

In the Bookshop

A missiological meditation



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The author teaches a postgraduate class on Christian mission with special emphasis on globalisation and postcolonialism. Research in the local bookshop turns up some interesting results.

A bookshop, it seems to me, provides an inventory of the things in our society that people find important for their lives. They buy books about their jobs, hobbies, passions and concerns, hoping to deepen their experience of life and perhaps even reach out to new undiscovered dimensions of existence. Also the books are written by the 'movers and shakers' in the land – certainly this is true of the novels and biographies, but of some of the DIY type books as well (think celebrity chefs) – and this in turn tells us something about our society.

So today I am in the bookshop, with notebook and pen in hand, and wearing my missiological hat.

I go first to the shelves marked **fiction**, the largest single section. The titles are arranged alphabetically and I decide to look just at the 'A's. I am particularly interested in the national and ethnic backgrounds of the authors. The books are all in the English language, of course, though some have been translated from other languages. I find a selection of names that are not evidently 'English' and by means of a little investigation am able to find out where the authors come from: Kader Abdolah (Iran), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngazi Adiche (Nigeria) Monica Ali (British but born in Bangladesh), Isabel Allende (Chile), Karen Alvtegen (Sweden), Nicola Ammaniti (Italy), Anita Amirrezvani (Iran), Tahmima Anam (Bangladesh). Of course there are some British writers too (e.g. Martin Amis) but I am surprised (and pleased) to see how many non-Brits there are and what a wide variety of nations is represented. (I should say that I have chosen the 'A's at random but am in no doubt that the other letters of the alphabet would have yielded similar results.) All this speaks to me quite directly about globalisation – in the obvious sense that the authors come from all over the globe – but also about postcolonialism which began as a literary discourse to do with the way that writers from the ex-colonies appropriated the language of the colonisers and mastered them for their own purposes – one of the early books about postcolonialism is called *The Empire Writes Back*.

Clearly the process of 'writing back' is still going on, and it provides us with a window into all sorts of vistas that are part of the landscape of mission: how the Global South has changed since the end of colonialism, how immigrant and diasporic communities are playing their part in formerly metropolitan nations, how Eurocentrism is no longer a viable worldview and so on.

I move on, wondering, as I do, why among the novels there is such a large Science Fiction section, and not finding an answer. The **biography** section is next and it immediately strikes me that this follows a rather different direction when compared with the fiction. While Westerners do not entirely monopolise the shelf space, they predominate. It may be, I think to myself, that our role models are still on the whole Westerners. Despite high profile exceptions – Mandela, Martin Luther King, some sportspeople and musicians – it is still true, I suspect, that power and influence flows 'from the West to the rest'. As it does in the world of mission even now, despite our disclaimers.

I am still on the ground floor, and must hurry on. There is a big **sports** section, with football books taking the pride of place. There are some obvious conclusions here. International

sport is a fascinating example of globalisation. Talent is recruited world-wide, spectator loyalties are alternately fiercely national and oddly cross-border (Manchester United!), the communications revolution, especially satellite television, has had a major influence on the way sport has developed, and great sporting events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games are the 'religious' festivals of a globalised society. Churches look wistfully at this passion and loyalty and wonder how they can reproduce it in a better cause. There is also a fair size **music** department. I realise that much of what I have been thinking about sport applies to music too.

I am passing by the **children's** section and am now moving to the second floor. First up as you hit the top of the escalator is an impressive **travel** section (including maps and languages). Cue mobility, interconnectedness, networking, tourism, other cultures and the like. This is one of mission's big opportunities, I think, somewhat successfully exploited by means of the short-term mission phenomenon (aka Christian tourism).

The **history** section looks surprisingly healthy, though closer inspection shows quite a narrow range of topics. There is a great deal of military history; European history is mostly about the Nazis. **Politics** also seems comparatively well stocked, especially books on American politics and the war on terror. I meditate in a rather dejected way about the extraordinary ignorance of the history of mission that the Christian public characteristically displays, and contrast this with the situation 100 years ago when Christian missionaries grabbed the headlines in the way that wars (the Great War, the Second World War, the Falklands War, the Iraq War) do now.

Cookery seems a less depressing corner of the shop, with its international flavour (!). **Computing** also feels like a global activity. If the one is about variety and the other about uniformity (Microsoft!) then that is a useful reminder that globalisation both unifies and fragments.

Finally I reach the **YOUzone** (well, that's what this bookshop calls it). I can hardly miss it. A mixture of 'spirituality', 'personal development', pop psychology, health, 'New Age', 'body, mind and spirit', it has a huge presence. **Religion**, I notice, is separate and tiny in comparison and seems to have as many books attacking religion as defending it. What do I make of all this? Is the YOUzone an opportunity for the gospel or a threat? Whatever the case, it certainly seems to mean that the rational certainties of the Enlightenment are under threat, and that this is another radical undermining of a Eurocentric worldview which fifty years ago was still largely in place. Another facet of postcolonialism perhaps. Missiologists take note.

As I put my notebook away I thought to myself that there were several other ways that one could analyse society. Are bookshops all that important, after all? I remember going to one of those huge shopping centres (I think it was Meadowhall in Sheffield) and not being able to find one decent bookshop in the whole place. There were other things, I noticed, that people preferred to buy! Also, are books themselves gradually becoming a thing of the past? (See Richard Johnson's article 'On Narrative and Networks' in this edition of *Encounters*.) I almost went straight home to do an in-depth analysis of the *Radio Times* on the grounds that what people are watching nowadays is more important than what they are reading. This was such a depressing idea, however, that I went and had a cup of coffee instead.

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