
1-1-1992

Should the West Stop Sending Missionaries?

Larry Poston
lposton@messiah.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brs_ed



Part of the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brs_ed/24

Recommended Citation

Poston, Larry, "Should the West Stop Sending Missionaries?" (1992). *Bible & Religion Educator Scholarship*. 24.

https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brs_ed/24

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

SHOULD THE WEST STOP SENDING MISSIONARIES? A RESPONSE TO K.P. YOHANNAN

Larry Poston, Nyack College

Since 1986, *The Coming Revolution in World Missions* by K.P. Yohannan has been generating discussion in the evangelical world. The Indian evangelist's call for a restructuring of North American missions policy in favor of supporting native missionaries is not new to those familiar with missiological issues, but this thinking has now reached the level of the masses in the form of a best-selling book.

Yohannan believes that "it is time to make some basic changes and launch the biggest missionary movement in history - one that primarily helps send forth native evangelists rather than a Western staff. The primary role for Westerners now should be to support efforts of indigenous mission works through financial aid and intercessory prayer."¹

In the summer of 1991, Yohannan's newest work appeared entitled *Why the World Waits: Exposing the Reality of Modern Missions*. In this book the author elaborates on themes introduced in *Revolution*. Four elements of contemporary Western missions are subjected to criticism.

The Strategic Element

Yohannan is convinced that Westerners have abandoned evangelism and churchplanting in favor of "social work":

Though they have tried various social programs to bridge the gap, Western missionaries today often find themselves still unable to restore a credible Christian testimony. Therefore, with the exception of a few one-on-one contacts, many Western missionaries have retreated from open evangelistic work and direct church planting.²

67% of North American missionaries are allegedly involved in "support activities" such as agriculture and development, child-care, medicine and education. Yohannan considers involvement in these ministries a "sidetrack", and believes that they may represent deliberate sabotage by "a satanic plot."³

The Financial Element

Yohannan believes that Western mission agencies are not good stewards of their finances. The average annual cost of supporting a Western missionary couple is more than \$43,000, compared to the cost of supporting native missionaries, many of whom reportedly live on \$3 to \$5 per day. "Clearly," says Yohannan, "it is no longer merely inefficient to support only Western missionaries, but it would appear actually cost-prohibitive."

The Human Element

The criticism here is that Western missionaries are inept and unproductive, and most have "private agendas" for engaging in missionary activity. These misguided motivations include a desire to perpetuate pet doctrines and denominations, to introduce economic or political systems, to pursue personal power, adventure, career development or economic gain. Furthermore, qualifications for missionaries determined by Western mission agencies are unbiblical:

In the real world of missions today New Testament standards for Christian service play such an insignificant role in missionary selection that the Lord Jesus Himself - and probably most of the apostles - would not even get through the screening process for their first interview. Ironically, well-connected, educated, middle-class, affluent, and politically oriented Judas might well have 'the right stuff' to score well on his application.⁴

The Spiritual Element

Western missionaries are powerless, says Yohannan. "Western-style colonialism" on the mission field today is guilty of "rationalism and unbelief in the power of the supernatural." Miracles, exorcisms, resurrections, and healings are necessary for the power of God to be revealed in its fullness, for "people are not going to be won to Christ through ideological, philosophical arguments."

These are the arguments presented against Western missions policy. How should we who are committed to a continuation of Western involvement in the worldwide missionary enterprise respond?

Response to the Criticism Concerning Strategy

Yohannan is dealing here with an issue that is both ancient and intricate. The struggle between advocates of "evangelism and church planting only" and those who promote "the social gospel" has no easy resolution. Yohannan has taken the side of the former and adequately defends his position from the Bible. What is left unsaid, however, is the fact that the opposing side offers evidence for their position from the same source.

Yohannan, like many others, has been too quick to judge what has been dubbed "the colonialist (or imperialist) era." This is in keeping with a modern trend espoused by anthropologists and historians alike. That there was evil involved in colonialist endeavors is indisputable. But we must not ignore the enormous good which has been the legacy of much that has been disdainfully dismissed as "colonialism". I for one do not wish to return to a world of tribal warfare, headhunting, irrational fear of the elements, superstition, occult practice, widow-burning, footbinding, infanticide, the oppression of women, temple prostitution, poor hygiene, disease epidemics and the like. We are told in our classrooms and by the media that cultures are inviolable and must therefore be left intact by missionary agents. But as students of the Bible we must acknowledge that all cultures - be they Eastern or Western - are the products of sinful human beings, and Christians have been commanded to allow the light of the Word of God to *transform* conditions around them.

Yohannan states that "the task of the missionary is simply to convert and disciple nations to Christ," but this is not so simple as it sounds. Does not discipling the nations involve aiding new converts in their struggle to flesh out their faith in the context of their cultural surroundings? Or is the gospel to be preached and churches planted while converts are left in poverty and ignorance? We see in the contemporary "Christian" West what happens to the Church when proper discipling does not take place and cultural issues are inadequately dealt with, and we have no reason to believe that the Third World Church will escape similar problems. Western

missionaries could conceivably help new converts avoid (if possible) some of the problems confronted in the contemporary West.

Response to the Criticism Concerning Finances

Many of Yohannan's observations concerning the extravagance of missionary support rates are worthy of consideration, and Western mission agencies would do well to require a more ascetic lifestyle of their workers. A return to a lower standard of living would most likely result in an increase in the credibility of missionary agents, since sainthood, in the minds of most of the world's peoples, is characterized by poverty, simplicity, and self-abnegation.

Yohannan touches on this but does not make it the focal point of his criticism. Instead he takes aim at such things as the costs of educating missionary candidates, maintaining that "the actual cost of training a missionary family might easily run as high as \$450,000 to \$500,000."⁵ These figures are exaggerated and do not reflect reality. Higher education is indeed expensive but at the kinds of schools where missionary candidates are prepared the costs are nowhere near what Yohannan intimates they are.

But let us for a moment set aside the arguments concerning the high cost of supporting North American missionaries. Even if couples continue to draw an average of \$43,000 yearly, American churchgoers can easily afford it. According to polls, 40% of the American people claim to be "born-again" and the percentage of regular church attenders is approximately the same. This amounts to some 100,000,000 persons. If half of this group earns the median American income of \$18,000 per year, their salaries would total approximately 900 billion dollars. If these persons were all to tithe, some \$90,000,000,000 would become available to the Church in America on a yearly basis. If 50% of these funds were used for missionary support, even at the rate of \$43,000 per family, American Christians could support in excess of one million missionaries.

We must also remember that the higher cost of support for Western missionaries is due in

part to the devaluation of the dollar, tax regulations and social security regulations (both at home and abroad), and to requirements imposed upon expatriates by foreign governments.

On the other hand, one may question whether indigenous missionaries are actually able to live as cheaply as Yohannan claims they can in the places where mission agencies are beginning to direct their energies. The world is urbanizing so rapidly that some demographers estimate that by the year 2050, 88% of the world's population will live in cities of 100,000 or more persons.

Two questions arise from this fact:

1) Can native missionaries carry on effective ministries in *cities* at the "bargain prices" mentioned by Yohannan?

2) Does any proof exist that these "bargain-rate" native missionaries are really more productive than North American missionaries *in the long run*? Are these natives equipped to handle the theological, sociological, psychological, economic, and political issues that will inevitably arise (and, in many countries have already arisen) as the Third World Church comes of age?

Response to the Criticism Concerning the Human Element

Yohannan accuses Western missionaries of harboring various "hidden agendas". As for *perpetuating pet doctrines and denominations*, only a few branches of the Church are still highly concerned with denominationalism in today's ecumenically-minded world. With regard to *spreading Western civilization*, most Western missionaries are concerned with neither economics nor politics; indeed, they are constantly caricatured for their lack of sophistication in these areas.

Concerning a *desire for power*, missionaries appear in the face of the continuing backlash against "colonialism" to be increasingly *powerless*. *Adventure* may be the initial motivation for teenage respondents to an idealistic picture painted by an over-zealous furlougher at a church missions conference, but it is doubtful that such a motivation survives the rigors of undergraduate and graduate education, the missionary application process, the candidate school, home

service, and deputation. As for *career development*, the occupation of "missionary" does not usually add glamour to a resume. Finally, despite the generous support rates mentioned previously, most would still find it ludicrous to think of entering missionary service for *financial gain*.

Yohannan's accusations, then, have little validity. The majority of missionaries are motivated by a love for Christ and His Church and a desire to be obedient to His last command.

It is true, however, that proper motivation does not guarantee effectivity. Can Western missionaries still be productive overseas? They certainly can; indeed, Westerners have several advantages over native missionaries.

1) A lengthy historical involvement in the Christian World Mission. Most American missionaries receive training from veteran missionaries who communicate items of cultural and strategic significance. This teaching increases efficiency by helping newcomers avoid mistakes made in the past. It also enables them to utilize successful techniques from the outset of their ministry.

2) Lack of contention with ancient enemies. In some countries Westerners are unpopular - but this is true of the citizens of other nations as well. There are rivalries that have existed between various Asian nations for centuries. The bitterness that exists between Koreans and the Japanese is legendary. In India, there are deadly rivalries between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. There are warring factions in the Philippines and in Sri Lanka, there are heated exchanges between Sunni Iraqis and Shi'ite Iranians, there is hatred between Cambodians and Vietnamese. Western missionaries are more welcome in some Asian countries than are certain Asians.

3) Freedom from rigid social structures. In many countries we find tightly structured social systems that prevent contact between peoples of different classes. In India, for instance, it is still difficult (and in some cases impossible) for social relationships to be developed across caste lines. Here the native missionary - who is subject to these class distinctions - is at a distinct

disadvantage while the foreign missionary may find himself well-placed since he cannot be classified according to any of the social levels.

4) Participation in the "international urban culture". As mentioned previously, our world is rapidly becoming an urban world. Urban culture has begun to acquire international characteristics, producing a lifestyle recognizable from New York to New Delhi. Cross-cultural travelers can move relatively easily from one city to another. Since the West is to a large extent already urbanized (some 75% of Americans live in cities), it is conceivable that missionary trainees recruited from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, Paris, or Stockholm would be better prepared for the urban districts of the Third World than native missionaries drawn from rural populations.

5) Commitment to technological innovation. Yohannan acknowledges that "Bible translation or broadcast technology ... is often best staffed by Western missions." But this admission does not do justice to the far-reaching consequences of Western inventiveness. The medical expertise of Agape Movement physicians, the linguistic creativity of Wycliffe Bible translators, and the agricultural skills of Mennonite Central Committee members have contributed enormously to both the credibility and accessibility of the gospel message.

Response to the Criticism Concerning the Spiritual Element

Some Western mission agencies subscribe to theological systems which restrict miraculous displays of supernatural power to the original followers of Jesus in the 1st Century A.D. Modern day miracles are consigned to the realm of the Satanic, the psychological, or the lunatic fringe. But, relatively speaking, this group is not large. The "third wave" of the charismatic renewal is producing a tremendous number of Western missionaries intent upon exercising supernatural gifts as a form of "power evangelism." Biographies of Western missionaries are rife with testimonies of healings, resurrections, exorcisms, and other wonders. In the face of such evidence, it is difficult to maintain that Westerners have become spiritually powerless.

Conclusion

Will native missionaries have it so much easier in today's world? Will they be more effective, for instance, in winning the world's one billion Muslims? Or the world's atheistic Marxists? Will they be able to function so much more cheaply in the cities that are growing at unprecedented rates? Will they be able to avoid the cultural, ethical, and theological issues which have plagued missionary efforts for centuries? I do not think so. For my native brothers and sisters preach the same gospel as I, and that gospel has always been "foolishness" and "a stumbling stone" to the lost. Native missionaries will carry their own cultural "baggage" and will be accused of "religious imperialism", they will experience inevitable entropy as their churches age, they will grieve over denominational splits, and they will struggle with cross-cultural issues. Neither we nor they can win the world alone. We need each other. Let us join hands, encourage one another, and put an end to the world's wait.

NOTES

¹ K. P. Yohannan, *Why the World Waits: Exposing the Reality of Modern Missions* (Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1991), p. 25.

² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.