The Indigenization of Missions and Contemporary Lessons[1]

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Throughout much of what is known as "The Great Century" (1792–1910), the two major aims of the mission enterprise were evangelization and civilization.[2] In the midst of several revivals in Europe and America, significant missionary fervor was released into the world, and that fervor helped characterize missions in this century by its "rapid geographical expansion of the work."[3] At the same time, though, missions was also characterized by its spread of Western civilization to the rest of the world. David Bosch explains that in America, "it was increasingly thought that the overseas mission of the American churches consisted in sharing the benefits of the American civilization and way of life with the deprived peoples of the world."[4]

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[2] R. Pierce Beaver, "Introduction," in *To Advance the Gospel: Basic Writings in the Theory and Practice of Missions*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 13. The term "The Great Century" was first coined by Kenneth Scott Latourette in his seven–volume classic on the history of Christian missions; Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 4 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937).

[3] Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed., The Penguin History of the Church, vol. 6 (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 215.

[4] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 283.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, though, the indigenization of missions movement developed in reaction to many of the excesses of this period. This movement was an attempt of missionaries and organizations to ensure that the types of churches they planted looked like they belonged in the contexts where they were planted. Too often, they looked like they belonged in England or the US and not in the locations where missionaries were serving. In the same way, they realized they had also not placed enough emphasis on raising up local leaders.

For missionaries in the contemporary area, it's important to understand this historical discussion since these insights still apply and should inform mission efforts today. Thus, the goal of this article is to examine the writings of key leaders who contributed to this discussion, including Venn, Anderson, Nevius, Allen, Hodges, Brock, and Hiebert, and then make some application points for contemporary missions.

Henry Venn

Henry Venn (1796–1873) was general secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London from 1841 to 1872.[5] His life was guided by a passion to see the gospel extend into new harvest fields. During his leadership of the CMS, he placed an emphasis on planting native churches and raising up native leaders. To this end, he developed the three–self formula for indigenous churches — that they should be self–governing, self–supporting, and self–propagating.[6]

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[5] This biographical information is from Max Warren, "Introduction: Henry Venn, The Man, His Thought and His Practice – An Interpretation," in *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 18-25; See also Justice Anderson, "The Great Century and Beyond (1792-1910)," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions,* ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: B&H, 1998), 208-09.

[6] As is evidenced by the following footnote, Venn tended to use the term "self-extending," but within the literature related to indigenization, "self-propagating" is more common. I've used the latter term in this article for the sake of consistency.

Venn argued that an essential step in founding an indigenous church was for that church to be self–supporting. He wrote that "a second step in the organization of the Native Church will be taken when one or more congregations are formed into a Native Pastorate, under an ordained native, paid by the Native Church Fund."[7] For a church to be indigenous, it must be led to support its own ministries.

Venn also argued for an indigenous church to be self–governing. Responding to critics who claimed his approach to government was too European, Venn explained the need for a cautious transition of the leadership responsibilities:

> Though, in the first instance, and while the tentative and transition stage lasts, it may be advisable to give a preponderating influence to European Missionaries, yet as the Native Councilors become efficient, and as the native contributors enlarge, and the Society's grant in aid is diminished, the European element will be gradually withdrawn, until the Native Church becomes wholly free and independent.[8]

In addition to the need for indigenous churches to be self–supporting and self–governing, Venn added self–extending to his formula. He wrote of the need for an exciting missionary spirit among the native church:

> The case needs to be stated to exhibit the warning and the duty that every convert should be instructed from his conversion in the

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[7] Henry Venn, *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 70. See also: Henry Venn, "On Steps Towards Helping a Native Church to Become Self-Supporting, Self-Governing, and Self-Extending," in *Classics of Christian Missions*, ed. Francis M. DuBose (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 243-49; Henry Venn, "Three-Self Principles," in *Classic Texts in Mission & World Christianity: A Reader's Companion to David Bosch's Transforming Mission*, ed. Norman E. Thomas, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 20 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 207-09. With the term "native" Venn was describing the local people from the context where the church was being planted. He used this term in contrast to missionaries, who were outsiders.

[8] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 76–77.

> duty of laboring for his self–support, and for the support of Missions to his Countrymen, and to lay himself out as a Missionary among his relationship and friends to bring them to the truth.[9]

He went on to write that passing on a missionary spirit to the native church would open the door to a new day of missionary effectiveness in which the native converts led their fellow countrymen to Christ. He wrote that a missionary spirit "will often give a reality, a vigor, an independence to native Christianity which it now wants (i.e., lacks) . . . and above all the work would spread as we may say of itself, and such an extension would soon appear, as we have hitherto almost ceased to expect."[11]

Arguing for his three–self formula, Venn explained the limitations of missionary–led churches.[12] He wrote that when missionary–led or missionary–supported churches are planted, the missionary's hands become full, and he focuses less and less of his attention on the unsaved. The converts, then, become dependent on the missionary, and the missionary society invests its resources in the ground already gained instead of focusing on "the regions beyond."[13]

To support this formula, Venn explained the importance of training leaders. He wrote,

> Missionaries should remember that it is upon the training up and location of such Native Pastors as we have described that their own labors and the resources of the Society will be best economized; and that a preparation will be made for the transfer of Missionary labors to the surrounding heathen.[14]

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[9] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 64.

[11] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 64.

[12] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 67.

[13] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 67.

[14] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 63.

He meant that missionaries become good stewards of their organization's resources by focusing on training leaders. Focusing their time and energy in this way enables them to raise up more laborers capable of shepherding the flock and reaching the harvest fields.

Venn also wrote about the "euthanasia of mission,"[15] in which the missionary cautiously removes himself from the leadership of the mission and begins to focus on new fields. He taught missionaries to keep in view the time when:

> the missionary is surrounded by well–trained Native congregations under Native Pastors, when he gradually and wisely abridges his own labors, and relaxes his superintendence over the Pastors till they are able to sustain their own Christian ordinances, and the District ceases to be a Missionary field, and passes into Christian parishes under the constituted ecclesiastical authorities.[16]

Working to that end, Venn argued, would lead to a time of great growth and expansion of the indigenous church, similar to the time when "the flowers of a fertile field multiply under the showers and warmth of summer."[17]

Rufus Anderson

A contemporary of Henry Venn and another scholar who wrote on indigenization was Rufus Anderson (1796–1880). Anderson was the senior secretary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from 1832 to 1866.[18] Under his leadership, the ABFCM grew to support 1200

[15] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 63.

[16] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 63.

[17] Venn, *To Apply the Gospel*, 71.

[18] Biographical information is from R. Pierce Beaver, "Introduction: Rufus Anderson, Grand Strategist of American Missions," in *To Advance the Gospel: Basic Writings in the Theory and Practice of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 10-12; See also Justice Anderson, "The Great Century and Beyond (1792-1910)," 208-09.

missionaries and focused more attention on evangelism and the training of native pastors.

Like Venn, Anderson developed his philosophy of missions in reaction to the dual emphasis on evangelization and civilization. He believed that the primary work of missions was evangelizing the lost in places where churches did not exist. To that end, he wrote, "Education, schools, the press, and whatever else goes to make up the working system, are held in strict subordination to the planting and building up of effective working churches."[20] He continued, "The governing object to be always aimed at is self–reliant, effective churches — churches that are purely native."[21]

Anderson looked to Paul as the missionary *par excellence*. He explained the mission work of the apostle through five qualities: the aim was to save men; the means employed was the gospel; the power relied upon was the Holy Spirit; the success was in the middle and poorer classes; and the result was the planting of churches and the ordaining of leaders. He then argued that if these were the attributes of Paul's missionary work, they ought to be the attributes of contemporary missionaries.[22] In a separate article, he wrote of Paul, "His manner of treating the native pastors and churches is a model for missionaries and their supporters in our day."[23]

Anderson argued that missionaries should never seek to become the pastor of a church they plant, and thus, he argued for the importance of investing resources in training native pastors. He wrote, "Without education, it is not possible for mission churches to be in any proper sense self–governed; nor, without it, will they be self–supported, and much less self–propagating."[24]

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[20] Anderson, *To Advance the Gospel*, 99.

[21] Anderson, *To Advance the Gospel*, 99.

[22] Rufus Anderson, "Principles and Methods of Modern Missions," in *Classics of Christian Missions*, ed. Francis M. DuBose (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 251; Anderson, *To Apply the Gospel*, 97–98; Beaver, "Introduction," 14–16.

[23] Anderson, *To Apply the Gospel*, 94–95.

[24] Anderson, *To Apply the Gospel*, 99.

He argued that focusing on training leaders saves time and resources by raising up more leaders:

> The cost of a ten–year course of education for five natives of India, would not be more than the outfit and passage of one married missionary to that country. And when a company of missionaries is upon the ground, it costs at least five times as much to support them, as it would to support the same number of native preachers. . . . The cost of educating a thousand youth in India, from whom preachers might be obtained, and afterwards of supporting two hundred native preachers and their families, would be only about $25,000; which is but little more than the average expense in that country of twenty–five missionaries and families.[25]

Missionary organizations, Anderson argued, are better stewards if they train pastors and church leaders rather than allow Europeans to fill those positions.

John Nevius, Roland Allen, and Melvin Hodges

In addition to Venn and Anderson, John Nevius and Roland Allen contributed to the missiological discussion on indigenization. Nevius (1829–1893) was a missionary to China with the American Presbyterian Board.[26] His writings focused particularly on the concept of self–support. Roland Allen (1868–1947) focused on the apostle Paul as the exemplary missionary. His books *Mission-*

[25] Anderson, *To Apply the Gospel*, 105.

[26] The biographical information in this paragraph is from Francis M. DuBose, "John L. Nevius: Introduction," in *Classics of Christian Missions*, ed. Francis M. DuBose (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 256-57. For a fuller treatment of his life, see Helen S. Coan Nevius, *The Life of John Livingston Nevius: For Forty Years a Missionary in China* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895).

ary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?[27] and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*[28] addressed the need for missionaries to return to the apostolic church planting pattern by planting self–sufficient churches and relying on the Holy Spirit.

Melvin Hodges (1909–1986) was an Assemblies of God missionary in Central America for eighteen years, and Roland Allen's writings influenced him.[30] His work, *The Indigenous Church,* focused especially on self–governing, which he argued was the most difficult to accomplish.[31] Within the subset of self–governing, Hodges devoted an entire chapter in his book to the issue of training leaders. Among other concepts, he argued that one key issue of training leaders is self–theologizing.

On the topic of self–theologizing, Hodges wrote, "There must be a standard of doctrine and conduct accepted in common by the believers."[32] He went on to state, "One point here deserves special emphasis. The standard of doctrine and conduct must be an expression of the convert's own concept of the Christian life as they find it in the Scriptures."[33] Hodges argued that the missionary can help with this process, but ultimately, the native believers must make these decisions for themselves. These new believers must learn to do theology independently, apart from the missionary's leading.

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[27] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

[28] Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes that Hinder It* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997).

[30] Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church: A Complete Handbook on How to Grow Young Churches* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953), 131-34. See also: Hodges, "Why Indigenous Church Principles," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity,* ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 8.

[31] Hodges, *The Indigenous Church,* 22.

[32] Hodges, *The Indigenous Church,* 26.

[33] Hodges, *The Indigenous Church,* 27.

Charles Brock and Paul Hiebert

Missionary church planter Charles Brock built on Hodges' ideas, mentioning the concepts self–teaching and self–expressing alongside the traditional three-selfs.[34] For self–teaching, Brock looked to Paul's letters in Romans 15:14, 1 Corinthians 14:26, 31, and 1 Timothy 4:13, where Paul commanded these churches to be faithful in teaching their members the Word. An indigenous church must do the same. For self–expressing, Brock explained that an indigenous church must be free to express itself in culturally appropriate ways during worship. All of these are an outgrowth of the indigenous church's ability to think theologically.

While others discussed the concept,[35] it was missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert who coined the term "fourth self."[36] When Hiebert wrote *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, he explained, "Every church must make theology its own concern, for it must face the challenges of faith raised by its culture."[37] In other words, a legitimate function of an indigenous church

[34] Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 92-94.

[35] For example, Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective,* rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005). For a discussion of "dynamic-equivalence theologizing," see Kraft, *Christianity in Culture,* 228-44. For his discussion of "ethnotheologies," which is similar to Hiebert's "transcultural theology," see idem, *Christianity in Culture,* 10, 94, 230-33, 305-06, 314, and idem, "Toward a Christian Ethnotheology," in *God, Man, and Church Growth,* ed. Alan Tippett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). For a discussion of how this issue relates to the three-self principles, see Kraft, *Christianity in Culture,* 247-56, or idem, "Dynamic Equivalence Churches," Missiology 1 (1973): 39-57.

[36] Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193-224. Also see: Darrell L. Whiteman, "Anthropological Reflections on Contextualizing Theology in a Global World," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity,* ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 60-61. For an explanation of how Hiebert's view differs from Kraft's, see: Yoshiyuki Billy Nishioka, "Worldview Methodology in Mission Theology: A Comparison Between Kraft's and Hiebert's Approaches," *Missiology* 26 (October 1998): 468-69.

[37] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 214.

is to develop theologies that speak to the relevant issues in their specific cultural context.

Hiebert stated that two of the crucial questions with which missionaries were wrestling which he sought to answer were, "Should [the native believers] be encouraged to develop their own theologies?" and "What should the missionaries do when these theologies seem to be going astray?"[39] Answering those questions, he explained that everyone's cultural background influences his theology: "We think that our studies of the Bible are unbiased, that our own interpretations of the Scriptures are the only true ones. It disturbs us, therefore, when we begin to discover that theologies are influenced by culture."[40] He continued, "The fact is, all theologies developed by human beings are shaped by their particular historical and cultural contexts – by the language they use and the questions they ask."[41] He then challenged missionaries to teach new Christians not just to teach the people the Scriptures but also to teach them *how to study* the Scriptures.[42]

Some might ask if that means believers in any context can do whatever they want in interpreting the text, and in response, Hiebert displayed balance in stating, "Although they have a right to interpret the Bible for their particular contexts, they have a responsibility to listen to the greater church of which they are a part."[43] He referred to this dynamic as a "transcultural theology."[44] A transcultural theology is formed when each individual culture understands how Scripture speaks to the issues of its day, and then the various cultural perspectives are compared and explored to determine the biblical universals. As this global level hermeneutical community forms,

[39] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 193.

[40] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 198.

[41] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 198.

[42] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 215–16.

[43] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 217.

[44] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 216–19.

cultural biases and areas of syncretism are uncovered, and ultimately, the church can grow to understand the biblical text in a more complete sense.

This historical survey has shown that in response to the excesses of the colonial period of missions history, the authors in the indigenous movement emphasized that when missionaries plant churches, those churches should be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Though Venn and Anderson did not articulate this point, later authors like Hodges, Brock, and especially Hiebert also explained the need for a fourth-self, that is that a church needs to be self-theologizing.

Application and Conclusion

Although this article is primarily a historical study, many applications exist for contemporary missions. First, the reminder is helpful that missionaries should seek to plant indigenous churches that are self-funded and self-led. Even though much mission sending has broadened to include missionaries being sent from formerly mission-receiving countries, the point is still valid that newly planted churches should not depend too heavily on resources from places where the church is strong. It is also still a relevant and needed reminder that missionaries should focus on raising up indigenous leadership.

In that sense, Brooks and Tan are helpful in stating that "the missionary must equip the local leadership to implement biblical forms of preaching, giving, worship, leadership, fellowship, prayer, and of course evangelism and missions."[45] The indigenization movement and its commitment to indigenous leadership points to the fact that "Missionaries should tirelessly labor to ensure national believers receive the highest quality training in the Word of God that is possible. . . . Treating national believers as truth brothers

[45] Sunny Tan and Will Brooks, "Theological Education as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy," in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, & Current Issues* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 179.

and sisters – as co-laborers on God's harvest field – entails doing everything we can to throw open for them the gages of access to Scripture."[46]

Second, given the multicultural nature of many large urban centers, it may seem outdated to examine this topic when many of the above authors envisioned missionaries planting churches in monocultural contexts. However, even in an urban context that consists of various cultures, these principles still prove valuable. For example, Paul Salem, sees cities as "cultural blenders" and encourages planting "language-specific, culturally dynamic churches."[48] These authors remind us that even in such contexts, a church should reflect the cultural makeup of its members in its leadership, decision-making, funding mechanisms, etc. Even when a church has members from a variety of cultural backgrounds, church leaders must take the initiative to learn their different cultural values so that they can communicate in culturally appropriate ways and apply the gospel to their culturally informed ways of thinking.

Let me give an example. Some years ago, I was teaching a course in a large city I considered largely monocultural where most of the students were from a single local church. In talking with the students, though, I realized many of them were from minority ethnic groups and represented a variety of cultural backgrounds. Since their church functioned in a trade language, though, some leaders assumed similar patterns of thinking. However, when I asked if those from the minority ethnic groups if they thought the same way about how decisions should be made in the church, they stated their thinking was actually different from the majority. Not only did this situation affect communication and relationships, but what was more concerning was that the church leaders were completely unaware that this dynamic even existed.

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[46] Tan and Brooks, "Theological Education," 180.

[48] Paul Salem, "Culture and the City: Rethinking Contextualization for Urban Peoples," *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 2023).

The danger here, then, is that those who are the dominant cultural group will make decisions and communicate them in ways that accord with their own cultural preferences, not realizing that those from other cultural backgrounds may prefer to dialogue or make decisions in different ways. A greater danger, though, is that the dominant group deems their culturally informed communication or decision-making preferences to be *biblical* even though these preferences are not biblically mandated. The result is that when some believers make decisions, process information, communicate, or have perspectives that are contrary to the dominant group's, they may be categorized as unbiblical, indecisive, unethical, or lacking integrity.

How does this point relate to the indigenization movement? The heartbeat of Venn and Anderson's writings was the desire to respect the local culture and cultivate local leadership. When multiple cultures are involved in a local church, these principles still apply in the sense that the leadership of a church needs to both represent and respect all cultures involved. Leaders also need to take the difficult step of communicating in culturally appropriate ways, which is difficult when people from a variety of cultural backgrounds are members of the church. Though it's difficult, insights from these authors remind us it is important.

Next, based on the historical development of this discussion, we can see the importance of self–theologizing, which is helpful on a few levels. It reminds us that the church needs theologians. It needs leaders who can think theologically long after the missionary is no longer with them. This point is critical when we consider the apostolic nature of the missionary task, that missionaries' goal is to equip the local church, help the local church develop, and then, eventually, leave. A key component of how a missionary disciples these new Christians is the process of training them to think theologically.

At the same time, this conversation is helpful because it reminds us that the leaders of the local church need to do theology in their own context. Because this newly planted church is in a unique cultural context, issues exist in that context for which few people (or possibly none) have ever given

any serious theological reflection. For a number of reasons, the leaders of this church must have the theological acumen to think clearly and biblically about these unique cultural issues. These issues may be cultural practices like a certain type of collectivism, polygamy, being a matriarchal society, or a host of other issues. They may also be more theologically inclined concepts like views of the afterlife.

Believers in this context must be able to evaluate their own existing cultural norms and thought patterns to determine which aspects are biblical and permissible and which aspects are not. At the same time, they must recognize how their worldview and cultural ways of thinking affect how they interpret Scripture. This preunderstanding can cloud every interpreter's judgment in any context. Thus, all interpreters must be aware of their own cultural perspectives and how they affect their interpretation of Scripture.

We can also consider the complexity of self–theologizing. Hiebert's comments are helpful here in that, yes, the new church must self–theologize, but at the same time, this new church is responsible for listening to the global church as well. How does the new church think theologically and in culturally appropriate ways while remaining orthodox? This is the great challenge of self–theology, and it requires missionaries to be well versed in both theology and the local context so that they can walk alongside local believers in this task.

As Hiebert said, to find the correct balance here, the new church must be taught how to interpret Scripture. These believers must be able to go to the Scriptures for themselves, to read and apply it to their own context. To be clear, to think well theologically, they must learn in other areas as well — biblical theology, historical theology, etc. However, biblical interpretation is fundamental to being able both to theologize and to evaluate potential theologies.

In conclusion, this article has explored the history of the indigenization movement. Reacting to the colonial period's emphasis on missionaries leading the institutions and churches they started, authors like Venn and

Anderson provided a helpful response in their writings that emphasized the need for churches to be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Later authors like Hodges, Brock, and Hiebert added self-theologizing, which is a helpful reminder that indigenous church leaders must be equipped with the skills to do theology in their own context.

Though missiologists have largely moved on from the discussion of indigenization by focusing on contextualization and other topics, in actuality, the insights from these scholars continue to have relevant applications for the church's mission today. Especially important are the reminders to be intentional in studying the cultural perspectives of all people in a local church and in promoting self-theologizing.

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