

Missiology and Mormon Missions

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MISSIOLOGY IS THE SCHOLARLY STUDY of missions. In an attempt to explain religious interactions, missiology uses an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon fields such as theology, sociology, anthropology, history, geography, communications, and statistics. Missiology, of necessity, is a dynamic discipline, as religion in its various expressions is an extremely difficult subject to treat scientifically. In the context of Christianity, numerous centers attached to seminaries, churches, institutes, and ecumenical bodies work specifically with missiology.

The foundation for all missiological research is mission theory, the explanatory frameworks or models that propose assumptions and beliefs on the role of mission, and deduce the methodology of approaching target religions.

Mormon missiological research is an emerging field. Almost no Mormon scholars have published in the non-sectarian missiological journals.¹ Despite the huge Mormon missionary network, claiming between 19 percent and 25 percent of the total Christian missionary force,² Mormons lack substantial representation in the discipline. The Mormon Church has never declared an "official" mission theory. Church leaders, however, have advocated various themes indicating identifiable elements of Mormon missiology.

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¹ The only work published by a Mormon scholar in a non-sectarian journal oriented towards missiology is R. Lanier Britsch, "Mormon Missions, an Introduction to the LDS Mission System," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3 (Jan. 1979): 22-27.

² Statistics calculated in R. Lanier Britsch, "Mormon Missions in a World Christian Context," a lecture to the religion faculty at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1980. He mentions that there are 30,000 full-time LDS missionaries contrasted to an estimated 125,000 non-LDS Christian missionaries. Typescript in possession of the author.

Mormonism emphasizes that conversion is ultimately made by the Holy Ghost, not by the missionary. The missionary is primarily a conduit, responsible for cultivating a reverent atmosphere, describing gospel principles, calling the Spirit to bear witness to his/her testimony, and challenging the potential convert to make new commitments and life changes. As such, the missionary must understand the concepts and doctrines he/she teaches. The investigator too must understand these crucial concepts of which the Spirit bears witness.

Often, the investigator is a member of a different faith, a citizen of a different country, and a person with differing ethics, morals, and cultural background. Mission theory is an analytic tool which can be empirically employed and tested in a continuing search for a more effective method of understanding religious interaction.

This article is an overview of the primary schools or positions of missiological theory, a subject to which volumes have been devoted. The footnote references are a good starting point for those interested in the detailed tenets and structure of these missiological theories.

EXCLUSION AND ABSOLUTISM

The exclusivist position is the oldest, most prominent, and most persistent missiological theory. It's a recurring theme in the theology and history of Christianity and a position long espoused in Mormonism, with its claims that it is the sole, divinely chosen carrier of the restored truth, that other Christian churches have apostatized from truth, and that non-Christian religions have distorted truths; the full restoration of priesthood authority, the sole plan of salvation, and divine revelation are found only in Mormonism.

Mormon exclusion is described as the "diffusion theory" by Spencer J. Palmer of Brigham Young University's Religious Studies Center. He summarizes it: "Adam, the first man, was taught the fullness of the gospel. In turn, he taught it to others. But men, yielding to the temptations of the evil one, sinned and departed from the truth. The original true doctrines were changed and warped to fit the appetites of evil, ambitious men. Thus the principles of the gospel have appeared in more or less perverted form in the religious beliefs of mankind."³

This belief is translated into a missionary mandate to supplant devil-distorted doctrines with the absolute, restored truth.

In a broader Christian context, exclusivists believe in the ultimate supremacy of Christ as described in the New Testament. Christ is far above all rule, all authority, power, dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that to come. (Eph. 1:21). All other religions, philosophies, and teachings are false.

Exclusivists also claim that the missionary message is for all mankind. In most exclusivist religions, proselyting is the top priority: "A chief purpose of the Christian mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ as divine and the only Savior

³ "Mormon Views of Religious Resemblance," in F. Lamond Tullis, ed., *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1978), pp. 185-207.

and to persuade men to become his disciples and responsible members of his church.”⁴ Sometimes, in fundamentalist religions, the Second Coming figures as a reason for urgent evangelism.

Exclusivists are intolerant of other religions, and Christianity as a whole could be characterized as exclusivistic for the first seventeen centuries of church history.⁵ Missionary work stamped out what it perceived as paganism and did not stop at “holy wars.” Charlemagne offered “baptism or the sword.” The Protestant Dutch in seventeenth-century Ceylon used bribery and oppression to win a half million converts, many of whom abandoned Christianity when Dutch rule ended.⁶

Today, exclusivists are more moderate, proclaiming the truth strongly, inviting people to come to Christ, and using mass media appeals. Whether the means be war or rhetoric, however, all exclusivist missiologies deny outright the validity of competing truth claims and stress active gospel proselyting.

DISCONTINUITY

The Third World Missionary Conference at Tambaran (Madras, India) in 1938 produced a book by Hendrick Kraemer, the famous Protestant missiologist, which “caused more profound thinking on the very bases of the missionary enterprise than any book written for many years.”⁷ Kraemer identified a new missiological theory, the discontinuous position, which has gained considerable currency in the ensuing forty-five years.

Kraemer maintained: “There is no true religion. If one looks at the thing honestly, there are only religions which present, though in no doubt various ways, interwoven threads of truth and error that is impossible to disentangle.” Indeed, Christianity “is not even in all aspects the best religion, if by that we mean the . . . best and noblest way of expressing religious truth and experience. During these parts of my life spent amidst other religions, it has been many a time that certain religious attitudes and emotions are more finely expressed in those religions than in Christianity. That is plain for any fair minded man to see; and one has a duty to say so and to give honour where honour is due.”⁸

Thus, if Christianity is not the only true or even the best of the true, it is still unique. Though all religions have divine-human linkages, non-Christian religions are basically human achievements, while Christianity is a direct mani-

⁴ Donald McGavran, ed., *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964-1976* (California: William Carey Library, 1977), p. 56.

⁵ E. C. Dewick, *The Christian Attitude to Other Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷ Carl F. Hallencreutz, *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1970), p. 23.

⁸ Hendrick E. Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 110; Carl F. Hallencreutz, *Kraemer Towards Tambaran* (Sweden: Almqvist & Wiskells, 1966), p. 278.

festation from God in the form of Jesus Christ. Put simply, Christianity is truth revealed in Christ, while the other religions are truths discovered by man.⁹

Since the origin of truth in Christianity is different than others, Christianity is discontinuous with other religions. In the encounter with other religions, it does not share a common origin, even though all religions have some elements of divine truth.

The discontinuous school, sympathetic to other religions, does not in its methodology seek to combat falsehood, as much as to stress the discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. Cooperation with other religions, however, is impossible. Kraemer states: "I am quite sure that as we really get acquainted with one another and really begin to communicate in a forthright manner, we shall come to understand better than we do that the differences between the various religions are unbridgeable, and irreconcilable."¹⁰

Kraemer's book, already a classic, for almost two generations has provided the basis for a tolerant, understanding attitude, even while evangelical activities continue to receive a high priority.

Mormonism's belief in one true religion identifies it with absolutism. If other religions have different doctrines, both cannot be true. It has never acknowledged that all religions could have both truth and falsehood while Christianity has a unique divine-human "bridge" or vantage point.

FULFILLMENT

R. C. Zaehner, a Catholic theologian who wrote prolifically on Roman Catholic tradition and comparative religions, was invited to deliver the 1967 Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion in Saint Andrews, Scotland. These lectures, later published as *Concordant Discord* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), became the foundation document in a popular missionary movement called the fulfillment school.

Fulfillment believes all great religions have parallel aspects and themes. Zaehner states that "the common ground between the great religions is that they are all concerned with eternity," and explores the possibility of "whether there is any system into which the fundamental tenets of all great religions can be made to fit."¹¹ Christian and non-Christian religions, therefore, have many concordant elements.

Discordant elements are differing beliefs and creeds. Theravada Buddhism, for instance, does not even recognize a supernatural God. Zaehner urges a recognition of this "concordant discord" rather than forcing more concord than actually exists.

Christianity's contribution is that it fulfills, comprehends, and consummates the non-Christian religions. If non-Christian traditions are "broken

⁹ Dewick, *The Christian Attitude*, p. 44. This philosophy evolved from concepts in writings of Barth and Kierkegaard.

¹⁰ Kraemer, *Why Christianity*, p. 122.

¹¹ R. C. Zaehner, *The Comparison of Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 18, 19.

lights," Christianity is the "full radiance" of God's glory, with Christ as fulfillment, not only of the Jewish law and prophets, but as fulfillment of the laws and prophets of all religions.¹² Other faiths are not untruths or discontinuous, but rather unfulfilled truths.

The fulfillment school's positive approach appeals to missionaries. Fulfillment begins with similar truths and leads to the higher Christian truth. Missionaries can encounter other religions seeking "to understand them from within and try to grasp how they, too, seek to penetrate the mystery of our being and eternal destiny."¹³ Thus, the missionary studies other religions, "not only with a view to criticize them and to learn how to destroy them more quickly, but [with] the expectation of finding in them things good and true," even though he/she will "affirm with undiminished confidence that Christianity is the one and only perfect religion for the whole of mankind."¹⁴

Some statements by Latter-day Saint leaders are fulfillment oriented, viewing other religions as God-inspired rather than devil-inspired.

A First Presidency message on 15 February 1978 stated: "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius and the reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals."¹⁵

B. H. Roberts, in *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (1907), asserted:

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and is one of God's instrumentalities for making known the truth, yet God is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. He raises up wise men and prophets here and there among the children of men, of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend; not always giving a fullness of the truth such as may be found in the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but always giving that measure of truth that people are prepared to receive. Mormonism holds, then, that all the great teachers are servants of God among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God's children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them.¹⁶

Such statements present the view that the gospel message is a greater truth, with the Church not the only bearer of truth but simply the bearer of the greater truth.

COOPERATIVE

At Tambaran in 1938, Kraemer proposed that the greatest danger facing Christianity was the revival of pagan "human" religions. This attitude was in direct opposition to the thought of William Ernest Hocking, a Harvard pro-

¹² Dewick, *The Christian Attitude*, p. 48; Zaehner, *The Comparison of Religions*, p. 80.

¹³ R. C. Zaehner, *Christianity and Other Religions* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1964), p. 8.

¹⁴ Dewick, *The Christian Attitude*, p. 48.

¹⁵ As quoted in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Co., 1978), p. v.

¹⁶ 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Press, 1907), 1:512-513.

fessor of philosophy, who spearheaded a view called the cooperative school. His 1940 *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1940) is the primary canon of the cooperativists, an ecumenical World Church Movement with whom Mormonism has no official sympathy.

Hocking's theory defines religion as "a passion for righteousness, and for the spread of righteousness, conceived as a cosmic demand. It arises in a universal human craving directed to an equally universal object. The passion for righteousness is not a capacity of special men or races . . . It is the response of human nature everywhere, as it faces its finite situation in the great world." Hocking further postulates that religion is also particular, influenced regionally by language, values, and culture in answering social and ethical concerns. "The particular and local element in religion may be no more mere historical accident, but is essential to religion itself." Furthermore, "no universal canopy of religion could cancel the need for the local functions of religion and its local histories." Replacing other traditions with Christianity increases rivalry and animosity when instead, religions should cooperate as "brothers in a common quest . . . The first step is to recognize it, and disarm ourselves of our prejudices."¹⁷

Hocking uses, as an example, the historical Middle Eastern interface between Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism that caused these religions to borrow different religious concepts. He foresees a world faith emerging, as universally applicable as scientific or physical laws. These universal spiritual "laws," however, must retain the particular elements of society. Hocking argues that "no religion can become a religion for Asia which does not fuse the spiritual genius of Asia with that of Western Christianity," and "evidently, if one and only one religion could succeed in absorbing into its own essence the meaning of all the others, that religion would attract the free suffrage of mankind to itself."¹⁸

Cooperativists feel that the best candidate for a true world faith is Christianity if it will "develop a certain acceptance of religious variety, not by dropping the postulate that religion must be universal, but by increased sympathy with the growing pains of religious change and a deepened appreciation of the preciousness of the local roots."¹⁹

Hocking asserts that missionary zeal actually causes missionaries to lose their grasp of what Christianity means. Christianity cannot be handed on as a finished doctrine, but is only perceived through the individual "cosmic demand of righteousness." Cooperativist missionaries should spread the meaningful substance of Christianity, not a name or what it is called.

The cooperativist missionary, therefore, cooperates with local elements. Missionaries understand "the necessity that the modern missions make a positive effort, first of all to know and understand the religions around it, then to

¹⁷ William Earnest Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1940), pp. 2, 31, 25, 263; William Earnest Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932), p. 31.

¹⁸ Hocking, *Living Religions*, pp. 185, 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 213.

recognize and associate itself with whatever kindred elements there are in them.”²⁰ For example, Christianity can gain from Islam a heightened awareness of the majesty, the grandeur, and the absoluteness of God. From Hinduism, Christianity can gain greater respect for meditation and reflectiveness. From Buddhism, Christians can understand the impersonal side of ultimate truth. The Confucianism emphasis on humanism, social order, and filial piety can enhance Christian life. From Taoism and Shintoism, the Christian can more fully realize the sacredness of nature. Hocking’s cooperativist school would incorporate and synthesize these faiths into a world church with universal understanding of the common spiritual laws.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue theories are the newest frontier of missiological research. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Harvard-trained advocate of dialogue, has influenced the development of this school greatly, and dialogical theories, though numerous, are best represented through his writings.

Smith purposely avoids using the connotation-laden term *religion* in favor of *faith* and “cumulative tradition.” Faith is a human experience with the supernatural, the fundamental issue of religion, while cumulative tradition is the doctrines, church practices, and all historical phenomena relating to religion — an expression of faith. Religion can exist without tradition. Indeed, throughout history people “have been able to be religious without the assistance of a special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies.”²¹

As inner experiential faith is the center of religion, it follows that the best missionary action should be a phenomenological understanding of religion, rather than the static transmission of a particular tradition. This understanding is best accomplished in dialogue, dialogue being “not simply our experience, but equally the experience shared with us, of those of other faiths.”²²

For dialogue to take place, the participants must rid themselves of prejudice and try to truly understand and experience the religious life of another. It is impossible for the teacher to maintain that his/her own religion is superior.

How can anyone expect that the person who is listening to him should be ready in principle to change his life and way of thinking if he, the evangelist, is not emotionally prepared to submit to the same discipline? This is the dangerous aspect of [dialogical] evangelization: namely, that the evangelist risks his own faith in the course of evangelization. Evangelists who evangelize from a fixed and unalterable position cannot seek support in the New Testament. They are propagandists and not evangelists.²³

²⁰ Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions*, p. 33.

²¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), pp. 183, 19.

²² Stanley J. Samartha, ed., *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971), p. 6.

²³ Norbert Greinacher and Alois Muller, eds., *Evangelization in the World Today* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 41.

Mormon missions tolerate little dialogue of this sort. Missionaries present doctrinal concepts from a pre-set lesson plan with the primary goal of baptism. Although missionaries are urged to teach by a prompting of the Spirit, two-way sharing and a mutual testing of religious ideals is discouraged.

THE ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN

Anonymous Christianity was developed by Karl Rahner, a Jesuit priest trained in philosophy and theology. His concept of Christian grace set within a world context is a complex and subtle one, but in broad outline he holds that God's grace, the "supernatural existential element," is within all people. Rahner asserts: "I know of no religion of any kind in which the grace of God is not present, however suppressed or deprived it may be in its expression."²⁴ God's supernatural, transcendent relationship permeates all humankind, all history. It is universally applicable, and he wills the salvation of all, regardless of their spiritual state. "This supernatural will for salvation means for all men at all times — because of Jesus Christ — the offer of supernatural grace (as an interior really existing factor in the individual and collective history of the human mind), no matter whether this grace is accepted or rejected."²⁵

If the grace of God and God's will for salvation are present in all men, then a Christian is no closer to salvation than an atheist, pagan, or agnostic. An attitude of love, hope, and other so-called "Christian principles" is what bring men to salvation.

As a result, Rahner firmly believes that "authentic Christianity, whether explicit or anonymous, will manifest itself in human experience. Christians will see its expression not only in the life of the church but in the lives of those who will probably never explicitly accept the Christian Faith."²⁶ Thousands of souls are Christians in how they live or think. These souls, by God's will, also have access to salvation.

Mormonism agrees that many people share Christian values through the light of Christ, an original spiritual constituent of all mortals. Also, part of the Mormon missionary effort is to bring this intrinsic quality to completion in extrinsic acceptance of Christ and his Church, and access to salvation depends on strict adherence to ordinances and principles of the gospel. Anonymous Christian mission theory has limited application to Mormon missions.

A common reaction to Anonymous Christianity is to challenge the necessity of organized churches and missionary efforts. Rahner sees missions and the churches as giving anonymous Christians a greater chance to express inner Christianity, a greater fullness of truth, and better opportunity for salvation. Intrinsic Christians should become explicit Christians. Missionaries do not

²⁴ As quoted in Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), p. 6.

²⁵ As quoted in Herbert Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner: His Life, Thoughts and Works* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), p. 59.

²⁶ As quoted in Anne Carr, *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 206.

gather people or reject the unworthy, but encourage them to express Christianity through church structure and function.

CONCLUSION

This theoretical survey can be seen as a continuum with the conservative exclusivist position as one pole, and the liberal anonymous Christian position as the other pole.

At present, Mormon missiology seems to be a partial synthesis of the exclusive and fulfillment positions. The partial exclusivist position retains integrity of doctrine and purity of teaching. The partial fulfillment position allows the Church to approach non-Christians with a positive, unvindictive message, recognizing and using the unfulfilled truth in other religions. This unique theoretical synthesis is certainly one reason for the Mormon missionary success story.

As the Mormon Church considers a world context for its message, perhaps missionaries could be trained to recognize specific unfulfilled truths in target cultures and use these truths as stepping stones towards the restored gospel. A harshly critical approach that disregards an investigator's deeply embedded religious convictions is unproductive.

Another possibility is that of teaching missionaries to use open-minded dialogue as a tool for conversion, rather than memorized lessons. Would not the truth reveal itself, emerging victorious from the phenomenological crucible? In such a case, not only would conversion be complete, but the missionary would have the strongest form of reassurance that truth is truth.

The Mormon Church could be on the threshold of unprecedented growth. Perhaps an entirely new, far more effective theory will emerge as the Mormon mission perspectives unfold.