

# Aspects of the Role of History in Missiology

by Dwight P. Baker

*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*

— L. E. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

*The past is never dead. It's not even past.*

— William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

**T**he image of missiology as a three-legged stool has been a durable one, for the three legs of theology, history, and anthropology give the field strength and vitality.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the three fields complement each other, each supplying perspectives that the other two lack. On the other hand, the presence of the three fields suggests restraint and provides a corrective whenever some monodisciplinarian mounts a hobbyhorse and flogs it too hard, wishing to claim overly exalted preeminence for the role of his or her favored discipline. (I wish to state clearly at the outset that in using the three-field model I have no desire to restrict missiology to those three fields. Rather, as I sought to spell out in an earlier article, I see theology, history, and anthropology as markers or metonyms for an expansive array of disciplines and fields of study upon which missiology can and will draw with profit. Missiology is inherently interdisciplinary. It may be more than tripartite, but it becomes distorted and less than it ought to be if one of its three core fields is elided.)<sup>2</sup>

Recent years, however, have seen schools of world mission in the United States deliberately rob the missiological stool of one of its legs—despite the precipitous instability of a stool with two legs that are off center. Some mission schools have explicitly downplayed the contribution of anthropology to missiology, motivated, if one understands them correctly, by a desire to enhance the status of theology.<sup>3</sup> Others have more quietly demoted the standing of anthropology by simply omitting to hire missionary anthropologists as faculty or by permitting the positions of retiring professors to remain vacant.

Now a leading missiologically oriented anthropologist, a friend of mine, places before us a comment that questions the value of *history* for missiology. As a guide for missionary practice, he asks, what does history have to offer comparable to the clear and practical value anthropology supplies?

Framed that way—as a hostile weigh-in between those who ought to be partners and to be cultivating collegiality, a cause that is not elevated by casting

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aspersions on others—this is surely a battle missiology does not need to fight. History provides substance, both as raw material and as reflection, in interaction with which mission theology arises, and it provides part of the means for critiquing various theologies of mission. Theology of mission itself feeds directly into the self-understandings and role expectations of missionary practitioners. So stated, mission history is germane to missionary practice by indirection. But it is even more directly germane. The practices of and virtues attributed to the likes of David Brainerd and William Carey, or to David Livingstone and Mary Slessor, or to John Mott, Roland Allen, and Jim Elliot, for that matter, feed directly into missionary motivation, self-conception, and practice, at least initially. (As might be expected, missionaries, at least older style career or lifetime missionaries, do grow, change, and mature over their years in service. See the reflections of senior missionaries to be found in the “My Pilgrimage in Mission” series that appears in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. Occasionally missionaries change enough to lead them to leave the missionary calling or even the Christian faith altogether.<sup>4</sup>)

Missionary history in its various forms has the potential to enlarge the outlook and conceptual equipment of missionary practitioners. It supplies furnishings for the mind that can sensitize and set off sparks of recognition, giving missionaries a wider field of vision and more acute insight. History in general and mission history specifically can be of direct value to missionary practitioners by helping to shape both the missionaries as individuals and the missionary community into better informed and thereby better equipped missional instruments. To alert and probing minds, history can be illuminating. This is true even though, for reasons to be discussed below, I concur that history cannot tell missionaries what to do except in the broadest of terms, for history does not offer “how

to” lessons or practical small-scale guidance. What it does do is to provide background for making such decisions.

The comment by my missiological friend appeared as a blog posting. Given opportunity, he might want to qualify his comment further or to reconsider the framing he gave to it.<sup>5</sup> After all, we are creatures of history; we are thoroughly and inextricably embedded in history, and so are the ideas, objects, enterprises, and endeavors we create, including missiology and the writing of history itself. The questions we ask, the things we think important, the apparatus, mental and physical, with which we cope with the issues of life arise from and are conditioned by our positioning in time and place, that is, historically. We can



hardly think to escape history, even if we felt that that might be a useful thing to do. We cannot jump out of our skins or extricate ourselves from history.

As noted, I have written elsewhere regarding the contribution anthropology makes to missiology and of the value anthropologists have as faculty members in schools of world mission.<sup>6</sup> In that article I was writing to affirm the three-discipline character of missiology, suggesting that missionaries and students of mission are ill-advised to acquiesce in the elision of anthropology—and, by extension, of the social sciences—from missiology. Anthropology is not a stepchild but a legitimate partner in the missiological conversation. But in

reaffirming anthropology’s role, I do not wish to see a shift to the other side and watch history be disenfranchised. In promoting the claims of anthropology, let’s not undercut the legitimate contributions made by the other two legs.

History, of course, needs no defense from me, and since my degrees are in other fields (anthropology, English literature, and theological studies), I probably would not be the person best equipped to come to its defense if it did. Instead, after citing the blog in question, I will suggest several reasons why we need, if anything, *more extensive* and *more intimate* knowledge of history, not less, even if history does not give us immediately applicable practical advice. Not least significant of these reasons, by any means, is that greater knowledge of history, including mission history, should lead to greater missiological humility. A modicum of acquaintance with mission history can temper our zeal with judgment and save us from uttering or repeating many foolish statements.

### *Questioning the Value of History for Missiology*

When my friend in early 2015 posed the question of history’s value for missiology, he did so as a discussion starter. He commented that he was not writing “out of strong convictions” on the subject. Rather, he stated that he was putting his “personal impressions” forward so as to provide those “with a stronger history bent . . . the opportunity to correct [his] biased perceptions as needed.” Fair enough: he was offering an observation or a judgment in the process of formation, with the request to be shown why he was in error, if someone thought that he was.

As is quickly apparent, part of the point to be established turns on the definition one gives to the term “missiology.” He writes:

One of the richest areas of scholarly research and writing about missionaries comes from historians and missiological historians. But little of this

research is explicitly and intentionally oriented towards usable knowledge by contemporary missionaries or people engaged in Christian mission (however one defines mission). Indeed, while the Yale-Edinburgh group meets each year with a focus on mission history, they explicitly insist that the papers being presented not be missiological. That is, the format is simply history—not oriented to contemporary practitioners of mission and the “practice of mission” (which is a defining characteristic of missiology). So while there are certainly some outstanding historians of mission who desire their work to be in service of Christian mission (such as my hero Dana Robert)—a large majority of mission history is not so intended or designed. And in my own view any research focusing on much earlier eras of history is less easily practical and applicable in the present—which I take as one defining goal of missiology. In that sense I take anthropology (which does of course for most of us include recent history) to more naturally serve as practical handmaid to the practice of Christian mission. Which is not to say that the historical should not be a core part of every missiologist’s education.

Then he asks if anyone might “wish to clarify, using concrete examples, how my impressions” of history’s “lack of practical and applied strengths” are in error. Is there, he asks,

any book by a historian that matches the practical applicability of Paul Hiebert’s . . . *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* [Baker Academic, 1985]?

### *What Might Be Lost*

One way to see what history contributes is to consider what might be lost if history were turned out into the cold. Besides some very good friends, some of the “richest areas of scholarly research and writing about missionaries,” as my friend’s blog note mentions, would go by the wayside. Those are a steep price to pay. But in the process of jettisoning history, we would also lose our grounding and frame of reference. Cut off

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from our own past, we would no longer know who we are, for we carry our past within us, as indeed do our words and language. In addition, we would lose an excellent instrument for humility.

### Loss of Grounding and Frame of Reference

In “Missiology as an Interested Discipline” I argued for differentiating between the expansive field of mission studies in general and the also broad but more specific subfield within mission studies called “missiology.” Missiology sees itself as committed and as being in the service of missionary practice. It is a species of reflection on missionary engagement carried out for the sake of correcting, improving, enabling, and enhancing missional practices.<sup>7</sup> On this point my friend and I concur.

But I would want to insist on the significance of missiology’s siting; it is situated within the framework of mission studies in general. It draws sustenance from those broader, more disinterested studies and is enriched by their findings. They provide one avenue for critique of missiological formulations and a guard against overreaching.

In the threefold interdisciplinary conception of missiology, there is robust interaction between the fields of theology, history, and anthropology. But mission—and so missiology—is dynamic rather than static. Therefore, I suggested standing the three-legged stool on its head and adding “a fourth leg, actually an axis, on the bottom,” thereby turning it into a top. To stand up, tops must spin. Otherwise they flop over and lie inert on their sides. The fourth leg on the bottom stands for missionary practice. To the picture must be added feedback loops, both horizontal and vertical. The spinning of the top represents the dynamic nature

of missiology, but so do the feedback loops. The horizontal feedback loops link the three fields and represent ongoing interaction among them. The vertical feedback loops represent the passage of data from the field so that they can be incorporated into ongoing missiological reflection and the flow of refinements in theory feeding back into practices in the field.<sup>8</sup>

As an intellectual discipline, missiology is not a self-contained field. It continues reaching out more and more widely. Missiology’s ambition is not limited simply to the role of offering practical advice on how missionaries can carry out their functions in the field more efficiently and effectively and thereby attain better results. It also aspires to make its contribution to the indispensable component of “understanding,” a component that is fundamental if the evaluative and refining activities to which missiology lays claim are to be realized. In the search for understanding of mission engagement, mission history is indispensable. The quest for understanding links missiology in a common pursuit with mission studies more broadly conceived. To forgo the quest for understanding as of value in itself would be a price beyond what missiologists should be willing to pay.

### Loss of Our Past Means to Lose Who We Are

We are, in part, our past. Without history, we no longer know who we are—as individuals, as families and communities, as a people, or as the people of God.

Remember the way that the Israelites in the Hebrew Scriptures continually recited their history:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in

number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. (Deut. 26:5 NRSV)

The Israelites constantly called to mind God's mighty acts in their behalf; they spoke over and over again about God's deliverances of them. By reciting their history, they reminded themselves of who they were. So must we if we are not to become psychic and spiritual orphans. The self-made person, cut off from family and bereft of history, is impoverished indeed.

We are all aware that physically, we are our past; genetically we are formed of the flesh and DNA our forebears have bequeathed to us. But more than that, we carry within us the inchoate legacy—psychic, cultural, and spiritual—of those whose lineage we carry forward. That legacy is on our tongues in the ways we pronounce vowels; it is in our way of standing and our stride and the way we go to the bathroom; it is in our hearts in what we value. The study of history enables us, to some degree, to stand “over against” those partial and imperfectly discerned legacies and to judge them and, in a limited way, to turn from them—or to affirm them, thereby making our heritage our own in a richer and fuller sense.<sup>9</sup>

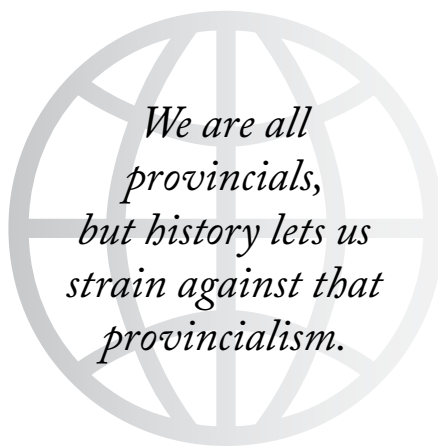
### Background and Equipage for Life and for Missional Decisions

As we study the Bible, still more as we seek to dwell within it and live with those whom we find populating it, we find in it a multiplicity that answers to the multiplicity that we find within ourselves. It is not just Walt Whitman who can say, “I am large, I contain multitudes” (“Song of Myself”).<sup>10</sup> So are we all; so do we all.

Part of the gain for those who are immersed in reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible from childhood is a mind that is furnished with an immense array of instructive persons, characters, and situations that can be drawn upon as examples, good and bad, when faced with new and demanding

choices or expectations. By trying them on for size, we can gain vicarious non-dangerous practice in assessing moral tests and challenges, and in weighing possible responses and courses of action. We can enter into and become part of an expansive family of heroes and some villains—and thereby gain a better idea of whom to emulate.

The point is that history offers similar opportunities to us. So does literature. So does living in proximity and familiar intercourse, to use an older idiom, with our neighbor. Without history we are trapped in the present or, worse, trapped in ourselves. We are all provincials, both temporally and spatially, but history lets us at least strain against that provincialism. We



may not all be able to travel widely, but through deepening our acquaintance with history—as also with literature—our mental horizons and the horizons of our souls can be expanded.

To a degree, history provides a laboratory in which alternate approaches to life, to politics, and to mission can be compared. Missiological reflection on what steps we ought to take would be immeasurably impoverished were mission history to be passed over.

### Loss of Humility

Mission history enables us to gain perspective on ourselves as persons, certainly, but it also lends clarity to our picture of our individual selves as instruments of mission. Mission history

sets our concerns and our grand “new” approaches for mission within a larger framework and serves to remind us that the new thing we are inclined to try has been tried before.

One thing that we find when we feel singled out and uniquely beset is the larger truth encased in Paul's reproof—or was it an encouragement?—that nothing has overtaken us that is not common to humankind (1 Cor. 10:13). We are neither all that special nor all that original, not as individuals and not as an era or epoch. Incidentals and the garb with which life is clothed change, but the poles around which our lives revolve are perduring. In mission thinking and practice, what about concerns for contextualization, or for not destroying cultures, or for respecting the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping the character the church will exhibit as it is formed in a new community of believers? Surely those concerns are distinctively modern; surely they are issues that have newly arisen in our day? Not so. Read the records of our Protestant missionary forebears of a hundred years ago and of two hundred years ago. They were concerned with the same issues, even if their language differed somewhat. In the late sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, Matteo Ricci in China and the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Rome struggled with these issues. Gregory the Great in sending Augustine (the other Augustine; not the writer of the *Confessions*) as a missionary to Britain at the end of the sixth century addressed similar concerns.<sup>11</sup>

Did the Native American people to whom John Eliot in seventeenth-century “New England” found himself ministering need to become “civilized”? That is, did they need to adopt “our ways” (English ways, in this instance) of organizing life and knowledge, before they could become Christ's followers? Were English ways of framing discussions of spiritual realities a necessary prelude to religious

insight? Which comes first: Christianization or civilization? These questions, and issues related to them, were topics of formal and extended public literary debate during the formative period of the modern Protestant missionary movement in Britain and the United States at the end of the eighteenth and opening of the nineteenth centuries. They exercised the minds and pens of Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, the preeminent U.S. and British mission thinkers and executives of the mid-nineteenth century. In the first half of the twentieth century, these topics found expression in the writings of Roland Allen. Current versions of this issue roil the waters of missiological discussion today.

If we were to forget the distinction between the sciences (thought of as cumulative; problem X has been solved and we can move on to a new puzzle) and the humanities (which constantly face anew the same issues albeit dressed in new clothes and regrouped in new configurations), we might be tempted to marvel at our own novelty. Here histories such as Jeffrey Cox's commendable volume, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700*, provide an excellent instrument for humility. A masterful review of its subject, Cox's book helps us to see how very much would be lost if mission history were to be cavalierly dismissed. Cox traces the complex interplay across three centuries of British missions between institutionalism and anti-institutionalism—between the building of mission stations, church structures, schools, hospitals, and so forth, grouping missional ministry and outreach around them, versus anti-institutional impulses. The tension between institutionalism and anti-institutionalism remains a constant; the context and forms in which it finds expression shift.

It is humbling to recognize that what we meet and what we have to offer are neither so new nor so novel or incisive or destined to be so effective as we

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might desire. But we are called to be faithful in engaging in the task, using what is in our hand—and in our hearts and our minds, the instruments that we have—in the task before us. We do so knowing full well that we will never deliver the master stroke that overpowers our mortal enemy, Satan, and his minions. Christ, not us, is the Champion who has already accomplished that in our behalf. We are not likely to be credited with having been the designer of the next great “break-through” in mission. We act in the confidence that though she may plant and he or we may water, it is God who blesses and gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7)—despite the feebleness of our halting and fragmentary efforts.

History, in sum, can help us to recognize what the real questions and issues are and how to distinguish them from their shifting phenomenological trappings that so frequently distract our gaze.

### *Point of Agreement*

There is a point at which I concur with the charge, cited earlier, that my friend's blog makes against history: history cannot decide questions of strategy or tell us in a given situation what we should do. It cannot give us precise directions for action. The past never maps directly onto the present or vice versa. Situations, times, circumstances, and means differ too widely. Discernment, thought, application, and hard effort on our part are required. But then, I do not find this inability to be a great loss, recommending as I do that the “strategies” we prepare should be small-scale, intended as a rough guide to our current concerns. Even while devising them we should consider them to be provisional and hold them lightly. We should be ready for them to be

disrupted and ourselves redirected. I suspect that we should always be wary of attempts to develop, still less impose, grand overarching strategies that try to wear a capital “S.”

Immersion through history in the experience and hard-won lessons garnered by others, however, can sharpen our perception. History can make us more alert to crux issues, can alert us to opportunities and to traps to watch out for. It can supply us with a feel for alternative means for addressing the crucial concerns we face in our day and our setting. Something similar is true of anthropology.<sup>12</sup> It is not a be-all and end-all for missiological concerns. It offers aid to persons of good will and provides perspective along the way. It can sensitize and raise some caution flags. It can provide some techniques for those willing to study them and learn to put them into practice, but it is not an assured path to insight and sensitivity in the field. Training and pre-field cautions are not to be held in contempt, but they will never make up for a failure in heart orientation on the part of the missionary. One seasoned missionary, who by the time we talked had earned a doctorate in anthropology, long ago told me, “The most obnoxious missionary I ever worked with had a master's degree in anthropology” (at that time not a common attainment among missionaries).

At one level, my blogging friend and I can be said not to disagree at all—which is not the same as to say that we fully agree. He can grant everything that I have said and still pose his “pin the butterfly to the cork board” question: Where is the book of mission history that stands on a par with Paul Hiebert's *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* in terms of applicable takeaway and formative advice for

mission practitioners? I can grant the import of his rhetorical skewering of history—after all, history is about a rather different thing than being a how-to book—and still contend that the contributions of history and of mission history are considerably wider and more fundamental than his posing of the issue seems to allow.<sup>13</sup> As for practical effect, it is hard to think of something more fundamental conceptually for missionaries or more consequential for missionary practice than the distinction church and mission historian Andrew Walls makes between proselytism and conversion, a distinction that grew out of his deep engagement with history.<sup>14</sup> It quite simply reorients missionary concepts and practice across the board.

Interestingly, despite the attempt to drive a wedge between anthropology and history (citing Paul Hiebert as exemplifying anthropology's superior value), it is Hiebert himself who states that though anthropology can tell us how things relate synchronically in the present, for meaning we must turn to history.<sup>15</sup> And his masterwork, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, is saturated with history.<sup>16</sup>

Christian faith, and therefore Christian mission, is inevitably and inextricably bound up in history. And it is so, in a richer and fuller sense than just that certain cosmically significant events—which they are—occurred in the early decades of the common era. Christian faith is formed by history and in history and, one can say, for history. Therefore, we do well to be informed about history—about that which has formed us and of which we are made—as we seek to live and speak and act responsibly in history for the glory of God, for the furtherance of his kingdom, for the praise of Jesus Christ, and for the spread of the Good News about the Lord of history, redeemer of humankind, savior of the world, and coming king. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this article were presented to the Northeast Region of the Evangelical Missiological Society, First Baptist Church, Flushing, New York, March 28, 2015, and at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society, GIAL, Dallas, Texas, September 18–20, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See Dwight P. Baker, “Missiology as an Interested Discipline—and Where Is It Happening?” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 1 (January 2014): 17–20. As discussed by Kenneth Nehrbass, earlier formulations of what missiology is have at times consisted of quite expansive enumerations of subdisciplines called to play a role, e.g., see mappings of the field by Alan R. Tippett and Arthur F. Glasser; and in practice, missiologists have incurred debts to many disciplines. Nehrbass himself advocates shifting from a multilegged stool metaphor to the image of a dynamic river carrying within it the contributions of many tributaries. See his “Does Missiology Have Three Legs to Stand On? The Upsurge of Interdisciplinarity,” *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 1 (January 2016): 50–65. I strongly concur regarding missiology's expansive interdisciplinarity, but for convenience I retain use of the stool metaphor.

<sup>3</sup> See the concerns expressed in Michael A. Rynkiewicz, “Do We Need a Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World?,” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 28, no. 2 (2011): 151–69, esp. nn. 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Xi Lian, *The Conversion of Missionaries* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997), and Notto R. Thelle, “Changed by the East: Notes on Missionary Communication and Transformation,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2006): 115–21. See also Elmer S. Miller, *Nurturing Doubt: From Mennonite Missionary to Anthropologist in the Argentine Chaco* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995); and Kenneth W. Daniels, *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Duncanville, TX: Kenneth W. Daniels, 2009). Michael Lee's recent doctoral dissertation deals with the topic of evangelical missionaries who have left their calling. See Michael Hakmin Lee, “From Faith and Advocacy to Unbelief and Defection” (PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For this reason I refrain from giving his name or information for locating the quotation.

<sup>6</sup> Baker, “Missiology as an Interested Discipline,” 17–20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Compare the observations of Daniel Jeyaraj at the Boston 2010 conference on the way that, following conversion to Christianity, members of oppressed castes in India have found in the Bible an alternate group memory that has enabled them to conceive of themselves and their future in new and liberating ways.

<sup>10</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” v. 51, in his *Leaves of Grass*, www.gutenberg.org/files/1322/1322-h/1322-h.htm#link2H\_4\_0002.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory the Great, “Adapt Heathen Temples,” in *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Norman E. Thomas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 22.

<sup>12</sup> See Dwight P. Baker, “Anthropologists and Missionaries: Some Parts of the Picture,” *Covenant Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (May 1994): 13–14.

<sup>13</sup> Quite adroitly, my friend has allowed himself an escape hatch by appending that, of course, students of mission need to learn mission history—in passing, as it were.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 1 (January 2004): 2–6.

<sup>15</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985); *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).