Ralph Winters, Alan Tippett, Charles Van Engen, Charles Kraft, Peter Wagner, and many others. The mere mention of these names should impress on the reader's mind the accomplishments of this school. Of course, that does not imply that every innovation was without problems. It does highlight, nonetheless, a capacity to rethink mission. Further, the School of Intercultural Studies' theoretical and practical missiological study is an example of what mission supported by theological education can accomplish. This should not, however, be taken as an uncritical endorsement of its missiological directions. Rather, it should be read as an encouragement to move forward in missiological reflection.

The present volume is a reminder of an important part of the evangelical history of mission in the past decades. The historical focus explains some of the weaknesses of this book. Celebrating the innovations of an institution can be beneficial. Remembering the past is indeed necessary for moving toward the future. However, parts of the book assume familiarity with the School of Intercultural Studies and Fuller's missiology. In that sense, the title of the book is somewhat misleading, since it is not first about *global* innovations in Christian witness, but about the school's innovations, which is quite different. Actually, the close association between global mission and this school at times gives the reader the impression that global mission is guided and led by the School of Intercultural Studies. Given the diversity and complexity of the mission field, this would be a rather naive overstatement.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to the dissemination of innovations formulated at the school. Among these are the church growth movement, a strong focus on the biblical theology of mission, and the ecclesial nature of mission. If the reader should want to become more familiar with these innovations, we recommend the introduction by Van Engen (12–13). Along with this, the first chapter also serves as a fascinating presentation of the early work of Donald McGavran, the initiator of the

church growth movement. The remainder of this first part reviews some of the innovations mentioned in the introduction, in particular, the hermeneutics of mission, the birth and growth of local churches, and the interaction with the religious “other.”

Though the first part is quite informative, for many readers the most engaging part will probably be the second, devoted to the implications of the missiological innovations of the previous section. However, the disconnect with the previous chapters and a sense of relative disunity can also be seen as a weakness. This is particularly the case with chapter 8, “Innovations at the Margins,” by Jayakumar Christian. The author highlights five theological topics that require missiological attention and that are crucial to reaching people at the margins: power, identity, anger, the Holy Spirit, and truth. We cannot develop these five points here, but they are all to varying degrees relevant to mission. It is difficult to see how this is an implication of the innovations of the School of Intercultural Studies. Similar gaps occur in some other chapters, which, though interesting, are not clearly linked with the second part of the book. However, this weakness is balanced by the theological significance of other chapters.

Among the chapters that are the most relevant, the reader will take note of chapter 9 (by Terry Muck), devoted to three ways to nourish an inter-religious dialogue (confrontation, consilience, and confession) that are in constant interaction with each other. If “confrontation” and “confession” do not require much explanation, consilience might. In Muck’s words, consilience is the way mission demonstrates the unity brought about by Christ, who “gathers up all things in him” (Eph 1:10), supremely through neighborly love. Of course, while talking about love, especially of neighbors, as the *locus classicus* for consilience, Muck could provide a stronger case and analysis by reminding his readers of the traditional distinction between love as passion and love as virtue. A further scholastic distinction about the one love of God mentions “*benevolence, beneficence, and complacency*.”¹ This distinction made by Francis Turretin, could also clarify how love of all neighbors is part of our mission.² This would be particularly helpful for those who want to follow the author’s advice and not radicalize consilience at the expense of the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

Let us also note chapter 10 by John Azumah on the meaning of theology to be attached to Muhammad. This last theme is a much-debated subject,

¹ By “love of complacency,” Turretin does not mean a complacent love of the world but the accommodating love of God for his creation.

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:242 (3.20.5).

especially given the theological arguments about “insider movements.” Finally, in his conclusion, Scott Sunquist, historian and dean of the School of Intercultural Studies, takes up the risky task of mentioning, with relative success, future “trends” within the global mission. Of course, some of these tendencies are already actual (“insider movements”) and some are not new (“migration”).

Despite the fascinating and often helpful articles collected in the present work, several recurring problems affect the theological quality of the book. To begin with, here and there statements sometimes contradict each other or give a rather simplistic view of mission. For example, it is quite ironic in a book celebrating decades of missiological innovation to come across the following affirmation: “American evangelicalism is relatively free from colonial baggage” (103–4). This demonstrates a simplistic view of colonialism, ignorant of the way colonialism is best seen as a mindset rather than as a political and economic system. At other times, some authors adopt a rather patronizing style, either because they are ignorant of other theological and missiological traditions or because of a lack of critical perspective.

This naiveté is at times echoed in the very generous view taken of the School of Intercultural Studies itself. Of course, that is expected when its accomplishments are being celebrated. But self-criticism and honest evaluation are the hallmark of a mature institution. Fifty years of theological innovations in the field of mission inevitably lead to critical assessments, which have undoubtedly been made. Quite paradoxically, no real critical dialogue has been undertaken in this book. If mission is in great part a dialogue with the “other,” as many articles try to show, then the first place of dialogue must be within the circle of missiological thinking and practice. A theology of mission and an institution dedicated to the strengthening and furthering of mission cannot indulge in the luxury of ignoring the criticisms, generous or not, that have been made in the last five decades. Critical self-reflection is not evident in this book, but we hope that such self-reflection will be engaged in elsewhere. This could help the school move further in its missiological calling.

Among the other weaknesses, the reader should note a somewhat limited view of world mission. This is understandable, since the book highlights the innovations of the School of Intercultural Studies. On the other hand, it is advertised as presenting the state of *global* mission, and on that front, it tragically fails to deliver. In fact, some absences are remarkable. To begin with, nothing is said about mission in the so-called Western countries. A few pages in chapter 12 deal with European secularism, but that is not enough to enable understanding of the challenges of Christian mission in Europe. If the book

were dealing with mission in the Majority World, this absence would be understandable. But in a global context, it is a regrettable omission.

Finally, one subject of concern is hermeneutics. Despite the weight placed by the authors on this topic, discussions are often charged with preconceptions regarding the nature and definition of the hermeneutical task. For example, a significant assumption of chapter 2, “Innovations in Missiological Hermeneutics” by Shawn Redford, is that hermeneutics is always partial, and thus each method needs to be complemented by others. Hermeneutical methods are therefore seen as theologically equivalent, and there is no in-depth discussion of their biblical foundation.

In this respect, there might be confusion between method and tools in the hermeneutical task. That many different tools are needed to interpret the Bible correctly cannot be doubted. However, this does not necessarily lead to a complementarity of hermeneutical methods. The absence of such a distinction is visible in the presentation of the “scientific hermeneutics” (58–59). According to Redford, such a hermeneutic is identical with its tools, which does not take into account that every hermeneutical method is informed by deeper presuppositions. This “historical-critical” method is thus not considered from its philosophical standpoint, leading the author to a naive view of hermeneutics. Unfortunately, he does not mention one major hermeneutical method, the “historical-grammatical” method, which served as the major hermeneutic of the Reformation.

This approach has unfortunate consequences. Some of the innovative proposals made by the author are in fact nothing new. For example, the centrality of the concept of “kingdom of God” in mission is not something that emerges necessarily out of the complementarity of the hermeneutical methods. Similarly, the place of the Holy Spirit, which the author labels “spiritual hermeneutics,” is also nothing new to Reformed theology. In fact, it has long defined two principles of knowledge, the Bible (*principium cognoscendi externum*), and the Holy Spirit (*principium cognoscendi internum*). Certainly, piety, prayer, and spirituality have a place in our hermeneutical task, and this has been recognized in the past. Rather than re-creating hermeneutics, we should learn from the past in order to be better prepared for the future. However, assumptions about hermeneutics often negatively affect this chapter.

We find an example of these potential hermeneutic problems in the same chapter. For example, Redford concludes that “without the field of ethno-hermeneutics, interpretations of Scripture are often subconsciously laden with preconceptions based on the interpreter’s deep-level worldview” (51). That sounds all well and good at first. Problems arise, however, when the

author tries to justify the importance of ethnohermeneutics and uses the example of 1 Samuel 6:1–13 to explain the force of this hermeneutic. In this passage, the Philistines return the ark of the covenant on a chariot pulled by cows whose calves have been left in their pen. The author emphasizes that ethnohermeneutics leads the Maasai people to better understand the text than “Westerners,” who often do not understand why the action of the cows is unusual. However, one can wonder whether this difference in understanding is really due to ethnohermeneutics. Maybe it is merely ignorance of cows, in which case it has nothing to do with ethnohermeneutics. The French farmer in my native countryside knows as well as the Maasai that a cow would not naturally leave its calf behind and that there must be something unnatural in this.

Finally, the reader could have expected more direct discussion of crucial contemporary issues in the field of mission. Although the topics discussed are relevant to the mission field, these topics do not go beyond the missiological discussion of the past decade. Further detail and theorization are proposed, but no new area of mission is brought to the attention of the reader. Three crucial dimensions would have deserved particular mention. The first dimension is *theological*. While the book often mentions biblical theology of mission, we fail to see how these essays help us discover its richness. Maybe the book suffers from an overemphasis on missiological practice. The second dimension is *strategic*. Directions for mission engagement would have been helpful. What should be the next few strategic mission fields? A clear answer would have been helpful. The third dimension is *geopolitical*. Here two topics should have their place. First, how can a book looking forward to the future of mission relegate the relevant—in fact, the crucial—issue of theology of migration to a brief mention in the conclusion? Second, the rise of new nationalisms requires a theological, biblical, and missiological answer.

In conclusion, this book, directed at practitioners, students, and scholars, can be of real value, but its value is found as much in areas of *concern* as in areas of *agreement*. One particular lesson the reader will learn is the importance of continuing hermeneutical and theological reflection that in turn nourish the practice of mission.

YANNICK IMBERT

Professor of Apologetics and Church History
Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence