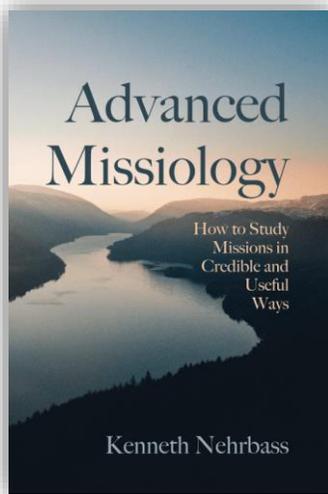


BOOK REVIEW

Advanced Missiology: How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways

By Kenneth Nehrbass

Reviewed by Paul Houston Blankenship



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With *Advanced Missiology: How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways*, Kenneth Nehrbass makes an ambitious, impressive, and helpful contribution to missiology. The purpose of *Advanced Missiology*, which includes chapters from Julia Martinez, Rebecca Burnett, and Leanne Dzubinski as well, is to help readers develop interdisciplinary sophistication to better understand how Christianity spreads across cultures. In an evolving, complex field that can sometimes miss the forest for the trees and get lost in ungrounded theoretical abstraction, Nehrbass and his colleagues weave theory and practice with seeming seamlessness. Indeed, what is at stake in *Advanced Missiology* is a penetrating illumination of missiological theories that might inform the everyday practice of missions around the world and generate more fruitful theories in the future. While this book is, indeed, as its title declares, an advanced book for more experienced students of missions—and therefore not

the introductory text new pilgrims wandering into the field might need—readers at many levels and from many different fields will benefit from spending time in this generative terrain. Even the secular anthropologist of religion, for example, who may have no stake in (and be deeply troubled by) the kind of religious project that Nehrbass advances, will learn a tremendous amount about what Christian missiology is, what difference it makes (or wants to make) in the world, and why it really matters.

For Nehrbass, what really matters is bringing the church across cultural boundaries and making Christian disciples of all people. This controversial evangelical project is the *raison d'être* of missiology, Nehrbass proposes, which, building upon the work of Alan Tippett and James Scherer, he defines as “the utilization of multiple academic fields to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures” (14). A missiologist, then, according to Nehrbass, is “someone whose primary work is to study the way Christianity spreads across cultural boundaries” (ibid.). Readers will likely appreciate Nehrbass’s careful, studied lucidity on what missiology is, and what missiologists do, in addition to his creative rendering of how missiology is done. The traditional metaphor of a stool—which depicts and organizes missiology on the academic disciplines of anthropology, history, and theology—is not adequate, Nehrbass thinks. Better is the more dynamic, changing, converging metaphor of a river that moves purposefully by powerful greater forces (31).

Advanced Missiology is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled “The Tributaries of Missiology,” includes chapters on the nature of missiology (chapter 1); the relationship between theology and cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 2); the relationship between history and cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 3); the role of anthropology in cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 4); the role of intercultural studies in cross-

cultural discipleship (chapter 5); how development theory can be used to facilitate cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 6); and how education matters in cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 7). Part II, entitled “The Distributaries of Missiology,” defines cross-cultural discipleship (chapter 8); renders seminal theories of (chapter 9) and seminal models for (chapter 10) cross-cultural discipleship; and the final chapter of the book is an attempt to imagine and shepherd missiology’s future. Since *Advanced Missiology* is a highly complex book that is laden with theory and data, readers may (like me) find it helpful that each chapter has “chapter goals,” concise summaries, missionary profiles, and stimulating invitations to real action, further research, and additional questions. I was particularly delighted that each chapter encouraged “heart goals” alongside knowledge and action goals. This is a book that is meant to make a home in your mind *and your heart* as you move with God in the world.

There is, as I hope this short review has already shown, much to applaud about this book. Its posture of openness and curiosity toward other academic disciplines is to be commended; it is courageous in making universal, objective truth claims across cultural differences. Each chapter is like a world that readers with different interests are likely to find fascinating and useful. As a theological anthropologist, I was especially enlightened by Nehrbass’s discussion about the relationship between anthropology and cross-cultural discipleship, and how missiologists use anthropology (hopefully to mitigate against ethnocentrism, for example, and to make sense of local worlds without drowning individual persons in their local worlds and therefore eradicating ontological human difference). I also appreciated learning that holistic or “integral mission” aims to transcend the tired, anachronistic dichotomy between personal and material transformation. For Nehrbass, adequate cross-cultural discipleship must free people from any oppression that inhibits their flourishing (158).

It is my commitment to practice a hermeneutic of goodness, hospitality, and empowerment. Academe, as most of us know too intimately, can be a rather nasty, toxic, and wounding space. Christian anthropologists ought to query how we speak not just about “the others” that we study and collaborate with, but also the colleagues with whom we work. What does it mean to love and live the Great Commission in our thoughts and sentences, and in our departments and conferences and in our journals and publications? Do

we love one another with our work, even those with ideas that we find harmful and with whom we fervently disagree? And what does it mean to speak the truth to each other in love?

I found myself wrestling with these queries as I read the theology that undergirds *Advanced Missiology*. The theology—which, it seems to me, tells a story about a God whose love is ultimately contingent on obedience and who wishes to use the human species to eradicate (rather than befriend) other religious traditions so that all are brought “under the lordship of Christ” (275)—enraged my mind and broke my heart. Nehrbass claims that what really matters about cross-cultural Christian discipleship is love (200)—yet he doesn’t demonstrate how, while calling for missiologists to produce data to generate better theories (207), making everything and everyone “Christian” is actually loving. That simple approach won’t due. I think that a better one, which I am trying to develop as “a pneumatic ethnography,” is for lovers of Christ to query and explore and nurture what it means to love in a different cultural world situated within a global village, not impose a (even highly contextualized) theology that may be experienced as unloving.

For the past five years, I have been doing ethnographic research on the spiritual lives of people who live on the streets of Seattle. It may not surprise readers that, in this so-called “None Zone,” the majority of the people I spend time with reject Christianity. Some, interestingly, even practice a kind of “Luciferianism” that defines itself as a liberating force against Christianity. As a Quakerly Christian, it took me a while to work past my Christian fragility and see how, in this local world, love seemed to mean creating space for people to reject a religion that egregiously wounded them and their world—and find fullness in another tradition altogether. Christ, it seems to me, is the creative love mystery that freely calls our more-than-human world into love and flourishing, whatever tradition (or traditions) that might lead us into.



Paul Houston Blankenship is a professor of spirituality and culture at Seattle University's School for Theology and Ministry. He is a recent graduate of Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union and has also taught courses at UC Berkeley and Fordham University. Paul's publications have appeared in *Spiritus*, *Current Anthropology*, *Land of Stark Contrasts: Faith-Based Responses to Homelessness*, and *Street Homelessness: Catholic Theological Ethics for the World Church*. Paul is a Quaker minister and a member of a Shingon Buddhist community in Seattle.

Author email: pblankenship@ses.gtu.edu
