

IN REMEMBRANCE OF PAUL G. HIEBERT¹

1934-2007

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Paul Hiebert, a faithful follower of Jesus Christ as his Lord, was more than a saintly man of God who, richly endowed with gifts of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), became a spiritual giant. He was also a courageous missionary statesman of consummate diplomatic skill, a learned academic who combined indefatigable research, imaginative scholarship, and highly original thinking with sensitive teaching and gentle guidance for those less gifted than himself. He falls among those few who, when their “time on earth” is done and they ascend to Glory, leave us with an acute sense of loss.

Born the 13th November 1934, in Shamshabad (a suburb of Hyderabad, a city that was then the seat of the Nizam’s Dominions but is now the capital of Andhra Pradesh), Paul represented the third generation of a Mennonite Brethren missionary family. His grandparents, Nicholai and Susie Hiebert, reaching India in 1899, were followed by his parents, John Nicholas Christian and Anna Jungas Hiebert. After attending Kodaikanal [now International] School and graduating from Tabor College (Hillsboro KS, 1954) and M.B. Biblical Seminary (Fresno CA, 1957), and obtaining an M. A. in cultural anthropology from the University of Minnesota (1959), Paul was sent to Shamshabad to take over as Principal of Bethany Bible School and College (1960-1965). His Ph.D. dissertation (Minnesota, 1967), published as *Konduru: Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village* (1971), established his reputation and placed him in the front ranks of scholars in his field. No longer allowed in India as a regular missionary, he

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became a professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies in major South Asian Studies centers. This career, first at Kansas State University (Manhattan, 1961-1972), where he became director (1971-1972), and then at the University of Washington (Seattle, 1972-1977), was extremely successful. During these years, he often went to India for field research under prestigious grants ([Ford] Foreign Area Fellow, 1964, 1965, 1966; K.S.U., 1968, 1969, 1971; American Council of Learned Societies, 1972; and Social Science Research Council, 1977). While in India, he often and continuously served the M.B. Mission's school in Shamshabad, Telengana. During these same years, he also spent one year as Visiting Professor at his M.B. Seminary in Fresno (1969-1970) and another year as a Fulbright Visiting Professor at Osmania University, in Hyderabad (1974-1975).

During his last thirty years, from 1977 onwards, Paul was a missionary anthropologist. This phase began when he accepted a research professorship at Fuller Theological Seminary. Yet, even while engaged in missiology, he also served on the Selection Committee of Fulbright Commission (1978-1981), as Chair of the Faculty at the Haggai Institute, Singapore (1981-1990), and as Adjunct Professor, Union Biblical Seminar (Pune). Then, after eleven years of training doctoral students at Fuller, he moved to Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary. Here, he spent his last seventeen years, serving as Professor of Mission Anthropology and South Asian Studies (1990 -2001), Chair of Department (1990-1999), Director of Ph.D. students (1994-1996), and Associate Dean for Academic Doctorates (1995-2001).

Honored with emeritus status in 2001 (?), a position that enabled him to draw upon an annual research allowance and, thus, to remain fully engaged in research and teaching, Paul Hiebert remained in harness and as heavily involved in his work as ever, especially in India. In the meanwhile, during all these years, Paul served several boards. Most prominent among these were his service for the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions (1972 - 2007), the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (aka University) (1977-1981), and the Mennonite Brethren Center

for Missions Studies (1984-1987). Then from 1985 onwards, Paul enjoyed a longstanding relationship with OMSC – as a regular instructor when each year he taught a one week seminar on “Missionary Response to Folk Religion”, as a member of the board of trustees from 1991-1998, as an IBMR contributing editor until 2007, and, in numerous ways, often in a spontaneous letter, personally encouraging two successive directors, Gerald Anderson and Jon Bonk. All of these kinds of work continued at full throttle until terminal illness slowed him down in 2005.

However, this short sketch of his professional appointments scarcely scratches the surface. Paul was a prolific thinker and writer, a wonderfully captivating and generous teacher, and a brilliant, even heavy-hitting, theorist. His intellectual trajectory can be traced in ten books and more than 150 articles. These works broadly covered many fields and delved into the depths of what can be called a critical realist approach to epistemology. Such works led him to what he called a “dialogue” between theology, anthropology, and missions – in efforts to “contextualize the message” within cultural systems. Experiences in India and years of reflection on high Hindu philosophy and lowly villagers, who knew little about formal debates over philosophical doctrines, led him to apply methods of anthropology to religious beliefs and practices among common people.

The result was a study of folk religions, split-level Christianity, and the problem western mission often face of the ‘excluded middle.’ This, in turn, led to biblical reflections on healing, spirit possession, spiritual warfare, guidance, and other existential questions, which are at the heart of folk religions.²

Such thinking, in the end, led him to contextualizing church life within local social systems. At the heart of such thinking was his theory of the “excluded middle.” One can hardly begin to delve into the complexities of this theory as he applied it to Telugu Christianity and as this was seen to emerge from among the very lowest, or the most ritually “polluted” of Hindu *Dalit* (aka *Adivāsi*) communities.

² Paul Hiebert, “My Pilgrimage” (March 2003, unfinished manuscript). Cf. “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” one of three chapters in *Perspectives on the World Christian Mission* (Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1999), third edition.

Throughout his life pilgrimage, Paul lived with inner tensions that he attributed to various forms of “dual identity.” Forms of dual identity have tended to marginalize most MKs (Missionary Kids) – those who grew up speaking at least two languages, within at least two or more cultures, and among at least two or more peoples, if not two or more countries. His Telugu, spoken fluently without a foreign accent, matched his mid-western form of American English, also spoken fluently and without an alien accent. Such persons, while belonging to at least two worlds, if only partially, also fully belonged to neither – to no single world except their own. Paul struggled with this issue all of his life. As he put it,

I was not a native of India, nor a native of America. I felt most at home in bicultural communities...participating in different cultures while remaining [an] observer, not identifying fully with any one of them – a form of cultural schizophrenia. This identity as insider/outsider shaped much of my life. It made me aware of cultural differences and, therefore, of cultures themselves.³

In short, this background shaped Paul’s understandings and practices as a missionary – an “insider/outsider” who, in the parlance of India, was a *dubashi* (two-language man go-between or broker). He shared two worlds, without belonging fully to either.

This was a life that his wife, Frances Flaming Hiebert, shared with him and fully supported until her death in 1999. She too was a scholar, and a restless thinker. It was a life that his parents and grandparents understood. It was a life shared with seven sisters, with three children – Eloise, Barbara, and John – and with their spouses, as well as with an aggregate of seven grandchildren. These, in turn, pick up the burden of this rich legacy as it continues to inspire saints within the Mennonite Brethren communities around the world.

Note: Robert Eric Frykenberg, also from a missionary family and a historian of India’s Christianity, grew up in Telengana and knew Paul Hiebert from childhood, through school years at Kodaikanal, and through most of his professional life as a scholar and missionary

³ *Ibid.*