

Application of Social Psychology to Missions and Evangelism

A New COTARI Initiative in Missiology

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Missiology is important in Christian missions and evangelism. It provides practical theology on how to reach out to non-Christians with the Gospel messages. It is a practical field of study for missions and evangelism, and a multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural, inter-confessional field of study:

- Multi-disciplinary – history, theology, anthropology, communication theory, religious encounter, ecumenics, methodology, geography, social science, psychology, comparative religion, Christian apologetics, linguistics, etc.
- Inter-confessional – works from Roman Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism, and Orthodox Christianity.
- Practical – not just theoretical reflection, but applied mission science.

It has the following four broad areas of study in Missiology:

- Biblical perspective – the foundation of missiology is sought from the Bible
- Historical perspective – the history of Christian expansion
- Cultural perspective – the understanding of different cultures in delivering the Christian messages
- Strategic perspective – practical methodology for missions and evangelism

Many people have contributed excellent works in various missiological areas of study. One area that Christianity has difficulty, however, is in how to reach out to peoples of other religions. The conventional methods developed in missiology appear to be powerless in reaching out to peoples of so-called great religions of the world. The statistics on the percentage of Christian population in the areas dominated by the great religions of the World is a living testimony for this difficulty: The Christian population in countries dominated by the great religions of the world is one or two percent or less

Out of many disciplines applied in missiology, no one has appeared to ever try to apply “social psychology” to missiology, in either any of missiological papers or books, or in practice. Social psychology has been developed only in the last 100 years, and is not well understood as a separate field of study to most Christians. Therefore, in this paper, we review the field of social psychology and propose to apply the results of research performed in social psychology to missions and evangelism. It appears that social psychology provides powerful tools in strategic methods in reaching out to peoples of other religions. In this paper, only a general overview is

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provided on the areas of study in social psychology and how they could be related to missions and evangelism. It does not cover specific applications in missions and evangelism. Specific applications should be handled as separate studies, beyond this paper.

The advantage of using the research results of social psychology over other theological considerations is that the research in social psychology is performed not only through theoretical considerations but also through laboratory experiments. Its hypotheses are tested by laboratory experiments before conclusions are made. Other theological research is primarily done by logical reasoning and literary studies of Biblical sources. For this reason, the research results of social psychology is scientifically trustworthy compared to purely theological considerations.

Social psychology has three primary areas of study².

1. Study of intra-group and intergroup processes. When a small number of people follow Jesus Christ in the area of other religions, the Jesus followers form a minority group naturally. How this minority group sustain its identity and survive in the society dominated by the majority of different faith and sometimes convince the majority to follow the faith of the minority could be all part of social psychological research.
2. Study of attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. The process of evangelism and missions is to change someone's existing opinions and beliefs into new opinions and beliefs. Also the attitudes Christians have toward peoples of other faiths are vitally important in the success of evangelism and missions.
3. Study of social perception and self-perception. This area deals with identity that people come to have. When a new believer is produced in the area dominated by other religions, the new convert develops his or her own perception of who he or she is. It is important to maintain and nourish such identity formed. Otherwise, the new convert would not remain a follower of Jesus Christ but revert back to the original religion that one had due to the pressure of the majority.

Nearly every research result in social psychology can find its counter part in missions and evangelism. This new area of missiology, application of social psychology in missions and evangelism, has many potential new discoveries and could produce many doctoral theses. It can enrich and complete missiology as never done before in its history.

² Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert, Gardner Lindzey, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th ed., Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2010. Vol. 1, p. 4.