

## ASM 2012 Meeting on The Future of the Discipline of Missiology

### Two Resources Needed for Missiological Theory Leading to a Three-Step Approach in Producing Missiological Theory

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Although missiology is basically a theological discipline, it employs a variety of academic disciplines that use secular methodologies. The social sciences, now increasingly used in missiological research, employ the specifically secular methodologies of science. Historical and Area Studies, traditionally important in missiology, likewise are often if not primarily secular in approach. The two resources, namely secular and theological studies, lead to a three-step approach in producing missiological theory: (1) Identification of questions in missiology in need of missiological theory; (2) Analysis of data obtained through secular disciplines; and (3) Development of missiological theory in which empirical data and theology are woven together. The three-step approach makes it more possible for missiologists to communicate with people in non-theological fields during the second step in order to verify findings. It also aids people of differing theological perspectives to communicate with each other about empirical realities that are important for missiological theory, as in ASM. The paper sets forth what is important for producing theory, the nature of the two resources for missiological theory, and the advantages of using a three-step approach in producing missiological theory.

#### Producing Missiological Theory

The term “theory” has a broad and a narrow meaning. In the broad sense missiological theory might mean systematic statements of truth or the beliefs and knowledge in missiology as a field. David Bosch (2005:431) points out in his magisterial treatment, *The Theology of Mission*, that in addition to truth (theory) and justice (praxis); people also need beauty or the “rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery.” He is using theory in the broad sense. I am proposing making use of a narrower definition of theory. It may seem pretentious since missiology and even the social sciences are not the same as the natural sciences that use the narrower definition, but I believe using the narrower definition of theory can make a contribution to developing missiological theory.

According to Webster's (1975:1209) short definition, theory is an "analysis of facts in relation to each other." This has clearly been influenced by the scientific approach. Thus, missiological theory can be seen as the analysis of mission facts in relation to each other. These facts may be known as "variables" for research purposes, as pretentious as this may sound, but variation in phenomena is a very good place to begin theory development and research. It is important to note that in the Webster definition, as well as in the longer definitions in other dictionaries, the emphasis for the meaning of theory is that it consists primarily of explanation. This is often overlooked by those who make use of only the broad definition of theory. In the narrow definition of theory, description or statements of truth have their place primarily as background for clarifying what needs to be explained. Thus, for example, while case studies and various statistics are important for descriptive background, it is important to use such data to seek explanations that can be applied more broadly. The same can be said of various histories of missions and responses to missions, both of which contain numerous facts or variables needing explanation. The purpose of developing missiological theory as explanation is to aid in making predictions regarding the effect of ongoing mission work and response to that work in the present. This paper, therefore, advocates the usefulness of thinking of theory as consisting primarily of explanation, to be more exact attempted explanation, not simply as systematic knowledge or information.

From this narrower understanding of theory, I propose that the *development* of missiological theory should mean primarily seeking to establish explanations for what has taken place in the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*) since Abraham and accelerated over the last two thousand years since the coming of Jesus Christ and is continuing to take place as God works in the world. Although this is basically a theological task, the Mission of God is expressed in numerous

empirically observable missions carried out by Christians and Christian bodies in the world together with the responses to those missions in numerous times and places. In addition to the sending and receiving aspects of missions, it is also important to examine the various events and processes taking place in the world in societal and social relationships that have affected the spread of the gospel, in some cases positively and in other cases negatively. Since God is working through all things in all times and places, missiological theory must incorporate all things, beginning with the non-empirical or supernatural and incorporating the empirical.

### **Two Kinds of Missiological Realities**

The realities, facts, or variables examined in developing missiological theory are both theological and empirical. In regard to the latter, empirical realities are those that belong to the natural universe, theologically referred to as the “created universe,” including the whole history of the world and of humanity. Empirical realities can be examined by methods that are essentially secular. In the case of the natural and social sciences the methods developed are specifically secular, meaning that they make no reference to God as a causative force. It is important, especially in considering the social sciences and contrary to much opinion, to recognize that not all of empirical facts are directly observable. For example, social scientists are very interested in human interior life, including human values, motivations, and emotional life. Much of religious life, of course, is interior to humans. Nevertheless, human interior life has external expressions that are directly observable. These are important indicators for analyzing human behavior and developing theories about that behavior. In addition to the sciences, many other academic studies of the world important for missiology, such as history and area studies, take a secular approach in not considering God as a causative force in the world.

Theological facts are found in total reality, the most important part of which is the eternal and ever present God known through God's self revelation. The uncreated God and God's creation, ever going on, are the two parts of total reality. One of the most important beliefs in theology is that God is active in the world. (Another important belief is that there is active opposition to God in human history.) Nevertheless, the central belief in Christian missiology is in the *Missio Dei*, the Mission of God that God is carrying out in the world. While theology is rooted in the non-empirical or the uncreated universe, it must incorporate the empirical world where God is working. Thus, theology is necessarily more comprehensive than science because it incorporates the valid findings of science, but places them in the light of God's self-revelation. (Philosophy is also more comprehensive than science because it places science within the context of human beliefs about total reality.) Thus science cannot incorporate theology, but theology must incorporate valid scientific findings, which are open to public scientific examination. Science, of course, is not a fixed body of knowledge, but is constantly changing in the light of new findings. This makes the theological incorporation of science a very dynamic process. Although there is debate on the subject, theology also is not an entirely fixed subject, but there is strong evidence that new theological understandings are constantly taking place, for example, changed Christian understandings of race, women, government, and nature (in which humans are seen to be a very small part.) At this point I simply want to recognize that due to the two kinds of facts to be considered in producing missiological theory, there are two resources necessary for Christian missiological theory: (1) theology based on God's self revelation and (2) the created universe that all humans experience. My own view is that it is most useful of the two resources can be recognized as qualitatively different and requiring distinct methodologies. In the book, *Introduction to Missiological Research Design*, (Elliston et al 2011), the influence of

scientific methodologies is seen in the many useful research approaches suggested. However, theology, although given a primary position, also tends to be placed alongside or even mixed with other disciplines throughout the book. I believe it is more useful to maintain a certain demarcation between the theological and other approaches that need to be and usually are secular in approach. Recognizing the qualitative difference in the two resources and methodologies associated with them leads to a three-step process in developing missiological theory that begins and ends with missiology, but incorporates valid secular empirical studies in between. The created or empirical universe is a gift from God containing regularities and patterns that can be studied resulting in new knowledge and technologies to benefit humanity, but unfortunately have also been used to harm humanity. Of course, when it comes to the human behavior aspect of creation that is important in missiology and in social scientific and historical studies, the regularities and patterns are more difficult to examine than they are in inanimate nature.

### **Beginning and Ending with the Theological Comprehensive Resource for Missiology**

Christian missiology is basically based on interpretation of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which make up the Christian Bible. Nevertheless, the Bible is interpreted according to the faith of interpreters, which faith is in turn based on the Bible. If this sounds circular, it is because it is circular. The theological method is a circular method, which is nevertheless necessary given the nature of revelation. That is, revelation is from God and gives with it faith, which returns to God. There is a knowledge and even a rational or reasoned content to faith, but it is not primarily intellectual knowledge nor is faith based on reason; it is the knowledge that goes with a personal faith relationship. The intellectual knowledge part of faith, just as the personal knowledge main part, is variable and fallible because it is in humans and expressed by

humans. People bring their faith to the Bible in order to interpret the Bible, but that faith should be constantly guided and corrected from the Bible, as well as continually inspired and strengthened, all of this in the community of God's people and over time, so far of the whole written Scriptures accepted by Christians since about the close of first century. The authority of the Bible for Christians is based on the authority of God given to Jesus Christ as stated in Matthew 28:18: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And the sufficiency of the Bible is based on the sufficiency of the death and resurrection of Christ for our salvation.

The Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is offered to all believers to aid in interpreting the Bible in the community of faith. Very important words are given in the Gospel of John regarding the work of the Spirit in interpretation. In John 16:12-15 we read:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

This passage shows that intellectual knowledge gained from the Bible is not complete and there is always more for Christians to learn and express. At the same time, it makes clear that what is learned in the future will be centered on Christ and completely consistent with all that Christ has taught and demonstrated about the truth revealed by God through him as recorded in

the Bible. This passage enables us to understand why the Bible has been interpreted by Christians within the whole Christian Community to which the Holy Spirit was given and why Christians have come to understand truths not explicitly set forth in the Bible, as noted above. Experiences in the Church as a whole and in human history, as guided by faith in Jesus Christ and knowledge that grows from that faith through the study of the Bible, have clearly been important in gaining new theological understandings of many aspects of life, for example, with race, women, government, and nature, as noted above.

Theological-missiological understandings require a special kind of perception only available through faith. In the Bible this is called “seeing and really seeing and hearing and really hearing.” Important key Biblical passages speak to this “perception of faith” that is essential for missiology. The Biblical call in the three passages, Isaiah 6:9-13; Matthew 13:13-15; Acts 28:26-28 is to hear and really hear and see and really see. These are the ears and eyes of faith that incorporate and go beyond natural and social scientific observation and lead to “understandings” that cannot be obtained simply by the secular scientific methodologies.

It is necessary to say “understandings” because it is clear that within the Church there have developed various “communities of faith” with particular teachings and emphases in their theologies that include different ways of recognizing the authority of the revelation of God through Christ and in the Bible. One of the contributions of the missions of the various faith communities and the missiologies that they represent is that there has developed an increasingly clear recognition of the *Missio Dei* of God in the world. David Bosch (1991: 389) noted in his classic work, “During the past half a century or so there has been a subtle but nevertheless decisive shift toward understanding mission as *God’s* mission.” Although often competing at their home bases, from the time of the Monophysite and Nestorian cooperation in Central Asia

(Moffett 1992:207-209) to the increasing cooperation of Church communities in the twentieth century in carrying out missions, Christians have found that they could work most effectively when cooperating with other groups of Christians. This has implicitly drawn attention to the fact that it is God in Christ who is the author and active worker in carrying out the Mandate for Mission found throughout the Bible and specifically at the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts. God is doing this work through many different groups and in many different ways. The believers' task is to allow God to work through them and not to hinder God's work.

It is now clearer than ever before that the development of all Christian missiological theory must draw on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as found in the Old and New Testaments and as the Holy Spirit has led Christians through the Universal Christian Community and in human history over the last two thousand years. This is the first and last comprehensive resource for missiological theory. It is the resource from which the questions for developing missiological theory should arise, but is also the resource from which missiological theory gains its eventual formulation. The first step, therefore, in developing missiological theory is to ask questions based on this resource, but the final step in this task is to return to theology for forming the statements of missiological theory. In between these two steps it is important to examine the created world with its empirical realities. The second resource that is used in the second step in developing missiological theory will be taken up next.

### **The Empirical Resource to be Used in the Second Step in Developing Missiological Theory**

The second resource, which should be incorporated by the theological resource is what can be learned from: (1) The numerous missions carried out by Christians as they sought to be used by God in God's mission; (2) The wide variety of responses to the missions carried out by



Christians; and (3) The events and processes taking place in the world that have affected both mission efforts and responses to those efforts. These three areas for examination are very much part of the empirical world, particularly the human part of it, which can be examined by historians, social scientists, and other scholars and is also under ordinary human observation. In other words these aspects of the empirical world can be examined by secular methodologies that have been developed in the sciences and other studies, especially history.

The discipline of history is central to clarifying what has taken place among humans over the period in which human activity can be investigated, but for Christian missiology it is especially the last two thousand years of the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ in succeeding waves that is important. However, in the last approximately two hundred years, the social sciences have been developed, which introduce new tools for examining human behavior to supplement the older discipline of history. The social sciences include economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and psychology. In addition, like the natural sciences with engineering and medicine, the social sciences have a number of areas of applied studies such as communication, education, linguistics, social work, organization, and management.

Although the social sciences build on historical knowledge, they introduce a special emphasis on developing theories or explanations of human behavior. The disciplines of history and the social sciences, though distinct, are to a great extent overlapping and certainly can and do make use of one another. In carrying out research both disciplines seek to develop knowledge that is free from the introduction of supernatural explanations and even, as far as possible, of human opinions or normative perspectives, known technically as “bias” in scientific studies. There is debate as to how far the latter can be controlled or ruled out, but nevertheless it can be

stated that in general academic studies seek to be objective regarding observable facts. The one point, which even scientists must admit, at which the normative views of the researcher come into play is in the selection of the topic of study. This is obviously where missiologists begin with the first step mentioned above in developing missiological theory.

I will not attempt to describe the general and specific approaches of scientific methodologies, which can be seen in many text books. I have already emphasized the importance of seeking explanations (theory) and the ruling out of any supernatural causes in those explanations. Although the social sciences are sometimes criticized for seeking too much to mimic the natural sciences (Clarke and Primo 2012), it is probably more important to understand the norms guiding the work of both the natural and social sciences. Probably the best description of these norms were given by Robert Merton ([1942] 1973: 268-278). The norms form the “ethos of science” or its “institutional imperatives” and were identified initially as *universalism, communism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism*. In my (1999:xviii-xix) *Introduction to the Sociology of Missions*, I wrote of these norms:

*Communism*, incidentally, has no reference to the political ideology, but to the norm that science is “part of the public domain” and findings must be widely communicated (*communalism* may be a better term). All the norms are overlapping. For example, *universalism* requires that “truth-claims, whatever their source, are to be subjected to preestablished impersonal criteria,” and *disinterestedness* requires that personal motives should be separated from questions regarding the truth of the findings. *Organized skepticism* requires that a critical stance be taken toward “every aspect of nature and society.” In summary, the findings of science are required to be completely open to the

examination and verification by all, according to agreed upon standard methodologies, and as a consequence there is an ongoing organized and systematic mutual criticism taking place in the sciences...Merton (1973: 286-324, 383-412) himself added the norms of *originality* and *humility*...T[t]he search for verifiable knowledge means that scientists are continually searching for new knowledge (*originality*) and the openness and ongoing mutual criticism requires an implicit *humility* in the expression of findings, whether scientists are personally humble or not. In another place, Merton (1967:27) points to the humbling fact, noted by Max Weber ([1946] 1967) in his essay on science as a vocation, that scientists, including social scientists, have to recognize that their theoretical work will be largely replaced in the future.

These norms illustrate the fact that scientific work rests on certain beliefs and practices, which are accepted in the communities of scientific scholars, both natural and social scientific. Typical of norms, they are very much taken for granted by scientists, but also increasingly by many other scholars. Although Merton does not state it, it is important to recognize that God is not to be considered as a causative force. This comes under the fact that science is “part of the public domain,” is “subject to preestablished impersonal criteria,” and requires that personal motives be removed from findings, but not from the choice of research topics. Although questioning is important in theology, it is far from “organized skepticism.” Nevertheless, as one considers the ethos of scientific work as described by Merton, it is understandable why so many Christians have found scientific work thoroughly compatible to their Christian faith and life, especially with his addition of *humility*. Christians recognize that although scientific study cannot establish the self-revelation of God, neither can it disestablish it. Most importantly,

scientific work can throw light on how God works in the created world and thus how humans may increase understanding of the best means of serving God in the world. This includes providing a basis for technology that aids humans, even though sadly technology may be used destructively. In principle, then, the two resources used in developing missiological theory can not, in principle, come into conflict and when they do conflict, it should be concluded that they were employed wrongly. It is important to recognize that the two methodologies associated with each resource are qualitatively different and should not be confused. Given the fallibility of human interpretation of God's revelation and the many difficulties of carrying out scientific studies, especially in the social sciences, it should not be surprising that the task of using both resources for developing missiological theory should be a daunting task. I will conclude with a discussion of how the two resources of theology and the empirical world can be used in a three-step research process.

### **Using the Two Resources of Theology and Secular Studies to Produce Missiological Theory**

I refer to "secular studies" as opposed to simply "the social sciences" because I want to include with science, particularly the social sciences, all of the academic disciplines, especially history, that use a secular methodology, namely do not refer to God as acting in the world and in history, which is exactly what missiological theory must do. The use of the two resources of theology and secular studies in producing missiological theory obviously requires a constant dynamic interaction between the two both in developing research questions and in seeking for answers. That is why I propose the three-step process for developing missiological theory.

Initially it is important that the two resources be kept separate given the great difference in their methodologies. In the end, of course, missiological analysis should seek to incorporate the

work of the disciplines that focus on empirical reality and which also consciously seek to eschew references to God as a cause in human affairs. The value in doing this is that human theological thought is fallible and the empirically focused disciplines may actually serve to correct or at least improve or supplement some aspects of past and current missiological theory or understandings.

A major advantage of keeping the use of the two resources separate initially and to some extent in ongoing work is that in this way, missiologists can communicate with others in the various empirical disciplines. If the development of missiological theory makes use of empirical methodologies, then those in the empirical disciplines will be able to communicate with those working on missiological theory and evaluate their work. This gives greater confidence in the validity and reliability of the empirical findings that are incorporated into missiological theory. In addition, given the variability of theological interpretations of God's revelation, keeping the empirical disciplines separate from theological work can aid theologians in communicating with each other regarding what should be used in developing missiological theory.

Interestingly, one of the contributions of the social sciences, even more than the natural sciences, has been to clarify how theory is developed. This is probably because the difficulties in studying human behavior require a clear statement of purpose and methodology, which because of the "externality" of the natural sciences is not as needed. Useful theory requires good research questions and since research is aimed at explanation, these questions are essentially "why" questions aimed at trying to understand variation. These are often spoken of as "problems," namely problems in how one variable is related to another. As noted, scientists have to admit that the choice of the topic or question for research has a normative, not a scientific base, even though it should wisely build on the research of others. Thus for missiologists, the

research questions arise from theology, which is that God is the Original Missionary and is the ongoing Director of Mission.

Although the work involved in being sent is highly important and why people go forth continues to need to be studied, the sending side has been studied more thoroughly than the receiving side of mission. Since research is aimed at explaining variation, a useful research question, therefore, is to try to account for the numerous variations in how people have responded to God's Mission. I believe this is the most crucial question needing to be answered (as partial as such answers may be) in missiological theory.

A review of Christian missions reveals that Christianity, the conscious bearer of the gospel of Jesus Christ, has not spread evenly or at a steady pace. It has spread in some directions more than others and it has had periods when it was largely rejected and other periods when it was widely accepted. It is even possible to raise questions, some theological and some empirical or some a mixture of both, as to whether the supposed successes of Christianity were not pure successes, but rather involved some diluting or distorting of the gospel. Given human nature, some distortion of the gospel has always taken place as it spread and some distortions have been quite great with consequences that have lasted for centuries. From a missiological perspective, the fourth century acceptance by Christianity of becoming an arm of the state meant falling for the temptation that Jesus Christ rejected beginning in the wilderness.

Christianity (empirically, we have to admit that it is a religion) is not the only religion to have spread. The most wide spreading religions apart from Christianity are Buddhism, which was initiated before it, but spread primarily in the last two thousand years, and Islam, which was initiated after Christianity, but in the same part of the world and continues to spread today. The research question which considers the variations of response to Christianity should also include

consideration of the variations in response to Buddhism and Islam, as well as response to other religions and even non religion or irreligion. Although as Christians, we believe that God's Mission is primarily carried out through the followers of Jesus Christ, usually called "Christians," it is theologically sound to believe that some of the God given capacities of human beings may be expressed in other religions and in responses to them. At the same time, human sin or resistance to God can be represented in the responses of Christianity, as well as of other religions.

The investigation of why people have responded in a variety of ways to Christianity as well as to other religions and non-religion should consider (1) the content of each religion (and non religion) and (2) the social conditions facilitating or hindering their spread. In other words, in Christian missiology we believe that God uses outward conditions to prepare people for the gospel and therefore these conditions, cultures, institutions, and processes should be examined as carefully as possible. Thus answering of the question (problem) of why people have responded so differently to spreading religions, a question that arises from the theological premise that God is working to redeem humanity, needs the help of social scientific investigation to uncover some of the answers. .

In the end, following the marshalling of data that are seen to affect how people respond to religions introduced from the outside, in Christian missiology we return to examining the implications of the findings for a theological understanding of God's Mission. Does this mean that theological understanding is determined by empirical findings? Not at all. Influenced, but not determined. We always start with the belief that God is working in the world. This means that the world is a sacred realm. Our respect for it means that we have to take empirical data seriously. Instead of determining our theology, we see the empirical world as a place for

discovery of the unfolding of the will of God. Our theology also tells us that there is serious opposition to God's will and worst of all, that opposition can be manifested by God's people. In the end, we find tentative answers to how God is working and how we can participate in God's work with as little damage as possible to the witness to Jesus Christ. Is that not missiological theory?

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