

Short Term Mission as the Undiscovered Country:

Anthropology and Missiology in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

Third wave missions – these contemporary phenomena of decentralized, *ad hoc*, and informal relationships between so-called Western churches and those in places traditionally understood to be the “mission field,” – are unquestionably interesting, perhaps confounding, potentially exciting, and possibly problematic. I originally proposed a paper to explore one aspect of this phenomenon – namely short term mission – and discuss how the practices of STM are contributing to changing conceptions of mission. I will still present part of that argument, but even as I prepared the paper I realized that there is another point emerging from my recent research that goes to the larger question of how we study third wave missions and get a handle on this phenomenon.

I am pleased to be on a panel such as this, in which people have deployed a variety of methods and theoretical frames to explore such diverse and dynamic phenomenon as STM, congregational partnerships, diasporic mission, sister church relationships, and the views of receiving communities on these. At the same time, I want to argue that in order for missiologists to understand these decentralized practices, and more importantly, to dig beneath the surface of explicit attitudes and ideas to the cultural forces at work, we need to employ traditional anthropological field work along with sophisticated cultural theory. Through an example of a church-based short term missions program, I want to demonstrate, first, how the institutional arrangement and cultural context work together in the practices of the congregation to shape the mission theology of the participants. But this ethnographic argument is, for my purposes today, primarily for the purpose of demonstrating how this understanding can only be gained through the kind of close-in ethnographic field work of anthropology interpreted through a theoretical framework that can hold the various influences in view together.

To work through these two aspects of the paper, I'll start with my research on STM. This is work that has, for the most part, been presented in more detail in my recent book. In my relatively short presentation today, I won't be able to flesh out the data in detail. What I hope is clear, however, are the ways anthropological theory and ethnographic methods combine to permit an understanding of these phenomena unavailable through other methods and theoretical frameworks.

PART I – STM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MISSION

My research on STM grew out of my observations of students at Wheaton College. Many of them had gone on STM trips prior to coming to Wheaton (and many more during their time at Wheaton.) What struck me as I heard them talk about these trips was how similar their narratives were, regardless of where their trips had taken them. Similar phrases – “They were poor but happy,” “I went to serve, but ended up being the one who was served” – were delivered in a narrative of transformation – “It totally changed my life” – that followed a similar narrative arc regardless of the country, and seemingly regardless of the length of the trip.

As I first considered investigating this phenomenon in 2004, I found that there was very little social scientific research on the phenomenon. However, there were fairly large academic literatures on similar forms of travel, namely tourism and pilgrimage that made clear connections between expectations, narratives, and experiences. Throughout these works, scholars have argued that the experiences of travel are subsidiary in their affects to the expectations and narratives produced prior to travel. What constitutes a site/sight for the tourist, or how one is to approach and be affected by a pilgrim shrine, are virtually predetermined through guide books, word of mouth, and media portrayals of the places to which tourists and pilgrims are going (Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011; Hutnyk 1996; see also, Kaell 2014). What has become clear in the anthropologies of tourism and pilgrimage, then, is that to understand how tourists and pilgrims engage the places they go, and how they interpret the experiences they had while in those places, anthropologists must begin not with the places themselves but with the travelers and the ways these travelers pre-construct their experiences.

It was this idea that guided my own research on short term mission in 2005. I began not by hanging out in the places where short term missionaries traveled, but by being with the short termers before they left. I joined the team before they were a team, going through the interview process, meeting with the team members in their first meeting in Wheaton, and joining them throughout the preparation period. Naturally, I also accompanied the team on the trip and participated in all the post-trip events, as well as re-interviewing them in the year following the trip. But the most formative part of the trip, I argued in the book, was the preparatory phase. And it was not, for the most part, the explicit teaching the students received that most shaped their understanding of the trip of “mission” and their expectations

for the trip. Rather it was the embodied activities in which we engaged. In the complete study, there were a number of events I noted as particularly meaningful. Let me give one of these to illustrate what I mean by the embodied formation that shaped us and our theology in ways that could not be uncovered through distanced research techniques alone.

The Interviews:¹

With the cooperation of a large congregation in Wheaton, I joined in the process of selecting and preparing a team to travel with 12 high school students and four other adults to the Dominican Republic for 13 days in the summer of 2006. In the months prior to our departure, each person who wanted to be part of any team (there were five that summer) went through an interview process.

Unlike job interviews or scholarship competitions, all of us going into the interview were aware that this was less about “selection” and more about forming teams. We knew we were going in to learn about what this process entailed as much as for the interviewers to gain information. For the prospective leaders in particular, it is often difficult to find the necessary number of leaders for these trips. If someone is seen to be utterly unsuitable for leading such a trip, he or she would be discouraged from applying and it is unlikely they would reach the interview stage. Yet the form of the interview varied little, in terms of practice, from what would be expected in a more competitive process. The practice of speaking involved in an interview comprises what linguistic anthropologists refer to as “officializing” discourse. This refers to genres of speech that encode and express “particular orders of knowledge and experience” (Bauman 2000:85) in which the speech and its form serves to reaffirm or re-signify social relations to reflect common cultural understandings and shared context (cf: Csordas 1997:161–163).² In other words,

1 These ethnographic data are taken from *Short Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Howell 2012).

2 The term “genre” is typically applied to forms of written language (e.g., the mystery genre). In linguistic anthropology, however, it has become a more widely applicable term and helpful in understanding the different contexts in which speaking about the trips planned for the GO program took on more cultural significance for those involved. As developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1985) and others (Bauman 2000; Hanks 1987), the notion of genre includes speech engaging the “emergent elements of here-and-now contextualization” (Bauman 2000: 85) worked out in “particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances” (Bakhtin as quoted in Hanks

the conditions of the interview and the performance of our speech made it an important moment in the creation of our experience of STM (what anthropologists call “subjectivity”), as well as profoundly shaping the narratives we would later employ to interpret the trip itself.

In one case I observed, typical of the dozen I participated in, the committee was talking to Rob Wilson, an adult leader applying to lead one of the STM trips. Charlie began, “OK, Rob, this is usually where I ask, why do you want to be a part of [the team]?” After a few more questions more specific to the individual, the chair returned to the interview schedule with the question: “Just give us a sense for where your skills lie or what sort of gifts you think that you could bring to the leadership team. Is it making lists and checking them twice? Or is it working with a student to build an atmosphere of mentoring and discipline and making sure their hearts are in the right place? [...] Or...?”

Rob answered about his skills in carpentry and construction, though he felt his real gifts lay “in the relational side of things,” working with the high school students. In all the interviews in which I participated, the questions followed a similar form: identify your gifts, tell us about your interests in using those gifts, what has been your experience of using those gifts.³ The most consistent element resurfacing in the interviews was the link between “gifts” and “tasks” in the short-term mission endeavor. The majority of the questions turned on the notion of the particular “gifts” an individual brought to the team, and how those gifts should be used in mission work. Sometimes this referred to personality, preferences, and skills that might contribute to the effective functioning of the group. But the language of gifts served to invoke the more specifically Christian language of “gifts” as God-given abilities prominent in evangelical Christian discourse.⁴ In this

1987: 680). In other words, it is not enough to attend to what is being said, but it is necessary to focus on the specific context in which speech is performed and interpreted.

3 I participated in six interviews with prospective GO team leaders, not including my own. The interviews for the students, though there were more of them, were more difficult to negotiate, as I needed to get parental permission prior to my participation. I was only able to participate in five of those. For that reason, I have not made conclusions or drawn as directly from those data. I would argue, however, that the effect of interviewing, as an embodied form and linguistic genre, served to shape the narratives of the high school students as strongly (if not more strongly) as the adults.

4 Though the notion of “spiritual gifts” is often associated with Pentecostal emphases on glossolalia, prophecy and the like, evangelicals have, for many years, used the notion in a less mystical sense. (McQuerry 1979)

way, the interview genre brought together the role of leaders and their activities such as “making lists” with the spiritual call of missionary work and ministry. As interviewees were led to frame their contribution to mission in terms of their gifts, they were led away from personal interest in a place or team, towards a view of themselves as needing to abandon any personal desires for the sake of serving the team.

This process of explicitly sublimating personal desires to the needs of the team is a process similar to what Rebecca Allahyari (2000:4) called “moral selving,” or “a concern for transforming an experience of an underlying moral self, in contrast to a situated identity.” Together with the interview team, the prospective leaders coming to the interview were casting their personal desires as necessarily less important than the needs of the group. Notably, this process of working out the nature of service and the moral self was unlike the volunteers to the social service agencies studied by Allahyari, in that the prospective STM team leaders at WCC were not foregrounding their desire for personal transformation, instead they were articulating a sense of calling, sacrifice, and self-abnegation, in line with the STM narrative.

When I explicitly asked people about their motivations for going on the STM trip, they often cited such goals as “learning about the Dominican Republic” or “spending time with my friends,” but from the beginning, our missionary narrative pushed those aspects of experience out of the frame. That is, learning from or about the people to whom we would travel, building stronger personal relationships, and connecting with those communities was not discouraged or denied as important or valuable; they were simply marginalized from the narrative of mission and the theological significance of our travel. Instead, following the call of God, employing our gifts, serving the long-term missionaries and sharing the gospel (all elements of “real missions”) were central to the interviews. This created a subjectivity of each participant towards the process that made other understandings of the trip difficult. Within the structure of the interview there was not an opportunity for the interviewee to reframe the discourse into areas not opened by the interviewers themselves. The officializing linguistic practice of the interview went in a particular direction, away from aspects of learning from or investing in particular communities, and towards a selfless notion of service. Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu described this kind of embodied practice of language the “religious field,” in which social and religious practices were organized

(i.e., structured) by leaders and laity working together to create a sense of the real and the possible in their religious lives (Bourdieu 1991). In a statement typical of French poststructuralist prose, Bourdieu argues that

[t]he effect of *consecration* (or legitimation) exercised by *explanation*... causes the system of dispositions toward the natural world and the social world inculcated by conditions of existence to undergo a *change of nature*, in particular transmuting the *ethos* of a system of implicit schemes of action and appreciation into *ethics* as a systematized and rationalized ensemble of explicit norms (1991: 14).

In other words, the act of endorsing, through the interview process, a particular view of one's role and purpose for being on a team (providing relevant gifts for the task ahead) creates a particular posture towards the world (in this case, the STM trip). This posture is not particularly clear to those who adopt it, though it is supported by a seemingly common sense or natural understanding of things.⁵

This practice of developing an understanding of “mission” as equivalent to “service” exists in tension with other views of mission that would include the connection of a person to a particular place or people through language learning, deep relationships, and investment over time. (Incidentally, I think this is why the phrase to “love on” someone has become so popular. To say you are going to “love” someone seems to retain the semantic range implying a relationship and

5 My own interview was a bit different than those of prospective leaders from the congregation. In my case, the committee was asking about my role as an anthropologist and how that might affect the dynamics of the group. Even within that context, however, the group doing the interview was self-consciously aware of the ways in which they saw the interview shaping the subjectivity of the potential participants. The interview began with,

OK, Brian, this is typically where we ask somebody why they want to be a part of the mission trip. And it's where people would say the Holy Spirit has really given me a vision to expose students to world missions, or I really feel called to serve our missionaries. So I'll ask you, why do you want to be part of this [Global Outreach] trip?

Thus, even as I sat explaining the ethnographic method and my interest in the topic, I had the experience of conforming my language to the expectations – or the perceived expectations – of the committee. It was not that I disagreed with these aspects of the motivations, but the embodied process of being interviewed made it more difficult to speak in ways that were not pre-structured to fit into the forms I knew were already part of the format. For those beginning to create narratives for travel, it became a moment in which the “structuring structure” came into play quite strongly, pushing our personal narratives of travel toward a shared ethic of STM (cf. Bourdieu 1980:49).

mutuality. To “love on” someone becomes an act of service, akin to giving a cup of water to someone, where no reciprocity nor time investment is implied. Thus “love on” becomes another activity of mission in which the gifting is non-reciprocal in its intention.) For those who come to experience, and subsequently understand, mission as the abnegation of personal desire, not requiring a relationship with a specific locale, the theology of mission becomes one in which “mission” is defined by acts of service and humanitarian action rather the call to devote one’s life and time to language, cultural learning and the building of relational bonds in a specific community.

I have no doubt that there are a variety of theologies of mission extant in the single church where I did my research, let alone in the North American church generally. My point here is not to make an argument that short term missions or even this particular aspect of STM has transformed mission into a new or singular thing. However, I do argue that the practices of STM are having effects on the theologies of participants (and non-participants) through the practices that are forming them in addition to, and perhaps in opposition to, the teaching they may receive as members of these congregations.

PART II – UNRAVELING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF INSTITUTIONS, PRACTICES AND CULTURE

In his recent work *Desiring the Kingdom*, and even more so in his follow up work *Imagining the Kingdom*, philosopher James K.A. Smith (2009; 2013) drew heavily on anthropological theory (and Pierre Bourdieu in particular), to argue that Christian formation occurs most significantly through those embodied practices most charged with meaning. Through what he terms “cultural liturgies” (which can occur inside and outside the church), he argues that humans in every context are formed into people whose hearts are directed towards particular loves (in an Augustinian sense), that guide our life.

I would extend his argument a bit to note that this not only directs our actions, but also shapes, or even creates, our theologies. Though, like Smith, I do not discount the importance of cognitive work and traditional education in the shaping of categories and frameworks by which we apprehend our world and place in it, I agree with him that the ordering and practicing of these frameworks is governed primarily by the commitments (the “loves”) we have developed through

the embodied practices of life, in particular in those moments most freighted with social, personal, and religious importance. And surely preparations for an STM trip are those freighted moments in which we have a heightened sensitivity to what Geertz (1973:143) famously called the “really real,” the true stuff of life, which is, for the Christian, God’s work and will in the world.

Third wave mission, as a diffuse, decentered, and deterritorialized process of mission creates numerous moments of practice and interaction in which people are bringing together cultural, institutional, and theological resources in new and unpredictable ways. We should ask the question: why did our STM team organize their interview process in the way they did? The reason for the interview process – denoting a climate of seriousness and serving as an “accountability” structure – was evident from interviews with leadership, and could have been ascertained through surveys, but the consequences of the interview process of shaping the mission theology of the participants was only evident through participation, observation, and engagement with the process over time.

If Christian theology generally, and mission theology specifically, is being generated and embraced in these moments of church life, then these are critical places where the missiologist must study these third wave movement phenomena. In order to understand how these processes work to shape and (re)produce Christian life, researchers must be present in the institutionalized moments of cultural production, as well as the informal practices that emerge as cultural liturgies of STM. I am not, of course, discounting the importance of interviews and surveys, both of which were part of my own research, but as I hope this small ethnographic illustration made clear, some of the formative processes at work in third wave mission can only be understood through embodied, ethnographic methods.

At the same time, while the ethnographic method is necessary, it is not sufficient. What must accompany the gathering of these ethnographic data are the theoretical apparatus to make sense of them. While I have leaned heavily on practice theory as read through the work of Bourdieu in this essay, I would not begin to suggest that this is the pinnacle of contemporary theory or should necessarily provide the analytical scaffolding for all our missiological research. I agree, however, with Michael Rynkeiwich that there is a great need for missiologists to engage the contemporary theory extant in anthropology in order to engage the sorts of phenomena most interesting and important in the church today.

Theoretically, missiology has been, as Rynkeiwich said, “steeped in functionalism and focused on symbol and ritual” (2011:153). This has led some missiology to continue to frame culture largely in terms of bounded locality and public alterity. While this has yielded some extraordinary research for the church today, as Robert Schreiter and others have noted, culture is primarily about networks, not locations; culture is a process rather than a possession (see Howell and Williams Paris 2012: Chapter 2). Grappling with issues of power, globalization, and inequality is not only about applying the methods of participant observation and ethnography to diverse contexts, but also grappling theoretically with these contexts in new ways, continuing to problematize the units of analysis, and engaging multiple conversation partners in theology, philosophy, history, and throughout the diverse discipline of anthropology.

Third Wave Mission represents a creative fluorescence of the church. No question there exists in these diverse movements promise and peril for the church of Christ. In order for missiologists to understand the dynamics of change represented by these diffuse and dynamic phenomena, we need research and theory that can holistically interpret and understand the wider contexts and particular agency at work. Only by bringing missiological research into an invigorated conversation with contemporary anthropological theory and method can we truly begin to unpack the new wave of missionary energy at work in the church today.

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