BOOKS I HAVE READ: WHAT'S WRONG WITH WESTERN MISSIONS?

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Category: Observations

Some books have enigmatic titles; you have to read half way through before you discover why the author has named the book the way they have - sometimes you can never work it out. What's Wrong With Western Missions?: The Perspective of a Local Believer by Kanat Yesmagambetov is not one of those books. You know what you are getting into as soon as you get into it.

Before I talk about the book, I need to say a word about the author. Kanat is a Russian speaking Khazak church leader. He has previously spent years working with Western mission boards. What is clear from the book is that he is very well read and culturally aware. He knows far more about aspects of popular Western culture than I do. It is also clear from the authors that he cites that he is an orthodox, evangelical Christian. I say this, because people might be tempted to dismiss a book like this as being written by some obscure, fringe Christian with some sort of agenda - this couldn't be further from the truth. Kanat is a man with a heart for the gospel and a desire to see the church grow in Central Asia. If he criticises Western missions, he does so from the best of motives.

> *Kazakhs have a proverb: â€œA friend makes you cry, and an enemy makes you laugh.â€*

> *It is quite possible to write a book about the good that missionaries have done in Kazakhstan or Morocco, but itâ€™s not necessary. This is declared at conferences and sent in mailings; you can read about it in Christianity Today. I wanted to talk about the other side. Few people talk about this because it is not very â€œfunâ€ ; they can be fired for it, and it frightens the heads of missions and key sponsors.*

The book is a normal format paperback of 203 pages. It is pitched at an average reading level with enough personal stories and humorous asides to make it a fair easy read, despite the somewhat difficult subject matter. There is a substantial bibliography at the end of the book.

The book has 13 chapters. None of them are particularly long, which makes for a fairly relaxed reading experience. My one criticism of the book is that I could not follow a thread through the book; that is not to say that there isn't one, just that I couldn't discern it. It wasn't always clear what the connection was between one chapter and another and sometimes threads seemed to be dropped only to be picked up a while later. However, this is a minor criticism and it did not distract from the books value or impact.

As I read the book, three themes emerged:

- The author's life story; which provides a background to his interactions with Western missionaries.
- Meditations on Christianity as a religion of faith, love and self-sacrifice. The fact that he includes this material is an indication of some of the things (surprisingly) that he finds lacking in the Western missions movement.
- Some direct and very trenchant criticisms of Western missions.

Make no mistake, this is not a comfortable book to read. However, I would regard it as essential for anyone working in a Western mission agency or for those who send church workers (especially to Central Asia). To be honest, there is nothing in this book that I have not experienced first or second hand. I hold my hand up to some of the more embarrassing accusations about missions and their leadership; I like to think I've learned better, but we still need the wise criticisms of friendly voices if we are to play our part in what God is doing today.

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I'd like to close with a series of quotes, but I'm going to link them thematically.

Theology

> *Another reason my mission ceased theological training was expressed by a missionary: â€œWhy do the Kazakhs need their own theologians? They have Timothy Keller and John Piper.â€*

> *Returning to the statement of the missionary brotherâ€"that we donâ€™t need Kazakh theologians because we have Timothy Kellerâ€"I would not agree. First, Timothy Keller will never serve in Kazakhstanâ€"or any other country on my side of the world. And John Piper is over seventy years old. Second, can they find resolutions to our questions? They are not Turkic people; they do not live in a Muslim country. We have dozens, no hundreds, of unresolved theological issues which seriously affect the daily lives of believers and those who do not yet follow Jesus.*

Mission Methodology

> *The era of fast food gave birth to Fast Food Christianity. If a mission asks its ministers to start meetings from scratch, in Central Asia, it will take from four to six years to build a congregation of forty people, and there are no guarantees even for that. For each successful church, there are ten meetings that never really get off the ground or disappear over time. Therefore, our mission needed magic formulas to multiply existing churches. But as you understand from what Iâ€™ve written above, nothing happened.Â*

> *Concluding this chapter, I want to say: There is no magic formula. There is no magic formula. There is no magic formula. There is no magic formula. There is no magic formula. There is no magic formula. That said, I am quite sure that church development fads will persistâ€"the latest church planting theories, new training techniques, secret methods of evangelism. Sadly, people have always had, and will always have, a craving for magic formulas promising quick results, like how to become a millionaire in a month or learn a foreign language in two days.*

> *Paul wrote thirteen epistles, and he doesnâ€™t teach his disciples any methods or tools in any of them. Rather, he kneels before the Father â€œso that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*

The Nature of Christianity

> *Faith is not just some kind of mental conviction, self-assurance, or confidence. The root of true faith is in God as He is. Faith arises from our understanding of His nature: His mercy, His goodness, His holiness, His greatness. By learning more about His character, His will, and His ways, our faith becomes stronger and stronger.*

> *In conservative Christianity, faith dreads feelings, like an obedient boy who sees the local bully and hides behind a fence. Our faith adores facts, logic, study, discipline, and principles and fears anything unknown, secret, immeasurable, uncontrollable, and incomprehensible.*

> *I realized that the theme of my quiet time was, â€œGod, what can You do for me today?â€ A true relationship with God is based on the theme, â€œGod, Who are You?â€*

> *This is not popular in the age of comfort and personal freedom. Suffering is the forbidden theme of the modern Evangelical church, where favorite topics include financial independence, success, potential, personal growth, family, and conflict resolution. Modern preachers are no different from motivational speakers, except that from time to time, they insert the words â€œGodâ€ and â€œJesus.â€*

Finance and Mission

> *It is important to note here that behind our godâ€"Statisticsâ€"there was an even more powerful god: Budget. If Moloch ate children, then Budget ate Statistics: the more gifts we gave to him, the more generous he was. So, we needed statistics, handed over every month, to attest to our movement. Therefore, we needed partners.*

> *Our field director, Brent, regretted that the cost of one seminar in Kazakhstan would pay for ten seminars in India. Are we following Godâ€™s voice or budget, statistics, and logic?*

Missionaries and Local Christians

> *We were divided into missionaries and locals. Itâ€™s like two rivers that flow parallel to each other: one wide, rich in fish, with green shores; the other narrow, shallow, with banks that had collapsed into the river. These rivers never intersect. If you look from afar, it may seem that they merge together, but this is an illusion, a mirage.*

> *I did not say anything, for though I bore the grand title of director, I was but a local, and merely having my own opinion was enough to get me fired.*

If you are a missionary, be careful about what you say and what you do. We locals do not yet know that for some of you, the words â€œbrothers and sistersâ€ are simply placeholder terms of the Christian subculture and that â€œI will pray for youâ€ most often means â€œI cannot help you.â€

Also, our missionaries had many different terms to describe sin. There was one â€œfavoriteâ€ sin which they all recognizedâ€"sexual sin, like adultery or viewing pornography. They preached about it, condemned it, and could excommunicate you for it. However, if it was something else . . . If they did not keep their word, it meant that they had a change of vision. If they had double standards, it was a new strategy. If they were not hospitable, it was just American culture. Pride was leadership principles, and indifference was just a different perspective.

In business, the focus has shifted from products, concepts, and development to the customerâ€™s need. Similarly, the focus of Western missionary organizations must shift from the missions themselves to the needs of local leaders. â€œI am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.â€ Today, locals are considered to be merely a work force helping the mission implement their plans and projects. The key word in that sentence is their. In eighteen years of service, I donâ€™t remember a missionary coming up and asking, â€œKanat, how can I help your ministry?â€ Mostly, they just told me what to do, what to pray for, and when to show up.

Donâ€™t create a â€œLittle Americaâ€ within Kazakhstan: your children go to an American school; on Sundays, you attend an American church; you have a missionary home group meeting on Wednesday nights. To complete your happiness, Papa Johns and Starbucks materialized in Kazakhstan. But ask this question, â€œHave you forgotten what you came for?â€

When I was self-employed, I could spend the whole day watching Friends on TV and then mark it on the calendar as â€œLearning English.â€ Similarly, a missionary can have fun all day long with his local friends and then call it â€œevangelism.â€

> *There is a joke in HR circles: â€œAn employee never achieved such perfection as in the preparation of a resumÃ©.â€ By analogy, it can be said that missionaries never achieve such perfection as in the presentation of their ministry.*

I wrote a paper for a Global Connections seminar ten years ago which touches on some of themes in this book; you can find it here, if you are interested.