

Recalling Ralph Winter's Apologetic for a Quasi-Religious World

We don't tend to examine our assumptions unless we're provoked. Ralph Winter had a provocative way of doing just that. He had a ministry of raising eyebrows. As editor of this journal for the last decade of his life, he stretched us beyond our settled notions of mission. When he passed from us ten years ago, he left some of his most fascinating thinking suspended in midair.

We owe a great debt to Beth Snodderly (former president of William Carey International University) for her custodianship of Winter's thinking from his final years.¹ In her EMS seminar last year, she reminded us of Winter's quick, inadvertent reference to "a set of keen thinkers" in one urban center of South Asia. He suggested that "if we recognize the existence of the 'unreached people' of the *scientifically educated community* of, say, Hyderabad . . . we quickly find the frontier . . . [of] 'the Religion of Science'"² (emphasis mine). Winter was pretty sure that a "quasi-religious scientism" could create a community of the like-minded anywhere, and that it presented a kind of religious boundary.

... the Religion of Science is clearly a barrier found today across many different ethnic traditions. It is one of the few frontiers that does not correlate specifically with the concept of unreached peoples, but rather runs throughout many different ethnic and cultural entities.³

As a missiologist, Winter widened our lens on the categories of religion by engaging modern scientism as a faith. He identified it as a modern form of religious consciousness—a thought world—that drew together those with a deep belief in the existence of order in nature (p. 98). Winter was enough of a scientist to appreciate the glory the scientist could behold in "the Book of Creation." Yet, fundamental to many of the scientific mindset was the belief that science was authoritative to the exclusion of other methods and disciplines. Winter believed it was unfortunate and unnecessary that scientists would categorically eliminate the Bible from the corpus of truth, and he was passionate about finding an apologetic that would speak into that mindset.

The articles and reviews in this issue of the *IJFM* are in pursuit of an apologetic for various forms of religious consciousness. Effective communication of the gospel will require a sharper discernment of the different denominations, allegiances, and thought worlds that crisscross any religious bloc: the Muslim Sufi (p. 59), the folk Buddhist (p. 69), or the devotional way of Hindu Bakhti (p. 104). Each is a slice of a larger and more stratified religious world.

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How should we go about refining a gospel apologetic for a specific religious mind-set? One could study how God used the cultural environment of the ancient Near East to communicate to Israel (p. 93). Or one might compare two prominent apologists from radically different religious contexts (p. 85). We might ask just how effective is the use of contemporary political idioms (p. 77). The missiologist would typically study emergent movements to Christ and identify important elements (pp. 100 and 102). The contributions in this issue range across Africa, Asia and Europe and offer the reader a bricolage of religious discernment.

But back to Winter's quest: he wanted to overcome the barriers of a quasi-religious scientism, that "science world" that flows universally across all religious worlds. He was upset with the unfortunate way this "ism" rejects a traditional Christian plausibility structure. His analysis began with the scientific community in the West, but the repercussions of scientism in a place like Hyderabad he would leave to others. He could merely point. Anthropology has been busy describing those repercussions for over half a century. The syncretic blend

of scientific consciousness and traditional religious worlds is documented in various cultural studies "beyond the West." It's usually seen as a collision that creates a cultural schizophrenia of sorts, a dissonance that Geertz called the "struggle for the real."⁴ It appears this collision of consciousness is growing among frontier peoples. Now that's important for frontier missiology, don't you think?

Winter's attempts to create this apologetic was impressive. He welcomed everyone in on his efforts to integrate science and the Bible. On occasion, he would hand me his latest schema for me to test on my scientific acquaintances. He admitted it was speculative, but he was trying to wield biblical truth just like the Apostle Paul. Recall that Paul's entire letter to the Colossians is his apologetic in response to the "plausibility" (Grk, *pitbanologia*, Col. 2:4) of an emergent syncretism in the Church. A certain structure of consciousness, built on certain "elemental principles," was capturing a segment of that first century society, and Paul's response—his apologetic—is one of the highest Christological portions of our scriptures.

Discerning the true nature of religious consciousness among a people is the basis of a more astute missiology. This issue of the *IJFM* appeals for greater discernment of religious worlds. Winter's analysis of a quasi-religious scientism demands that same sensitivity.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ "Bibliography of Articles by RDW about the Religion of Science," accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.rdwresearch-center.org/single-post/2018/08/27/BIBLIOGRAPHY-OF-WINTER-ARTICLES-ON-RELIGION-OF-SCIENCE>.

² Ralph D. Winter, "From the Editor's Desk," accessed June 14, 2019, *IJFM* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2004):3, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_1_PDFs/02_04_Editorial_21_1.pdf.

³ Ralph D. Winter, "From the Editor's Desk," accessed June 14, 2019, *IJFM* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 108, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/20_4_PDFs/107_Editorial_20_4.pdf.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, "The Struggle for the Real," in *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 90–117, https://monoskop.org/images/0/06/Geertz_Clifford_Islam_Observed_Religious_Development_in_Morocco_and_Indonesia_1971.pdf.

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- ☞ 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.