

Ralph Winter and the Strategic Use of History

Forty years ago, Ralph Winter drafted the blueprints for a new mission agency focused on unreached peoples. Yet were it not for his historical imagination, Winter might never have conceived of the U. S. Center for World Mission. He intuitively drew on historical analysis as a tool for mission, trolling it for insights into the ways God had moved men of the past for His Kingdom purposes, and then welding those insights into practice. For ten years he taught the Historical Development of the Christian Movement at Fuller Seminary, always demanding that his students approach contemporary mission through historical lenses.

This crucial dimension of history in missiology was addressed in Dwight Baker's presentation last fall at the EMS/ISFM gathering (p. 5). Baker believes missiology to be an "interested" discipline,¹ one in which mission interests are a justifiable stimulus for our biblical, anthropological and historical study. While a good missiologist will guard the authenticity of the past, his mission concerns will shape how he ventures into history.

Winter made *use* of history. You couldn't work on projects with him without hearing frequent historical anecdotes. At meetings he would offer vivid historical interpretations as compelling rationales for his organizational ventures. History seemed to give Winter a certain outlook, an optimism that David Bosch so perceptively identified with the historicism of Kenneth Scott Latourette (whose volumes Winter assigned to his students at Fuller).² Bosch fit Winter's optimism into a modern Enlightenment paradigm of missiology, and the positivist, progressive spirit of modern times did seem to characterize Winter's use of the past.

Winter was actually a Johnny-come-lately to history. Those who entered the study of history through the humanities immediately felt something different about Winter's orientation. He was an engineer by training (Caltech), as were many of his post-World War II missionary colleagues. They were problem solvers, and the problems they faced in mission were the stimulus for Winter's historical craft.

One can miss important distinctions if Winter is pigeonholed in Bosch's paradigm. An evangelical historian like Winter had a countercultural view of purpose—God's purpose—which a modern epistemology jettisons from its historiography. As an engineer, he may have utilized a scientific method to assess causes and effects in his study of the past, but what he found he always

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interpreted as part of the *advance-ment* of God's kingdom. It was God's providential design that he expected to discover when he peered into history.

Neither should one gloss over Winter's integration of anthropology into history. His doctoral work at Cornell oriented him more to the study of groups, tribes and social institutions than to individuals. He might have exemplified the "great man" theory in identifying the pivotal roles of a William Carey or a Saint Patrick, but it was their formation of mission institutions that he considered most vital. His mix of engineering and social science conditioned him to search the past for structures and how they might promote or inhibit the expansion of God's kingdom. His historical elaboration of two structures in God's redemptive mission was one of his seminal contributions to modern mission,³ but it also influenced how he would design a mission organization if given the chance. Forty years ago, the chance arose and he took it—and it was his deep appreciation for history which helped shape that Pasadena agency (now Frontier Ventures).

The authors in this issue are conscious of history as they frame their present mission concerns. Steve Hawthorne has traced the journey of *frontier* missiology over a half-century (p. 23). Originally given as an address to the ISFM 2014 on the 40th anniversary of the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Hawthorne surveys recent history to distinguish the essential features of a missiology that undergirds a mandate for the frontiers.

Other authors reflect the use of history in our encounter with other religious worlds. H. L. Richard surveys the choice of Sanskrit terms for God in Bible translation in the Hindu world (p. 11). A cadre of Japanese colleagues addressed the recent SEANET consultation on the emerging contrast between a post-tsunami evangelism and previous evangelical efforts to reach a Buddhist (and resistant) Japan (this portion is from their recent compendium reviewed on page 35). And Timothy Schultz's review of Robin Boyd (p. 34) offers a more accurate history of contextualization in the Indian church.

Our missiological interests in approaching history are obviously varied and selective, but an informed historical imagination remains a crucial dimension of mission practice. Winter's keen appreciation for history, combined with his engineer's mindset—one of creative problem solving—certainly proved that forty years ago.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Dwight P. Baker, "Missiology as an Interested Discipline," *Int'l Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 38, no. 1, (January 2014): 17–20.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 335.

³ Ralph D. Winter, "Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *Missiology* 2, no. 1 (1974): 121–39.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.