


CHAPTER 7
THE CONTROVERSIAL IMAGE OF THE US AMERICAN IN MISSIONS
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INTRODUCTION

Even as the United States wields substantial cultural influence in this era of globalization, US Americans are controversial figures. US Americans who sojourn overseas are even more controversial. Expatriates from any country are often received with ambivalence, whether they are migrant workers, refugees, or successful business owners, but among controversial others, the US American missionary is especially provocative, as the United States of America represents “Gospel and gold, ointment and gun, oppressor and oppressed” (Conn 1984, 55). Opposing images of missionaries from the United States are portrayed in major motion pictures and best-selling novels, and they are coupled with the ubiquitous metaphor of the “Ugly American” (who is presumably NOT from Canada). Evening news broadcasts of flag-burnings and protesters holding signs that read (in Arabic) “Death to America” (Al Jazeera 2013) further reify the notion of anti-western and especially anti-American sentiment.

Such negativity is prevalent to different degrees across the globe—sometimes reflexively in the form of “western self-loathing.” However, the United States continues to receive a fairly high international approval rating in polls. And in the midst of this ambivalence about the West and the United States in particular, the country which sends out the largest number of missionaries is still the United States (see Steffan 2013). In what ways do missionaries from the United States experience this phenomenon of anti-American sentiment? How do international stakeholders in Christian mission perceive US Americans and especially missionaries from the United States? Is the “ugly
American" any more of a reality than "the ugly Canadian" (or the ugly German, Russian or Pakistani, etc.?) Are images of the US missionaries in film and news broadcasts congruent with the experiences of missionaries abroad? And how do international perceptions of US Americans affect mission strategies?

Since an understanding of international opinions of US Americans in the twenty-first century can help shape how we design mission strategies for the future, this chapter examines the pervasiveness and lived reality of anti-American sentiment in the setting of missionary work. To accomplish this, I interviewed nineteen participants (US Americans and internationals) who have resided outside of the United States for at least two years to gain insight regarding the broad spectrum of international perceptions of US Americans. I then analyzed this data in order to develop a theory that explains the impact of anti-western sentiment on missionary work.

IMAGES OF THE UGLY AMERICAN

The controversy of American missionaries is manifested in major motion pictures and best-selling novels, where portrayals range anywhere from the selfless Bible translator Rachel Lane in John Grisham’s Testament (1999), to the self-absorbed Nathan Price in Barbara Kingsolver’s Poisonwood Bible (1998). An unspoken rubric seems to be employed in popular culture as the basis for rating missionaries. And while the rubric is not directly based on missiological metrics (e.g., whether the missionaries plant sustainable churches, or their ability to leverage cultural knowledge to effectively teach doctrine), the method of evaluation turns out to be surprisingly well aligned with Christian values. In film and fiction, missionaries are graded on their ability to embrace their host culture. They seem to be assessed by the degree to which they make significant contributions to the standard of living in their mission context. Put another way, Hollywood seems to evaluate missionaries based on how closely they resemble the incarnational ministry of Jesus, minus the teaching.

Missionaries are most positively depicted when their social action defends the rights of the powerless. British missionary Gladys Aylward, portrayed by Ingrid Bergman in The Inn of the Sixth Happiness (Robson 1958) fought to end foot-binding in China, and adopted nearly a hundred orphan children whom she led to safety during WWII. The Spanish Jesuit priests Gabriel and Mendoza fought to the death to defend the rights of the Guarani natives of Brazil in The Mission (Joffe 1986). And despite his checkered past and penchant for violence, the US American preacher Sam Childers is a semi-heroic character in Machine Gun Preacher (Forster 2011) as he defends an orphanage in Uganda against the Lord’s Resistance Army. In fact, Hollywood’s value of cultural identification works both ways in this film: Childer’s failure to identify with his home country (the USA) makes him increasingly less effective back home.

Complex images of well-meaning but naive missionaries also abound. In The Other Side of Heaven (Davis 2001), the neophyte Mormon missionary John Groberg has no success until he eventually dedicates himself to learning the local language and culture. We are likewise left feeling ambivalent about the fervent yet almost reckless US missionaries to Ecuador in The End of the Spear (Hanen 2005). On the one hand, their theological commitment to “all tribes and nations” compels them to engage the Woadani. On the other hand, their ignorance of Woadani history and culture leads to their death before they make any progress among them.

On the more critical side, Barbara Kingsolver’s Poisonwood Bible (1998) portrays missionaries whose naive mono-cultural attitudes are directly proportional to their fervor for evangelism. The patriarch of the missionary family, Nathan Price, is culturally clueless and eventually dies a failure. To be sure, we would also find levels of ambivalence toward Korean or Brazilian or Canadian missionaries (and so on) in popular culture; but the dominant image in film and news media has focused on the controversy of US Americans who serve in missions overseas.

Constantino Arias’ famous photo titled “the Ugly American” conveys all the undesirable qualities people assign to US Americans who
travel overseas. A hairy overweight older man, wearing shorts that are as bare as his sombrero is broad, smokes a cigar while saluting the camera with a quart of liquor in each hand. This was the “Ugly American” of Cuba in the 1950s when international tourism was a privilege only available to westerners. “Ugly Americans” can still be found, wearing cutoff shorts in Muslim countries that value modesty, or letting their kids run wild in Japan, despite the cultural value of orderliness there; or ordering Coca Cola in an Irish pub. It is not that they are physically ugly, but that their “ugly” behaviors draw attention to themselves from the second they step off the tour bus and start snapping pictures to the time they run back into the air conditioning of their safe hotel.

The moniker “Ugly American” was both challenged and popularized in a political novel by Lederer and Burdick (1958), which was later made into a film starring Marlon Brando (Englund 1963). Homer Atkins, the rugged protagonist, was physically ugly in contrast to the polished delegation of US government advisors who were sent to combat the communist agenda in a fictional country called Sarkhan (set in Southeast Asia). Atkins, though physically unattractive, was compassionate and helpful. Meanwhile, his compatriots were too self-absorbed and culturally isolated (cross-culturally illiterate, really) to connect with the people of Sarkhan. So in a twist of literary irony, the true “ugly Americans” turn out to be the polished workers of the US Foreign Service. The tragic end of this ugly behavior is that the US workers lack social influence; they are unable to persuade the Sarkhanese to adopt a Western free market system, and Sarkhan succumbs to communism. Lederer and Burdick wrote their novel to argue subtly that for US Americans to win the Cold War and spread democracy, they needed to understand and engage with Southeast Asians. In other words, to be world changers, cross-cultural workers need to be culturally literate.

Ethnophaulisms change over time, and nowadays the “ugly American” can refer to all US Americans—even those who do not travel—or to westerners in general. The evening news gives the impression that the rest of the world—at least many in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America—have hostility toward US Americans. Who actually feels this way? And is the sentiment specifically anti-American, or is it anti-western in general? Or is it just plain old xenophobia, with a geopolitical spin?

**INTERNATIONAL IMPRESSIONS OF US AMERICANS**

We cannot say definitively how the “rest” feel about the United States, since hatred cannot be quantified for statistical comparison. But the BBC has tried to quantify each year how 29,000 adults throughout the world feel about twenty-seven prominent nations including the United States. It turns out that the world feels most positive about Germany, with a global approval rating of 59 percent. Canada is in second place with 51 percent. But the United States is a close number three, seen by 49 percent as positive, while 34 percent hold a negative impression.1 The country with the lowest global approval rating was Iran, with a 15 percent approval rating. Russia, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan also have ratings at 30 percent or below (BBC World Service 2010).

So, the “ugly American” is no more of a reality than “the ugly Canadian, German, Russian or Pakistani.” In an era of globalization, with China losing jobs to Malaysia, with Lebanon receiving refugees from Syria, and with globetrotting tourists going everywhere, there will be anti-other sentiment, wherever the other comes from. For example, the Seattle Times recently reported that the “ugly American” has shifted to the “ugly Chinese” tourist in Thailand (Gray 2014). Anti-western sentiment is as real as anti-eastern, or anti-Asian, or anti-African—these are permutations of anti-other sentiment (which goes by a number of other labels, including xenophobia, ethnocentrism, etc.). The BBC survey does not teach us much about international sentiment of people from various nations, except that everyone seems to have feelings that

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1. The remaining 17 percent abstained.
range from negative to ambivalent toward all the world’s nations. If the BBC surveyed people from all 220 or so of the world’s nations, we would find the same mixed reviews regarding each of them.

The global impression of the United States, however, may be worsening. Another study (Pew Research) showed that twenty-six countries had a less favorable view of the United States in 2007 than in 2002. Of forty-seven nations surveyed, the nations with the highest view of the United States are in Africa. In fact, three nations—Ivory Coast (88 percent favorable), Kenya and Ghana—had a higher view of the United States than US citizens did (80 percent of US residents had a favorable view of their own country). Other countries with considerably high opinions of the United States include Mali, Nigeria, Israel, and Ethiopia. The lowest opinions were found in Morocco, Palestine, Turkey, and Pakistan, all with approvals of 15 percent or less.

Katzenstein and Keohane (2006) theorize that anti-western sentiment has to do more with economic wealth than political policies. The United States and western nations in general, possess an indefatigable economy and hegemony. Since many novices see the economy as a zero-sum game, conventional wisdom says that “if the USA is wealthy, then we will be poor.” The “ugly American,” in this case, is a self-absorbed businessman who gets rich off the poor. One participant in my study named John (a college professor who taught in Brazil from 1965 to 1989) described how he observed discourse against western hegemony in light of a Brazilian national agenda:

I think the biggest thing was political. It was resentment of the power, of the dominance of the US... how much they resented that all the name brands for toothpaste, and home goods come from the USA. One Brazilian asked, “How come we export our long fibers for US toilet paper and our own children have to wipe with second rate toilet paper?”

Such reports of negative sentiments cause some cognitive dissonance for US Americans who have traveled extensively, since they have observed quite positive attitudes toward their homeland. Americans report that they were seen by their hosts as “exotic, or a demigod” (Iyer 1991 in Kelly 2008, 268); they were “treated extremely well” and shown “tremendous curiosity and kindness” (Kerr 1996 in Kelly 2008, 268). Kelly reports that as an English teacher in Japan, he was complimented, flattered, and made comfortable (2008, 269). I have personally noticed that many Pacific Islanders feel a similar sense of awe about the United States because of the aid that comes from the United States in the form of dollars, healthcare, and technical training. Note that in the BBC’s report (BBC World Service 2010), 82 percent of Filipinos see US American influence as positive. The same is true for 85 percent of Kenyans and 64 percent of Central Americans. In many other developing nations, westerners, if not appreciated, are at least seen as an important source of income for the tourism industry. In that sense, they are respected and even pandered to. US American missionaries who have worked in East Africa, Turkey, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Thailand told me that they are often pleasantly surprised to find that they are not despised (not outwardly, anyway) as the news reports intimated they would be; rather, they are often received hospitably and go on to develop rewarding relationships in their host country. However, some missionaries told me that the more “ugly” US Americans behaved, (i.e., the less cross-culturally literate they are), the less successful their cross-cultural experience became.

When we actually study international perceptions of US Americans, a theory emerges: anti-western discourse, like all discourse, is communicated for a purpose. That purpose seems to have more to do with the speaker in his own context, than with US Americans or the United States.

**ANTI-AMERICAN SENTIMENT AS A TOOL FOR IDENTITY MANAGEMENT**

One feature of any communicative act is the management of identity (Goffman 1958), and it turns out that internationals are finding that
they can use anti-American discourse as a useful tool for managing their own identities. For example, one participant from Nigeria explained that it is largely the educated elite who use anti-American discourse to separate themselves from the commoners: "They think that by speaking against America they can show how sophisticated they are—that they understand [global] issues better than others do." The "sophisticated" are able to articulate alternative, complicated explanations to counter the "commoner’s" simplistic notion that America represents freedom and opportunity. Daniel, a Ugandan pastor described a similar breakdown of discourse in his country:

Daniel: When they see an American, they say, "There is the answer to all my problems." There is a sponsor . . . Others say that Americans only come to Africa for their own interests.

Ken: How do you reconcile the two very different attitudes about America?

Daniel: It is usually the elite who have the view that America is imperialist.

However, there seems to be a contradiction: often, the international academics and elites who tout anti-western sentiment are the very ones that rely on the West for their own upward mobility and comfortable lifestyle. If such communicators of anti-western sentiment employed the rhetoric about the evils of capitalism and the West, their own consumerism and social mobility would be hypocritical. However, if we reframe anti-western discourse as identity management, rather than a firmly held ideology, the contradiction is resolved. Talking bad about life in the West is simply another tool available for elites to separate themselves from the lower classes in their nation. One West African participant in my study said that those who speak against Europe and the United States are the ones who "own condos in London and send their kids to the US for education . . . they cannot succeed without the West." Will, a missionary who worked in North Africa, said that immediately after witnessing a USA flag burning, protesters approached him to ask him to help them get visas to the United States.

A participant who worked in Brazil told me, "There was this strong resentment and anger toward the US, but also a desire to have the benefits of living in the US." Joseph, an Indian community development worker who has lived in several countries in the Arabian Peninsula, said, "I would hear people talk [negatively] about American values, but then if I asked, 'Would you like to move there?' They would answer, 'Oh, yes!'"

If what people say is different than what they actually feel, their communication must serve a purpose other than the construction of plausible propositional truths. I have argued here that anti-western discourse is often a tool for branding self-identity. And this sort of discourse is especially useful for managing one's religious identity. Participants from India, Turkey, Cameroon, Indonesia, Eastern Europe, and East Africa indicated that Christians in their home countries express a more favorable view of the United States than Hindus or Muslims in the same context do. Since the United States and Christianity are often seen as coterminous, pro-western discourse is a way for Christians in these nations to show their solidarity with missions and Christianity. Likewise, anti-western discourse is a way of expressing concerns about Christianity in general.

**ANTI-AMERICAN DISCOURSE AS A TOOL FOR NATIONALISTIC MOVEMENTS**

Anti-western sentiment is most visible to all of us through the news media. And, as with all communication, anti-western discourse is utilized for a specific purpose. Most commonly, political movements leverage stereotypes of unjust US American hegemony and greed in order to muster feelings of nationalism. One participant explained to me that in India, the anti-western discourse becomes particularly useful as any political party can demonize its opponents by labeling them "puppets of Europe and America." A missionary who spent extensive time in Brazil, Portugal, and Poland between 1979 and 1990 indicated that nationals' responses to US Americans were dependent
on their own political orientation. Those who were sympathetic to communism had animosity toward US Americans, even accusing missionaries (in a national newspaper in Brazil) of sterilizing women to reduce the population for an eventual takeover. On the other hand, those who did not identify with communism were more accepting of US Americans. In these cases, the use of anti-western discourse is really a tool for the management of political identities.

Anti-western (especially anti-American) discourse in the media is focused on military force—employing strong words like invasion, aggression, meddling, and interfering. Before Korean rapper Psy became a beloved icon in the United States due to the one hit wonder “Gangnam Style” on YouTube, he severely denounced the United States in his song “Dear American.” The translated lyrics read: “Kill . . . Yankees who have been torturing Iraqi captives . . . who ordered them to torture . . . Kill their daughters, mothers, daughters-in-law and fathers . . . Kill them all slow and painfully.” At a pause in the song, Psy smashed a small replica of a US Tank on stage, to adoring fans (TMZ 2012). The “ugly American” as the overweight tourist or the wealthy capitalist has been replaced by a new ugly American: the meddling, violent soldier. Hussein (2012) argued, “Occam’s Razor, the logical principle that the simplest explanation is most often the correct one suggests that the American militarism which once ravaged Korea and which has now been set upon the Muslim world is the cause of this growing antipathy.”

But even in the midst of this political conflict, US missionaries in Muslim countries report that they enjoy strong social relationships with people in their host culture. A doctoral student who was living in Istanbul told me that after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, he received several calls from his Turkish friends, offering their condolences. “We hope nobody in your family suffered,” a Turkish friend told him.

The use of anti-western sentiment as a tool for burgeoning nationalism highlights the need for cross-cultural workers to understand the history of colonialism, and the psychology of nationalism. “In Nigeria, we say that we divorced Britain to marry America” one participant told me. He explained that the independence movement specifically involved anti-British strategies: A rejection of the parliamentary system, and switching driving to the right side of the road. These were outward symbols of an alliance with US American values rather than colonial ones. In this case, anti-British sentiment and pro-American sentiment were more about burgeoning Nigerian nationalism than underlying feelings about the United States or the United Kingdom.

Each nation state has its unique experience with colonialism, so the discourse and sentiment about certain western powers will be nuanced, and will in fact change over time. But several themes emerged from interviews with missionaries who work around the globe, as I will describe below.

**PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO THE COLONIAL PAST**

Sociologists refer to the tendency to project one behavior on all members of an ethnic group as essentialism (Holliday 2011). For instance, participants said they regularly heard nationals say that US Americans are rich. In this case, the nationals are essentializing US culture. This “flattened” view of the other’s culture causes outsiders to attribute an individual’s actions to his or her ethnic culture. To take an example from India, a missionary from the United States paid too much for a watch at an open air market, and a man in his host culture attributed the swindling to his American-ness: “He doesn’t know how to bargain, because he is a rich American.” Rather than seeing sojourners as individuals, the tendency to essentialize causes people in a host culture to filter expatriate’s behaviors through their pre-conceived idea of US Americans.

Participants who work in nations which have been demoralized due to communism or colonialism especially evidenced this sort of essentialism: US Americans are rich, and they throw money around “because they are Americans.” So the role of westerners is to be the benefactor. One participant who worked in a former territory of the
USSR said, when she arrived with just a suitcase her host expressed
dismay, “The other American team brought a truckload full of pallets,
piled up with goods—but is that all you brought?” Participants from
East Africa said their compatriots also engage in this sort of essential­
ism about post-colonial benefactors. “When a westerner moves into a
village, we say, ‘You have a white man. Now you’re rich.’”

Essentialist views are easily reinforced when expatriates live in ho­
mogenous enclaves. In many former colonies, westerners have created
their own wealthy neighborhoods, thus, limiting their interaction with
the dominant culture. The isolationism makes it difficult for members
of the host culture to get to know westerners in particular, so host
country nationals use the minimal observations of westerners to make
ethnic attributions about westerners in general. Participants told me
that these enclaves have created the (sometimes true) perception that
whites/Europeans/Americans only live cross-culturally to advance
their own interests. “They think Americans see cultural engagement as
a hassle or necessary evil.” One participant who worked in East Africa
described an enclave of large European houses in Dar es Salaam:

Often Tanzanians think that Europeans want to stick
to themselves, “They don’t care about us . . . They
don’t want to eat the food, don’t want to learn Swahi­
li” . . . Once a shop owner asked me, “You’re white . . .
why are you speaking Swahili? White people don’t
like Swahili.”

This participant theorized that the sterile and posh western en­
claves can make the hosts feel like idiots, dirty, or backwards. In
another case, a Thai woman said, “We can tell the missionaries from
the business owners, because only missionaries bother to learn our
language.” A visitor to Haiti told me that she observed an expatri­
atue aid worker in Haiti blurt out, “These Haitians need to know that
when Americans come all this way to help them, we need the air con­
ditioning to be working.” Such attitudes of aloofness and entitlement
reinforced a global stereotype that US Americans are elites who like
to stay in their comfortable enclaves.

While expatriates have set up more or less permanent enclaves
throughout the world, the majority of westerners actually live over­
seas on a temporary basis. A recurring theme that emerged from my
research was that missionaries may leave any time: if they get sick, or
if their organization moves them, or if their kids go to school. The
perception that the US American is transient has a number of effects
on mission work. First of all, one Filipino pastor explained to me:

We feel like since the US missionaries are temporary,
we must be good hosts to them as our guests. So we
don’t tell them when we disagree. We want to make
them happy. We don’t open up to them about our
problems, because they may soon be gone.

In other words, the ephemeral nature of an overseas mission as­
ignment affects rapport building and creates an environment where
the missionaries are unable to receive candid feedback. The tempo­
rainess also gives the impression that US missionaries work abroad for
somewhat selfish motives. A professor who worked in Romania at the
fall of communism said that host country nationals were ambivalent
about the US aid that was coming in. “Americans only think of them­
selves. As soon as they find another way to spend their money, they’ll
stop giving to us.”

Another common perception of westerners, especially due to co­
lonialism, is that no matter the background, all westerners are experts.
Expatriates typically have desirable skills like a superior grasp of English,
or literacy in computers, or have attained higher education. Participants
who worked in East Asia, East Africa, Indonesia, and Central Europe
related that their hosts often defer to them with far more respect than
makes them comfortable. Western sojourners are known to occupy po­
sitions of leadership, so they are sent to the front of the queue, seldom
carry heavy objects, and when they make a point, nobody is willing
to argue with them. A missionary who worked in Indonesia said,
"We live in a hierarchical society, with leaders and underlings. And we're perceived as leaders." Prior training in the legacy of colonialism, and in cultural value orientations, helped these missionaries to form a more accurate understanding of how they were being perceived in their host cultures, and how to fit within their expected social roles.

The extraordinary status that western expatriates are afforded also gives the impression that they are above the law. Missionaries and host country nationals alike mentioned that while nationals are held to one standard by local officials and the police, westerners have the clout to get out of trouble with the police. The effect is that nationals as well as local officials can resent expatriates for their special status.

A major criticism of US missionaries working from India all the way to East Asia is the use of their "special status" to operate above the law by persuading people to convert. John, from India explained, "Missionaries ostensibly come to start a business, or hand out supplies, but then ask for open conversions in large numbers." John suggested that missionaries who challenged this perception of US Americans as duplicitous, and who made their motives clear from the beginning were often better received. A participant who works in Thailand said it was the same dissonance between ostensible motives (business) and actual work (evangelism) that caused some local authorities to distrust missionaries in her area.

The colonial past has played its part in creating many of these perceptions of US Americans as benefactors, or temporary experts who live in enclaves and operate above the law. But the byproducts of industrialization and globalization also lead to ambivalent impressions of the West. This is especially seen in the values (or anti-values) coming from Hollywood.

**ANTI-VALUE**

Of course, Hollywood plays a part in global perceptions of the United States. Pearse (2004) records the intense ambivalence that people from many developing nations have regarding North America and Europe, based on what they see on the television. On the one hand, western values are enticing at a visceral level—illicit sexuality, immense wealth, and unfettered individualism. But at the same time, non-westerners instinctively know that these very values are antithetical to their own pre-industrial cultures, which often place high values on duty, the community, and modesty. It is precisely this ambivalence—this simultaneous enticement plus "anti-value" which engenders a recipe for the "rest to hate the west." While Pearse's erudite essay on anti-western sentiment is plausible, international and US participants in my study only considered the "anti-value" as one of many factors contributing to anti-western discourse. Instead, as I have argued here, anti-western discourse is more about identity management, nationalism, and essentialist ethnic attributions that were formed as a legacy of colonialism. Below, we will see how these perceptions of US Americans affected their cross-cultural strategies.

**IMPACT OF ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENT ON CROSS-CULTURAL STRATEGIES**

By this point, we must conclude that global opinions of the west in general, and of the United States in particular, are multi-vocal and complicated, and these various opinions of "ugly Americans" or "beautiful Americans" require a multi-layered strategy for any sort of cross-cultural work. The responses missionaries are implementing are somewhat contradictory: at times accepting or leveraging the international perceptions, at times challenging them, but always mindful of them.

**Self-loathing**

Despite the generally positive reception that many of us actually receive when we travel overseas, a fear (or snobbery) of being portrayed as the "ugly American" has caused some sojourners to be ashamed of their nationality. In fact, participants in my research indicated that they experienced more anti-American sentiment from people who originate from western nations, with less negative sentiment
from their hosts in Asia or Africa (usually Muslim or Buddhist). Our sharpest criticisms are of people that we are similar to—not of people halfway around the globe. An Indian participant said that he experienced more anti-western discourse from US Americans than he heard at home in India.

McLaren describes this self-loathing:

[US Americans] think small, do nothing daring or prophetic or entrepreneurial, never offend the indigenous Christians . . . don't innovate, don't act American even if that's what [we] are. Meanwhile, North American popular music, film, and culture in general are—for better or worse—arguably the most universal cultural phenomena in the world. So ironically, just as the missionary movement begins to feel snobbish toward all things American, more people around the world have more in common with North Americans than ever before. (1988, 127)

Professors of intercultural studies observe a mild form of this self-loathing as their students begin to understand how European cultural values differ from the value orientations in other parts of the world. We observe students enthusiastically embrace the collectivism, relational-oriented, hospitable, and flexible cultural values that are characteristic of many societies outside the US, and reject their host culture's values of individualism and task-orientation. Bennett (1986) observed this to be the second of six stages of cultural sensitivity: defense against the differences. In this stage, cross-cultural novices sometimes defend the differences of their host culture, and express rejection of their home culture.

But the career missionaries I interviewed were able to be self-critical of their home cultures without idealizing the other or completely rejecting their home culture. Their tactic was not as much self-loathing, but instead to challenge the perception of US missionaries, or to distance themselves from that perception.

Challenge the Perception

A number of participants are painfully aware of the behaviors of “ugly Americans” and they challenge those images. Participants especially challenge the perception that US Americans are impatient or self-centered by building relationships and showing that they were genuinely interested in their hosts. If westerners are seen as above the law, missionaries take extra pains to follow the law, “even ones that the nationals disobey” like zoning and traffic laws. If westerners are thought of as pushy, missionaries are careful to listen better and seek consensus. If “ugly Americans” drive SUVs, these missionaries take the bus. If “ugly Americans” rush to the front of the line, they wait their turn. If the “ugly American” loses his patience in public, they keep their cool.

Well-trained missionaries challenge the perception that westerners are most comfortable in their wealthy enclaves. I asked a Cameroonian participant what caused certain US missionaries to be well received and others to be rejected. He said the well-received ones “learn the language. They are respectful of Islam in the way they dress.” A missionary to Indonesia said that his mindfulness of the perceptions of US Americans as arrogant and self-serving compelled him to become part of the community. Whereas the expectation was that he, as a wealthy “patron,” would not do manual labor or domestic tasks, he took part in road construction projects. “Indonesian patrons would never act like servants and make coffee or tea,” he said, “so they were surprised when I made them tea.”

In order to quash concerns about the temporariness of expatriate stays, missionaries challenge that perception by committing to work for the long haul. They challenge that notion in deeds, by marrying host country nationals or adopting children from there, or by building permanent homes. They also challenge the notion in word. Isaac, a missionary to Honduras, told me, “After teaching for a year, I walked into the classroom one day and the chalkboard said ‘Missionary go back to Canada.’ But I left the message there and wrote, ‘I love Honduras.’” Isaac was not going home any time soon.
And some missionaries are challenging the notion of the sponsor or benefactor. If “ugly Americans” throw money at their problems, these participants challenged that image by looking to community action and cooperation, rather than to foreign money as the panacea.

Leverage the Perception
At times, it is more strategic to leverage perceptions of US Americans than to deny or challenge them. For example, in East Asia, English is valued (even if there is a stigma about nations where English is the first language). Missionaries in these regions capitalize on the interest in English as a way of building relationships. Where education in general is valued, missionaries often are highly educated, and are valued for that resource, even if their home country itself is not particularly respected.

The perception of US Americans as the benefactor can also be strategic. For example, the role of the “big man” in the Pacific requires leaders to distribute goods. Missionaries in the Pacific are automatically ascribed, perhaps as a legacy of colonialism, the status of “big man” (or “big woman”). But in order to legitimately fulfill the role, missionaries must have access to wealth that they can redistribute. This characteristic, recognized in the local cultural logic as generosity, is central to the status of leader. Missionaries from the Pacific indicated that they did not conceive of generous distribution as the focus of their work, but people in their host culture did key in on this role as central. So missionaries leverage their access to outside financial resources as a way of legitimizing their status as leaders. For example, when Roy and Jane lived at 7500 feet in Papua New Guinea, a frost destroyed the villagers’ crops. As “big men” in the village, Roy and Jane recognized their role was to find food to alleviate the famine. “Part of the exuberant response to our Bible dedication later on,” they said, “was due, in part, to the way we had helped bring food.”

Also, two missionaries who served in the Pacific and later in Thailand recalled that they were often given a chance to speak “even at a random church simply by virtue of being a westerner ... You have to have something prepared in advance, because you may be asked to speak, even if you have nothing to say.” While missionaries often feel awkward (to use one participant’s description) about this unmerited forum for public speaking, it would be disrespectful to decline the opportunity. Instead, one missionary explained, “Have something meaningful to say, and point to Christ rather than yourself.” Having worked in the South Pacific, I noted that “big men” are often given the forum to speak, but leverage that opportunity to advance their own status as politicians or leaders. Missionaries stand in stark contrast when they decline to use the podium for personal gain.

A US American who teaches at a university in Southeast Asia said, “As a westerner, I am put on a pedestal, which goes against my grain” but this opportunity also gave him a platform of influence. He said, “People even come to me to ask for advice in their personal lives.” Rather than decline the opportunity to influence his students’ lives, he said that he tried to “use that as a way to speak truth into people’s lives.”

Purposeful Distancing from the Perception
Both negative and positive stereotypes are based on the assumption that every member of the exotic other’s culture holds the same values and behaviors. Many participants said their strategy for cross-cultural work was to challenge this sort of essentialism—to show that they did not fit the stereotype. If they could be seen as individuals, rather than as “Americans-in-general” they would be immune from the attributions and stereotypes, and hence, the scrutiny.

Since the title “missionary” is controversial, missionaries around the world purposefully distance themselves from that name. A missionary to the Middle East told me that the term “missionary” in his host country connotes someone who will “steal your kids, take them to some camp and brainwash them, and return them, never able to fit back in to the family and social life.” Missionaries from as far west as Ireland and as far east as Indonesia purposefully avoid the term “missionary” in order to disassociate themselves from negative images. A participant who works in Southeast Asia said that missionaries...
keep a low profile in Asia because host governments in those countries tend to be "pro-Muslim, pro-Buddhist, extreme-Hindu or pro-communist." So while western tourists may be welcomed, the Christian workers are seen as a threat to nationalistic movements that use religious identity as a unifying force.

The term "American" is also volatile. Some missionaries from the US have told me they tell people they are from Canada, "since people like Canadians more." And one missionary said he found it more expedient to tell people he was from California.

But the strategies of distancing go deeper than simply avoiding labels like "missionary" or "American." In fact, if anti-western sentiment is primarily a way for internationals to foster nationalism, as this research has suggested, then it is imperative for US missionaries to distance themselves from political discourse while overseas.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural workers are mindful that they "live in a fishbowl." Certainly natives of the countries that host them are prone to losing their patience, dressing inmodestly, and exhibiting other "ugly" behaviors—but when expatriates violate cultural norms, people attribute these negative behaviors to their ethnicity or nationality. So there is a sense in which cross-cultural workers are simultaneously being evaluated as individuals (that is, interpersonally) and as ethnics (that is, inter-culturally).

This research has shown that anti-western sentiment does not debilitate western missionaries. Missionaries from all over the globe indicated that they enjoyed positive relationships in their host countries. But both negative and positive stereotypes of westerners do cause missionaries to be self-reflective about how they are being perceived. At times they challenge or distance themselves from those stereotypes, and at times they leverage them.

REFERENCES


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