

73: Peoples and Ethnic Groups: The Third Era of Missions

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Introduction

We come to a high point in a way in the entire four-module program. It is difficult to articulate what people must have been thinking 100 years ago, compared to what they are thinking today, and where this new thinking came from. It is one of the major changes in all of human history.

In certain terminology, we could say that our course is on the phenomenon of *global civilization*. If there is such a thing, are we moving toward it? Is there some sort of global coalescing of understanding that is more and more pervasive? For example, are people wearing notched coats? That is very important: that everybody in the world wear notched coats. Wherever I go in the world, sure enough, I see people with notched coats. At one time the purpose was to be able to tie around your neck, so the notch had a function. But it does function as evidence of global civilization. I don't want to make a big point of that, but we are also talking therefore about development, the development towards something. It is all very mysterious; you might say it is the central question of human experience. Who are we? And where are we going?

We are taking a great leap forward. In ancient times, at the time of Christ for example, the Roman Empire was a phenomenon. Empires take control of large territories. It is kind of a brute-force attack on human diversity, which is a terrible nuisance. It makes for trade and for roads, and nowadays telecommunications that are more and more intelligible around the world. What if we could not send e-mail around the world today? That would be terrible, if people had a different technique in every country and you had to have a different software program for every country? It is like word-processors; now that we have fewer and fewer word-processors, it is a happier situation. So we see that the Romans contributed something. However, it did not stick. There is no empire that has ever stuck—they come apart again and again.

Further on in the story of mankind, you see the so-called “nation state” coming together. These are smaller empires. For example, Napoleon notably was one of the last people to try to create, or re-

create, a Roman-type empire. He failed, but at least he strengthened the base. What we call France today is to a very large extent the result of the spurt of energy, and tragedy, that surrounded the sequence of events between the French Revolution and Napoleon—Napoleon III, eventually—and our modern situation.

Even in our modern situation, the nation states are breaking down. The last great empire, you could say, would be either China or the Soviet Union. They are both breaking down, in one way or another. Take Chechnya, within the state of Russia for instance. You could even conceive of the state of Russia as being a smaller empire which encloses at least 40 or 50 major sub-groups, like the Chechnya group. They do not necessarily want to consider themselves part of the nation state. Nation states are thus, like empires, both artificial and fragile, though they perform some real practical functions. But they “blow up”, like Yugoslavia, for example. Perhaps many other states (Africa in particular) are going to rebel against the nation state structure imposed from the outside, and break down into smaller states. This is called *balkanization* in technical terms, but in our lesson structure here, it is being discovered in a very dramatic and graphic way by the mission movement itself.

In this lesson we will not be discussing empires or nation states. We will be looking at peoples and ethnic groups. This is such a significantly new insight, that we are actually defining a *third era of missions* by these observations. We would like to get to the bottom of this—what really actually happened? We will not talk about the contemporary situation, except for illustrations. We are going to look at the two people who contributed more to this new understanding than anyone else. These were the two “John the Baptists” who were “voices crying in the wilderness.” Practically no one listened to them, although interestingly, John R. Mott, a global statesman, took note of what Donald McGavran was thinking about, and also Pickett, another missionary in India; but it was notably McGavran who wrote it up and pursued it as a lifelong insight.

Townsend was in a totally different world but also began, as a leader, to see these similar insights.

Others had also seen what he saw. A wonderful book that demonstrates this is *Trail Blazers for Translators* by Anna Marie Dahlquist. This nifty little book tells the background of the Wycliffe Bible Translators (the largest mission in the world today). These people (Wycliffe) are zeroing in, not on empires and not on nation states, but on peoples.

The last laugh comes from the Bible itself, which has always been talking about peoples. The Bible acknowledges the existence of empires, yet not such a thing as a country. There is probably no word in the Bible that can be translated “country” properly. But all through the Bible, it is sensitive to what we now call *ethnic* diversity.

Donald McGavran’s classic book, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*,¹ is a major contribution in this area, summing up some of his earlier insights, using India as an illustration. India, which is cut up into major language areas, is cut up even more finely, more disturbingly—and more disastrously in a way—by thousands of smaller groups which do not define themselves by language but by culture. Language and culture perhaps outrank even race which is not the most important thing apparently. We have to take into account all these things.

Let me give just one illustration. Years ago, one of our staff members went to a world-level fair of some sort in Vancouver, Canada. There was a pavilion there representing the country of Pakistan. All the major countries of the world had their pavilions, with articulate spokesmen who would come out every 20 minutes and give a little 7-minute talk. The people would look around and see the glories and the wonders of that particular nation state. As I said, nation states are fading in terms of determination. This insightful—and I would say daring and brave—government official got up and had the audacity in his very first sentence to come out with this statement as a representative of the country of Pakistan. He said, “In Pakistan there are no Pakistanis.” I have used this illustration many times—it is so graphic. All the people were in shock. He said, “We have in the southwest, Baluchis; in the southeast, we have the Sindhis; in the northeast, we have the Punjabis; in the northwest, we have the Pushtuns.” He went on naming the many groups that are to be found in Pakistan.

This is not true of just Pakistan. India, for example, is one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. Or if you go to Uzbekistan, three-fourths of the people in the country speak one variety or another of the Uzbek language family. Five million, or one-fourth of the people who speak a language in that family, do not even live in Uzbekistan. They live in 21 other countries. If you try to map them, you have a problem; geography does not serve us well when we start looking at peoples. Empires, yes; countries, yes. Our political maps, derive from the era of the nation states.

People who attempt to map peoples are faced with the necessity in Uzbekistan, for example, of 55 overlays: different layers of plastic, of peoples on top of peoples. You say, “Wait a minute. You just said there were 15 million (by extension: one out of four is outside; three out of four are inside) of the people in Uzbekistan who are Uzbeks. Who else is there?” There are 55 other people groups in Uzbekistan and if you were to map that properly, you would have to have 55 plastic overlays to look at them all at once. I do not know what you would see that would be intelligible. You would have to lift them up to see what is really there. It is even worse in India, where in the same village you might have 50 different castes that segregate themselves very distinctly.

So now the fat is in the fire. Now reality has hit the fan! With distressing complexity we are facing the reality of the *peoples* of the world. It just may be that God was kindly to us and has let us think that we were going out to the *countries* of the world to preach the gospel. When we got to the place where we had a church in every country of the world, which has been true for some time, we had to be let down softly, and say, “Ahem! The job is not quite done yet.” Maybe that is what God had in mind. But today it is irretrievable. We now face the reality which the Bible has been talking about from the beginning, namely, the ethnic entities, the peoples, defined by race, language, and culture.

The pioneering thinking on this was not being done in universities, but was being done in the field. It is almost always true that new ideas come from the *activists*, not from the philosophers. The philosophers take those ideas and run with them, and roll them around. Sometimes—it is embarrassing to point this out—the philosophers even pretend it is their ideas that influence the reality, when it is more likely the other way around. The reality gave the philosophers something to think about and to talk about. In any event, the theoreticians today, in the area of ethnic

¹ Published in 1979 by William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA.

entities, are at every point yielding to the greater complexity of the reality.

For example, consider China. It is still true that there are people who live in America, educated people, who would not be shocked to hear that somebody has a cousin studying Chinese at a university. They would be shocked—most Americans derive from Europe still, though this truth is changing quickly—at someone learning to speak European. They would say, “Of course not! There is no such language.” Neither is there a Chinese language! Mandarin and Cantonese are as different as German and Italian. There are simply ignoramus conditions in America that allow us to fail to see the peoples of China.

But it is worse than that! Most of the people in China may be Han Chinese. That is the generic term for this large family of dozens and dozens of languages that are mutually unintelligible. But in addition to this large, discernible—and probably the world’s largest—mega-people, you have many languages, cultures, and peoples in South China and in Northwest China. They used to say there are hundreds of smaller people groups in China. More recently we hear there are really 400. We are being forced to yield day by day, to the complexity of the reality.

This could be very discouraging, in a way; but it could be very encouraging, because we are getting there—we are getting out to the grassroots, finally. Our theoreticians are having to yield to the realities that there are more peoples than they thought there were. Nevertheless, we are really getting there. Townsend and McGavran are the two people in the world of missions who have made this reality unavoidable. They are key people to keep track of in this lesson.

Review

1. There was a vast chorus of voices in the mission sphere following the massive impact of the SVM. Compare McGavran, Kraemer, Townsend, Hocking. Were they in different worlds?

We have entered into a new subject in Question #1. Thus far we have encountered McGavran and Townsend, and to a lesser extent Kraemer and Hocking. These are not the only four voices. By far the two loudest voices probably are Kraemer and Hocking. Kraemer was one of the major exponents at the Jerusalem 1928 meeting of the IMC. Hocking was noted for many things, but in the world of missions he was noted primarily for his

ground-breaking *Rethinking Missions* book, which is the result of a world survey, a superficial run around the world. He was not the only one on the trip, but he was the one who wrote it up. The impact of his book has often been decried as a tragedy. What can be said is this, that at the time it came out, it was not taken too seriously. Over a period of time, however, either his book had a lot of influence, or other people came to similar conclusions.

There is a good deal of meat and merit in what he wrote. There is also a good deal of insight and a good deal that is just perfectly obvious. On the other hand, the way he stated things went too far. He got into trouble because of the relatively superficial impact he made. For example, he talked in very Marxian terms about the need for a “new man,” a new person. You have to have a new person in order to have a new society. More and more Christian anthropologists have come into the picture since then and now you could almost state it in reverse: you cannot have a new man unless you have a new society. Somewhere in there, the two truths are to be held in balance. Hocking also spoke in terms of the need for, what we would say, is a *relativistic attitude* towards different cultures of the world. That is probably an unfortunate terminology.

More unfortunate still, though not a major factor in his work, is the idea that he may have originated—or at least certainly articulated—what we would now refer back to as the “*great divorce*” between evangelism and social action. There was no divorce on the field. Missionaries always, from the very beginning to the very end, have been concerned about social as well as spiritual factors. His glancing impression at the situation led him to believe that some people were concentrating on one and some on the other. If it is true, that some favor one over the other, it would probably seem to be those who concentrate on the social, rather than those who concentrate on the evangelistic. The people who concentrate on the evangelistic end up with converts; they end up with people and churches, real people with real social problems. You simply cannot avoid the material, the intellectual, nor the secular dimensions of salvation when you are dealing with the souls of people. But it is very easy to not make reference to or deal with the “heart” conditions of peoples if all you are doing is dealing with their external problems.

Kraemer, who was a staunch upholder of orthodoxy, probably went too far in stressing the uniqueness of Christ, insofar as he would conceive

of that expression to be limited by a certain set of factors. He probably would not be quite so friendly to the advanced contextualization that we talk about today, but which was in fact involved in both McGavran's and Townsend's work from the beginning. The people out in the field were doing more radical contextualization than Kraemer would be happy about, or that Hocking would even have thought of. But they were doing it within the safety of the assumed uniqueness of Christ, which Kraemer stressed but Hocking somewhat questioned. In any event, you have two of these four people, field people whose theories derived from empirical experience, and two of them who were more or less in a theological or philosophical vein.

2. What is Hiebert's distinction between the perspective of McGavran and that of Townsend? How are both perspectives superbly important and complementary, and to what extent were these people realities overlooked earlier?

Hiebert's distinction is between the *horizontal* segmentation of mankind, distributed across geography, typical of tribal societies who do not live on top of each other, and McGavran's social distinctions (more of a vertical thing). Let us say for example that in one village, you have fifty different groups of people. They do not actually really live "in the same place"; even there it is a kind of a micro-segmentation. But it is not the macro-segmentation which Townsend was dealing with when he was dealing with tribes.

However, the distinctions between the tribes on the one hand, and the castes or classes or social levels on the other, is radically different when it comes to language. If you go horizontally people have to travel distances to be in touch with each other, and languages diverge. You have more and more dialectic differences. In an Indian village where you have different social levels; people talk to each other, so long as they do not get in the shadow of each other. The language is quite unified; the distinctions are not linguistic primarily. Both of these perspectives are very valuable, and in many cases they are both in operation in the same situation. We are simply indebted to these two men for pioneering in these two dimensions.

3. The shift from individuals in countries to peoples scattered in more than one place is the largest shift in

mission strategy in the 20th century. Why has it taken so long?

The paradigm shift between a perspective that understands individuals in countries, to peoples scattered in more than one place but have no geographical fixity, is so major a shift that it would have to take a long time. In fact, to this day most of our research documents and almost all of our people data is broken down by country. The Joshua Project list, along with Barrett's and Johnstone's, simply chops the people up according to country. Take the Albanians, for instance: more of them are outside the country than inside. You have got two kinds of Albanians: you have got Albanians in Albania and you have got Albanians in Macedonia (and even more in what could be called Serbia). As many countries as the people are found in, that is how many peoples there are.

This is highly artificial, since in many cases around the world the so-called country borders are not visible. The people themselves do not even know where the borders are. They did not know that somebody in London drew a line and put half of them here and half of them there. Or like the Masai, they go back and forth, migrating. One month they are in Tanzania, the other months they are in Kenya.

Let us face it. Our world has still not shifted over to looking at people in "people terms." For those who are concerned about the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and even the "communication identity" of a given people, it is difficult to get data on them as a group. As we talked about already, you have to go to 21 countries to find all the Uzbeks. Here is the interesting thing: it may be easier to deal with the Uzbeks in one of those smaller populations than in their heartland. The fact is that missionary strategy, development strategy, or any kind of agents of transformation, need to carefully take into account what the most strategic place to begin would be.

Again, the country divisions do not help us at all. It might be much easier to work in depth with a certain family or a certain leader, in Amsterdam, for example, than in Morocco. You can help that person really grasp what you are trying to say. Then let them go back, using their own language and cultural background, to deal with people in larger numbers, where it is more difficult for change to take place.

Now the specific question: *Why has it taken so long?* If we look closely at any point in history in answering the question, we realize it is not because it was unclearly articulated. As a matter of fact, it is

not because it was something that went unseen either. As I have already said, in ancient times, in the days of the empires, it probably was more possible to talk intelligently of linguistic sub-strata than it would have been in the nation state era. Then, we had this illusion that we were going to make everybody into one people within a country.

We went a long way in that direction: Americans spoke of “the melting pot,” and so forth. It was a grand idea. We can call it a grand illusion today. Beginning with “Black Power,” and then “Brown Power,” and every other kind of power, we are now going backwards with the speed of a freight-train, backing away from the idea of uniformity, instead of, hopefully, unity. The question, the problem, the challenge, can be stated philosophically. You can say: How in the world can you have continuity with variety? This is essentially what Hocking, Townsend, and others were dealing with regarding the empirical realities. The idea of a pluralistic society is unthinkable in most primitive societies or most earlier eras. The slightest deviation in a society and off went the heads! People simply could not tolerate clashing social differences of perspective.

Maybe it is not possible to have continuity with variety. For example, in the United States you have massive opposing factions: those who say that we

must give freedom to every language and every culture—we already have maybe 100 different languages used on public radio—and then others who say, that if we do not settle on one language, we cannot be a country! There are Mexican-Americans who are stressing English and Anglos stressing Spanish! You have got every wind and perspective when you come into this picture.

We must not suppose that we can walk away with a simple answer. But we can at least go away from this subject, realizing that it will stay with us and that there are valuable insights at every end of the spectrum. We are now grappling with a dimension of reality which has never before in history been taken as seriously as it is at this point.

You may remember when Alexander the Great was thinking about all this. His answer was to line up all the maidens from all the different cultural traditions within his expanding empire, and marry off all his soldiers. Thus he tried to mix up all the languages and all the races and come out, of course, with Greek. He did achieve a phenomenal amount by spreading Greek all over the place, but he did not really merge all the peoples into one. Similarly, it does not look like we are going in that direction either. We will have to wait and see.