

## Gypsies and Secret Agents

### *Cross-cultural Mission*

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

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*"Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs ... and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (Clifford Geertz)*

*"Own only what you can always carry with you: know languages, know countries, know people. Let your memory be your travel bag." (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)*

*"In Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, I once met an 87-year-old man. He told me that he had lived his entire life in the same place, yet at the same time he had lived in seven different countries." (Javier Solana, Secretary General of NATO)*

**T**he problem with 'conventional wisdom' is that it is usually more parts convention than wisdom. As evangelicals, we are particularly given to accepting conventional wisdom. An idea is birthed, a fresh term coined, a new paradigm offered up on the bookstands and the speaking circuit and we, in our ceaseless quest for formulas, accept it as truth, rarely challenging or subjecting it to critical assessment.

One negative result is that we often can become captives of definitions that we ourselves have put in place and rarely even consider the need to step outside the boundaries of those categories we believe to be true and fixed. We become prisoners of paradigms created by ourselves and accepted from others.

Hence my challenge of the evangelical paradigm of 'cross-cultural missions' - a term (and an understanding) that essentially defines cross-cultural as the crossing of one, at the most two, boundaries. Those of culture and/or language. Certainly these are valid boundaries but I contend that they are not as definitive as we think - there

are others that are rarely, if ever, considered. We allow these to remain intact in our lives as untouched and uncrossed as distant frontier posts. I think we need to "push the envelope" a bit.

Let me posit the thought that the normal Christian life is one of constant and continuous cross-cultural tension in which the Christian - the serious, mission-minded believer - is seeking not only to cross boundaries wherever he may find them, but who does his utmost to reject any boundaries and in the course of so doing, lives the majority of his life outside of his 'culture', like a soldier behind enemy lines.

As Salvationists we undertake a similar journey in our theological understanding of the sacraments, as an example: *'... the philosophical framework of the Salvationist interpretation is a sacramental worldview...they take so seriously the idea that ours is a sacramental universe...they cannot limit the notion to a particular ceremony...'* (Beacon Dictionary of Theology). I am likewise broadening the definition of cross-cultural to an all-encompassing worldview that assumes a centrality in our thinking of mission, rather than one periphery aspect of mission as it is generally now defined. In this understanding virtually every encounter, every day, becomes an opportunity for 'cross-cultural' engagement and becomes a choice for the missionary to either stay within, or to step out of, preconfigured boundaries.

The normal (ideal) Christian life is one of pilgrimage and of a light hold on the world and its treasures and values. We are to live in a holy tension with all that surrounds us, never leaving yet never cleaving (John 17:15-18). Eternal strangers, yet everywhere at home, citizens of a different reality with only the Lord and his Kingdom claiming our ultimate allegiance and loyalty. Like spies we should be able to move easily and smoothly in and out of the cultural pools, provincial prejudices and comfort zones erected by the nations and the tribes, including our own.

Indeed our hymnology and is rife with such understanding. Historical precedent abounds. 'Every land is my Fatherland - because every land in my Father's', claimed Bramwell Booth. The mission strategy at the outset of the Army's war was distinctly incarnational as illustrates the following circular memo sent out in the summer of 1882, prior to the Army's advance in India:

***"Remember that you are likely to be absolutely alone - it may be for months together...in the villages the men must expect to have no furniture at all, except some mats, and must learn to sit on the ground like a tailor...you will have to learn to cook just as Indians do and to wash your clothes at the stream with them... You must make up your mind to leave entirely forever and behind you all your English ideas and habits..." (The General Next to God, Richard Collier)***

Booth's parting words to Booth-Tucker as he left London to head the team were: 'Get into their skins, Tucker!' As so he did.

*'It came home to Tucker that The Army's greatest problem was the rigid stratification of caste - and the souls he sought were those of India's sixty million outcastes.'*

*"Tucker now took an epoch-making decision: to win these people, his soldiers, now reinforced from England, must embrace the life the outcastes lived. He pared his party's subsistence allowance down to 3s. 6d. a week. English boots were out-of-place; from now on they went barefoot, like mendicant friars. Only later, after some had contracted sunstroke through the soles of the feet, did Tucker relent and allow weaker spirits to don sandals. Their clothing was the Indian fakir's saffron robes of renunciation.*

*Along with English clothing, the sloughed off English names. William Stevens, a former jeweller from Worthing, Sussex, who paid for his training by melting and selling the gold in shop aptly became Yesu Ratnam (Jewel of Jesus). Clara Case, a wealthy farmer's daughter, was now Nurani (Shining Light); Tucker himself was Fakir Singh, the Lion of God. Others took names translating as Messenger of Truth and Lion of Comfort.*

*For Tucker's force, soon to total 479 officers, no sacrifice was too great if it meant winning souls. To reach the Tamils of Southern India, the men shaved their heads Tamil-fashion, leaving only a round patch of hair coiled in a queue, at the crown and back of the head. Their foreheads bore a patented Salvation Army castemark - red, yellow and blue. To win*

*the Bheels, a stocky diminutive warrior tribe in the jungles of Bombay Presidency, Ensign Carl Winge, the Swede assigned to them, adopted the tribal bow and arrow and brass earrings. For women officers the brass anklets of Bheel wives became regulation. And the Bheels, who had no elaborate religion like the Hindus, proved worth the winning: four hundred of them enrolled under Booth's banner. In time Winge brought them to love God as an embodiment of perfection, to look on prayer as a communion with all that was ultimate, beautiful and everlasting.*

*As true Salvationists, Tucker's troops took pride in Indianisation. They cleaned their teeth with charcoal, like all peasants did, washing from a brass bowl; their simple meals of curry and water were eaten cross-legged on the floor. They came to budget like misers: language lessons were given in the sand to avoid wasting paper. "Hallelujah!" one new arrival exulted in a letter home, "I haven't been in a bed since coming here but sleep on the ground ... my feet are swollen and ulcerated with the first week's work and visiting ... but to see the happy faces of the converts makes up for everything."*

*So warmly did they welcome this nomad hardness that one group of officers, offered money, refused it point-blank. They still had a spare rupee whose use defeated them until they decided to save it for stamps.'*

Apparently to our forebears, any border was transient, and any frontier crossable, any boundary breakable. We have become cautious with age, however. The radicality of The Salvation Army's understanding of 'cross-cultural' was explosively revolutionary in the culture of Victorian England and the British Empire. Booth-Tucker and his team met opposition not so much from the Indians as from the British ruling establishment. But, they had the blessing and full support of the Army's leaders. Is there any THQ in the world today that would countenance such an approach, regardless of the cost?

Commissioner George Scott Railton penned the following words in song 362 in the Salvation Army Songbook:

***No home on earth have I,  
No nation owns my soul,  
My dwelling place is the Most High,  
I'm under his control.  
O'er all the earth alike,  
My Father's grand domain,  
Each land and sea with him alike  
O'er all he yet shall reign.***

*No place on earth I own,  
No field, no house be mine;  
Myself, my all I still disown,  
My God, let all be thine.  
Into they gracious hands  
My life is ever placed;  
To die fulfilling they commands,  
I march with bounding haste.*

*With thee, my God, is home;  
With thee is endless joy;  
With thee in ceaseless rest I roam;  
With thee, can death destroy?  
With thee, the east, the west,  
The north, the south are one;  
The battle's front I love the best,  
And yet; they will be done.*

We may applaud the sentiments of Railton, but conventional wisdom tells us that it is impractical and unnecessary. Should not the man and woman of God avoid all extremes, as the Scriptures counsel? Surely Railton is expressing an extreme! Or could it actually be the norm, the ideal?

No. Not for most of us. We pledge allegiance to certain flags and will not let go, each time undermining in various degrees our ability to be truly cross-cultural. If our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and all other allegiances - ranging from that of the nuclear family unit to that our national orientation - are to be subject to this, this means that for the sake of the lost, we 'unhinder' ourselves of all that would slow us down, blunt our edge, dull our senses and render us ineffective.

As Paul points out: *'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...'* (Hebrews 12:1). If I can posit our Salvationist forebears as such witnesses, how do we fare in the light of their scrutiny? William Booth' maxim was: *'Will the adoption of this idea or the abandonment of that method, help or hinder the salvation war?'* Can we claim such clarity of focus and commitment to mission?

In the book Community in Mission, Phil Needham highlights this vital, yet oft-neglected side, of the Christian identity: *'Pilgrims are literally people who journey, often in foreign lands. The image of the Church as a band of pilgrims embodies three key aspects of the Church's life in the world.*

*First, it defines the Church as a people on the move. Second, it articulates the tentativeness of the Church's relationship to the social structures and behavioural patterns of contemporary society. And third, it suggests a Church which is moving towards the future...'* (Chapter Three, 'Called to a Journey: The Pilgrim People')

Are we tentative in our relationships to social structures and behavioural patterns of society and culture? Are we 'unhindered' for mission? It is not something to come to us naturally, but like an spiritual discipline, needs to be worked at, practiced and crafted. If we are committed to mission then we will learn to 'unhinder'.

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I want to identify three boundaries that hinder us and that need to be considered and dealt with for the sake of effective mission.

1) **Patriotism** (Culture). Patriotism is the acceptable face of nationalism and yet, the concept of patriotism, (*'patriot: a person who vigorously supports his country and its way of life'*, Collins Concise Dictionary) finds no Scriptural justification. Of course it is not a bad thing in most cases, for the average person. But for the missionary it is one of the main hindrances to living truly 'cross-culturally'.

Once any culture, country, language group, form of government becomes the standard by which we evaluate and judge others, that is when we start to lose Kingdom perspective. Allegiance to Christ and citizenship in the Kingdom of God should be the only point of reference for such evaluations (Colossians 3:11). The mission the only defining factor. The more we become 'culture-bound' and hindered with patriotism, the less easily we can move amongst the 'tribes and nations'.

*'As we become more self-centred and more individualistic we enter into other cultures with greater difficulty...what is called for from us is a self-denials that is completely against the grain of our culture.'*  
(Paul Dekar)

*How many of would willingly heed the instructions of that memo of 1882 regarding the mission strategy for India: 'You must make up your mind to leave entirely forever behind you all your English ideas and habits...'*  
?

2) **Materialism.** The fact is that most of us in the West simply do not want to

give up our toys. We develop a theology wherein *wants* subtly become *needs*; *luxuries* become *ministry tools* and *comforts* are in reality *God's blessings* and thereby de facto approval of our mission. Thus hindered, we stagger across boundaries, barely able to lift our legs over the barriers, overweight and dressed all wrong. Rather than jettisoning such trinkets prior to mission, we justify retaining such by attempting to bring these dubious blessings to the people to who we wish to engage in mission. Whether they need them, whether they want them, whether they will 'help or hinder', we do not ask. We will not give them up so we accommodate our strategy to include them.

3) **Religion** (Traditionalism). More often than we are probably aware, and more often than we like to admit, it is our religion that creates one of the biggest barriers to mission and to crossing boundaries. The prophets were killed over religion. All of Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees and Sadducees were over religious picayune. Take any bad example from the history of the church starting with the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition right to your own home corps and the wearisome bickering over brass banding and traditional hymns as opposed to worship bands and praise choruses. The problem is the same - religion as traditionalism.

Cross-culturally it seems to be the rule to mix our religion (our 'extra-biblical codexes of salvation' as someone aptly termed it) and our faith and offer the rather confusing result as the truth, the gospel - we confuse people. And we are willing to fight for our religion and defend it biblically if necessary. Booth was willing to tinker with his religion to get at the sinners. We have allowed our rich traditions to fossilize into traditionalism, and mission effectiveness is always the first to suffer in such circumstances.

This is a big issue and I would suggest anyone missionary who wants to get a handle on it to read Christianity Rediscovered by Vincent J. Donovan (see reading list). Can we deconstruct our religion and forgo our traditions enough to allow the Gospel message to blaze brightly and in power?

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So what is to be done? We need to deconstruct the

'cross-cultural' paradigm and realize that the minute one seriously commits to be becoming a follower of Christ and decides to engage in mission, one automatically makes a decision to become a cultural orphan. We are adopted by God as his children but we abandon our 'parent' culture. This is more of a process than a crisis and only as we mature and are able to keep our mission focus true and firm do we develop the ability to identify and discern barriers to mission that we need to remove. We must resist the urge to settle down and stake a claim in a particular place or people. This is very hard and everything within us fights against it - few of us are naturally pilgrims, we all long for a home, for a sense of security and the familiar. It is something learned, something fought and sacrificed for. The cost is tremendous.

Picture if you can, a man bound by hundreds of barely visibly strings, wrapped tightly around his body, pinning his arms to his sides and his feet together. Many of these he does not notice and many he sees but does not recognize. As each of these strings is broken, greater freedom of movement is allowed - the maximum freedom and mobility occurs when all the strings have been broken.

Thus it is with the confines of culture that we inherit and assume as part of the trappings of growing up where we grew up and with whom we grew up. Many we willingly wrap around ourselves, (materialism) many we are taught are good and even possibly necessary (patriotism), some we are instructed in even by the church (religion, tradition), some result from societal sins (racism, sexism).

Behavioural norms, cultural mores, respectability, acceptability - barriers exist in various forms both inside the community of believers and outside in the world at large. Sociologists claim that such define and hold together society and in many ways they do. Ultimately, however, they stem from sin and are evidence of the separation and alienation of man from God and subsequently man from man. As such, they need to be viewed from a Kingdom perspective that acknowledges them as realities but treats them as more hindrance than help with regard to mission.

As always, true freedom is much too terrifying a concept for most people and for any institution so we buy into existing boundaries and even create our own. The alternative is to throw off the traces and step out into uncharted territory, it is to risk and maybe lose. Forsaking country and culture, comforts and our religious identities if necessary, to run unhindered with the Spirit. No safety

net, no guarantees but that God is smiling on us and that, for most of us, is a bad bargain.

So we set the boundaries of what we are willing to do, where we are willing to go and how far. We predestine our mission effectiveness and live content within such limitations. But what if they are false - paper tigers of our own creation? Our worse - the devils, in order to render is ineffectual in the war, in order to hinder us?

How far are you willing to go for the sake of the mission, for the sake of the lost?

*‘Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.’ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)*

This is Paul at his most radical, though I fear that familiarity with the text has dulled its edge for most of us. This is the definitive statement in ‘cross-cultural’ mission. This is Paul the pragmatist, the realist - hot-tempered and impatient - yet a brilliant tactician, as he rages against the petty confines of safe faith and measured, risk-free mission. This is Paul saying that he will venture into bandit-infested hinterlands, brave raging seas, suffer the wrath of religious fanatics, the might of the Roman Empire, the prejudice of the Greek intellectual community. He will go anywhere, do anything, be anyone and lose his life if necessary (and it was) to cross any barrier - geographical, cultural, social, religious for the sake of the mission, for the sake of the lost.

So what is the call? For stateless, rootless, internationalists, owing no particular allegiance to any one country or culture? Willing to give up all, from family to material comforts to life itself for the cause? For God-fearing nomads, gypsy missionaries, spies and secret agents who can cross frontiers in the dark of night, change identities at the drop of a hat, sleep in a palace and a pig-sty and converse with both king and commoner? Is that what we are talking about?

Is it achievable? Is it desirable? Is it necessary?

It is the gospel, I am afraid. The doctrine of the incarnation is God’s cornerstone for the whole salvation story and on this hinged the redemption of the nations in Jesus. It hinges on this today as we, following the example laid down for us by Christ, seek to incarnate this same gospel that recognizes neither ‘Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, male nor female’ (Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:26). As we embody this message, as we incarnate it in our world it is only to the degree that we are successful in doing so that the kingdom will come.

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*‘Of the 360 million people in the European Union alone, nearly a quarter are between 15 and 29 years old. Despite popular notions of “union”, they have little sense of shared identity. They are living within the context of no context. The fragmented politics - of gender, race, religion and sexual preference - that characterize the waning years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century serve only to splinter the youth further...’ (The New Youth by Elizabeth Gleick, Time, 1998)*

*‘La generation salle d’attente’* - the waiting room generation. Waiting for what? Waiting for whom? In the midst of such a splintering of identities and loyalties, in a world literally torn apart by nationalism and religio-ethnic conflicts and where it seems that the horrors of the twentieth-century are but a practice run for what awaits us in the millennium - what brings reconciliation? In a world where the map is not only being redrawn but quickly discarded as countries as entities lose their prominence and the coming generation will more naturally turn on MTV than stand for their national anthem - who will have credibility?

The *what* remains the same - the gospel good news.

The *who* is the question.

*‘When we have really understood the actual plight of our contemporaries,  
when we have heard there cry of anguish and when we have understood why  
they won’t have anything to do with our disembodied Gospel, when we have  
shared their sufferings, both physical and spiritual,  
in their despair and*

*their desolation, when we have become one with  
the people of all nations  
and of the universal church, as Moses and Jeremiah  
were one with their own  
people, as Jesus identified himself with the  
wandering crowds, "sheep  
without a shepherd," then we will be able to  
proclaim the word of God - but  
not until then!' (Jacques Ellul)*

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### **Suggested reading list:**

Wild Hope, Tom Sine.

Monarch Publications Limited, 1991.

*A wake-up call to the challenges and opportunities of  
the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Dr. Sine is a Christian and a consultant  
in futures research for both Christian and secular  
organizations*

Rediscovering Christianity, Vincent J. Donovan.

Orbis Books, 1978.

Father Donovan is a Roman Catholic priest who wrote  
this book after 17 years of mission work in Tanzania. A  
fascinating account of the true meaning of missionary  
work and what the gospel truly is when stripped of its  
cultural accretions from the West.

Community in Mission, Phil Needham.

SA IHQ, 1987.

The only Salvationist ecclesiology ever written - as  
far as I am aware. This book paints a picture of the ideal  
Salvation Army as a missionary Church. Every salvationist  
should read it annually.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom, T.E. Lawrence.

Penguin Books, 1926.

T.E. Lawrence (better known as Lawrence of Arabia)  
was not a Christian. Yet this classic military chronicle of  
the desert war in Arabia during WWI serves as one of  
the best explorations of cross-cultural adaptation ever  
written.

Captain Richard Francis Burton, Edward Rice.

HarperCollins, 1991.

One of the most fascinating figures of Victorian  
England, Burton was not a Christian and lived a life in  
many ways contrary to the Gospel. His ability to live cross-  
culturally was legendary however, and sets a standard that  
has likely never been matched, in or out of the church.