



A Just Mission by M. Haddis. InterVarsity Press, 2022

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In *A Just Mission*, Mekdes Haddis offers a bi-cultural perspective on Western missions based on insights from her own journey as an Ethiopian Christian moving to the USA. Raised in Ethiopia by an Evangelical Christian mother and an Orthodox Christian father, she moved from Addis Ababa to the USA for college. She describes the shocks of encountering religious bias (“Were you a Christian before coming to the United States?”, p16), racist microaggressions (“Do you feel like you have an easier time being accepted in white circles as a Black woman because you are light-skinned?”, p13), and societal racism (including police shootings of black men, p17). Following college, her work for over a decade in church ministry brought encounters with ministry paradoxes such as efforts to “reach Black people in a faraway land” (p21) through short-term missions while ignoring local poverty at home, and the discrepancy between deliberate and meticulous efforts at local discipleship training contrasted with relatively minimal training of leaders in the cultural complexities inherent in short-term missions (p23). This brief cross-cultural autobiography frames her discussion of missions and ministry through the remainder of the book.

While Christian global mission work has historically been predicated on concepts traced to Matthew 28:19 (“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations”, NIV) and Romans 10:14 (“how can they hear without someone preaching to them”, NIV), Ms Haddis suggests that Western missionary work has historically been characterized by too much emphasis on cultural propagation, and too often failed to recognize the global scope and the cultural and ethnic diversity of the church. After a discussion of the “doctrine of discovery” whereby European

cultures in the 15th and 16th centuries cast indigenous peoples in colonized lands as “savage” and justified “violence, genocide and slavery in the name of Christian evangelization” (p50), she explores the ways this set of ideas continues to affect churches both in the USA (undermining the witness and authentic community) and the nature of international mission (by reducing mission to patronizing pity and casting Christians as either victims or rescuers). Fundamentally, she argues, “white saviorism” (p3) harms all participants in mission by creating barriers to genuine Christian community.

The way forward she proposes includes “decolonizing” short-term missions by shifting the focus away from “slum tourism” (p91) and the emotional needs of the “go-er” (p97), and instead emphasizing mission based on a laying down of power and embracing mutuality (p109). Alluding to prior work by Lesslie Newbigin who proposed mission as “service learning”¹ and the Celtic model of evangelism described by George Hunter, which “shared the gospel without dampening the beauty of the culture” (p170),² she argues for “learning from marginalized communities here at home before going around the world” (p109) and for working to ensure true partnership and collaboration between Western mission leaders and Black and Brown church leaders in order to develop truly reconciling ministry.

The critique of Western missions history in *A Just Mission* might seem to ignore evidence for a beneficial effect of Protestant religious influence on developments such as education, printing, civil institutions, and economics.³ Other authors, however, have previously explored in more depth the

mixed legacy of missions in which contributions to health care and education must be seen in contrast to the abuses of coercive conversions and inattention to social justice issues including the African trade in enslaved humans.⁴

For the reader who may return to the Romans 10 question of “how can they hear”, Ms Haddis makes three points that are both simple yet profound. First and perhaps most importantly for those whose missiology emphasizes a “go”, she points out that the Gospel has already “gone.” She calls for a recognition that the church truly is global, and in many parts of the world older and more rooted than in the West in general and the USA in particular. “Theology that is not of the West is deemed as less-than, and many mission organizations won’t even consider forming partnerships with local pastors who don’t ascribe to Western Theology.” (p83) Here again the challenge is to a view that sees Western evangelical Christianity as the primary manifestation of the Christian faith. Her argument for Western Christians to take seriously the historic global identity and witness of the church alludes to themes addressed in more depth by other writers. Thomas Oden’s *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* argues that much more of early Christian intellectual and spiritual development was formed in Africa than is appreciated (and that part of this under-recognition is due to European intellectual prejudice in the 1800s-1900s).⁵ This history is explored in more detail by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru Gitau in *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, a comprehensive survey of African believers’ efforts through the centuries to embody the Kingdom of God in uniquely African Christianity.⁶ Most recently, Vince Bantu’s work in *A Multitude of All Peoples* provides an in-depth exploration of the historical roots of a Western “cultural captivity” of the church which has led the modern Western church to overlook, downplay, or ignore the historical developments and witness of non-Western Christianity.⁷

Second, she points to the work of the Holy Spirit in spreading Christianity in Muslim countries through visions and dreams, reminiscent of Paul’s

conversion experience in Acts 9. While this phenomenon is not explored in detail in *A Just Mission*, other writers describe the role that dreams may play for those of Muslim background as a preliminary or initial step in a multi-year journey of faith⁸ and suggest that a Western approach to cross-cultural evangelism overly steeped in a “scientific” worldview may inordinately downplay the role of spiritual realities in the spread of faith.⁹

Third, she argues for a more robust appreciation of the role of general revelation (Romans 1:20) both in preparing the hearts of those to whom we may minister (p42) and in building unity across faiths and denominations for efforts in common to promote justice, topics addressed in more systematic detail by Thomas Johnson (whose *The First Step in Missions Training* argues that for Paul wrestling and conflict with God was the central theme of all human existence)¹⁰ and Robert Johnson (whose work *God’s Wider Presence* systematically and theologically explores the connection between common experiences of the transcendent or numinous, and God’s wider general revelation)¹¹. Simply put, she reminds readers that we should not think of Gospel spread as primarily depending on human effort, rather it is fundamentally due to the work of the Spirit whether human witness is present or not.

As Ms Haddis notes, the term “mission” is a post-Biblical Latin term that simply refers to being sent, and when “God sends his people, he sends them to do his work in his name and not to make a name for themselves” (p30). Bantu points out in *A Multitude of all Peoples* that the Greek “go” (πορευθέντες) in Matthew 28:19 is a past participle which could also be translated as a subordinate clause providing the context of “having gone” for Jesus’ primary directive of making disciples.⁷ In other words, the discipling would be read as primary and the “going” as secondary. Ms Haddis takes this a step further in her discussion of the scriptural call from Jesus to his followers is to “be my witnesses” (ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες) (Acts 1:8 NIV & SBLGNT) locally, nearby, and perhaps far away. The

fundamental vocation is not necessarily to go, but to faithfully bear witness.

A Just Mission gives a clear and challenging call to faithful witness and, at the same time, provides a shift in paradigm that reminds us the work is God's and not ours. Other writers and scholars have explored many of her themes in more exhaustive detail, but in *A Just Mission* Ms Haddis provides the uniquely first-person perspective of a bicultural Christian with first-hand experience of life in both Africa and the USA. Much of her writing is in response to experiences with short-term mission efforts, but as demonstrated above the challenges she raises apply to considerations of both short- and long-term cross-cultural missions. The way forward she proposes invokes a new vision of mutuality, collaboration, humility, and openness to the work of the Holy Spirit.

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Note: Scripture passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV) and the SBL Greek New Testament (SBLGNT)

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