Summary

Title: An Intimate Revelation: Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents

The purpose of this study is found in the following research question; what effect, if any, does the process of intercultural Bible reading have on the spiritual growth of adolescents? Intercultural Bible reading is a method whereby a reading group is formed in one culture which reads the same Biblical text as a reading group in another culture. Each group as an interpretive community then develops its understanding of the passage, after which the groups are paired and they exchange their interpretations. Differences in perspectives on the text then become apparent, and the groups react and respond to each other as a second exchange is made. After this exchange comes the final stage where a letter is written from one group to another to express appreciation and/or lingering questions, and the groups have the option to decide whether to continue in another exchange. For the purposes of this study, spiritual growth was defined as a change or deepening of perspective and adolescence was defined as an age range from 13 to 20 years old. Fourteen groups participated in the study which included adolescents from Latin America, North America, Europe, and Asia. The groups all read the parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15:11-32. Several tools were used to analyze and interpret the data, including Glock and Stark’s measures of religiosity, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, and grounded theory analysis. When the reading reports and transcripts were evaluated, the study found evidences of spiritual growth as it was defined for the project. While the project makes no claims of causality, it does appear that a changing or deepening of perspective happens in adolescents who are engaged in the process of intercultural Bible reading.

The first task, undertaken in Chapter One, is to elaborate on the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur as essential shifts in hermeneutics which focused attention on the crucial role which the reader plays in constructing meaning from texts. Because it is from these foundations that the concept of the “ordinary reader” was born (a concept which is essential to this study), the next section of the chapter demonstrates how Mesters (in the 1970’s) and West (in the 1990’s) applied this turn to Bible readers in those theologians’ different non-Western contexts. The chapter then goes on to examine the international study “Through the Eyes of Another” (TEA) which, as the first large-scale study of its kind, sought to utilize the Bible as a means for an intercultural encounter which could create opportunities for “ordinary readers” to have their voices heard by other ordinary readers in other contexts and by the wider theological community.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical frameworks of the study. The first section offers a detailed look at the physical, cognitive, and psycho-social characteristics of adolescence before offering the specific cultural characteristics of adolescence in eight regions of the world to demonstrate the global prevalence of the life stage. The next section examined the concept of culture and presented empirically useful definitions of both “culture” and “intercultural” by adopting Hofstede’s theory of common cultural dimensions. The dynamics of intercultural communication are discussed due to their primacy in the intercultural Bible reading process before the section ends by making the case that globalization provides an increasing motivation for intercultural religious studies of this kind. The next part of the chapter presents known intricacies in attempting to measure spiritual growth before offering helpful markers of spirituality based on the work of Glock and Stark, Moberg, and two New Testament metaphors. Finally, a definition of spiritual growth as change or deepening of
perspective is given as an appropriately open-ended concept for examining the effects of intercultural Bible reading on adolescents.

Chapter Three recognizes and discusses the complexities of performing empirical research in the area of theology, and then explains how a grounded theory approach provides the best opportunity for researching adolescents in the process of intercultural Bible reading. The specific protocol for the study is explained and a detailed list of codes is provided.

Chapter Four begins by summarizing the experience of ten exchanging groups (four others contributed reading materials but were not able to participate in exchanges) and specifically notes each group’s cultural characteristics, adolescent characteristics, dynamics of intercultural communication, and feelings about the intercultural Bible reading process before offering an initial examination for spiritual growth along Glock and Stark’s measures of religious dimensions. The next section delves deeper into the reports of all the groups to discover how spiritual growth appeared in the experiences of the groups by looking for more subtle signs of change as evidenced by shifts in how the participants understood the Biblical passage, changed in their view of themselves, and learned to see their partner group differently. The third section of the chapter presents evidence of how intercultural openness was related to groups which displayed spiritual growth, and the final section presents the top three interpretive themes in the reading reports and compared them to Smith’s National Study of Youth and Religion.

Chapter Five examines how adolescents functioned in offering theological insights from the passage (Luke 15:11-32 – the Prodigal Son) by comparing the material which was generated by the groups with more traditional understandings of the meaning of the parable. While similarities to classic theological understandings were noted, there were other subtle yet significant differences which suggested that adolescents can indeed function very well as Biblical interpreters who are able to offer meaningful insights into the text.

Chapter Six briefly presents the concept of the “Other” as Levinas and Lacan develop it in their work and examines the concept’s connection to adolescent development. The reading reports are then presented for evidence that adolescent participants can indeed come into contact with the Other during the intercultural Bible reading process before the chapter ends by making recommendations on ways to increase the opportunity for confrontations between adolescent participants and the Other.

Chapter Seven, the last chapter, offers a critique of the current practice of youth ministry before examining a study on effective youth ministries which highlights significant and positive points of connection with the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents. Next, the challenges of ICB with adolescent participants are noted as well as the opportunities for moving forward in adopting the practice in youth ministry. Finally, recommendations are made for enhancing the logistical details of exchanges, choosing texts which have themes that resonate with adolescents, preparing the participants for intercultural conversations, choosing partner groups, and involving socially engaged Biblical scholars in the process.