Book Review

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Stanley Skreslet’s purpose forms the opening sentence of his academic book, “to introduce the field of missiology and assist western Christians whose churches now disavow missionary agendas of their 19th century forebears” (1). He undertakes this burden with unusual boldness by using an historian’s eye and the skills related to synthesis. He recognizes that in the body of literature dealing with missions there has never been a work written to meet the academic mind, while at the same time bringing together all aspects of theological and non-theological methods in one place (14). Other works detailing recent research usually deal with one specialized area such as biblical, historical, cultural, or strategic areas of mission. In addition, recent research usually only concerns itself with non-academic audiences (3).
Skreslet, the dean of Faculty of Union Presbyterian Seminary is an ordained minister and a mature scholar who knows his “trade.” The subject addressed is familiar to him for he has written extensively on this subject as evidenced by some of his publications cited in the book. These include but are not limited to “Doctoral Dissertations on Mission: Ten-Year Update, 1982-1991” (International Bulletin of Missionary Research 17, 2003, no. 3: 98-133); “Configuring Missiology: Reading Classified Bibliographies as Disciplinary Maps” (Mission Studies 23, 2006, no. 2: 171-201); and Picturing Christian Mission: New Testament Images of Disciples in Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). His work is largely descriptive, drawing lessons from the first century to the contemporary era on how mission was done and for what purpose. It is very clear from his argument that the discipline has changed a lot and will continue to change (197). For example, first century Christians struggled to spread the gospel with the hope of Christ’s soon return as a primary focus. The church was also viewed as a dangerous sect or cult. But the twenty-first century church grapples with different issues altogether, it has and has already been accepted by governments as “respectable religion.” It is troubling to discover that Christ’s soon coming is too often completely outside the agenda, instead the focus is on liberation, universalism, reconciliation (in a political sense), contextualization, healing, shalom, etc.

It is noteworthy to see that Skreslet has engaged key scholars in the field, such as Bosch (5), Jongeneel (4), Hans Kung (5), Luzbetak (14), Nida (38), among others. This gesture gives scholars in the field of missions a reason to take the work seriously but at the same time he introduces novices to the giants in the discipline. I was also encouraged to discover that the author appears to have a high view of non-Western theologians (although his stated audience is Western). Skreslet engages Musa Dube and Lovemore Togarasei on how missionary Bible translators used local languages to create conceptual structures which the colonizers used to enforce physical subjugation of the natives. The author partly accepts the above argument by suggesting that sometimes unintended and often subtle effects of missionary translations are unavoidable (42).

While the book is celebrated as a comprehensive guide and indeed has an annotated index on a wide range of modern literature on mission studies, it is disturbing to see that missions is largely directed to Asia, Africa, and Latin America and not vice versa. I think mission ought to be a two-way endeavor. The book suggests that when missionaries arrived in their field, sometimes change not only occurred among the indigenous people, but change occurred among the missionaries too (102). My argument is that the named regions can enlighten the West on how to do missions. The rapid growth of Christianity in those regions is a powerful argument in
favor of dialogue between Western and non-Western missiologists. It also appears (to the reviewer) that the book has given insufficient consideration to the issue of immigration and its role in western countries where Christianity is in decline. Finally, it seems that the book does not deal with the post-modern and materialistic West. I am convinced that all of these issues are pertinent, especially if addressed in the context of Jesus’ second coming, the consummate hope of all believers (Titus 2:13).

In summary, the book is both comprehensive and makes a unique read. It fits not only Western students and their professors in missions, but is also a welcome text for non-Western missiologists.