AVOIDING THE UGLY MISSIONARY: ANTHROPOLOGY AND SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

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On New Years Eve, 1974, a man named Jonathan McCrostie attended a Bible study we were having at our small house church in Stockton, California. We were a ragtag bunch of ex-hippies, ex-druggies, bikers, and young people who didn't feel comfortable in the institutional American church and were trying to live by the precepts, as we understood them, of the New Testament. Jonathan was visiting his parents who lived in Stockton, and somehow heard of our Bible study and decided to ring in the New Year with us. None of us knew Jonathan, but he brought a message to us that would change the trajectory of many of our lives. Jonathan was one of the leaders of a short-term mission organization called Operation Mobilization, or OM. On this night he shared with us the missionary task and challenged us to consider participating on OM. The following summer five of us from the house church went with this organization, working on a campaign they were carrying out in France. I spent a month in Brest and a month in Nancy, and came back changed forever. The following year I rejoined OM, and ended up spending two more years working in Austria, where we took Bibles and Christian literature to believers living behind the Iron Curtain, and one year on the ship Doulos visiting ports along the east coast of South America. I am an anthropologist today largely as a result of the experiences I had while with OM.

Since my time with OM, the increase in short-term missions has skyrocketed. An article in *Christianity Today* a few years ago (October 2003:30) stated that in 1979, my last year with OM, approximately 22,000 lay people from the United States were involved in short-term missions programs ranging in length from a few days to four years. Current estimates are that between 1 and 1.5 million people, from 40,000 churches, agencies, and schools, go on such programs annually (Priest, et al., 2006: 432. Livermore [2006:12], citing other sources, estimates that the number may be as high as 4 million). In the 1970s organizations like OM were viewed fairly negatively by traditional mission organizations, whereas today there is much greater acceptance of the role short-term missions can play in the overall missionary task. Indeed, many traditional mission organizations now have their own short-term programs that they use to expose people to the need and work of missionaries, and as a means of recruiting long-termers.

Still, short-term missions come under some pretty heavy criticism for their alleged "superficiality, cross-cultural ignorance, and poor stewardship of resources" (*Christianity Today*, October 2003:30). These criticisms led a coalition of organizations that sponsor short-term work, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, YWAM, InterVarsity, and the

Southern Baptist Convention, to develop a set of "Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission." Included in these Standards are the need for "appropriate training" and "thorough follow-up." It is these two areas I wish to focus on in this paper—preparing people to participate on short-term projects and helping them with their re-entry when they return. Specifically, I will explore how the "tools" of cultural anthropology can be used to help students better understand the cultures of the people they are going to and, in turn, their own.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

To begin, let me address how my interests developed in this area. As I previously indicated, I came to anthropology through missions. My OM experience gave me a lot of "data" to work with, but it was while attending classes at the U.S Center for World Mission in Pasadena, California that I was first exposed to the anthropological concepts that provided the analytical framework to interpret my mission experiences. Many of the guest lecturers, including Don Richardson, James Buswell, Robertson McQuilkin, and David Hesselgrave, applied to various degrees anthropological methods and concepts to the study of contemporary missions. The interplay between anthropology and missions caught my interest, and I knew at that time that I wanted to go on in anthropology—but always with an eye on missions. In my current position as professor of cultural anthropology at Asbury Theological Seminary I am able to focus more explicitly on the interplay between anthropology and missions, examining how the former can be applied to assist the latter.

During my fifteen years of teaching anthropology at a liberal arts college I was involved at various levels with students participating on short-term missions projects. It is through working with these students, as well as reflecting on my own experience with short-term missions, that I have come to appreciate the role cultural anthropology can play in helping people get the most out of their missions experience.

TWO RELATED PROBLEMS

As I've worked with students preparing for short-term missions projects I've detected two related problems that hinder their pre-departure preparation and on-field effectiveness: the first has to do with the inherent tension between the universal and particular nature of the Gospel, and the second is an emphasis on "doing" rather than "learning." I find that students interested in missions often focus on the universal nature of the Gospel—i.e., there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free--and either downplay or totally ignore the particular cultural and social context in which the people they hope to reach actually live. This is particularly true for the type of student I typically dealt with—white, middle-class, and from smaller towns in the Midwest. Take for example the issue of ethnic identity, my area of expertise in anthropology and one in which I offer several courses. For most of my students their ethnic ancestry plays no role in their day-to-day lives—indeed, it plays virtually no part in their self-identity whatsoever. As a result, it is difficult to get students to appreciate the foundational role such identities often play in the lives of people in most of the rest of the world, and how

these identities can affect almost every sphere of their lives—social, cultural, political, economic, etc. The assumption seems to be that since ethnicity is meaningless to the students, it is therefore meaningless for others as well. If more of my students came from minority populations in the United States, they would probably have a very different understanding of, and appreciation for, the role of ethnicity and race in daily life. But by being ignorant of, or ignoring, the importance of ethnic identity in the lives of the people they are going to "reach" with the Gospel, they may inadvertently offend the native population, resulting in a rather "cold" reception at best. I'll return to this point in a moment.

By focusing on doing rather than learning, students risk not understanding the local situation and therefore being less effective with what they understand to be their "task," i.e., sharing the Gospel with others. As the evangelical historian Mark Noll has noted, American evangelical Christians, reflecting their cultural context, value action over careful thought and analysis. He states that "its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended towards an oversimplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection" (1994:12). We can certainly see this characteristic among many who participate on short-term missions projects. Often when I hear presentations by students who have gone on such projects—over winter or spring breaks, summers—they tell of all they accomplished, and how many people were "saved" at the end of their one to four week experience. Far too seldom do I hear them speak of what they received from the local people, as if there was nothing to learn from the "natives." After all, the students were the ones with the Good News to share and the natives were in darkness. This was brought home to me a few years ago when my wife and I were helping with an evangelistic campaign being conducted by a local church in a small town in the Basque Country of Spain. A group of Campus Crusade for Christ students from the United States had come over to help with the campaign due to the fact that the church was showing the *Jesus* film in the local cinema. After being there for a few days one of the female students approached my wife and I expressing her frustration that, even though she had studied Spanish in high school and college for several years, she found that she could neither speak nor understand the language well enough to share the Gospel with the local people. She told us that since God had "called" her to work on this project, and since she couldn't "share" the Gospel with these people, she saw no reason why she should stay. My wife and I tried to convince her that perhaps God *had* called her to be there, but that He had something else in mind for her—perhaps He had something for her to *learn* about herself and others. I'm not sure how well she received this, but she did end up staying for the rest of the campaign.

The danger of focusing on the universal at the expense of the particular and on "doing" rather than "learning" is that students are then uncritical and unreflexive when it comes to the impact their own culture has on how they understand what the Gospel is, and how they present it to others. Ethnocentrism appears to be a universal phenomenon where the "assumed givens" of social life in a particular culture are believed to be "natural" and "good," whereas those of other cultures are viewed as "weird" and "wrong." There are enough stories about the ugly Americans who travel to other cultures and expect the natives to adjust to them—speak English, eat the same foods (thanks to the McDonaldization of the world this gets easier every day), dress like them, live on the

same time schedule, etc. Unfortunately, the same is true for many Americans who go on short-term missions projects; because they tend to be unreflective of their own culture, much of what is "given" to others is the Gospel neatly wrapped in American culture (see Loewen 1976).

SHORT-TERM MISSIONS AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Having outlined two related problems associated with Americans involved in short-term missions, I now want to examine how cultural anthropology provides the "tools" or perspective needed to help overcome these obstacles. I will look at how its holistic perspective, its emphasis on understanding the native's point of view, and its reflexive nature can provide a framework to help those going on short-term projects effectively deal with their ethnocentrism and be more effective in the missionary task.

Holism

One of the principle tenets of cultural anthropology is that different aspects of a society or culture cannot be examined in isolation; when anthropologists conduct fieldwork they typically have a particular question they are interested in exploring, but they realize that they have to understand that question in its broader context. For example, my research question had to do with the affect the Spanish immigrants to the Basque Country were having on Basque society and culture. Were they integrating or remaining separate? To what extent were they changing the local scene? How did they view the native population? How were they viewed by natives? Were the terms "immigrant" and "native" still meaningful as social categories? And so on. In pursuing answers to these questions I needed to understand the local political situation (i.e., Basque nationalism and Spanish nationalism), the economic situation (the changes in industrial output and the affect on jobs), the housing situation (how different barrios developed and how they affected intergroup relations), the voluntary associations (who belonged to which associations, and why), the local language policies (the Basque language vs. Spanish), and the educational system (who is educated where, and why), to name but a few. In cultural anthropology we refer to this as the holistic perspective; people don't live in worlds where these various elements are nicely segregated, and therefore we must study how all of these parts affect the particular problem we are interested in.

When the Campus Crusade group referred to above came to the Basque town of Tolosa to help with the evangelistic campaign, one of the things they did was to not only share the Gospel with people, but to share it in a way peculiar to Campus Crusade—they used "The Four Spiritual Laws." This was an evangelistic tool that developed on university campuses as a "bridge" to reach college students who are use to dealing with different laws, particularly in the natural sciences. In this context, to speak of "spiritual laws" was a connection students could make—"Just as there are natural laws, so, too, there are spiritual laws." Campus Crusade developed a tract that could be used to walk students through the "Four Laws."

However, the same context was not found in the small town of Tolosa. The Basque people suffered for nearly forty years under the oppressive laws established by the Franco regime. These laws prohibited Basques from using their own language or having any other external symbols reflecting their distinct culture and identity. This caused Basque culture to go underground, and relegated the language to the home. Now, at the time of the evangelistic campaign in 1984, less than a decade after the death of Franco and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, here were young Americans (a nationality not held in very high esteem in the Basque Country) stopping people on the street and trying to read to them from their "Four Spiritual Laws" tract. There is little doubt that when Basques heard the word "laws" it had a very different connotation to them than it did to their foreign visitors. In addition, when debriefing after a day of evangelism in Tolosa, one of the Campus Crusade students described how he had been invited by a man to go to a local pub and, after making clear to the other Campus Crusaders that he had consumed no wine with the gentleman, they had had a wonderful conversation. Still, the student stated with a sense of failure, he hadn't been able to share the laws with him yet, but hoped to meet with him again to do so. Here we have a situation where, because the students had no understanding of Basque culture or history, and were not only focusing on the universal aspect of the Gospel but on the universality of the message of the "Four Spiritual Laws," they were inadvertently communicating a very different message to their listeners than they had intended. As Loewen notes, "Differing cultural backgrounds and their concomitant presuppositions will cause their people to *hear* a differing content from the same message" (1979:160).

From my own experience, I recall walking around the streets of Buenos Aires in 1979, thinking how much it reminded me of European cities and how it was unlike other cities in Colombia and Venezuela we had visited on the Doulos. I was totally unaware of the fact that at that time people were "disappearing" from those same streets, never to be seen again. Politically it was not that different from other corrupt and totalitarian regimes in Latin America. How can one communicate the Gospel effectively when he or she is unaware of the broader context in which people are living their lives?

The Natives' Point of View

As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has so poetically stated, humans are suspended in "webs of significance" they themselves have spun, and as such, the task of cultural anthropology is "an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973:5). In order to understand the great diversity of meaning embodied in different cultures, anthropologists attempt to get at the natives' point of view, or, as Geertz puts it, "trying to figure out what the devil [the natives] think they are up to" (1983:58). This is certainly no easy task, as any anthropologist can attest, but if it is native meaning we are after then we must put in the time and effort necessary to approximate this meaning.

An example from my own experience might help illustrate what can happen when we're ignorant of local meanings. In the late 1970s I took a trip to Turkey with two other Americans. We were with Operation Mobilization at the time, and had traveled through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria distributing Christian literature in a clandestine manner along the way. When we arrived in Turkey we went to a bank to exchange money. One of my friends and I took a seat on a small couch while the other went up to the teller. In front of

us was a coffee table with two chairs facing us on the other side. Shortly after we sat down a Turkish gentleman entered the bank and took a seat across from us. As we two Americans interacted with one another my friend put his foot up on the edge of the coffee table, as many Americans do. The Turk on the other side glared at us, stood up, said something in Turkish which we didn't understand, and proceeded to knock my friend's foot off of the table. We were shocked; what had just happened, and why? The best meaning we could give at the time was that Turks must not like people putting their feet on furniture. It wasn't until a few days later we were told that, by showing the bottom of his shoe, my friend had greatly insulted the Turkish gentleman. And, in a culture that puts a high premium on honor and shame, this man evidently felt compelled to defend his honor in the face of this obvious insult. We had absolutely no frame of reference to know how insulting my friend had been, nor why the Turk acted in what we considered to be a violent and aggressive manner.

Traditionally, missionaries have outshone anthropologists when it comes to the amount of time they spend with a people, if not the effort. But when it comes to short-term missions this is a different story. Far too often, I'm afraid, there has not been enough effort given to prepare short-termers to understand the meanings of the local cultures they will be entering, which can lead not only to being less effective, but can actually harm the missionary cause. Let me illustrate. A few years ago there was a group of students who went with a short-term mission team to China. Each American lived with a Chinese student at a college catering to China's ethnic minorities. They were to live together for over a month, spending time with their roommates and trying to share the Gospel in word and deed. After being there for a couple of weeks the American students decided they would have a foot-washing ceremony to show humility and servanthood to their Chinese counterparts. The Chinese students balked at this idea, but the Americans insisted, carrying out what was to them a very meaningful act. It was meaningful to the Chinese students as well—unfortunately in a very negative way; they interpreted the American students' actions as an indication that they thought the Chinese students were dirty and needed to bathe. Whatever rapport had developed was lost, and many of the Chinese students wanted nothing to do with their American roommates after this act.

One of the leaders of the mission trip to China wrote to me with examples of how our students had been culturally insensitive. He stated,

> The major issue is misattribution which stems from a basic failure to enter the point of view of the other culture. The … students consistently interpreted their Chinese roommates' behavior from their U.S. point of view and thus made faulty interpretations of behavior and misattributed motives to those behaviors….We need to anticipate the places where our cultures differ and be ready to be proactive.

He asked for my help in "stressing how important it is that [the] students go as culture learners."

Of course, students can purchase books like *Do's and Taboos Around the World* (Axtell 1993) which can help them become more aware of taboo hand gestures in different cultures (anyone remember Dan Quayle giving the "O. K." sign in Latin America?), gift giving and receiving, jargon and idioms, and perhaps even what showing

the bottom of your shoe means in Middle Eastern cultures. But, while these aspects of culture are not unimportant (as my Turkish experience illustrates) it is imperative that students also understand the deeper, more historical aspects of cultures as well—what has often been referred to as "worldview" in the missiological literature (see, for example, Kraft 1996:11). I have overseen several student short-term missions projects to Mexico, usually done for a week or two during spring or winter break. One of the things I try to get my students to understand is the role honor and shame, patron/client relations, and limited good play in the everyday lives of people in Mexico—how these create "webs of significance" that affect all of life, including how the Americans themselves will be perceived. I tell the students of the first time I became aware of the concept of limited good. A colleague (who is a Latin Americanist) and I were interviewing an immigrant from El Salvador who had settled a few years earlier with his family in a small Iowan town. When we asked him if he had many Latino friends he said "no," and went on to explain that whenever he and his family experienced difficulties, the other Latinos were happy; it was the Anglos who offered him and his family comfort and support. When I later asked my colleague about this he explained to me the idea of "limited good," a cultural construct that is below the surface in many Latin American countries—i.e., that there is a limited amount of "good" to go around, so if something bad is happening to someone else, it means that there is more good out there potentially for you. Our narrator's experience shows how this concept can affect daily interaction and the formation of friendships.

Another cultural difference with Mexico that students always notice right away is how time is conceived—Mexicans are always "late" or "wasting time." What they often fail to recognize, however, is how time in Mexico ties into broader cultural constructs such as honor and status. I have students read a chapter from Glen Dealy's book, *The Latin Americans* (1992), entitled "Homo Políticus," in which the author goes into some detail on how Mexicans and other Latin Americans often manipulate time as a way of establishing their status and social ascendancy in relation to others; making people wait on you is a way of exerting power over them. After a conversation with a Mexican student in which he learned that their persistent tardiness was intentional, Dealy writes,

> This exchange marked a coming of age with regard to the Latin American way of life. Despite having previously vacationed and lived in Central and South America, only at that moment did I truly "see." As if through religious enlightenment, my frame of reference changed; however haltingly, I began to grasp the mainsprings of that culture….The Latin Everyman dreams not of winning impersonal deference through faceless material accumulation, as does the capitalist, but of directly earning and receiving esteem (1992:54, 55).

After reading this chapter, a student planning to go to Mexico asked the insightful and important question, "How will they view us as Americans?" He had come to realize that they, too, could be used as a way for certain people they encountered in Mexico to earn and receive esteem. Whereas the Americans would almost certainly focus on the material poverty of the people—indeed, one of their main tasks was to help with the construction of a house—many of the Mexicans, particularly those with a degree of local power,

would be focusing on honor and esteem. These are two fundamentally different ways of constructing the situation that profoundly affect the meaning given to social interaction.

A word of caution is perhaps warranted here. While recognizing these deeper, "worldview" aspects of a culture, students also have to be aware of the fact that not everyone in a particular culture acts the same, thinks the same, or gives the same meanings to events around them. This should be somewhat self-evident—all a person has to do is be cognizant of the diversity found within his or her own culture—but probably needs to be made explicit. For over ten years, during summer breaks, I directed ethnographic field schools with American students in the Basque Country and Wales. The main question I had students address was how Basqueness or Welshness was defined. As students explored this issue they became aware that identity was quite complex, and people defined Basqueness or Welshness in different ways employing a variety of criteria. What the students found was that people often defined ethnic identity in a way that included themselves—i.e., if the spoke Basque or Welsh, then language would often be the key defining characteristic; if they didn't, then place of birth, emotional attachment to the country, political affiliation, or any combination of these would take precedence. Through this research students came to appreciate the diversity of opinion and belief found within the cultures being studied. Awareness of this diversity does not negate the deeper cultural constructs, it just mitigates the belief in a universal uniformity (see Douglass 2000 for a discussion of essentialism in anthropology).

Approximating the natives' point of view has very practical implications for missions in general, and short-term missions in particular. Attempting to "enter into," or understand, the natives' point of view will not only make sharing the Gospel more effective as students are better able to grasp the natives' "felt needs," but will also help them develop a truly humble attitude as they take on the role of learners.

Reflexivity

One of the metaphors for cultural anthropology is a two-edged sword—that is, studying other cultures causes one to reflect on and analyze one's own. Since much of culture is tacit, or below the surface, this reflexive aspect of anthropology is quite important in understanding our own underlying cultural assumptions. For example, one of the things students learn in going to China is the difference between egocentric and sociocentric societies. On many occasions students returning from China have commented on how, when they asked their roommates what they thought about a particular subject, the answer they received was "We Chinese think…" rather than "I think…." For many of the Americans this was baffling. However, once they returned home they could think about how that response reflected the "communal" worldview of the Chinese in contrast with their own "individual" worldview.

Still, although being exposed to another culture may cause a person to reflect on his or her own, that reflection is not naturally critical. Ethnocentrism is often subtle and difficult to break. I find this to be true in the courses I teach as well as with students who go on short-term mission projects. All too often both blades of the two-edged sword are used against the culture one is in or studying. For those immersed in another culture this can be a manifestation of culture shock. I recall the difficulty an American roommate of mine in Austria had with the local culture. Regularly he would compare things Austrian

with their American counterparts, with the former always coming up short. I didn't know what to call it at the time, but I knew he was not adjusting well when he came into our room one evening ranting and raving about the "stupid" Austrian traffic lights that blinked green before turning red and showed both red and yellow prior to turning green. I have to admit that at the time I was more concerned about an exit strategy from the room than I was with the symptoms of his culture shock.

Returning to the short-termers in China, not all of them initially handled the egocentric/sociocentric worldview differences well. The director of the program informed me that several of the female students complained that their Chinese roommates were being dishonest and duplicitous because they "refused to tell us what they were really feeling." Rather than seeing this as a cultural difference, the American students interpreted it in an individualistic way and took it quite personally. So, though reflexivity is one of the hallmarks of an anthropological perspective, it does not necessarily come natural or easy, which emphasizes the need for pre-departure and re-entry training. For students to get the most out of their experiences, they need to be able to anticipate where cultural differences might lead to misunderstandings and they need assistance in making sense out of their experiences once they return.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter I have given examples, both my own and those of others, that largely reflect the damage that can be done by short-term missionaries being unaware of the local culture they are going to and focusing too much on doing rather than learning. Let me close with a more positive example. Megan was a student I had the pleasure of working with during her undergraduate years. In the fall of her sophomore year she took an anthropology course that focused on interacting with an ethnic or racial community different from her own. Megan did her project among Sudanese refugees at the Lutheran Social Services in Des Moines, IA. This was her first exposure to refugees from the Sudan. The next semester she took a course entitled "Ethnicity and Nationalism" in which she studied the civil war in the Sudan for her final project. She also took "Ethnographic Field Methods" that semester which allowed her to interview Sudanese refugees she previously had met in Des Moines. Megan had also decided she was going to participate on a summer mission project in Cairo sponsored by InterVarsity. I recall how excited she was when she found that a number of Sudanese she was working with and interviewing in Des Moines had actually spent time at the refugee camp she would be working at in just a few months. In a presentation she gave the following fall regarding her Cairo experience, Megan talked about how the academic work she had done prior to the experience had prepared her to work among the refugees. One thing that was especially helpful to her was knowing about the different ethnic groups from the Sudan that were represented at the refugee camp. She was aware of how important their local languages and cultures were to them; in other words, they did not necessarily see themselves as Sudanese, but as Dinka, Nuer, etc. However, the common suffering, and fighting a common enemy, had drawn these various groups closer together. From her Cairo experience she came to see that not only does God have a "heart for the world," but He is also concerned about injustice. She said that her definition of joy had been redefined through the experience. That same fall Megan once again worked with

Sudanese refugees in Des Moines, and was able to use the little Arabic she had learned in Cairo to communicate with new arrivals who spoke very little English. When asked about her future plans, Megan said that she now wanted to work with refugees, but probably outside the United States. Currently she is working with international students on an American university campus with InterVarsity, and loving the experience.

Applying an anthropological perspective to the missionary task is not new in missiology; indeed, it was 26 years ago that I first was exposed to this application at the U.S. Center for World Mission. However, in my experience with missionaries in the field, and in working with short-termers at a liberal arts college, I still find this perspective to be largely lacking. Whatever the reasons for this, I believe the conceptual tools of cultural anthropology discussed in this presentation—holism, the natives' point of view, and reflexivity--can help equip our students to more fully appreciate the role that local culture plays in how people understand everything around them, including foreign missionaries. It can also help them understand the role their own culture plays in how *they* give meaning to the world around them—including the world of Christianity. In this way short-term mission projects have a much greater chance of being successful as the participants are able to make the Gospel "Good News" both to those they are going to as well as themselves. After all, in order to contextualize the Gospel, you must first have an understanding of the cultural context from which you come, and the one to which you are going.

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