

Course: CS 502 – Church as a Social and Cultural Institution      Date: 03/26/23

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Topic: Conference Interaction Paper

The Northeast Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) Regional Conference was held virtually on Saturday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The Conference Theme is “Educating for Contemporary Mission”

The Conference commenced at 9:00am with a welcome address, a short devotion, and instructions for the conference by Marcus Dean, the President of EMS.

At 9:10am, Jim Harries took the center stage and spoke on the topic “Theological Education with an Indigenous Gait, Africa”. Jim highlighted on the fact that in the Western culture while envy is repressed or appears not to be an issue because the society is developed, in Africa the concept of envy is not taken lightly at all. He pointed out that in Africa if a woman is beautiful and dresses well than a neighbor’s wife that could be a source of envy. That neighbor’s wife could envy this woman who dresses well and is beautiful. Therefore, Africans protect themselves from this evil which they attribute to witchcraft activity. Consequently, they may get amulets, talismans or find ways of protecting themselves. Jim revealed that the indigenous gait is very crucial because everything is tied to the culture of the people. Female circumcision is practiced so the women stick their husbands and not be promiscuous. Africans would also explain poverty as a result of witchcraft activity. For this reason, any theological education in Africa, should take a closer look at all these issues in order to make it meaningful for the African Christian. For theological education to be transformational and meaningful especially in Africa, the indigenous gait must not be ignored, and westerners need to tread cautiously. Jim’s session ended after 30 minutes, and Dr. Ed Smither took over from him at 9:40am.

Dr. Ed Smither spoke on the “Plenary: Reflections on John Stott’s Method of Equipping for Mission”. Ed. Smither, described the lifestyle of John Stott, his discipleship habits, and how he mentored global leaders. Ed Smither remarked that “becoming a Christian is one thing and being a Christian is another thing. Ed. Smither revealed that Stott was an Anglican Evangelical in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who never married, lived a simple lifestyle. He lived in a modest apartment, had a small car, had one coat, one shoe and whenever he travelled, he would travel economy class, stay with friends in their apartments, instead of hotels. He always found a way of saving money for missions and evangelism. He had a spiritual rhythm of having personal devotion, one hour of bible studies, special times for prayer, one or two days of retreat, inviting younger pastors for bible studies, and sometimes stepping out to watch birds. Ed Smither mentioned that Stott always developed friendships and he mentored many global leaders in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He had the practice of listening to others without engaging in power struggle with them. Thus, he learnt to restructure power by allowing others to lead. Ed Smither pointed out that though Stott was a westerner, he chose to live a modest lifestyle and he gave all his royalties at the time of his death.

Ed Smither’s session ended at 10:50 and there was a brief period of break.

At 11:05am, Peter Ndaita, presented on “Faith and Grit: Charles Hurlburt and the expansion of the African Inland Mission (1901-1925). Ndaita provided a reflection on Charles Hurlburt’s lifestyle that he lived from 1860 to 1936. He was born in Ohio, California and he determined to embark upon the African Inland Mission to witness and evangelize. Ndaita recounted that Charles Hurlburt moved his whole family to Kenya in Africa. With the

construction of Kenya - Uganda railways, he planned to have mission stations all along to Congo and move the administrative headquarters to Nairobi. Ndaita discussed that Hurlbert was committed to Prayer, holiness, passion for missions, education and dealing with social issues like female genital circumcision, polygamy, and health. Hurlbert believed in the contextualization of the gospel, so he started a Bible School and a printing press where the Bible and Christian literature were printed in local language. Ndaita revealed that Hurlbert started the Rift Valley Academy (RVA) to educate missionaries who would advance the gospel in the region. Last but not the least, Ndaita, pointed out that Hurlbert mobilized and collaborated with other organizations like Scotland Mission Society to support African Inland Mission. His presentation ended at 11:35am.

Next to speak was James R. Fryer who talked on “Calvinism as a Theological Catalyst for Biblical Instruction and Subsequent Cultural Transformation”. Fryer stated that Calvinism as a reformed Theology emphasized individual and societal transformations. John Calvin, born in France developed this Christian theology. Fryer mentioned that Calvin saw the calling and the vocation of the believer as ordained by God. Similarly, the power to save is also ordained by God. Fryer discussed that Calvinism believes God builds His Kingdom from transformed lives and His desire is to see the world transformed by the gospel – Family life, domestic and cultural transformation). Calvinism asserted that working and having good work ethics honors God because God created us to work. This Calvinistic belief challenged monasticism that it is contrary to scripture. Fryer pointed out that Calvinist hold the belief and conviction that the people of God need to live out in the society, work hard and let the gospel transform lives.

There was a lunch break from 12:05 – 12:45pm and this was followed by another presentation by Richard Cho. Cho touched on “The Influence of Culture in Theological Education for Contemporary Mission: An Analysis of American Theological Education from an Iranian Perspective”. Cho remarked that Theology in the West is removed from culture. Thus, to say Theological Education has been presented by the West as a culturally insensitive concept. Cho hinted that presenting Theological Education could take a “Cognitive Style” and have no “Contextual” relevance or Theological Education could be contextualized. In a study with some Iranian Christians, he discovered that the participants want Theological Education to be contextualized and appeal to the heart. Using the Resurrection theories about Jesus – “the Swoon”, “the Theft” and “the Hallucination theory” to explain Jesus’ resurrection, these Iranian believers said these do not make any sense. Cho revealed that what these Iranian Christians felt would be more effective because of the way Christianity is presented to a culture which is predominantly Muslim is to contextualize it and appeal to the heart. Cho concluded that issues like these have serious implications for Western Theological educators.

At 1:15pm BJ Jeong picked it up from Cho and spoke on “Engaging Theological Schools in Southeast Asia.” Jeong did this study in Indonesia. He was born in Korea but grew up in Indonesia. He stated that Indonesia has a population of 279 million people with about 87% of the population being Muslims. There is freedom of religion in the country, but the public education is dominated by Islamic reading, translations, and Quranic recitals. Islamic education is embedded in the education curriculum such that all children spend most part of the day learning this. In this study, Jeong found that the best way to teach Indonesian Christians about

God is to use the name “Allah”. These Christian can connect to God better when Allah is used because of their knowledge and understanding of who “Allah” is. Again, this shows how contextualization of theological education is crucial in places like Indonesia. Jeong presentation ended at 1:45pm and there a brief period of break from 1:45 to 2:00pm.

Daniel Ahn was the last to present at 2:00pm. He spoke on the topic “American Missionaries’ Education of the Korean Historical Myth and Their Discovery of the Trinitarian and Incarnation Analogy in the Tan-gun Myth”. Ahn disclosed that Tan-gun was the symbol of unity and community connectedness in Korea. Tan-gun is believed to be the legendary founder of Korea. Ahn pointed out that Koreans prefer to call God “Hananim” (The Great One, or the Lord of Heaven. His son Hwanung saddened by the evil in the hearts of people begged the Father (Hananim) to let him go to the earth, live and work to help humankind. Ahn asserted that Koreans have a strong monotheistic belief, trinitarian and incarnational beliefs which are all found in the Tan-Gun myth. He also discussed Matteo Ricci’s ‘The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven’ and affirmed that God is worshipped everywhere. The Chinese prefer to call God “Shangti” while for the Korean it’s Hananim. Indeed, this information are relevant for missionary education, evangelism, and theological education as a whole.

There was a brief period for questions and answers after each presentation. The last presentation ended at 2:30pm and Mark Dean shared the closing remarks .

In considering all these presentation on the theme “Educating for Contemporary Mission”, I think there are many takeaways that can shape the way missionary activities should be carried out in the twenty-first century.

All the speakers touched on very important and critical areas that are worth considering in contemporary missions. Clearly, one thing stood out that that Contemporary Mission must seriously consider contextualization to spread the gospel. Culture differs from one nation to another, one region to another region, one place to another place and one ethnic group to another ethnic group. Therefore, understanding the culture of the people helps to promote the gospel. Missionaries have been criticized for their missionary strategies and approaches especially as they move from their culture to another culture. Over the years missionaries have been criticized of being culturally insensitive in many parts of the world. Many argue that Western Missionaries disregard local cultures and impose their culture on the local people. As discussed by Jim Harries in his article “*Theological Education with an Indigenous Gait, Africa*” it is important for Europeans to thread carefully in their missional activities in Africa because there is a “why” for whatever Africans do. Consequently, it would be helpful to consider the indigenous gait in any theological education.

Dana Robert in her book *Christian Mission - How Christianity Became a World Religion* pointed out that both critics and defenders of missions in the nineteenth century assumed that missions tried to convert people and change cultures. But mission supporters struck back against racial determinism by insisting that all people were created in God’s image, were capable of understanding the gospel, and had the rational power to choose to follow God. Many

missionaries argued that they brought “civilization” and social improvements through modern schools, hospitals, the elevation of women, and ideas of democratic governance.<sup>1</sup> Robert disclosed that many leading missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s therefore argued that the purpose of missions was not to change people’s culture, but simply to introduce them to Jesus Christ. Culture change occur as a result of encounter with the gospel, but in ways that grow naturally from within the indigenous worldview rather than forced from the outside.<sup>2</sup>

One other takeaway from the presentations, was the Calvinist position on work ethics. As mentioned by James Fryer, Calvinist emphasize that work honors God. This belief is important especially in an era where some prophets and pastors do not want to work but rely solely on the church to support them financially. Paul in his letter admonished the church of Thessalonica to work with their hands - ... and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody<sup>3</sup> (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

One other thing that struck me was the reflection on the life of John Stott, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican Evangelical who intentionally led a simple life in the midst of plenty to save money for ministry work and also to support the poor. Though a Westerner, he was not moved by materialism and what the culture promotes but preferred to lead a simple life and shared with

<sup>1</sup>Robert, Dana *Christian Mission - How Christianity Became a World Religion* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 89

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 90

<sup>3</sup>*NIV Life Application Study Bible* ((Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 2019

others what he was blessed with. He mentored many global leaders and formed the habit of listening to these leaders than always doing the talking. I believe his lifestyle is a legacy for many Christians who are becoming self-centered and materialistic.

In a nutshell, the Northeast Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) Regional Conference was very educational, informative and relevant for contemporary missions since earlier missionary activities did not pay much attention to contextualization of their missionary work.

## **References**

*NIV Life Application Study Bible* ((Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011)

Robert, Dana *Christian Mission - How Christianity Became a World Religion* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009),

