

Daniel J. Fleming's Planetary Missiology for a Broken World

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Abstract

This article traces what it calls the “planetary missiology” of Daniel J. Fleming. In a world in which nationalistic ideologies are sacralized by different religions such as Islam in Iran, Hinduism in India, Buddhism in Myanmar, and evangelical Christianity in the United States, Fleming offers a planetary missiology of engagement that embraces differences through mutuality in worship, reading of sacred texts, and peaceful cooperation while at the same time holding the uniqueness of Christ for such encounters.

Key Words: interreligious dialogue, larger self, mutuality, planetary missiology

Introduction

Daniel J. Fleming (1877-1969) was one of the most distinguished missiologists of his time, a missionary to India for twelve years, a prolific writer, and a seminary professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. His contribution to the field of missiology is vast, using his theory and his faith to write 30 books on missionary subjects (Hutchison 1987, 150). From the beginning of his career, Fleming had a vision for world unity and world Christianity. This article reviews some of Fleming's writings where he developed the idea of what it meant to be a planetary Christian. This theme sets the precedent from which to demonstrate that Fleming's missiology was global in its scope and a forerunner of the field of world Christianity.

The article first places Fleming in his historical context from the end of the nineteenth century—when Fleming was entering adulthood—through World War II. Second, Fleming's books *Marks of a World Christian*, *Whither Bound in Missions*, and *Attitudes Towards Other Faiths* are reviewed to convey the broader scope of Fleming's missiology. Finally, the article uses Fleming's 1946 *Bringing Our World Together: A Study of World Community* to demonstrate that Fleming's career as a missiologist was dedicated to the idea of world Christianity through his planetary missiology.

Daniel Fleming and Internationalism

Daniel Fleming was born into a Presbyterian family in Xenia, Ohio, but never had any intentions during his youth to become a missionary or minister. It was not until his college years at the College of Wooster in Ohio that the spark of serving God first came to his life. It was through the ministry of J. C. R. Ewing, a Presbyterian missionary on furlough, who convinced Fleming of a short-term assignment as a math teacher at Forman Christian College in Lahore, India (Hoyle 1998, 486). For three years (1898-1901), Fleming taught classes of math and science in the prestigious school. This experience transformed his life dramatically to the point that he claimed he was “reincarnated” through a spiritual awakening (Hoyle 1998, 457). That awakening motivated him to pursue a theological degree at Union Theological Seminary and a master's in physics at Columbia University, where he lived for three years. He did further studies in chemistry at the University of Chicago and was ordained by the Presbyterian

Church in 1903. In 1904, he married Elizabeth Cole and began an eight-year missionary career in Lahore.

When the family returned to the United States for a furlough leave of two years, medical complications kept Fleming from going back to India. He enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Chicago, finishing with a dissertation entitled, “Devolution in Mission in Administration” in 1914. He had a long academic career at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1915 to 1944, exploring topics of missionary work in relation to the social sciences, interreligious and cultural encounters, missiology, and Christian aesthetics (Hoyle 1998, 487).

During Fleming’s missionary assignment, World War I was in its beginnings. After the war, a new spirit of internationalism was emerging to alleviate the horrors of the conflict. Dana Robert has argued that Protestant missionaries not only embraced internationalism as a source for the missionary enterprise but also “helped to shape it, participated in it, and both defended and critiqued it at a grassroots level. The missionary movement after World War I in Anglo-American Protestantism functioned within the globalizing discourse of internationalism” (Robert 2002, 50). The purpose of internationalism was to “reestablish friendships across national boundaries... an agenda of pacifism and international unity.” Robert continues, “The post-war American mission focus on ‘world friendship’ represented a combination of pacifism, inter-racial reconciliation, and vision of global unity” (Robert 2002, 52).

Fleming exemplified this post-war trend by embracing internationalism as a new missionary commitment. He claimed,

In a day when the nations of the earth are awakening to the claims of brotherhood, and when inter-national trust and good will are being stressed as the great way to peace and prosperity, people are beginning to recognize foreign missions as one of the most effective movements in human history. Inter-nationalism has been implicit in Christianity from the beginning. Its service, its message, its salvation could not be confined to individual, to family, or to community, but must be grasp nothing less than the whole world (Fleming 1922, 116).

Fleming believed that Christian missions could bring a planetary movement for peace rooted in the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. The dedication of missionaries to proclaim Christ as the Prince of Peace was conducive to world friendship. Fleming promoted and articulated the new ideology of the internationalization of the world, striving for a better world of peace, unity, human rights, and equality among the nations.

Fleming’s Idea of the Larger Self

In 1919 Fleming published *Marks of a World Christian* in which he articulated the influence that world Christianity should have in the world. In quite triumphalist terms, he perceived Christianity as a religion that could bring peace and be the principal religious force in the world through his planetary missiology of the “larger self.” In his perception of the meaning and duties of a world Christian, Fleming argued that “indissolubly knit together are me, other folks, and God” (Fleming 1919, 1). Fleming saw himself as part of

a triangular relationship which included humanity and God in solidarity on the affairs on earth. He called this interrelationship among self, other, and God the “larger self.” It was most likely that this idea of the larger self was a product of his missionary career in India. His experiences in India in a cultural setting that valued community and self-denial were essential to his planetary missiology. He recounted how prizes were awarded in schools in India where the rewards were intended to promote group loyalty rather than the individual selfishness of Western schools. He noted that, “instead of rewarding the top boys of the classes, they give a prize to the top class of the school, that is, the class which obtains the highest average in marks all round, for the body, mind, and soul” (Fleming 1921, 139). The selfless action from the winners was to spend the prize not on themselves but for the community by buying books for the library, decorating the school, or charity for the poor. For example, “every winter the boys help by cutting up firewood for those who are too poor to pay woodcutters, and for those houses where there are only women who could not do heavy work” (Fleming 1921, 141). Fleming reflected that, through the students’ selfless acts of mercy, Jesus Christ was concrete and practical in their lives and thereby creating a connection between self, God, and the larger self.

Fleming argued that for Christians to understand the complexity of the self they should address the significance of such words as “selfish” and “unselfish.” For Fleming, “unselfishness does not mean lack of self, for all that we do must be in response to some satisfaction our self gets in the act, but it refers to the kind of self that gets the satisfaction; it signified a truer sense of values” (Fleming 1919, 14). In contrast, selfishness “is used to describe a person who centers only on a part of his whole possible self and who manifestly works for this smaller so-called self” (Fleming 1919, 14). Therefore, there cannot be a true selflessness in human beings. Humans had created to their own advantage and convenience a narrow self which serves their own purposes in life.

The larger self is that conscience driven capacity to relate to the world in ways that reflect the acknowledgement of the “other” as part of oneself. Christians who understand the self in this capacity cannot be ignorant of or apathetic toward world affairs. Fleming argued, “inextricably linked up are we with a world society of immeasurable intricacy, complexity, and pervasiveness” (Fleming 1919, 17). After all, the self is surrounded by other selves who are interconnected one way or another, sharing a common humanity. Fleming’s conception of the larger self challenged Christians to become world citizens. In this sense, his planetary missiology strove to create a world order that was rooted in the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity and world friendship. The larger self as a planetary Christian should be in solidarity with the rest of humanity to create a world community that is guided by the principle of love. His planetary missiology of the larger self proclaimed that “the whole social order is Christianized” under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Fleming 1919, 19). When the self embraces the world, it participates of the affairs of the world, and the world community becomes the community of the self. In other words, the self broadens the self’s understanding of the world and readjusts to the needs of the world. It becomes involved as an active participant in those activities that bring human beings closer together, and it longs for the manifestation of God on earth through Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit.

Fleming's Mutualist Missiology

In 1925 Fleming published *Whither Bound in Missions*. In this book, he was critical of the sense of superiority of Western Christians over the people of other cultures. He argued, “a hundred years ago European civilization naively assumed that the Caucasian had been made by God to rule the world” (Fleming 1925, 1). Missionaries should not have the assumption and presupposition that their culture and way of living was superior to those people among whom they ministered. The internationalization of the church called for a more dynamic process by the part of missionaries. Leaders from Japan and China criticized the paternalistic mentality of the missionaries in their countries. For example, Fleming quoted U. Kawaguchi from Japan:

The sooner the missionary delegates his paternal instinct, his desire to possess and control, his endeavor to direct and to lead, to his Japanese co-laborer, the sooner his ideal of an independent, autonomous, native Church see its realization; and the more lasting will be the period of his usefulness in accomplishment of the Christian program of the Church (Fleming 1925, 9).

Statements like this one challenged the missionary societies to be more embracing of indigenous leadership in the development of native churches. It was a call to true brotherhood, sisterhood, and friendship in the spirit of unity, but at the same time it was a call to independence and indigenization. The Western mentality of superiority and corresponding interpretation of Christianity needed to be re-assessed considering the host culture.

Fleming's planetary missiology embraced mutual cooperation between the missionaries and the missionized. For him, the missionaries and Western culture must place themselves in a position of not only giving but also in an attitude of receiving what they could learn from other planetary Christians. The ideal in this cooperation was “mutual stimulation and cross-fertilization of culture, and that the better world will be achieved only when all work together from common goals in the light of a common experience” (Fleming 1925, 24). For Fleming, the church should be a “plurality of cultures each contributing its distinctive flavor” (Fleming 1925, 45). The Western missionary must recognize those people to whom they minister as equal partners in the kingdom of God. Mutuality will be a guiding principle for Fleming's theology of internationalization in his efforts to establish a church that gives space and allows the native leadership to interpret Christianity through their own cultural lenses.

Fleming and Indigenization

The main concern for Fleming in the continuance of church and ministry in the world was the total participation of nationals and the indigenization of the church. Fleming pointed out, “We now see clearly that the church that shall be able through Christ to redeem and enrich a given land must be indigenous, acclimated, naturalized to that particular land, striking its roots deep into the soil of the national life” (Fleming 1925, 154). The church should be free to participate fully in its own culture through the power of the Spirit who guides the church into all truth. Through the indigenization of the church, Fleming was advancing the theory of internationalism, and by invoking mutual

cooperation he was a forerunner of the development of contextual theologies rooted in the experiences of Christians in the majority world.

The guiding principle for Fleming's internationalization was his broader picture of world Christianity and the unity of all people under God through Jesus Christ. This broader framework can be seen in Fleming's position for mission to readjust to the cultures and religions in foreign lands. First, he insisted on changing the vocabulary of the "missionary enterprise to the development of Christianity abroad" (Fleming 1925, 165). Second, the indigenization of the churches should provoke a reactionary change in the perception of mission in Western countries. Now the whole world should be seen as the mission of the church. Third, Christian literature should be truly the inspiration and construction of nationals while the missionary should only serve as advisor. Fourth, the mission agencies should give places of leadership to nationals as soon as possible. Missionaries should be able to work under the leadership of the nationals with joy in their hearts, knowing that the work being done was for the glory of God and not for individualistic aggrandizement. Finally, the training of national leadership should be one of the main concerns for the missionary. As stated previously, the process of readjustment gave space and helped develop "the larger self" because it explores and expands the sin of narrowness in every individual (Fleming 1925, 180).

When Christians engage the other in a relationship of mutuality, the dynamism of the Holy Spirit creates a new identity which is inclusive and even pluralistic in its outlook. Because the Spirit hovers over the lives of believers, the Spirit could represent the power of God in relationships. Fleming's planetary missiology placed God, self, and others engaged in a triangular relationship of care, love, respect, growing, and becoming through their daily struggles. Therefore, humans are always searching and implementing the quality of the larger self to every experience that they went through with their fellow human beings and God. As Fleming affirmed, "The universal brotherhood of children of God is one of the great Christian convictions.... On its international and interracial side this great formula means that all men are children of God, and hence have a common divine heritage" (Fleming 1925, 196).

Fleming and Other Faith Traditions

In 1928, Fleming published *Attitudes Toward Other Faiths*. That same year, the ecumenical movement held its conference in Jerusalem. The theme of the Jerusalem conference was how to approach non-Christian religions. The tone in this conference regarding the non-Christian religions was sympathetic for the most part. A number of papers advocated fulfillment theory, including those by Nicol Macnicol, Julius Richter, Rufus Jones, John A. Mackay, R.E. Speer, and Oliver Quick. These presenters held to the supremacy of Christ over the non-Christian religions without destroying the light and truth that these religions possessed. For example, Macnicol proclaimed, "The Christ whom we preach does not destroy any gracious and beautiful trait in the character of the Hindu... he came not to destroy but to fulfil" (Yates 1994, 98). Also, an excerpt of the final report shows that Christians were interested in working together with adherents of other faiths as motivation for missionary activity. The report states:

We call on the followers of non-Christian religions to join with us in the study of Jesus Christ as He stands before us in the Scriptures, His place in the life of the

world, and His power to satisfy the human heart; to hold fast to faith in the unseen and eternal in face of the growing materialism of the world; to co-operate with us against all evils of secularism; to respect freedom of conscience so that men may confess Christ without separation from home and friends; and to discern that all the good of which men have conceived is fulfilled and secured in Christ (Kinnamon 1997, 395).

Fleming was a missiologist who similarly held the superiority of Christ over non-Christian religions but at the same time was very sympathetic to their contributions to civilization and ethics. In *Whither Bound in Missions*, he gave a sympathetic outlook of the non-Christian religions while holding his view of fulfillment theory. Fleming pointed out, "Every religion in its essence is seen to be a prolonged prayer for life from the unseen world" (Fleming 1925, 80). He used the terminology of *peidagogues* ("teacher") to refer to the non-Christian religions in several places. Also, he considered the sacred texts of non-Christian religions to be of inspiration and sources of ethics. Fleming's purpose in writing *Attitudes Toward Other Faiths* was "an effort to face the increasing religious contacts which lie ahead with attitudes refined by the spirit of our Master and chastened by a consideration of how we would have others act towards us" (Fleming 1928, x). One of the main reasons Fleming developed ways to engage adherents of other faith traditions was his conviction that the world was becoming a unified society, or what later would be called a "global village." He believed in the possibilities of common worship experiences with people of other faiths through prayers, songs, and the use of sacred Scriptures by the participating members. Also, he argued that a fellowship of silence could be the best way to secure common worship in a context where many different religious traditions were gathered. He pointed out, "I must be able to reach my God through another's forms of worship if this worship is to mean any real communion for me with the Divine. Otherwise, the service is not worship, but education; and I become an observer and listener, rather than a real participant" (Fleming 1928, 33).

The unity of God with humanity was one of Fleming's principal topics since his 1919 *Marks of a World Christian*. God was Creator of all that exists, and as such the religions of the world and their devotees were means to receive the revelation of God that was not uniquely ascribed to Jesus Christ. Perhaps this position is one of the biggest tensions in Fleming's planetary missiology: to hold to Christ as fulfillment of all religions and at the same time argue for the unity of God in the religions. Perhaps this paradox could be appreciated more clearly if one considers that Fleming believed that the revelation of God was operative in the entire cosmos. For him, all that is truth in other religious traditions came from the Father of Light. Fleming viewed revelation as coming not only in the biblical material but also in the revealing activity of the Spirit as already present in other faith traditions, giving them life. In this sense, he embraced the truth in other religions as means of grace because the inbreaking of the Spirit was operative in the entire cosmos.

Fleming believed that common service should contribute to the eradication of world problems, helping humanity in its unification of loving solidarity. He argued, "Service in a planetary basis should be inaugurated against narcotics, against war, against wrong conditions of labor. Ought we to seek opportunities where Christians and non-Christians may share responsibility in meeting such needs?" (Fleming 1928, 131). Humans should explore the dimensions of common worship and cooperative service in their daily

struggle to resolve the problems the world faces every day. For their part, doctrines and dogmas should be placed to the side, giving space for new explorations on issues of justice, peace, global economy, and love. Fleming sought to challenge the Western church in its dealings with the rest of humanity. He set forth his utopic vision of world peace, justice, and love as a guide for Christians to seek reconciliation with the rest of humanity.

Conclusion

Daniel Fleming was a world citizen. He dedicated his entire life as a missiologist to envision a world community of solidarity. For him the unity of humankind was an enterprise that could be achieved by the Christian Church. Fleming wrote *Bringing Our World Together* during World War II in 1946. The book continued the legacy of his ideal of a unified humanity. Fleming asserted, “This volume assumes that the vital forces of the universe are working toward a world-wide human brotherhood under God” (Fleming 1946, vii). Even during the dehumanizing period of World War II, Fleming still believed that humanity could achieve unity through the message of Jesus Christ by calling for active participation of men and women of goodwill on behalf of a broken world.

In producing *Bringing Our World Together*, Fleming was aware that Christianity was the solution only in the realm of religion. He recognized that the participation of people in political power was crucial for a new world order that could improve the existing conditions of his time. He called for an ecumenical collaboration not only among Christians and adherents of other faiths but also among politicians, social scientists, economists, geographers, and urban planners who wanted to build a planetary society (Fleming 1946, 92-96). Fleming’s planetary missiology of the larger self-included every human being who was willing to sacrifice their ego to embrace a global citizenship that would suit the aspirations of justice and peace in the world. His planetary missiology was a call to embrace the cosmic Lordship of Jesus Christ to create the all-inclusive global family of God.

Today’s world, perhaps more than ever, needs at least some type of “planetary missiology” to tackle the unsurmountable challenges of the planet. The world continues to be divided. Wars between so-called “Christian nations” and people of other religions have not stopped; the poor continue to be poor while the rich continue to get richer; the elderly are too easily overlooked or even discarded; racial and ethnic tensions boil over into violence. Christians today can decide how useful Fleming’s planetary missiology might be in helping the Church and individuals deal with such ongoing problems. In any case, it is precisely because of the seemingly insoluble problems the world faces that the kind of “planetary missiology” that Fleming produced is worthy of continued study and attention.

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