

# SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MISSION

**Enoch Wan**

Chair, Division of Intercultural Studies and Director, Doctor of Missiology Program,  
Western Seminary, OR, USA

Published in Global Missiology, Research Methodology, April 2005, [www.globalmissiology.net](http://www.globalmissiology.net)

<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MISSION:</b> .....	<b>1</b>
FORMATION OF THE DISCIPLINES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES & MISSION .....	1
PRESUMED CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES & MISSION.....	2
<b>CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MISSION:</b> .....	<b>2</b>
ACCEPTANCE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN MISSION .....	2
APPLICATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN MISSION .....	3
<i>Training of Workers:</i> .....	3
<i>Knowing the Field/Audience:</i> .....	3
<i>Mobilizing the Saints:</i> .....	4
<i>Sowing the Seed:</i> .....	4
<i>Bringing in the Harvest:</i> .....	4
<i>Developing Partnership:</i> .....	4
<i>A Case Study of GCOWE '95</i> .....	5
<b>CONCLUSION:</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>5</b>

## INTRODUCTION:

Specialization and integration in the "social sciences" are relatively recent developments in the academic disciplines as compared to classical studies of the humanities (e.g. philosophy, literature, etc.) and the natural sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry, etc.). There are different ways of classifying and categorizing disciplines in the "social sciences;" only five (i.e. anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics and communication) are selected in the following discussion on their relationship to mission.

## HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MISSION:

### ***FORMATION OF THE DISCIPLINES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES & MISSION***

Of the five selected disciplines in the social sciences for the present discussion, three emerged as separate and independent disciplines in the 19th century (sociology in the 1830s, psychology in the

1870s, anthropology in the 1880s), and two (i.e. linguistics and communication; presuming the studies of philosophy and philology are not to be considered the same as modern linguistic science and communication science) in this century.

"Mission" is the divine design of bringing spiritual blessings and the gospel to all nations through Christians' involvement in world-evangelization. It is a time-honored, centuries-old enterprise but "missiology" was not recognized as a legitimate field of study in North America until several decades ago.

### ***PRESUMED CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES & MISSION***

Evangelical Christians in general were very suspicious of the social scientists in time past. They have a very bad impression of socio-cultural evolutionists such as Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, anti-Christian psychologist/psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (religion as "a universal obsessional neurosis"), socio-political theorist Karl Marx (religion as "the opium of the people"), etc.

The presumed conflicts between the social sciences and mission are not unfounded for most schools of the social sciences have atheist assumptions for knowledge and truth, non-Christian presuppositions of methodology and measures, unbiblical view of the universe and man, unreserved optimism of human nature and future destiny, etc. All these are valid concerns and warranted reservations which are also applicable to the studies of modern medicine and mass communication. However, contemporary Christians can serve as missionary medical doctors and without any hesitation would gladly use the mass media to reach millions with the Gospel.

### **CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MISSION:**

Following the pattern of formation and development of disciplines in the natural sciences, social scientists began with striving to establish disciplinary distinctiveness for public recognition and after a long period of formulation, flourishing and full-blown growth, the current trend is interdisciplinary integration instead of isolationist specialization.

Nowadays, social scientists learn from related disciplines, benefit from researches done in other fields, borrow and exchange methodologies and techniques from one and another, and begin to collaborate in mega projects.

### ***ACCEPTANCE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN MISSION***

For the last several decades, various disciplines of the social sciences have been gradually accepted and utilized by Christians for mission. For example, most of the missions departments in Bible schools and seminaries would have a professional anthropologist serving on the faculty

and offering courses in anthropology. Most missionary candidates are screened by psychological testing prior to their acceptance by the organization and field appointments. Most missionaries have official language training (i.e. descriptive and applied linguistics). All missionaries use modern technology (e.g. camera and slide projector, radio and telephone, some even have computer with e-mail capability) in communication.

The encouraging trend is that many godly Christian scholars with expertise in the social science disciplines are working towards integrating their academic excellence with Christian faith for mission purpose.

## ***APPLICATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN MISSION***

### **Training of Workers:**

An increasing number of Christian workers involved in mission received some basic training in mission-related subjects (e.g. anthropology, linguistics, etc.) as part of their ministry preparation. Though "missiology" had been a recognized academic discipline in Europe since the turn of this century, the first evangelical institution in North America to have official degree programs in "missiology" was the School of World Mission at the Fuller Theological Seminary, beginning in September, 1965.

"Missiology" is an inter-disciplinary academic study underlying the task of world evangelization. The core areas of missiological curriculum in general are: anthropology (cross-cultural matters ranging from cultural anthropology to applied anthropology), practical theology (evangelism, discipleship, church planting, church growth, etc.), history (mission history, ethnohistory, etc.), linguistics (descriptive linguistics, applied linguistics, Teaching English as a Second Language, etc.), biblical studies (biblical theology of mission, hermeneutics, contextualization, etc.), communication (cross-cultural communication, mass media and evangelism, etc.) and several other subjects, depending on the institutional goal, faculty size, academic level, program distinctiveness, etc.

### **Knowing the Field/Audience:**

Christians are not of the world but are sent to the world to evangelize (Jn 17). Concerned Christians are utilizing knowledge and techniques of several related disciplines in the social sciences (ethno-geography, ethno-history, statistics, communication science, etc) to answer the following questions: Who needs the gospel? Where are the unreached people-groups?

Cultural anthropology (e.g. ethnographic monograph and video), and communication science (e.g. audience analysis and feed-back evaluation) are a good place to start. Sample resource material listed below are helpful: Unreached Peoples series beginning in 1979, Operation World

(up-dated annually in both book and computer diskette formats), resource world maps produced by Global Mapping International, etc. are handy tools.

### **Mobilizing the Saints:**

The planning, preparation of and participation in mission conference/consultation at the local church level, national level (e.g. Urbana), and international level (e.g. Lausanne '74) are the confluence and embodiment of inter-disciplinary integration of the social sciences as evidenced in the subsequent publications (e.g. Let the Earth Hear His Voice. edited by J.D. Douglas, 1975 and Down to Earth. edited by J.R.W. Stott and R. Coote, 1980). These helpful consultations/conferences/compendium volumes are ways and means to assist the saints by averting cultural imperialism, avoiding ethnocentrism, ascertaining active evangelism and contextualization.

Other publications such as MARC's Mission Handbook, Christian Research Association's UK Christian Handbook, Interchristo network, Adopt-A-People Campaign, AD 2000 United Prayer Track, Global Exchange Network, many denominational monthly magazines and annual prayer handbooks, etc. are found to be helpful.

### **Sowing the Seed:**

Theories and insights of the social sciences will enhance the Christian's knowledge of how to remove barriers and to build bridges in communicating the gospel to them. Factors of resistance to the gospel (e.g. religious background, cultural tradition, language limitation, social structure, psychological complex, etc.) are to be seriously considered before the sowing of the gospel seed.

Effective ways and means (i.e. programs, strategies, etc) to improve receptivity (e.g. humanitarian aid, literacy, community development, etc.) are to be explored and employed.

### **Bringing in the Harvest:**

The inter-disciplinary use of the social sciences in missiology has proven to be helpful and fruitful in: church growth study, the use of the "homogeneous unit principle," the understanding of "ethno-linguistic people," and "people movement", the efforts to evangelize the "unreached people-groups," "the 10/40 window" - the area of ten to forty degrees North of the equator from West Africa to East Asia where most of the unreached people-groups are located), etc.

### **Developing Partnership:**

The use of TEE (Theological Education by Extension) and contextualized theological curriculum will expedite the rate of growth and maturity of new Christians in many lands. The indigenous principle in mission and globalization of mission will allow the churches of many lands to enter

into partnership for world evangelization. The cooperative efforts of inter-denominational scope at the national level (e.g. the "Dawn 2000" movement in many countries) and the "AD2000 and Beyond" movement are just two examples of active evangelical's aggressive evangelistic efforts of this kind.

### **A Case Study of GCOWE '95**

(Global Consultation of World Evangelization)

About 4,000 Christians from 186 countries gathered in Seoul, Korea, in May 1995 to have mid-decade progress report prior to AD 2,000. The motto of this international evangelistic and church planting movement is "A church for every people and the Gospel for every person" (i.e. setting the goal of all 12,000 ethno-linguistic groups to have a church planting movement by AD 2000). This goal was developed based on social scientific research of "ethno-linguistic peoples" (i.e. a combination of anthropology, linguistics and statistics).

The section called "Our Mandate" (the Incarnational Model of Jesus Christ) in the "GCOWE '95 Declaration" is an integration of Bible teaching (biblical studies) with Christology and eschatology (theology).

The primary focus of GCOWE '95 was the "10/40 Window" which is the result of sociological (poverty, illiteracy, disease and suffering) and statistical research (% Christian to total population).

### **CONCLUSION:**

The current trend of inter-disciplinary integration in the social sciences provides an excellent opportunity for Christians to benefit from its insights and implementation. The increasing number of professionally trained social scientists who are also productive workers for the gospel will contribute much to world evangelization.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Engel, James. Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979.

Franklin, Karl. Current Concerns of Anthropologist and Missionaries. Dallas, TX: The International Museum of Cultures, 1987.

Hesselgrave, David J. Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Homes and Foreign Missions. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.

Hiebert, Paul G. Anthropological Insights for Missionaries. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.

Kitagawa, Daisuke. Race Relations and Christian Mission. New York: Friendship Press, 1964.

Kraft, Charles. Christianity in Culture. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.

McGavran, Donald A. Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979.

Tippett, A.R., ed. God, Man, and Church Growth. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.