SOME MUSINGS ON MISSION AGENCIES

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Some thoughts on the religious, political and intellectual worlds that gave birth to the modern missionary movement and how they have changed.
Category: Observations

Evangelical missions developed at a time when it was possible to conceive of the world as being divided between a Christian West and the non-Christian rest. The distinction between the worlds was clear and mission could be distinguished from other forms of Christian service because it involved travelling out of the Christian world into the non-Christian one.

The political world in which the mission agencies developed was one dominated by Empire. The places to which British agencies were sending missionaries were also very often the same places that became colonies of the British Empire. Over time, the two movements became closely entwined, with the government seeing missionaries as part of the strategy for expanding colonial reach. From the point of view of those receiving the missionaries, it could be very difficult to separate out the religious agenda of the missionaries from the political agenda of their colonial overseers. There was also an inevitable power gap; the missionaries being seen to be backed by the vast wealth and military power of the empire.

Mission agencies developed in an intellectual climate dominated by the enlightenment and a period of rapid technological development. This allowed for new advances in mission, as practices from the business and commercial world were adapted in order to further the missionary cause. Over the succeeding 200 years, mission agencies have been quick to adopt new technologies such as radio, computers and the Internet for the spread of their work. At the same time the enlightenment separation of the sacred and secular tended to distance missionaries from the people they were serving, as missionaries failed to appreciate the complex spiritual worldviews of many societies worldwide.

Each of these three dimensions of the world that mission agencies developed in; religious, political and intellectual, has changed dramatically in the last fifty years and this cannot fail to have an impact on their future.

This is part of the first draft of something that I am writing in order to get my own thoughts straight on these issues. It isn't the whole story, but I thought you might find it interesting.Â