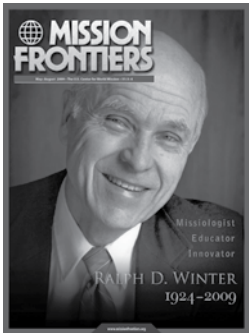


Always Looking to the Next Frontier: A Tribute

by IJFM Editorial Staff



The IJFM wants to recognize its indebtedness to Ralph D. Winter, who died this past May 20th, one who honored this journal with his editorial leadership over much of the last decade of life. This readership has benefited greatly from his broad command of missiology, his dexterity with

the human sciences, his passion for biblical understanding, his encouragement to re-engineer mission institutions and his intrepid blend of energy, invention and discernment. Of the many letters that have poured in from across the globe, two statements by missiologists may especially represent this readership:

The writings and doings of this man represent a rich treasure trove, which women and men of missions will explore for years to come. Without question, scholars and practitioners alike will give careful consideration to Ralph D. Winter's numerous contributions for many years to come. They will constitute an abiding legacy. Without question, they will give praise to God and voice to his thinking both in halls of learning and in fields of labor. That will constitute a continuing tribute.

—David Hesselgrave (*Mission Frontiers* 31(3-4):48-49)

The status quo was abhorrent to this visionary. He was called to drive the missions movement into new frontiers. Ralph was a restless person. His mind never seemed satisfied. Often he would lose us with his statistical overload. But slowly we of more ordinary intelligence would catch up to Ralph and have an eureka moment. Then off we would go back to our mission outpost to seek to implement some of our guru's insights.

—Phil Parshall (*Mission Frontiers* 31(3-4):47)

He was known to be quite self-conscious of any personal accolades, converting any personal attention into an opportunity to propagate, encourage or inspire fresh perspectives on the frontier mission enterprise we all hold dear. It, therefore, may be most honoring of Ralph Winter's wishes that we recall just one of his fundamental perspectives that captures his editorial direction of the IJFM over this past decade or so. In his book *Frontiers in Mission*, he appealed for a reevaluation of ministry among large blocs

of unreached peoples, stating with his usual interdisciplinary persuasiveness:

...All along our eyes had been peeled on mainly smaller groups around the world. This was because all the major groups already had been, supposedly, breached by Christianity in one form or another. We had rather highly Western beachheads in them, and our globalized culture was permeating them, but, in the main, the major groups were continuing to be rather awesomely unfriendly to the Western form of Christianity. For example, Hinduism as a whole, and Islam as a whole just aren't breached in any major way at all. We have only relatively small beachheads in these blocs. So we began to think, "Well, maybe we've got the wrong approach; we're not contextualizing sufficiently."

So here comes the idea of *radical contextualization*, and all of a sudden our eyes are opened to what is already happening. In Africa, 52 million people in the African Initiated Churches movement have radically contextualized (and by many are not considered valid Christians). Or, take India. According to the Missouri Synod Lutheran theologian/missionary, Herbert Hoefler, in his book *Churchless Christianity*, in the largest city of South India maybe four times as many Hindus are devout followers of Christ as the number of devout believers who are affiliated with the official Christian churches. In China, the swath of 50-80 or more million people in the so-called unofficial churches does not fit the pattern that we would consider normal Christianity. And in Japan, you know, we haven't gotten anywhere. We are told that Christianity now includes only 300,000 people out of 130 million people in the country. Forget it. We apparently haven't even got a truly Japanese church yet. I remember Phil Foxwell (a retired missionary from Japan) showing me an editorial written by a secular sociologist—this was a couple of years ago—saying there is not yet a truly Japanese church. There is just a Western church.

Thus, the idea of *radical contextualization* is an incredibly new frontier. It's not just how many minority peoples are left. It's how many large blocs are still untouched or unchosen. It's how many peoples which are supposedly already "reached" are not really reached. Well, is it possible that within these large blocs of humanity we have achieved (with trumpets blaring) only a form of Christianity that ranges from sturdy and valid but foreign, to maybe superficial or phony? Something which from the point of view of these large blocs has been acceptable only to a minority and is not going anyplace? What is the meaning of the oft-quoted statement that Christianity in Africa is "a mile wide and an inch deep?" (Isn't that true in the USA too?)

Isn't it getting clearer that we're never ever going to persuade all the Muslims to call themselves Christians and this itself is a very peripheral issue? Can't we recognize that it's

not important, nor helpful-not merely impossible-to make very many Muslims to identify with the cultural stream called "Christianity." If someone is a born-again believer, isn't that enough?

Take for example, the 19th Century Protestants in this country. As the Catholics streamed into this country after 1870, the Protestant churches spent something like \$500,000,000 to win Catholics and yet after 50 years of sincere home mission work had only won a handful of families. That is, we can't realistically set out to win over people to a new faith if we intermix the requirement that they identify with a different community in a substantially different culture. Thus, we can't make Catholics into Protestants in large numbers. And, apart from those who want to be Westernized, we can't readily make Muslims or Hindus over into our cultural form of Christianity.

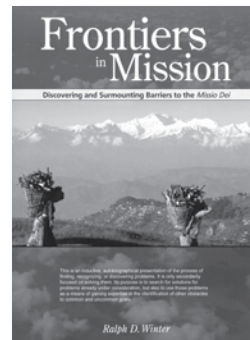
This gives rise to the idea of a "Third Reformation." The first reformation was the shift from Jewish clothing to Greek and Latin clothing. A second happened when our faith went from Latin Christianity to German Christianity. This "second" reformation is THE Reformation that everyone talks about, of course.

But now Western Christianity, if it really wants to give away its faith, is poised to recognize (and to become sensibly involved with) something already happening under our noses-a Third Reformation. Sorry to say, as before (both in the time of Paul and in the Reformation), this rising phenomenon probably will involve astonishment and antagonisms. The Bible itself describes vividly the profound antagonisms between Jewish and Greek forms of the faith. History records vividly the same thing between Latin and German forms of the faith. In each case the burning question has been "Just how Biblical are these various forms?" (2008:30-31)

We may need to go beyond mere radical contextualization. The Biblical faith has gone beyond Judaism. The NT has shown us how that can and must be done for the sake of the Gentiles. We have now also long seen how our Biblical faith has been able to go beyond Roman Catholicism. To go beyond Judaism did not invalidate the faith of those believing Jews who remained Jews. To go beyond Roman Catholicism does not invalidate the faith of those believing Catholics who have stayed behind. Is it time to allow for the possibility that some people around the world will choose to go *beyond Christianity* as we know it?...

... We have seen our Gospel work fairly well-to draw people into Evangelicalism, a Westernized Evangelical movement. But by and large this has happened only if they belonged to a minority or an oppressed group-like tribal peoples or Koreans under the Japanese, people who had more to gain by giving up much of their cultural identity. In all such cases worldwide, people have seen the value of identifying with a foreign import that would befriend them and take their side. But by now we have lapped up most of these minorities and oppressed peoples. The future is correspondingly bleak for the further extension of our faith into the vast blocs of Chinese, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists unless we are willing to allow our faith to leave behind the cultural clothing of the Christian movement itself. Do we preach Christ or Christianity?

Apparently our real challenge is no longer to extend the boundaries of Christianity but to acknowledge that Biblical, Christian faith has already extensively flowed beyond Christianity as a cultural movement just as it has historically flowed beyond Judaism and Roman Catholicism. Our task may well be to allow and encourage Muslims and Hindus and Chinese to follow Christ without identifying themselves with a foreign religion. The Third Reformation is here! (2008:32)



He was always looking to the next frontier, what he called "discovering and surmounting barriers to the Missio Dei." From his first editorial in 2001, when the "steam had gone out" of the AD 2000 movement to unreached peoples, he guided the journal through a vulnerable transition in frontier missiology.

He also helped establish the sister *International Society for Frontier Missiology (ISFM)*, one he saw as distinct from the *American Society of Missiology (ASM)* which he had helped establish in 1972. In his own words,

This new society was deliberately different from the ASM in more than one way. Unlike the ASM it focuses specifically on the new and cutting edge of missions, the frontiers of mission. The ISFM is not as interested in the flourishing church life which is the result and product of missions. The ISFM is not as interested in the endless discussions which derive from church life. The ISFM is specifically concerned for what mission agencies, not churches, are doing. Unlike the ASM it has from its founding incorporated younger people in its meetings (2006:32).

We enjoyed his prophetic style, giving our membership a sense of anticipation, of expectation that God was truly advancing his Kingdom. While others may have pigeon-holed him as a dreamer or a mere optimist, this journal appreciated how his bold critique was always in tandem with his profound belief in the progressive nature of God's ever expanding Kingdom. And his ability to coin a phrase or give metaphorical accent always made frontier missiology a downright fun place to think. We miss his editorial hand and thank God for the few years he honored this journal (and society) with his contribution. **IJFM**

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