Anthropology and Mission have had a long and stormy history to the present era. Nevertheless, anthropologists have used ethnographic data compiled by missionaries to develop their theoretical models. This article briefly traces this history and shows how applied anthropology emerged and impacted mission. Missionaries' use of anthropological insights is also explored, including discussion of the precursor to Missiology, the journal Practical Anthropology. The article concludes by drawing on the Incarnation as a model for mission and then arguing that there are biblical and theological reasons for developing a closer connection between anthropology and mission. In order to be more incarnational in cross-cultural ministry, we need to draw on the insights from anthropology.¹

Good missionaries have always been good ‘anthropologists,’” is the opening line of Eugene Nida’s classic text, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (1954), published nearly a half century ago. In this article I will explore why Nida’s comment is so profoundly true and why anthropology still has an important role to play in twenty-first-century Christian mission.

In the present era of globalization God’s mission to the world takes on forms that are quite different from yesterday’s missionary activity in the heyday of colonialism. In fact, appropriate forms of mission today are so different from yesterday that some people believe that because we are becoming a global village, the insights from anthropology that help us to understand and appreciate cultural differences are no longer needed. The erroneous assumption is that the world is quickly melding into a homogeneous global village, with capitalism as its economic engine and English as its language of discourse. But this is not happening, at least not quickly, and so I maintain that the present era of mission needs the insights from anthropology as much, if not more, than any previous period of missionary activity (cf. Whiteman 1996). Moreover, I propose that there are biblical and theological reasons for devel-

**Darrell L. Whiteman** is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. His cross-cultural research and mission have been primarily in Central Africa and Melanesia.

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oping a close connection between anthropology and mission. We begin with a historical overview of the relationship between anthropology and mission, proceed to discussing the importance of anthropology for mission, and conclude with a discussion of the Incarnation as a model for mission.

In the Beginning: The Emergence of Anthropology as a Discipline

Anthropology began in the mid-nineteenth century as armchair social philosophers speculated on the origin of human beings, their religion, and their culture. Evolutionary thought was in the air, and belief in human progress was undaunted. With advances in exploration of the globe and the colonization of exotic places in the world, the sheer enormity of human and cultural diversity called for some kind of “scientific” explanation. Early anthropology was driven by an evolutionary paradigm conjecturing that human societies and cultures evolved from homogeneous to heterogeneous, from simple to complex (Spencer 1873). Within this evolutionary framework, anthropologists tried to make sense out of the bewildering and exotic diversity of peoples and their cultures being discovered around the world. For example, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), recognized today as the founding father of anthropology, developed a scheme in which he proposed that religion was evolving from initial animism to polytheism, and eventually to monotheism. Tylor had no personal use for religion and in fact derided theologians. As a product of the Enlightenment, he was convinced that through rational thought “primitive” people would evolve into civilized people. Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) developed a universal evolutionary scheme that put humanity on three rungs of the evolutionary ladder: savages, barbarians, and civilized. James G. Frazer (1890) argued that human beings progressed from belief in magic, to belief in religion, and eventually to science. E. B. Tylor’s book Primitive Culture (1871) gave us the first definition of the concept of culture in English; although it was a static unilinear view of culture, it nevertheless helped to establish the concept of culture and the beginnings of scientific anthropology.

Missionary Contributions to Anthropology

It is important to remember that initially the early anthropologists drew the data for their speculative theories from explorers and travelers and later missionaries, not from firsthand encounters with “the natives.” Firsthand fieldwork did not come into anthropology until the 1920s and 1930s. Instead, they sat in the comfort of their Victorian studies, reading reports of others’ initial contact with non-Western peoples. The journals of explorers like Captain James Cook in the Pacific provided the grist for their intellectual mill. E. B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, among others, corresponded with missionaries, inquiring about the people among whom they lived, and outlining areas of research for missionaries to pursue. It is arguable that the discipline of anthropology would not have emerged without its heavy reliance upon ethnographic data provided by missionaries. Despite the fact that there was little application of anthropology to mission during this period, it is ironic that missionaries supplied much of the ethnographic data used by anthropologists to spin their theoretical designs.

To demonstrate how anthropologists like Tylor and Morgan stimulated missionaries’ ethnographic research, let us look briefly at the writing of missionaries in Melanesia. Lewis Henry Morgan, author of Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity in
the Human Family (1871), sent his kinship questionnaire all over the world to missionaries, asking them to fill in the data and send it back to him. One of his contacts was Lorimer Fison (1832–1907), the Australian Wesleyan missionary in Fiji, who became hooked on anthropology and developed a deep appreciation for how it helped him to understand the Fijian worldview and the changing Fijian society under Western contact (1907). Fison corresponded with Robert H. Codrington (1830–1922), an Anglican missionary with the Melanesian Mission in the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides, who then also became an ethnographer, writing a book on Melanesian languages and producing his landmark book, The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folklore (1891). Codrington’s work influenced another Melanesian Mission missionary, Charles E. Fox (1878–1977), who wrote an important ethnography entitled The Threshold of the Pacific: An Account of the Social Organisation, Magic, and Religion of the People of San Cristoval in the Solomon Islands (1924). Several other Anglican missionaries of the Melanesian Mission made significant ethnographic contributions, including Alfred Penny (1845–1935) (1887), A. I. Hopkins (1869–1943) (1928), and Walter Ivens (1871–1939) (1927; 1930).

Although the Melanesian Mission is outstanding and unusual for the number of missionaries who made ethnographic contributions to anthropology, other missionaries should also be noted. For example, “The author of one of the finest anthropological monographs yet written,” according to Evans-Pritchard (1962:114), was Henri Alexandre Junod (1863–1934), of the Swiss Romande Mission, who in 1912 published The Life of a South African Tribe.

We cannot leave this topic of missionary contributions to anthropology without mentioning the substantial contribution made by Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954). Although never a field missionary himself, as a trainer of missionaries he nevertheless encouraged and organized members of his own Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and others to produce carefully researched ethnographies of the people among whom they worked. In 1906 he founded the ethnological journal Anthropos as a venue for publishing the many ethnographic reports he received from missionaries, and later he established the Anthropos Institute as a center for anthropological research (cf. Brandewie 1990; Luzbetak 1994). Luzbetak, who studied with Schmidt, says,

To him, ethnology was a pure Geisteswissenschaft and a strictly historical field. As a scholar who believed in the purity of his discipline, he would not allow the journal [Anthropos] or his [Anthropos] Institute to depart from this concept, insisting that concentration on strictly scientific, rather than applied, ethnology would assure the needed respect of the world of science. (1994:478)

There are many more missionary contributions we could note (cf. Burridge 1991:206–218), but here my point is to establish the significant contributions missionaries have made to the field of anthropology, and I think today there is more acceptance of that achievement. For example, the November 2003 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago has scheduled a symposium entitled “Homage to the Missionary Anthropologists.” Presentations will be made by many of us who are missiological anthropologists, but the secular anthropologists will also make contributions to this symposium.
The Ambivalent Relationship between Anthropology and Mission

The relationship between anthropology and mission has been an ambivalent one for over a hundred years (cf. Hiebert 1978; Stipe 1980; Luzbetak 1985; Sutlive 1985; Van Der Geest 1990; Burridge 1991; Priest 2001). Committed to the doctrine of cultural relativism, most anthropologists view religion as only an epiphenomenon of culture, as a mere reflection of society (Durkheim 1915). They therefore conclude that Christianity is no different from other religions. It is simply a cultural byproduct; it is human-made, they argue, not God-given religion. Because there are so few anthropologists with personal Christian faith, it is not surprising that a fair amount of antipathy toward missionaries has come from anthropologists. For example, in his presidential address to the American Anthropological Association in 1976, Walter Goldschmidt (1977:296) declared, “Missionaries are in many ways our opposites; they believe in original sin, the moral depravity of uncivilized man, and the evil of native customs. Because they wish to change the people we wish to study, we view them as spoilers.” Some missionaries must confess, “Guilty as charged,” but the preponderance of evidence demonstrates that missionaries have often contributed to the preservation of languages and cultures more than to their destruction. Lamin Sanneh (1989) has argued persuasively that through Bible translation into vernacular languages, missionaries have done much to preserve rather than destroy indigenous cultures.

If anthropologists have been suspicious of missionaries, missionaries in turn have been slow to show appreciation for the insights that anthropology has to offer them. Twenty-five years ago Paul Hiebert (1978) described the relationship between missions and anthropology as a love-hate relationship. Eighteen years ago Louis Luzbetak (1985) called for a better understanding and a closer cooperation between the two antagonistic groups of anthropologists and missionaries, and he offered some practical suggestions as to how this could come about. Kenelm Burridge (1991), who is more sympathetic and understanding of missionaries than are most anthropologists, documents this long history of ambivalence between anthropologists and missionaries, and notes the significant ethnographic contributions many missionaries have made.

A Turning of the Tide in Anthropology and Mission

At the beginning of the twentieth century, anthropology as a discipline was becoming established and recovering from its obsession with evolutionary thought. Other theories were advanced to explain the diversity of human beings and their cultures. In reaction to the nineteenth-century evolutionary schemes, several different theories of cultural diffusion were pressed into explaining cultural diversity. The devastation left by World War I and the expansion of colonialism called for the application of anthropology to human problems. For example, in 1921 proposals were made for the establishment of a School of Applied Anthropology in Great Britain, suggesting that “the anthropological point of view should permeate the whole body of the people” and that the lack of this “was the cause of our present troubles” (Peake 1921:174).

Applied anthropology emerged in the 1930s. Bronislaw Malinowski began calling for the practical use of anthropology as early as 1929, and in 1938 argued that the time had come to make anthropology practical:
The anthropologist with all his highly vaunted technique of field work, his scientific acumen, and his humanistic outlook, has so far kept aloof from the fierce battle of opinions about the future and the welfare of native races. In the heated arguments between those who want to “keep the native in his place” and those who want to “secure him a place in the sun,” the anthropologist has so far taken no active part. . . . Anthropology must become an applied science. Every student of scientific history knows that science is born of its applications. (1938:x)

Malinowski did much to take anthropology beyond the academy and into the real world. His theory of functionalism was a helpful schema for understanding how change introduced into one part of a culture impacts all other aspects of the society. As a theory, Malinowski’s functionalism is not particularly fruitful, but it is an excellent guide for research and for interpreting the impact of one culture on another. This perspective would become quite important for colonial administrators and, of course, for missionaries.

In the early twentieth century, missionaries also started to recognize the value of anthropology for their work. Ecumenical mission conferences had been held in New York in 1854 and Liverpool in 1860, and in 1888 the Centenary Conference on Protestant Missions was held at Exeter Hall in London, with 1,600 representatives from 53 mission societies. Over this 30-year period, missions had grown statistically in a remarkable way, but they had also become more paternalistic, with more vested interests. There is little evidence of either awareness of, or need for, anthropological insight coming out of these conferences. But Edinburgh 1910 was a different story. The report of the commission was a large series of nine volumes, with one devoted completely to the preparation of missionaries (Vol. 5). The importance of understanding the cultures and customs of the people to whom missionaries go was stressed from this time onward. Edinburgh is important because it shows that missionaries were struggling with all the points of criticism that anthropologists would make, long before they ever started to speak on the matter. One of the features of this conference was the recognition of the fact of sociocultural change, as well as the need to move beyond ethnocentric evaluations of cultural differences. The call for anthropological training of missionaries was clearly sounded at Edinburgh.

Edinburgh differs from other missionary conferences because it was the first time that a particular voice was heard. Both the speakers at the conference and the reports that had come in from all over the world articulated what many missionaries were feeling strongly: a need for better understanding of the religion and the values of the people among whom they were working. They were beginning to realize that sympathy was not enough, that empathy and understanding were required, and that their evangelism would be far more effective if it took place within a worldview other than their own.

The leading advocate for applying anthropological insights to mission was Edwin W. Smith (1876–1957). Smith, born of missionary parents of the Primitive Methodist Mission in South Africa, served as a missionary in Zambia among the Bila-Batonga people from 1902 to 1915. Although he often thought of himself as an amateur anthropologist, he nevertheless was held in high esteem by contemporary anthropologists of his day. He was a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain from 1909 until his death in 1957, and served as president from 1933
to 1935, the first and only missionary to do so. He contributed substantially to anthropology (1907; Smith and Dale 1968) and wrote frequently in the *International Review of Missions*. In 1924, in an article entitled “Social Anthropology and Missionary Work,” Smith (1924:519) argues that “the science of social anthropology [should be] recognized as an essential discipline in the training of missionaries.” He goes on to note that, if mission work is to be effective, we need to understand people from their point of view, not just our own. In language characteristic of his time, he declares:

A study of social anthropology will lead the young missionary to look at things always from the native’s point of view, and this will save him from making serious blunders. Tact is not enough; nor is love. . . Tact needs to be based on knowledge; love there can hardly be without understanding. (Smith 1924:522–523)

Ten years later, in his 1934 presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute, “Anthropology and the Practical Man,” Smith connected his Christian faith and missionary work with his anthropological perspective:

I think that too often missionaries have regarded themselves as agents of European civilisation and have thought it part of their duty to spread the use of English language, English clothing, English music—the whole gamut of our culture. They have confounded Christianity with western Civilization. In my view this is a mistaken view of the Christian mission. I am convinced that essential elements in Christian belief and practice are of universal value—that, in other words, there are fundamental needs of the human soul that Christ alone can satisfy. But in the Christianity which we know, there are unessential elements, accretions which it has taken on from its European environment and which it is not part of the Christian missionary’s duty to propagate. (Smith 1934:xxvi–xxvii)

Smith goes on to note, in language similar to contemporary discussions of contextualization, that Christianity must take on appropriate cultural forms in each culture it encounters. And then with a spirit of optimism he claims:

Here and there in the field academically trained anthropologists are to be found on the [mission] staffs. Some of us will not be content until such qualified persons are at work in every mission area and every missionary has had some anthropological training. In short, there are signs that the modern missionary is becoming anthropologically minded, without being any the less zealous in his religious duties. (Smith 1934:xxix)

I believe Edwin Smith’s optimism was premature: today many, if not most, missionaries are not anthropologically minded, even though we see there was a call for this as far back as Edinburgh 1910.

Another early advocate for connecting anthropology and mission was Henri Philippe Junod, missionary in South Africa and son of the missionary ethnographer Henri A. Junod, mentioned above. Writing in 1935, he says, “I wish anthropologists would realize what they owe to missionary work. Many scientists do acknowledge this debt, but others forget the contribution of missionaries to science itself. It is not accidental if missionaries have sometimes proved to be the best anthropologists.” Then he bemoans the fact that “mission policy, however, has had too little to do with
anthropology” (1935:217). He goes on to say, “I believe that anthropology can help us greatly. It can widen our views, it can open our eyes, it can teach us to understand, it can improve our educational policy and point out to us the dangers of the way. But we are not here to preserve native custom as a curio for some African museum. We are dealing with the realities of the present” (H. P. Junod 1935:228).

During the 1940s and continuing well beyond the end of World War II, Wheaton (IL) College became a center for preparing missionaries. The distinguished and popular Russian-born Dr. Alexander Grigolia developed a strong anthropology major and course program, and he was succeeded at Wheaton by a series of young anthropology instructors committed both to providing balanced undergraduate anthropological training and teaching the conceptual and practical tools required for effective communication across cultural boundaries. Perhaps the most famous anthropology major from Wheaton was the renowned evangelist Billy Graham, who graduated from Wheaton in 1943 and had chosen anthropology partly because of an interest in becoming a missionary (Graham 1997:64–65). Graham drew on anthropological concepts for his evangelistic ministry. Students such as Charles Kraft, Henry Bradley, and William Merrifield (class of 1953) would all go on to make important contributions to missiological anthropology. As of 1953, Wheaton had graduated over two hundred majors in anthropology, many of whom were serving, or were destined to work, as missionaries.

The Kennedy School of Missions of Hartford (CT) Seminary was the equivalent graduate program; there anthropology was taught and used in the advanced training of Protestant missionaries. Edwin W. Smith, upon his retirement in 1939, was a visiting lecturer of African anthropology and history at Hartford until 1943, and Paul Leser served as Professor of Anthropology. Charles Taber and Charles Kraft are two well-known anthropologically trained missiologists who received their Ph.D. degrees from Hartford before it closed this program in the mid 1960s.

A high-water mark in the history of anthropology and mission came in 1954 with the publication of Eugene Nida’s *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions*. Although Nida’s Ph.D. is in linguistics, he traveled widely as a translation consultant for the American Bible Society, working with some two hundred languages in 75 countries. From this vast experience, Nida saw firsthand the problems and challenges faced by missionaries and translators. His anthropological perspective enabled him to make keen observations and write copious notes, from which he wrote *Customs and Cultures* in a brief six-week period while in Brazil between translation workshops. *Customs and Cultures* is conceptually so rich and well-grounded anthropologically that it is still used today in colleges and seminaries, although many of his illustrations are dated, especially those from pre-Vatican II Latin America. Nevertheless, students have told me they wished they had read Nida’s book before they had sallied forth into cross-cultural ministry.

**The Journal *Practical Anthropology***

Following World War II, with the proliferation of Protestant missionaries and the beginning decline of colonialism, a new journal entitled *Practical Anthropology* was launched in 1953. Its humble beginning came when Robert B. Taylor, anthropology instructor at Wheaton College, prepared and distributed two initial issues to test the level of interest in a journal on applications of anthropology in Christian thought and
practice. The response was favorable, mainly among those interested in cross-cultural communication of the Christian message.

At Wheaton, Taylor typed the mimeograph masters and had them reproduced by the college copy center. Both at Wheaton in 1953–1954 and in Eugene, Oregon, in 1954–1956, he continued to develop the journal, keeping the subscription cost at a dollar per year by doing all the work with the help of his wife, Floris Taylor, except for the mimeographing and, later, multilithing. Within a few years there were 250 subscribers.

During these years of development, the project was helped along, perhaps indispensably, by the counsel and writing of articles by William Smalley, William Reyburn, Marie Fetzer Reyburn, Eugene Nida, and James O. Buswell III. When Taylor left the University of Oregon campus for doctoral field research, William Smalley became editor, and Practical Anthropology developed into a journal primarily for missionaries and Bible translators. They needed insights from anthropology and wanted a forum where they could share their ideas and their anthropologically informed experiences of mission in the field. This conformed to Smalley’s long-held vision for just such a publication, and with the help of others, he built effectively on the journal Taylor turned over to him, to realize this vision (cf. Stine 2003:87–88).

Practical Anthropology continued as an outlet for anthropologically minded missiologists like Nida, Smalley, Loewen, the Reyburns, and Charles Taber, all of whom were committed to cross-cultural mission and Bible translation. The pages of the early editions of this journal are full of stories and examples of how anthropology can illuminate the complexities of effective cross-cultural mission work. In many letters to the editor, readers expressed the wish that they had had this kind of anthropological insight before beginning a missionary career. For example, Herbert Greig, writing from Batouri, Cameroon, lamented, “If only I had this before I went to Africa, what a difference it would have made. With regret I look back upon the embarrassments and the lost opportunities, and would like to save others from like mistakes” (Greig 1957:204). In 1973, after 19 consecutive years of publishing six issues a year, Practical Anthropology merged into Missiology, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. At this time there were over three thousand subscribers to Practical Anthropology (Shenk and Hunsberger 1998:17), indicating the tremendous growth this journal underwent in a relatively short span of time. The need for insights from anthropology applied to the problems of cross-cultural mission was significant, and Practical Anthropology had responded with timely, helpful articles.

The editor of Missiology for its first four years was anthropologist Alan Tippett, from Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission, and he promised to continue the emphases of Practical Anthropology. I, as an anthropologist and the editor of Missiology from 1989 to 2003, also kept the Practical Anthropology legacy alive. William Smalley captured the best of Practical Anthropology in two books entitled Readings in Missionary Anthropology (1967) and Readings in Missionary Anthropology II (1978).

When Practical Anthropology was launched in 1953, the common understanding among most Bible translators and missionaries was that if we could just put the Scriptures into indigenous peoples’ languages, then they would come to think like us in the West. And so, anthropology was pressed into the service of Bible translation and other aspects of mission. Not until the 1970s would we come to appreciate the
importance of contextualization and to realize that people in different cultures should not only not come to think like us once they have the Bible in their own language, but that they should have the mind of Christ within their own culture.

While evangelical missionaries, anthropologists, and Bible translators were writing for Practical Anthropology, Roman Catholic missionaries were being introduced to the writings of Father Louis Luzbetak, who trained in anthropology under the famous Wilhelm Schmidt but differed from his mentor in believing that anthropology should be applied to, and integrated with, mission instead of being a separate enterprise. In the midst of his mission and fieldwork in New Guinea, Luzbetak came to the conclusion that academic anthropology needed to be better connected with mission:

I became so convinced of the importance of cultural anthropology for the mission of the church, and so frustrated was I by the fact that so little attention was being given to the relation between faith and culture, that I was determined to do everything in my power not to return to my original specialization but rather to devote all my energy in the future to the application of anthropology to mission. (1992:125)

In 1958 Luzbetak sketched out his ideas in an essay entitled “Toward an Applied Missionary Anthropology” and then delivered on his promise with the publication of The Church and Cultures: An Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker (1963). This work was met with enthusiasm by missionaries in the field and by missionary anthropologists. I remember reading the second printing (1970) as a graduate student in anthropology and saying to myself, “This is exactly what I want to do with my life—make anthropology understandable and useful for the missionary enterprise.” After two printings with Divine Word Publications, William Carey Library reprinted the book four more times. Luzbetak’s ecumenical spirit spilled over into Protestant missionary circles, hungry for deeper understanding of how anthropology could relate to mission. Then, 25 years after the original publication of The Church and Cultures, Luzbetak published his magnum opus, a complete revision of The Church and Cultures with a new subtitle: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology (1988). In his lavish review of this book, Charles Taber (1990:103) rightfully calls Luzbetak the dean of living missiological anthropologists and says that The Church and Cultures “is one of the most significant missiological books of the last quarter of this century” (1990:104). Luzbetak’s subtitle, New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology, breaks new ground conceptually, by moving us beyond missionary anthropology, tied to the previous era of colonial missions, to missiological anthropology, which is more appropriate for the present age of global Christianity (Jenkins 2002).

Several other Catholic anthropologists have made significant contributions from anthropology to mission. First is Gerald Arbuckle, a Marist priest from New Zealand who has written and lectured widely. Applying anthropological insights to the church, Arbuckle (1990; 1993) has focused especially on inculturation and the refounding of religious communities. Another significant Catholic missiological anthropologist is Aylward Shorter, a British White Father, who studied under E. E. Evans-Pritchard at Oxford. Drawing on his extensive mission work in East Africa, Shorter (1974; 1985; 1988) has brought to bear anthropological insights on the church in Africa.
Anthony Gittins (1987; 1989; 1993), a third Catholic missiological anthropologist, was trained at Edinburgh, has had mission experience in West Africa, and is presently teaching at Catholic Theological Union. And finally, anthropologist Stephen Fuchs, SVD (1965; 1977), has published extensively from his experience in India, contributing substantially to Catholic missiological anthropology.

Thus, there is a growing contribution of, and appreciation for, anthropological insights and perspectives applied to mission. Nevertheless, the number of North American missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, who have any kind of training in anthropology is rather small. Over a 13-year period I worked with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and helped train about three thousand of their five thousand missionaries. My two-day intensive crash course on anthropological insights for crossing cultural barriers with the gospel was frequently met with an astonished comment like this: “Why have I never heard this anthropological perspective before? Here I am, six weeks away from getting on an airplane to fly off and spend the rest of my life ministering to people in a different culture, and I’ve never heard anything like this.” Eugene Nida once said to me in the mid 1990s that he thought missionaries were more poorly trained today in the area of cross-cultural understanding than at any previous period of mission history.

And then, as the center of gravity for the Christian Church moves south and east, the number of European and North American missionaries is declining as the number of non-Western missionaries is increasing (Pate 1989). For example, today there are over ten thousand Korean missionaries found all over the globe. As part of their missionary training and orientation, they seldom if ever are introduced to insights of anthropology that would help them discover the nature of their cross-cultural interaction and ministry (cf. Choi 2000; Moon 2003). And because Korea is one of the most homogeneous societies in the world, Korean missionaries easily confuse Christianity with their Korean cultural patterns of worship, so their converts are led to believe that to become a Christian one must also adopt Korean culture. If Americans are guilty of wrapping the gospel in the American flag, then Koreans metaphorically wrap the gospel in kimchi (a spicy fermented pickle serving as a potent symbol of Korean culture). This pattern of confusing the gospel with one’s culture is being repeated throughout the non-Western world, and missionaries from these cultures are making the same mistakes that Western missionaries made in the age of colonialism, when the gospel was first brought to their cultures.

So the need for training missionaries from the West as well as training non-Western missionaries in cross-cultural understanding has never been greater.

**Connecting the Gospel to Culture: How Anthropology Can Help**

In 1999 I spent part of my sabbatical in Paraguay, one of the poorest countries in South America. There I encountered the phrase, “Paraguayans speak in Spanish but think in Guarani.” Guarani is the language spoken by the indigenous people before the Spanish Conquest, and it is still alive and well today. I immediately asked, “In what language do Paraguayans worship and read the Bible?” The answer was “Spanish, not Guarani.” In other words, Christianity is expressed through the medium of Spanish rather than in the heart language of Guarani. More recently I learned that when the Jesuits came to this area in the seventeenth century, they asked for the local name of the highest God in the Guarani cosmology and were given a name that they used for...
God instead of the Spanish “Dios.” Only recently has an anthropologist researching the Guarani cosmology learned that the Guarani had a god that was higher than the god whose name they gave to the Jesuits, but that god was so high in the sky that no name was given to it. In other words, here was the “unknown god” (cf. Acts 17:23), alive and well in the Guarani cosmology, but because the missionaries did not adequately research and understand the Guarani cosmology, the Christian God they introduced was put into a subordinate position to the unknown god of the Guarani.

The missionaries also searched for a word that they could use to convey the meaning of baptism. It was not easy, but they found a term they thought captured the essence of baptism for the Guarani. Anthropological investigation, hundreds of years later, discovered that the term used for baptism meant “becoming Spanish.” Missionaries could avoid mistakes like this if they were properly trained in anthropological methods of research, and if they had an anthropological perspective to help them cope with, and understand, cultural differences. Much more could be said about the important role of anthropology in connecting the gospel to culture, but much of that is covered in the works of others (Mayers 1974; Kraft 1979; 1996; Hiebert 1985; 1994; Hiebert and Meneses 1995).

The Incarnational Connection

I now come at last to what I call the incarnational connection between anthropology and mission. I have argued (above) that there are pragmatic and efficiency reasons for anthropology informing mission, but more importantly, there are theological reasons for doing so as well. The Incarnation is our model for cross-cultural ministry and the biblical reason why anthropology needs to inform mission. As a theological concept, the Incarnation is about God becoming human, but God did not become a generic human being. God became Jesus the Jew, shaped and molded by first-century, Roman-dominated, Palestinian Jewish culture. This meant that Jesus spoke Aramaic with the low-prestige accent used around Galilee. He avoided eating pork and other foods prohibited by the Torah, and he assumed that the earth was flat and the center of the universe, with the sun revolving around it. Jesus did not know that disease was caused by germs, as Pasteur discovered centuries later (in 1865). In other words, Jesus was thoroughly shaped by his Jewish culture. The God of the universe was manifest through Jesus, who was embedded in this particular culture. As Philippians 2:6–8 says,

He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—his death on the cross. (Good News Bible)

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), himself a Jew, once wrote, “How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews.” But God did choose the Jews at a particular point in time to reveal something about God’s character. In “Holy Sonnet 15” John Donne has written:

'Twas much that man was made like God before.
But, that God should be made like man, much more.
The Incarnation tells us something important about God. For making known
God’s supreme revelation, God chose an imperfect culture with its limitations. From
the beginning of humanity, God has been reaching out to human beings embedded in
their different cultures. And God’s plan for the salvation of the world has been to use
ordinary human beings, like ourselves, to reach others who are immersed in a culture
different from our own. The Incarnation tells us that God is not afraid of using cul-
ture to communicate with us. S. D. Gordon once said, “Jesus is God spelled out in
language human beings can understand.” This language that human beings can un-
derstand is the language of human culture. The Incarnation shows us that God has taken
both humanity and culture seriously. So the Incarnation tells us something about
God’s nature. It also becomes a model for ministry in our own time. In the same way
in which God entered Jewish culture in the person of Jesus, we must be willing to
enter the culture of the people among whom we serve, to speak their language, to
adjust our lifestyle to theirs, to understand their worldview and religious values, and
to laugh and weep with them.

But how do we do that in cultures that are so different from our own? This is
where the power of anthropological insight comes to bear on our ministry. I submit
that without the insights of anthropology that help us understand and appreciate cul-
tural differences, we will automatically revert to our ethnocentric mode of inter-
pretation and behavior. We will fall into the cultural trap of assuming that what works
well for ministry in our own culture will also work well in a different culture—but it
seldom does. We will tend to assume erroneously that all human beings see the world
essentially the same as we do, and that cultural differences are not that significant
since we are all human beings created in God’s image.

But cultural differences are significant, very significant, for theological reasons
as much as anthropological ones. The various cultures of the world are gifts of God’s
grace. We receive a picture of the biblical importance of cultural diversity in
Revelation 7:9, where John writes:

After this I looked, and there was an enormous crowd—no one could count all the
people! They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood in
front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palm branch-
es in their hands. (Revelation 7:9, GNB)

The image we see here is one of cultural diversity, not cultural uniformity. People
from every ethnolinguistic group will surround the throne of God, worshiping God, not
in English, or even English as a second language, but in their own languages, shaped
by their own worldviews and cultures. The view we gain of the kingdom of God is mul-
ticultural participation, not ethnic uniformity. Around the throne of God are people rep-
resenting cultural diversity and united in praise to God as the Lord of Life, but express-
ing that praise through a diversity of languages, cultures, and worldviews. We can count
on hearing about 6,809 languages around that throne someday (Grimes 2000). One of
the things we admire most about the gospel is its ability to speak within the worldview
of every culture. And this to me is the empirical proof of its authenticity.

The same process of Incarnation, of God becoming a human being, occurs every
time the gospel crosses a new cultural, linguistic, or religious frontier. The mission of
God was achieved through the Incarnation of Jesus, and Jesus in turn said to his dis-
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principles and to us, “As the Father has sent me into the world, so I send you into the world” (John 20:21, paraphrased). So then, what does this mean for a model of mission, of cross-cultural ministry? I think we can assume that we are bound to work within the limitations of the cultural forms of the people to whom we are sent. This is not rigid or static because culture changes, but it means that we start with the confines and limitations, as well as opportunities, imposed by their culture. We start where people are because this is where God started with us in order to transform us into what God wants us to become.

When we take the Incarnation seriously as a model for mission, it frequently means downward mobility. Incarnation for Jesus led to crucifixion, and for us this means that there will be many things in our life that we will have to die to—our biases and prejudices, our lifestyle, our agenda of what we want to do for God, maybe for some of us even our physical life. When we take the Incarnation seriously in ministry, it means we bow at the cross in humility before we wave the flag of patriotism. The Incarnation as a model for mission means we must give up our own cultural compulsives and preferences, and we must not insist that the cultural expression of the gospel in another culture be the same as it is in our own.

Incarnational identification with the people among whom we live and serve does not mean we try to “go native.” Try as we might, we cannot. We cannot go native because our parents were not “native.” That is, we already have been shaped and molded by another culture, so we can never completely rid ourselves of that experience. And we don’t need to do so. Pathetic attempts to “go native” are often met with disgust by those we are trying to impress. Moreover, if we were to succeed in “going native,” then we would no longer be a conduit for ideas and values outside the culture that come with the gospel. I must admit that, in over 30 years of studying missionaries, I have yet to find anyone who “went too far.” We normally have the opposite problem of not going far enough in our attempts to identify with the people.

So, what does it mean to be incarnational in our approach to cultural differences? It frequently means at least the following seven practices:

1. We start with people where they are, embedded in their culture, and this frequently requires downward mobility on our part.
2. We take their culture seriously, for this is the context in which life has meaning for them.
3. We approach them as learners, as children, anxious to see the world from their perspective.
4. We are forced to be humble, for in their world of culture we have not yet learned the acquired knowledge to interpret experience and to generate social behavior.
5. We must lay aside our own cultural ethnocentricism, our positions of prestige and power.
6. To be incarnational means we will be very vulnerable; our defenses will have to go.
7. We make every effort to identify with people where they are, by living among them, loving them, and learning from them.

Conclusion

We have seen how over the past century or more anthropology has slowly been appropriated by mission for service in the kingdom of God. And we have briefly dis-
cussed the contribution that missionaries have made to the field of anthropology. Today we understand the value of anthropological insights for mission perhaps better than we ever have because of the missiological and anthropological research and writing that have transpired over the past century. But we continue in a situation where the majority of missionaries, both Western and non-Western, are still largely uninformed by anthropological insights. Without cross-cultural understanding, we will miss the richness of other cultures: one who knows only one culture, knows no culture (Augsburger 1986:18). There is a wonderful Kikuyu proverb from Kenya that captures the blinding ethnocentricism that comes from knowing only one culture: "He who does not travel, believes his mother is the world's best cook." With proper anthropological training, missionaries can overcome their ethnocentricism and feast on a smorgasbord of cross-cultural experience prepared by many good cooks.

In this article I have argued that the Incarnation as a model for cross-cultural ministry helps us make the important connection between anthropology and mission. I want to close this discussion on anthropology, mission, and Incarnation with an ancient Chinese poem that captures the essence of the Incarnation.

GO TO THE PEOPLE,
LIVE AMONG THEM,
LEARN FROM THEM,
LOVE THEM,
START WITH WHAT THEY KNOW,
BUILD ON WHAT THEY HAVE.

This is the incarnational way of doing and being in mission, but we need the insights of anthropology, the humility of Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to be in mission in this way.

Notes
1. An earlier version of this article was presented as the Third Annual Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, Lecture on Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL, May 5, 2003. An expanded version of that talk and this article is available from Catholic Theological Union, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Chicago, IL 60615-5698.
2. Because of space limitations, I have not been able to address why missionaries are today less anthropologically informed than ever, despite the rich history and wealth of information in published books and journals on how anthropological insights can inform mission practice. Research needs to be done to determine if the problem is primarily a lack of desire and curiosity for understanding people different from themselves or perhaps missionaries' lack of training in how to do it. Undoubtedly, there are many factors contributing to this problem.

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