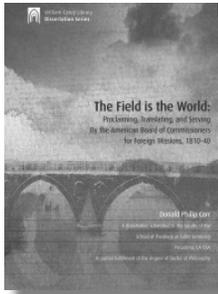


Book Reviews & Notes

The Field Is the World: Proclaiming, Translating, and Serving by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-40, by Donald Philip Corr (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 320pp.)

—reviewed by Scott Hedley, research associate in Asia



Corr's research in this volume is important because it carries us back to the early nineteenth century and reveals the strategic goals of America's first voluntary mission organization: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

The division of chapters displays the scope of Corr's considerations:

(1) introduction, (2) sermons preached

to the ABCFM annual meeting, (3) proclamation on the field by ABCFM missionaries, (4) proclamation by indigenous preachers, (5) Bible translation by board missionaries, (6) Education, medicine and social concern.

Strengths of the book. The book highlights an important goal of America's first and, for a significant period of time, largest mission organization. ABCFM administrators, supporters and missionaries between 1810 and 1840 considered propagating the Gospel to be the highest priority, with Bible translation an important complement to preaching. As someone involved in Bible translation in Asia, and who shares its noble objective, I wanted to read this historic record of the ABCFM. Indeed, the book shows that the ABCFM emphasis on *preaching the Gospel to all nations* was found in the sermons given at the annual meetings of the ABCFM.

The book was also helpful in exposing some of the appropriate and inappropriate strategies of the ABCFM. One helpful ABCFM strategy was encouraging new believers to develop their own theology statements. It seems that some of the believers in China were able to develop a complete statement of Protestant doctrine (p.165). This type of indigenous effort, if true, is very noteworthy and a bold challenge to modern methods of contextualization. It goes hand in hand with the ABCFM's strategy of encouraging the missionaries to learn the vernacular languages and of addressing the native audience in their own vernacular language (p.175). Some ABCFM missionaries went as far as producing vernacular dictionaries, as Goodell did in Turkish (p. 229). (Unfortunately, Corr did not provide any bibliographic reference for this dictionary).

However, Corr also highlights ABCFM practices that we might today consider inappropriate. First, he points out that International Journal of Frontier Missiology

ABCFM missionaries seemed at times more interested in Christianizing natives *out* of their culture rather than allowing the Holy Spirit to transform them *within* their culture. For example, instead of training indigenous church leaders to baptize new believers, the missionaries insisted on baptizing new believers themselves (p.82).

A second aspect of the ABCFM "Christianizing approach" was that the ABCFM missionaries insisted on nationals taking on "Christian" names which were chosen by ABCFM donors. Corr proposed two possible reasons for this naming practice. First, the original names of the nationals were thought to be tainted by Hinduism or other religions (p.146). Secondly, native names were often hard to pronounce by Westerners (p.147). However, the problem with requiring new names for these new believers was that they usually had no relevance within the indigenous cultures. Individuals with such names often stood out as not being a part of society. Finally, Corr notes that this naming practice created serious complications when the nationals wanted to get married.

A third aspect of the ABCFM "Christianizing" approach was the "mission station approach." This practice involved the extraction of national children out of their families in order to live on the mission compound, both to keep them away from their "heathen parents" and to facilitate the preaching to the young people. But the "mission station approach" does not facilitate indigenous, self-propagating fellowships of believers.

A fourth shortcoming of the ABCFM approach was the reliance on literate means of scripture distribution, a means foreign to most unreached people groups. Corr mentioned ABCFM missionaries who used preaching and tract distribution for delivering the gospel (p.170). But, since he made no mention of oral Bible storying, the reader can only assume that the ABCFM missionaries did not use this method.¹

A fifth shortcoming of the ABCFM approach was that it seemed that the ABCFM missionaries did not allow the local people to choose their own orthography, the orthography which would eventually be used to produce the Bible in the local languages (p.236).

Potential weaknesses of the book. The book often refers to concepts that are never defined for the general mission audience. For example, Corr refers to a concept called the *New Measures* (p. 18f), yet he never defined the term. Corr also referred to the *Lancasterian schools* and the *Lancasterian method* but he never defined those terms either. As a reader of the book, I felt the need for more historical aids to help me follow the text.

Corr has a tendency to make blanket statements which may require some further missiological development. He mentioned at one point that the converts of ABCFM missionaries became overqualified and unable to live on a native salary and return to rural life (p. 138). I would disagree with this blanket statement and say the "over-qualification" would

depend on the type of training that the converts received. But the author fails to develop the context in which we can see just how this “over-qualification” happened and how it prevented them from returning to native life. For instance, if ABCFM missionaries trained these new converts in Koehler’s oral Bible story telling methods, this “over-qualification” might not have been the case (Koehler 2010).

Overall, I found Corr’s research to be helpful for understanding the history of the ABCFM and some of the appropriate and inappropriate strategies that they implemented. This was especially true of the latter, the inappropriate strategies. Understanding how and why these inappropriate strategies did not work can help prevent the same mistakes in our mission endeavors.

References

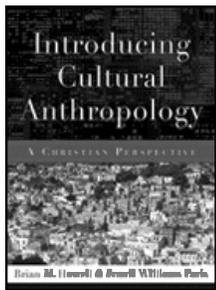
- Goodsell, Fred Field
1959 *You Shall Be My Witnesses: An Interpretation of the History of the American Board 1810-1960*. Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission.
- Koehler, Paul. 2010. *Telling God’s Stories With Power*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Endnote

¹ Paul Koehler, in his book *Telling God’s Stories With Power* (2010 William Carey Library) shows the power of oral Bible story telling in facilitating people movements to Christ in India.

Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective, by Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, 261+xiipp.) [Projected release date is December 2010; as of this writing, the pagination does not include the projected index]

—reviewed by Edwin Zehner



Evangelical Christians have long needed an introductory anthropology text designed especially for them, a text that introduces anthropological topics in ways understandable to the uninitiated, that takes Christians’ concerns into account, and that demonstrates contemporary anthropology’s relevance to them as people living, ministering, and serving

in increasingly complex and multi-cultural situations.

Introducing Cultural Anthropology, by Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, addresses this need beautifully. Privileging no particular perspective, other than the value of being grounded in contemporary anthropology while also being grounded as faithful Christians, they introduce standard anthropological topics and concepts—and also a few less standard ones—in language and with examples that are close to home, that draw on their personal field experiences, and that

take into account the specific concerns, themes, and ministerial potentials that may be of greatest interest to Christians.

Drs. Howell and Paris are ideal authors of such a text, and their personal backgrounds make the book especially useful not only for those considering preparation for frontier mission at home and abroad, but also for those who would like an accessible introduction to how anthropology treats certain topics today. In many ways the text is an extension of their personal experiences as anthropologists who have studied Christian communities, who are active in local congregations, and who incorporate an engaged Christian perspective in their teaching at leading Christian institutions.

Brian Howell is associate professor of anthropology at Wheaton College (Illinois). He studied at Wesleyan University, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Washington University (St. Louis), and did a Ph.D. dissertation drawing on work among Southern Baptists in the northern Philippines. He writes in the areas of globalization, global Christianity, and short-term missions, and to a lesser extent on race and religion in churches in the United States. He is also president of the Network of Christian Anthropologists.

Jenell Williams Paris is a professor of anthropology at Messiah College. A graduate of Bethel University (Minnesota), where she also later taught for several years, she earned her Ph.D. in anthropology at American University (Washington, DC), doing dissertation research focused on political activism and community formation in a low-income neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Her work focuses on urban anthropology, race, gender, and sexuality, with attention also to urban ministry, cultural pluralism, and service to the poor.

As for the book, it is well organized, with a good selection of topics. The first chapter introduces the discipline of anthropology while the second discusses ways to think about the central concepts of “culture,” “cultures,” “ethnocentrism,” and “cultural relativism.” Middle chapters discuss topics ranging from language, to social structure and inequality, to cross-cultural and anthropological studies of gender and sexuality, religion and ritual, kinship and marriage, power and authority relationships in society, and globalization and cultural change. The next-to-last chapter provides a brief introduction to contemporary anthropological theory, and the final chapter focuses on practical applications, with special focus on the work of Christian anthropologists.

Each chapter begins with discussion of general concepts and their contemporary relevance, and then proceeds to issues and questions of special interest to Christians. Each chapter ends with a glossary of key terms and a pair of “devotions” that draw on passages of scripture to spark thinking about the chapter’s relevance to our lives as Christians in society.

As they proceed, the authors draw frequently on their own research and on the experience of other Christian anthro-

pologists. Short set-aside boxes discuss such questions as whether the United States is a uniquely “Christian” culture (the answer depends on how you look at it), whether “American” can be conceived as an ethnic category, John Calvin’s theology of politics, the significance of the “kinsman redeemer” in the biblical story of Ruth and Boas, and examples of Christian anthropologists studying such topics as Islam and globalization.

Several of the chapters deserve special praise. For example, the chapter on culture discusses how and why this notion has changed over time, and why anthropology’s “cultural relativism” concept is useful and how it differs from the more problematic notions of moral or epistemological relativism. It also discusses common metaphors for the culture concept, ending with the notion of “culture as a conversation,” a metaphor highlighting anthropologists’ recent focus on how shared cultures engage humans with each other while not necessarily homogenizing them.

The chapter on gender and sexuality is especially important, discussing complex issues with sophistication while remaining accessible. Many of its discussions introduce conceptions that will be new to many of this journal’s readers, but in doing so it points out the cross-cultural observations that made these considerations necessary, the biases they seek to address, and some of the biblical and ministerial issues to which they may relate. Many of these issues have been little discussed in missiological training to date, yet they are directly relevant to situations that may be encountered in the field, and to a degree they are already in the awareness of the younger generation entering ministry. Consequently this chapter is a must-read even for missionary trainers and administrators, while its footnotes suggest routes into further reading.

The chapter on globalization is equally useful, providing conceptual frameworks for thinking about the larger global processes that often impact local communities and ministries. In doing so it notes some of the real-world issues and conflicts that have been associated with these processes, and it discusses some ways Christians have been responding.

The chapter on anthropological theory deserves special praise. Despite its brevity, it works better than anything else I have seen in helping evangelicals understand how they can integrate recent conceptual developments with their prior work and faith commitments. Opening with discussion of early theories from Durkheim to functionalism to structuralism, it presents newer developments like post-modernist and feminist anthropology as necessary supplements addressing specific needs and omissions rather than revolutions sweeping away all that preceded them.

This is a sensible approach, and it helps that the authors have themselves worked within the newer frameworks (in Brian’s case even using feminist “standpoint” theory to argue for greater anthropological attention to evangelical Christians’ perspectives). This enables them to discuss

recent developments in straightforward terms while demonstrating both in this chapter and elsewhere in the book why anthropological theory matters even for those who do not plan to become anthropologists.

The final chapter builds on this point, discussing the unique contributions anthropological methods and perspectives can provide on practical issues, and pointing out ways they can be useful in personal and ministerial life, especially in cross-cultural ministries serving the global Christian community. Drawing on examples from corporations who have asked anthropologists to help them design better products for people in developing nations (flashlights on cell phones, for example), to a former anthropology major who used his linguistics training to learn how to communicate better with his autistic daughter, to discussions of why anthropology matters in ministry and mission, the authors make a persuasive case.

I am aware that there already exist significant works addressing anthropology and Christianity, including well-known efforts by Charles Kraft, Sherwood Lingenfelter, and Paul G. Hiebert.¹ Also deserving special mention are such people as Ralph Winter, who was trained as an anthropologist, and the culturally astute Donald McGavran.

However, the best known of these works are nearly thirty years old, and none of them have digested recent theoretical, conceptual, and methodological developments in quite the way that Howell and Paris do. It is hard to think of another recent work by Christians that so effectively introduces contemporary anthropology’s central concepts, that addresses issues of practical relevance to evangelicals, and that familiarizes readers with the work of other Christian anthropologists who are modeling ways of being loyal to their faith while engaging with the mainstream of their discipline.

In sum, this book is a re-invitation to anthropology. I highly recommend it not only for the undergraduate students it addresses but also for more advanced readers who desire an accessible introduction to how anthropologists think today, the topics they address, and how that may help their lives, work, and ministry. **IJFM**

Dr. Edwin Zehner earned his bachelor’s degree at Houghton (NY) College and a Ph.D. in Anthropology at Cornell University. His dissertation studied conversions to Christianity in Thailand. He teaches anthropology and humanities at SUNY Canton and St. Lawrence University, while writing on anthropological and missiological topics.

Endnote

¹ Charles Kraft’s *Christianity in Culture* (1978); Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Meyers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (1st ed. 1986, 2nd ed. 2003); Paul G. Hiebert’s (1985) *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, and the introduction to the second edition of Paul G. Hiebert’s *Cultural Anthropology* (1st ed. 1976, 2nd ed. 1983).