Annotated Bibliography for Wendt Project: “Biblical Virtues Across Cultures”
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Missionaries in a foreign culture are often confused by the differences in what they believe to be universal Biblical values or virtues. Learning to minister cross-culturally effectively means learning to interpret not only the Biblical texts, but also the host culture and one’s own culture. The following list of books, written primarily by anthropologists and missiologists, is intended to provide a starting place for understanding Christian ethics and the challenges of ministry and mission across cultures.


Written by a professor of theology and ethics, Adeney was born in China and has lived and taught across the globe, most extensively in Indonesia. This is one of the best texts I have found for understanding and navigating the intricacies of cross-cultural ethics. Adeney seeks to give direction to Christians working within other cultures by addressing ethical issues that often cause conflict when people with different cultural values and priorities mix (gender relations, religious plurality, Biblical authority, bribery, etc.). He does so through personal stories and narratives making this a very readable text. He writes from the perspective that: “[t]he will of God is incarnated in human practices that derive their meaning from the cultural communities in which they take place. To mean the same thing in different cultures, our practices may have to change.”


A Mennonite and director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, Bonk points out one of the greatest drawbacks in mission today: “the sense of entitlement with which western missionaries regard their personal material and economic advantage.” The extreme affluence of the western world often raises a number of ethical issues when rich westerners work among the majority of the world’s poor. Bonk calls for repentance on the part of western Christians and offers insights into countering the “mire of personal affluence” to work more effectively in cultures with extreme material poverty.


The seminal text for the study of mission, Bosch lays down the basic Trinitarian theological framework for understanding mission as a part of the very nature of God who calls and sends the Son, who with God calls and sends the Holy Spirit, to call and send the church into the world to witness to the love of God. Bosch then provides a history of the understanding of Christian mission through the ages
and across cultures. In so doing, he shows the transforming power of the Gospel in every culture – and in the lives of those who witness to it.


A member of the Spiritan order and professor of missiology at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Gittins claims that “authentic mission is a movement from the center to the margin. . .of society, of nations, of territory, even of agendas.” And it is incarnational. From his vast cross-cultural experience, Gittins explores means of effective ministry and gives practical suggestions that include being host, guest and stranger among others.


A basic text on intercultural communication that takes a strong narrative approach, this book covers everything from defining culture to issues of identity, non-verbal misunderstandings and managing conflict. Although it’s the final chapter on ethics that has the most interest for this topic, the other chapters offer both useful information and exercises to develop culturally astute practices for living cross-culturally, including the practice of forgiveness. His conclusion is particularly helpful by proposing three principles he believes crucial to communicating cross-culturally: recognizing a mutual legitimacy of all cultures, allowing for peaceful disagreement, and commitment to loving relationships.


The son of missionary parents and himself a missionary and professor of anthropology, Hiebert has written several books useful for ministering cross-culturally. This text is most helpful for its practical application. Envisioned as a primer for new missionaries in foreign fields, it provides a basic understanding of cultures as well as guidelines for working within them with sensitivity and respect. Hiebert draws on his years of mission work in India.


Although a rather simplistic comparison between cultures that tend to be either hot-climate (relationship based) or cold-climate (task-oriented), this little book is very useful as an elementary primer for short-term mission groups or youth. Having lived on six continents, Lanier highlights cultural differences most apparent to an outsider, such as time, tasks, and hospitality, and provides some useful guidelines for cross-cultural encounters. Hers is a practical guide, not a theological treatise on cross-cultural ethics.

Written specifically for “missionaries, pastors and laypersons,” Lingenfelter and Mayers seek to minimize the conflict and tension inherent in cross-cultural relationships. Their goal, as stated in the preface, is to teach how to “engage in incarnational ministry, taking on the identity and values of others,” in order to “point others to freedom in Christ.” Through use of a basic personal values questionnaire and graphing of the results, they show how tensions can develop between differing cultures and personalities. They then suggest a Biblical paradigm for responding fruitfully and faithfully.


Based primarily on his missionary service in the Philippines, Montgomery-Fate addresses the difficulties of doing mission from a position of privilege in a former colony of the U.S. Through his experiences there as an English teacher, he develops the idea of “co-mission,” learning to be silent to hear the voices of the culture and of God. Too often missionaries are deafened by “white-noise” that prevents understanding of another culture, much less being of much service in it.


A missionary statesman from Great Britain, Newbigin drew on years of work as Bishop of South India, as pastor, and as a leading figure in the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches. He was also a prolific writer and this volume pulls together many themes and insights into cross-cultural ministry – especially in the West, which he found “more pagan than India.” Newbigin combines a thoroughly evangelical view of the Gospel with a dedicated ecumenism that helps readers to grasp theological foundations for effective cross-cultural witness. He is one of the leading missiologists of the day.


Walls, a Scottish missionary statesman, writes from the vantage point of years of work in Africa mentoring young African theologians. Highly respected for his encouragement of an indigenous voice from Africa, his writings come primarily from lectures and short pieces in numerous publications. This anthology includes some of his best and puts forth the strong case for the “infinite translatability” of the Gospel across cultures and the ability to both “liberate” and “imprison” them. This text gives valuable insight into cultural receptivity and Christian ethics.