BOOKS I HAVE READ: FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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I really wanted to like this book...
Category: Observations

I've been struggling to write a review ofÂ From the Inside Out: Reimagining Mission, Recreating the WorldÂ because it is a book with great ambition, which looks at important topics, but it is also a book which I found too flawed to be willing to recommend it.

I've not seen a hard copy of the book, I was provided with a pdf by the author (which makes this review even harder to write). However, it looks to be a medium format paperback and comes to just over 200 pages. It will set you back about seven quid on Kindle and considerably more if you want a hard copy (in the UK, at least).

Let's start with the good bits. Ryan Kuja is prepared to ask some hard questions about the reasons that motivate people to be involved in mission, questions which desperately need to be asked.

> *Had I acted more as a catalyst for patronizing charity than biblical justice? Was part of the reason why I was engaging in mission to fulfill my personal need for meaning and purpose? (p.7)*

This is a vital question that needs to be asked of anyone in Christian ministry, not just missionaries. The author then takes this question of motives a bit further and looks at what it is that people do on the mission field.

> *I cam to see that people who sense a call to cross-cultural work of all sorts - discipleship, community development, aid work, short- and long-term mission, anti-human trafficking work, social entrepreneurship and other forms of advocacy (who I refer to throughout the book as faith-based sojourners)- often head off somewhere to make a difference without the psychological self-knowledge, spiritual maturity, theological goundedness, and cultural competency necessary to do the good they hope to do, to be the catalysts for justice that they have the potential to be. Many end up furthering harmful relational patterns, a narrow version of the gospel rooted in American Christianity, neocolonial assumptions, and a savior complex rather than the redemption and flourishing of the kingdom of God. (p.8)*

This is all good, thought-provoking stuff and I found myself saying a hearty amen to much of it. Kuja suggests that the key answer to this lies in a more grounded spirituality for missionaries. Once again, I am 100% in agreement. I believe that the most important thing that I did when I was involved in devising training for Wycliffe workers was to include a segment of spiritual formation into their orientation. I'm not entirely comfortable with some of the approaches that this book advocates, but I think he has got the diagnosis spot-on.

He also takes a well-aimed swing at some of the practices of mission and aid agencies. I particularly appreciated this quote.

> *... the continued growth of international nonprofits has created increasing competition for limited funds. According to the head of a large American humanitarian organization in Kenya. "When you're fundraising you have to prove there is a need. Children starving, mothers dying. If you're not negative enough, you won't get funding (p.53)*

So why don't I like it?

It is too American. I don't mean this in any pejorative sense. There is nothing wrong with an American author aiming at an American audience writing an American focussed book. However, it does limit its usefulness outside of that audience. As I'm writing for a predominantly British public, I'm not sure that this book really scratches where we are itching today.

TheÂ *missio Dei.*Â Regular readers will know that this term that I struggle with. For the record, I believe that it can be a useful concept which can really help us rethink our approach to mission. However, the term has a checkered history for a good reason. It can be interpreted in a number of different ways and means all sorts of things to different people. There are a couple of chapters where the termÂ *missio Dei* (or the mission of God) occurs fairly frequently in this book. However, I'm not convinced that the concept has been adequately thought through or defined, there are times when it seems to be suggesting that anything good that happens in the world is part of theÂ *missio Dei,Â* something I would struggle with. Theologically speaking, I think this book blurs the difference between common grace and the mission of God (this is not an uncommon problem, to be fair).

Generlisations.Â For all that its heart is in the right place, this is a book of sweeping generalisations. Take this one for example.

> *By the time the European superposers began their project, more than a thousand years after Paul, Christian mission had tragically been co-opted by a different imagination, captive to imperialism rather than the risen Christ. (p.108)*

There is undoubtedly some truth in this statement, however the situation was far more nuanced than the author implies. For example, the fractious relationship between William Carey and his colleagues with the British authorities in India show that mission and colonialism were not aligned in the simplistic way that the book presents and the examples could be multiplied. I found the following statement interesting (emphasis, mine):

> *This means mission is in danger of becoming irrelevant even amid its noble aims of promoting the gospel and doing the work of justice - through evangelization, community development, peace building and humanitarian aid - because of its illiteracy, its inability to read its own history and the histories of the localities it is called to serve. (p.37)*

One of the problems ofÂ From the Inside OutÂ is just this. It doesn't read mission history. Bryan Stanley's excellentÂ The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Mission and British Imperialism in the 19th and 20th CenturiesÂ paints a much more nuanced picture of the relationship between mission and colonialism and should be compulsary reading for anyone writing on this subject. InÂ Mission After Christendom, David Smith explores how the complex relationship between Christendom and mission has an impact today. The problem with Kuja's approach is that by generalising about the past, he isn't able to learn some of the lessons that we need to learn. This brings me to a problem with the book's publicity. The blurb on the back tells us that this is a new and revolutionary book, it isn't. Most of the same ground has already been covered by others, who have often done a better job.

The Missing Church. I will admit, that my comments so far have been fairly specialist. Not everyone will care about these things - though I do think they are important. However, there is one serious flaw, which, to this reviewer's mind, makes the book potentially harmful, rather than helpful. Throughout the book, missionaries are presented as individuals with a call who go off around the world doing stuff. The role of the missionary's church in commissioning, supporting and caring for the missionary is more or less absent from the book. Some of the issues that this book seeks to address are related to a lack of connectedness to a Christian fellowship and the answers lie, not in individual growth, but in accountability to and integration with a body of believers. Having complained about generalisations, let me make one of my own; the biggest problem facing the Western mission movement (especially in the United States) is a low ecclesiology. The lack of accountability to a sending church is the elephant in the room throughout this book and much American writing about mission. If we are serious about rethinking mission, then we need to start from the point of view that Christianity is a corporate, not an individual religion.

I was provided with a free copy of this book by the author in return for this review. I have not allowed this genorosity to influence what I have written beyond indicating that it has received a number of positive reviews on Amazon which paint a different picture to mine.Â