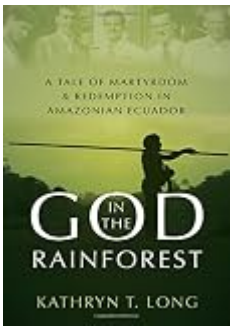
WE MUST RESIST THE HYPE

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When we give in to the temptation of giving a positive spin to our stories we are effectively denying the God that we claim to be serving - it's that serious.
Category: Observations

I'm reading God in the Rainforest: Missionaries and the Waorani in Amazonian EcuadorÂ by Kathryn T. Long at the moment. It's an absolutely excellent book and one that deserves a very wide readership (though you might want to wait till the paperback is released). I'll write a fuller review in a day or two, but for the moment, I want to pick up on a theme which reverberates throughout the book; missionary publicity.



The book tells the story of mission to the Waorani or Auca people of Ecuador, with a strong focus on the work of Bible translation. The first missionaries to the Waorani were famously killed before they could make more than superficial contact with the people who had a reputation for ferocity and isolation. Subsequently, Elizabeth Elliot, the wife of one of the martyred missionaries and Rachael Saint the sister of another were the first missionaries to live and work among them. This story of sacrifice and heroism was to capture the imagination of the evangelical world in the US and around the globe.

Saint was a linguist-Bible translator seconded from Wycliffe Bible Translators to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (which was our situation when we worked in Ivory Coast). She worked with DyaumÃ¦, a young woman who was the first Waorani Christian on language analysis and translation.

In between their life in the rainforest, DyaumÃ¦ and Saint became celebrities in the US. Saint was featured on This is Your Life and the two of them were invited to take the stage in a series of Billy Graham rallies. The book recounts the way in which a number of prominent evangelicals sought to increase their own profile by claiming an association with the two women. Wycliffe were far from unaware of the motivational power of the Waorani story and (somewhat cynically to my eyes) used the two women and their story to raise serious amounts of money for the work in Ecuador.

However, on the ground in Ecuador, things were not going as smoothly as the heroic stories told in the US might indicate. Bible translation was more or less stalled and relationships between the missionaries and the fledgeling church were far from healthy. Eventually, in the 1970s, this disconnect between what was happening on the field and what was being reported at home started to cause some ripples.

The Wycliffe director in the US found himself in a dilemma, for years Wycliffe had been receiving positive reports from Ecuador and they had been telling this story to their supporters. But now they were hearing that "the situation there is a mess". What should they do? They couldn't easily retract all of the books and articles which had told a rosy story about the Waorani.

> *Wycliffe looked for ways to lower expectations... "People should be warned against the tendency of idolizing the Auca work and thus getting vicarious satisfaction to compensate for*

> *discouragments in the home church."Â This comment touched on a reality that WBT, mission andgencies and others would find hard to acknowledge during the years to come. Saint had created a culture of dependncy among the Waorani, but it was equally true that during the twenty years since the missionaries' deaths, segments of American evangelicalism, including Wycliffe, had become deeply dependent on the inspriational and emotional power of the Wao story. It had become a drama without parallel and proof of God at work in the world. Both patterns of dependency would be difficult to break. (p.210)*

There is a huge amount of significance in this short paragraph. The danger of people living vicarious lives through "Christian heroes" is something that could be explored in depth. This issue I want to focus on is something which is an endemic problem in what are called "Faith Missions". Organisations such as Wycliffe and missionaries (like me) are dependent on individuals and churches donating to the work they do. Without the generosity of many groups and individuals, organisations like Wycliffe would have to close down and Sue and I would need to find paid employment. In this environment, it is understandable that Wycliffe would latch onto the inspirational story of DyaumÃ¦ and Rachael Saint. The problem was that the story that was told didn't quite match reality.

This temptation to emphasise the positive and to play down the negative is an ever-present in the life of Faith Missions - I feel it every time I start to write a newsletter (sign up to receive them in the sidebar). The work of Bible translation in minority languages is incredibly important, but in a world where the vast majority of people actually have access to the Bible in their mother tongue, it is easy to over-hype its significance, too (perhaps there is a blog post to be written on this issue).

When talking about mission work, it is important that our stories match reality and that we avoid hype and spin. Pragmatically this is because if people realise that things are not as positive as we paint them, they are likely to stop supporting us, not only that, but stories of struggle and failure can actually be highly motivational! More importantly (much more importantly), we serve a God who is truth and who values truth-telling. When we give in to the temptation of giving a positive spin to our stories we are effectively denying the God that we claim to be serving - it's that serious.