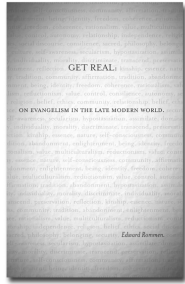


Book Reviews

Get Real: On Evangelism in the Late Modern World,
by Ed Rommen (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010)

—reviewed by Brad Gill



Our late modern world has generated a strange yeast. It expands ever-so-quietly, shaping and predisposing our modern sense of ‘self’ towards any gospel proclamation. This same yeast is fermenting within every cultural setting we would consider a frontier for the gospel, creating late modern ‘selves’ amidst even the most traditional of populations. It

seems we would do well to find some new lenses on ourselves if, indeed, our world drifts in this direction.

Ed Rommen has taken up the challenge in *Get Real: On Evangelism in the Late Modern World*. He has explored our contemporary context and the way it shapes our modern sense of reality, bending us as persons away from any receptivity to traditional evangelism. But to get modern readers outside themselves, able to see the currents that shape them, currents usually so taken-for-granted, demands an exercise in abstraction. So, beware, this is no easy read. The author demands a philosophical dexterity most of us don’t use in our daily lives. He’s canvassed modern social theory and synthesized how scholarship tries to capture the realities of our contemporary context. This synthesis is valuable in itself, but he also pushes beyond. He offers an assessment for evangelism from his experience as both an evangelical and Orthodox minister, the latter tempering the theological shape of his assessment.

In part one he identifies the historical values that underlay our late modern world. Again, his Orthodox theological orientation sensitizes him to certain aspects of the Enlightenment. He offers a new recipe of rather normal ingredients: the impact of secularism on belief; ‘the disengagement of religious institutions from society’; moral erosion; and the autonomy of human reason. It’s not a typical summary, but more what he calls “a moral imaginary”. It allows the reader from any part of the globe, involved in ministry to any and every people of the world, to sense aspects of late modern life that permeate their traditional setting.

In part two Rommen’s analysis steps from history to what he calls ‘the trajectory of the late modern self’. Here lies the crux of his argument. He believes we have lost a real sense of ourselves in this age, and that part of evangelism is to “get real”, to help reinstate that ‘real’ sense of who God has designed us to

be in His image. He explores, therefore, this modern mode of ‘being’, ‘identity’ and ‘self awareness’ (Chapters 3 and 4) in an effort to make sense of so much we evidence in modern life: the deterioration or redirection of personal trust; the depersonalizing of institutions; the fragmentation and pluralization of our lives; the fixation with our bodies and appearance; and the increasing simulation in our lifestyles. Rommen suggests that these modern realities reflect a deeper predicament, one that forces the late modern person to question their own intrinsic value. The introspective tendencies of the late modern self can only find an answer self-reflexively, in either self-referencing, self-defining, self-actualizing, self-monitoring, or in self-authenticating. Rommen responds theologically to this bleak assessment in each chapter, offering a perspective from the Church, or what his Orthodox theologians call ‘ecclesial being’. He reinforces again and again that “the Church’s teaching on the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God represents the only solid basis on which the value of human being can be established” (p. 113).

So, the author believes evangelism has to back up a few steps, or go a few leagues deeper, if it is going to capture the right predisposition in communicating the gospel. He claims an increasing ineffectiveness to our more traditional approach of “Gospel-as-Information”, and that our late modern world pleads for a “Gospel-as-Person”. But, quite ironically, the hunger of the modern self is resistant to this personal gospel. Rommen explains that, indeed, moderns want to resolve their ‘ontological insecurity’ and ‘anxious being’, but that the endemic individualism of modern consciousness has jettisoned the relational basis of being. He faces the consequences in part three, “Social Discourse in the Late Modern Context”, where he tackles this relational predicament in a study of ‘belonging’ and ‘diversity’ across the ‘socoscape’ of contemporary life (chapter 5). His conviction is that any sense of belonging is a lot tougher in this late modern world, due mostly to the fragmentation that results from increasing diversity and multiculturalism. Rommen explores the range of belonging in our world, and from a palette of types (i.e., ascription, achievement, voluntary) paints how moderns go about belonging. It’s a haunting x-ray into a mode of being desperate to integrate ‘identity fragments’ around an empty core of being. This modern core, unhinged from the ‘image of God’, and so self-oriented, warps “the strength of affiliation, the view of membership, and the sense of belongingness” (p. 124). Our modern ‘absolutizing of inwardness’ has transformed how we go about belonging.

Rommen spends a whole chapter examining how all of this impacts us religiously, and specifically how modern social discourse can vanquish traditional religious institutions (ch. 6). Some of the tidbits in this chapter are valuable beyond the pale, for those who minister within major non-Christian religious worlds. He sets the stage in earlier

chapters, gradually deconstructing our usual understanding of religion. He's framed religion within a broader 'moral orientation' (as defined by Charles Taylor), an orientation that helps us answer the question of "where I stand" (p. 71):

My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.

I found that Rommen provides a fresh way of thinking through Muslim or Hindu religious orientation. In our post-9/11 era of religious jihad, we can so easily profile or reduce what the 'other' religion comprises. Or, in opposite fashion, we carry that simplistic sense that traditional religion is eroding under the impact of modernity. By introducing new terms, Rommen helps us transcend these reductionist tendencies when it comes to religion. But he proceeds beyond his analysis, and grounds his theory of modern religious transformation in a study of the Orthodox ethnic communities of America. He shows how religious identity (the church) became the glue for 'belonging' in these sub-cultures (p. 128f), and by so doing provides at least one clear example of late modern religious change.

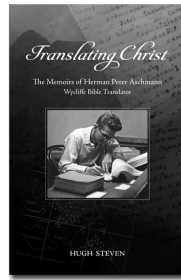
In chapter six he reviews the more typical post-modern skepticism of all metanarratives, and the futility modern man feels in referencing any religious discourse. He discusses the paradoxical rise of spiritual interest and accounts for it by this same self-reflexive tendency in late modern life. His prognosis for any traditional religious practice is quite threatening:

The reason that religious institutions have fallen out of favor has to do with the ways in which social discourse and its attendant institutions have been transformed by the absolutizing of inwardness. Inwardness seems to have left us with no one and nothing to trust but ourselves. Yet the complexity of late modern life requires some form of trust. Traditionally, that has been developed and expressed within the context of a network of stable and persistent relationships. But under the influence of social complexity and extreme inwardness many have opted for transitory commitments in which what is important is the utility of some shared interest, choosing and managing select associations only as need requires. This leads to a transformation of the institutions involved, including religious institutions (pp. 161-162).

I'm suggesting that what Rommen carefully observes within the modern American context has broad application to the cultural contexts of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim across the world. Any religious context is fermenting with this late modern yeast. Rommen is actually alerting the mission movement to the modern encroachment on communication and reception of the gospel across the globe. And he calls readers to consider the new theological resources we must call on in helping a late modern world to 'get real' and come to terms with the gospel.

Translating Christ: The Memoirs of Herman Peter Aschmann, Wycliffe Bible Translator, by Hugh Steven (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011)

—reviewed by Brad Gill



Hugh Steven has rendered a vivid picture of the traditional translation task of the 20th century through the memoirs of Herman Peter Aschmann. A newer generation in mission might count it antique, especially with the absence of any familiar global technology and communication, but it's a very accurate and genuine piece of history. From that

core of students at 'Camp Wycliffe' in the 1930s, which hosted future translation luminaries like Kenneth Pike and Eugene Nida, emerged lesser celebrated translators such as Aschmann. He seemed an ordinary missionary, and in many ways he was just that. He would cut his linguistic teeth in the highlands of Mexico where Wycliffe began to find its training wheels. He caught the itch early and threw away a normal collegiate career, accruing what he needed intellectually and professionally over the years from the growing institutional acumen of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Not a bad model in a day when collegiate costs have sky rocketed.

Steven has collated journals, first person accounts and collegial testimony to sketch for us Aschmann's combination of intellectual, physical and spiritual energy that extended over half a century. It was an apostolic combination that centered on the focused task of one people having the chance to read the Bible in their own language. There is a great sum of tenacity in this man, as was true of many of his ilk, but it didn't dispel his quiet, gentlemanly regard for all those he came in touch with. He translated Christ with his life as much as with his fixation on words.

The new world of linguistic discovery would be for Herman, as for many a Bible translator, a journey "of deep observation and a slow accretion of details." Eugene Nida claims this "journey into the secret realms of a people's language introduces one to the soul of a nation and makes it possible to lay the foundation for teaching the Truth as it is found in the revelation of God through the [translated] Scriptures" (p. 40). Steven captures this well in Aschmann's story, a "life-long, incandescent, joyous journey into the very heart, soul and mind of the Totonac people" (p. 48). Through mishap and circumstance Steven maps a journey into the misty horizons of a tribal mind and the discovery of another distant reality. The key was to crack the code of language.

The nature of motivation in a typical run-of-the-mill translator is one who really loves language, who in pre-cybernetic times was "born with ink in his veins." My wife and I spent a summer

Instead of submitting one possible rendering of a biblical expression, (Aschmann) usually had a half dozen different ways of representing the meaning of the Greek text

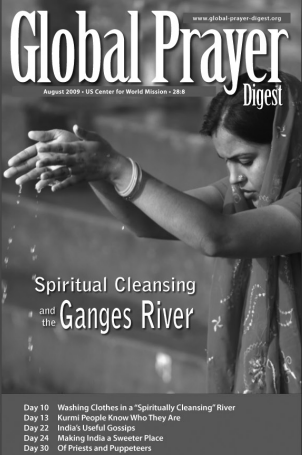
at SIL in 1976, and worked alongside translators for seven years in the mountains of Africa, and we witnessed just how integral this gift is to the mission movement. Steven has chosen the genre of biography to capture this drive and orientation. In 1938 the linguistic tools were crude and required much from the instinct and intuition of the translator, and Steven is at his best in illustrating this capacity in Aschmann. The science of tabulating and identifying language families and dialects was in its infancy, and most surveys required weeks of trekking across treacherous terrain. Reports were usually filled with multiple hair-raising incidents, but Aschmann reported hardly any. It's only in Steven's biography that one catches the soul-tearing loss of Aschmann's five-year-old son to a freak accident while this man was incommunicado on one of these extended trips.

Steven has given us an honest story of an honest man. It weaves along the margins of other more significant events, like the formation of Wycliffe and the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Mexico City in 1942. There's humility in and around Aschmann, whether it be his hospitable manner in working with national colleagues, or he and wife's initial reactions to the 'christopaganism' of Totonac life. Theirs was a landscape won by the monks just after the arrival of Cortez, the rise of stone churches, the survival of animistic

notions and taboos, and of endemic alcoholism. (It was that syncretistic Catholic turf that failed to be included in the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference). Aschmann faced the demanding need for discernment in all these challenges with an open, progressive and teachable spirit. In 1983, after almost a half century of linguistic work, he displays a "willingness to admit he had a lot to learn about producing an idiomatic translation . . . about translating meaningfully and dynamically into another language." This humility won his way into that indigenous world.

But Steven also frames Aschmann's ability to transfer a wonderful creativity to his national workers. Eugene Nida, one of the past century's foremost linguistic consultants, saw something exceptional in Aschmann: "instead of submitting one possible rendering of a biblical expression, he usually had a half dozen different ways of representing the meaning of the Greek text . . . [and] he inspired local people to imitate his skill in discovering more and more meaningful ways of communicating a message into an entirely different language and culture."

Tenacity, humility, creativity. These are apostolic qualities to be emulated in every generation, and one certainly catches their scent in these pages. **IJFM**



The image shows the cover of the August 2009 issue of the Global Prayer Digest. The cover features a woman in a sari with her hands clasped in prayer. The title 'Global Prayer Digest' is at the top, and the main article is 'Spiritual Cleansing and the Ganges River'. A list of other articles is at the bottom.

Today **73,000** people around the world will **pray** for a specific *unreached* people group. **you** can join them!

Have You Heard of the U.S. Center for World Mission's *Global Prayer Digest (GPD)*? The same organization that produced the *Perspectives* class has also produced a daily prayer guide for unreached people groups and strategic mission efforts.

It's in four different languages, and used by 73,000 people. The smallest language edition is English, followed by Spanish and Chinese. The largest edition is in Korean.

For free downloads, go to:
globalprayerdigest.org

For subscription: (626) 398-2249 or subscriptions@uscwm.org
\$12/year for 12 issues within the United States.