

In Others' Words

Editor's Note: In this department, you'll find resources outside of the IJFM that we hope you'll find helpful: other journals, print resources, DVDs, web sites, blogs, YouTube videos, etc. We welcome suggestions, but cannot promise that we will publish each one we receive. Standard disclaimers on content apply.

The Negotiable Frontier

Dana Robert's recent contribution to *Missiology*, "Mission Frontiers from 1910 to 2010", has given a fresh historical perspective on how we negotiate the "frontier" in Christian mission.¹ Rather than a quantitative analysis of the frontier mission movement, Robert provides an interpretive essay on the concept of "frontier" and how we use it to prioritize mission. The abstract indicates the following:

The idea of mission frontiers is an enduring theme in mission theory and practice. This article charts the changing definitions of frontiers in twentieth century Anglo-American Protestant mission discourse. Part I traces the concept from 1910 to the end of European colonialism, through the concepts of "unoccupied regions" to multiple boundary crossings. Part II begins with the mid-century postcolonial idea of frontier as boundary between belief and unbelief, documents disputes over the definition of frontiers, and argues that the concept of unreached peoples represented both a shift and a narrowing of discourse about mission frontiers. The article concludes by raising questions about the nature of frontier discourse in the twenty-first century.

Her claim is that behind the term "frontier", or "mission frontier", has been "a locus of heated debate over the meaning and validity of mission." She begins with the 'pioneer spirit' of the American frontier and its influence on the student volunteerism in the late nineteenth century. "Go West, young man" simply became "Go East" and the mandate to occupy the world. She weaves the lives of mission statesmen like John R. Mott, Sherwood Eddy and J.H. Oldham into the radical shift that took place in the 1920's after WWI "shattered the myth of Western superiority." It was in this context that "missionary frontiers moved from the territorial expansion of Christianity to include Christian witness amid secularism and colonial racism." The "generational shift in mission philosophy" became evident with a revolt among young mission leaders at the 1924 SVMFM convention, where "students engaged in passionate discussion of Western racism, war, and labor relations, but expressed little interest in foreign missions." But she also details the pendulum swing from the 60's mood of moratorium in mission, to that 'strange optimism' of Donald McGavran, and the identification of 'frontier peoples' in

the early 70's. She is at her best in the combination of interpretive synthesis and historical detail.

Towards the end of second part she highlights the role of 1980 World Consultation on Frontier Missions in Edinburgh, Scotland, and how this meeting 'shifted the amorphous concept of *mission frontiers*'. She notes 'the inverted word order' that became *frontier missions*, and correctly suggests that this "served to limit frontier discourse specifically to planting evangelistic churches among unreached people groups, in order to complete the task of world evangelization." Then she forecasts a questionable future: "It remains to be seen whether the definition that (Ralph) Winter crafted will continue to have the same influence among twenty-first century 'transformational' evangelicals that it had in the late twentieth century." Robert is suggesting that another shift in frontier discourse is presently in motion, and that this shifting is quite normal in the history of mission discourse.

Robert's analysis has the shortcoming of narrowing down on the discourse of mission within the more ecumenical wing of mission and the World Council of Churches. Maybe the more evangelical, neo-evangelical and fundamental mission movement didn't use the term "frontier", but they would have defined their frontier nonetheless. What Robert sees as a shift to a frontier between 'belief and unbelief' in the second half of the 20th century was simply a frontier evangelicals consistently called 'the lost'. By focusing down on missionary discourse Robert might have failed to give a comprehensive treatment of *mission frontiers*, but she has demonstrated how we negotiate the priority of mission through the language of 'frontier'.

She has probed mission history with what social scientists call "an essentially negotiable concept."² Words like 'frontier', or more theological terms like 'kingdom' and 'church', can be contested terms with no uniform accepted use. While there may be a general sharing of their meaning, these terms are complex and more open for debate. They usually designate some exemplar or paragon of achievement, and they're used to define a situation, to characterize an issue, to construct a priority, or to capture the terms of discourse. Robert's tracing of our bargaining over *mission frontiers* exposes how history and context can often shape our priorities in mission, and indeed, how one single term can symbolize mission-shift. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Dana Robert, "Mission Frontiers from 1910 to 2010", in *Missiology: An International Review*, Part I (Vol XXXIX no.2, April, 2011) Part II (Vol. XXXIX, no.3, July, 2011) (Electronic Issue).

² Lawrence Rosen, *Bargaining for Reality* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984) pp. 185f.