The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends

Authors of the following book are: Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, Douglas McConnell. Publisher: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

At a recent training event with our mission, a senior at BIOLA University, seeing my review copy of The Changing Face of World Missions, remarked brightly: “Oh, we read that book this fall and it was great!”

There can be no better recommendation for a text book on contemporary trends in missions than the affirmation from a bright student that the book was readable, helpful, and well-written. She added upon questioning, “It was a little heavy in places, but it really stretched my worldview.”

This volume is the second of an eight-volume series titled Encountering Mission, a series designed to replace the outdated series of texts used in the 80s and 90s written by J. Herbert Kane. The Changing Face of World Missions is intended for upper-level under-graduate and graduate students preparing for cross-cultural ministry, and lay and church leaders wanting perspective on the changing context in which missions is now conducted.

Beginning with an Introductory chapter that brilliantly summarizes the key trends in mission and a critique of evangelical missions of the last quarter of the 20th century, the authors underline the growing concern about the limits of the Western mission ministry moving into the 21st century: “As modernity yields to postmodernity, those working in the field of missions need discernment so that they do not simply exchange one set of problems for another” (12).

The conviction of the authors is that “North American evangelical schools and their graduates can remain relevant only to the extent that they read, listen, and interact with believers from around the world about the conduct of the missionary enterprise. This means that students and educational leaders should be reading material developed by Christians from other cultures” (14).

Having said that, we would expect a future volume compiling the best insights and wisdom from missional leaders around the world.

A guiding principle in choosing the trends for this volume arose from agreement over the distinction between a trend and an issue. For the authors, “the word trend refers to a relatively enduring and growing phenomenon. An issue... is more temporally limited and the focus of debate or discussion among those who reflect on global outreach” (13). They select 12 trends which they divide into three critical contexts. The global context describes major trends in the world (e.g., globalization, changing demographics, world religions to multiple spiritualities, and the changing basis of knowledge—from modernity to postmodernity). The missional context deals with trends internal to the body of Christ and the mission community (e.g., global Christianity, changing motivations for missions, increasing awareness of spiritual power, and innovation in missions operations). The strategic context focuses on trends of a strategic or procedural nature (e.g., collaboration, international partnership, new technologies, and contextualization).

A number of outstanding resource features for teachers and students using the book as a course text include informative side-bars for specialized vocabulary, mini-case studies, key concepts descriptions (e.g., “The Supremacy of God in Missions through Worship,” p. 177), comparisons and contrasts (e.g., “Globalization: Winners and Losers,” p. 39; “Evaluating Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare,” p. 190), statistical summaries, biblical insights, and guidelines (“Questions to Guide Financial Decision Making,” p.295), and selected resources on that topic. The case studies alone make this volume invaluable.

Michael Pocock’s excellent first chapter on “Globalization” serves as a representative sampling of the quality of the research and the writing throughout the entire book. Each chapter follows a four-part outline:

1. Identifying the trend. A wide survey of recent and current authors establishes the definition and direction of the trend. In Chapter 1, Pocock reflects back to McLuhan (1964) to ground the origins of globalization in the term “global village,” moves forward to Thomas Friedman’s definition in The Lexus and the Olive Tree (1999), and draws on Richard Tiplady’s description of the pace of change in One World or Many? The Impact of Globalisation in Mission (2003).

2. Evaluating the trend: Pocock draws on authors as diverse as Catholic Robert Schreiter (1990), Protestant Max Stackhouse (2000), Evangelical Bob Goudswaard (2001), and organizations such as the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA, 2003) to evaluate the trend from both conflicting and complementary perspectives. In each section, the author is clear in revealing his concern over the impact on missions. Pocock asks, “Should missionaries maintain their home-grown ministry methods in different cultural settings? Is what they do any different from what TNC’s do as they globalize industry and business?” (28).

3. Reflecting on the trend in light of Scripture and theology: The highlight of each chapter to me was the quality of theological reflection on each trend. The authors present a scholarly and balanced perspective on the Biblically positive and negative elements of that trend, tapping a rich range of theologians, missiologists, and economists as needed to provide topography to the discussion. The over fifty citations in each chapter make the reading slow-going, but enriching and mind-expanding.

4. Engaging the trend: what should ministry look like in a globalized world? Professors and mission leaders using this text will appreciate its structure. While most popular articles on globalization in the last decade have defined the trend and jumped quickly to “So what?” implications for missions, this section moves to action implications only through definition, description, evaluation and theological reflection.

Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell all bring impeccable credentials as field missionaries, scholars and professors at well-known seminaries and graduate schools in North America. This book is mandatory reading of every student of missiology in the West as well as the majority world. Every new missionary being sent should know of this resource. Most importantly, every mission executive leading a mission organization and every mission pastor facilitating church-based sending must comprehend these trends so their efforts do not encounter misunderstanding and ineffectiveness. Finally, field and team leaders would be greatly helped by mastering the principles covered in the chapters on Globalization, Multiple Spiritualities, Changing Motivations, Partnerships, Spiritual Warfare, and Contextualization. To effectively engage the emerging trends and issues, this volume is a clear mirror for detecting the changing face of global missions. ✍️