

Review: *Misunderstanding Stories: Towards a Postcolonial Pastoral Theology*

Melinda A McGarrah Sharp

Eugene, OR, Pickwick, 2013. xiv+215pp, ISBN 978-1-1388-3821-5 (pbk).

Melinda Sharp is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Ethics at Phillips Theological Seminary in Oklahoma, and wrote this volume out of her experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer. As a pastoral theologian, she assumes that narratives of human experience and being attentive to suffering can help facilitate healing and mutual understanding. Moreover, informed by postcolonial studies, she recognises the suffering of historical colonialism and the ways it has institutionalized identity crisis and dehumanization. Sharp's explanation of her discipline of pastoral theology and the importance of it being deepened by insights from postcolonial studies was the first element I appreciated about her book. She explains that pastoral theology will ideally benefit from greater engagement with postcolonial perspectives, as they are both committed to understanding suffering and promoting liberation and empowerment:

Pastoral theology is a field of study open to conversion partners to help understand the suffering of the human condition and what it means to participate in the healing work of empowering, liberating, and resisting, which supplement and build on previously theorized pastoral functions of healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, and nurturing individuated persons and communities. (11)

Misunderstanding Stories revolves around ethnographic telling and retelling Sharp's experience of several stories of intercultural crises in a village in the Republic of Suriname, South America. Previously a Dutch colony, Sharp lived there soon after September 11, 2001, so it was a setting and a time ripe for learning the importance and means of intercultural understanding. Inevitably in intercultural contexts we will misunderstand each other's stories and experience conflict of values and expectations, but these situations are opportunities to go deeper. Sharp explains how she broke cultural taboos or faced the complexity of intercultural misunderstandings where she intervened when a mother went to strike her daughter, how she revealed cultural taboos to new Peace Corps volunteers, how she wanted to explain to young girls that if they went to North America they would not be enslaved, and most significantly how she and the village responded to young girls breaking into her home while she was away. The unfolding stories are fascinating, but also evoke similar misunderstandings her readers may have experienced. The basic argument of the book that misunderstanding is the route to greater understanding is the second element I most appreciated about the book. Her conclusion is that:

When recognized as such, ordinary moments of misunderstanding paradoxically form the shared space of mutually healing intercultural understanding. Intrapersonal, interpersonal,

familial, intergenerational, and certainly intercultural relationships work in and through inherent failures and frustrations. ... Open to misunderstanding, we can move into embodied experiences oriented toward mutually understanding our shared stories.” (184–85)

Sharp models critical reflection on her own experience and interrogates her stories, and the stories of her community, from multiple angles. Her aim is to foster mutual understanding, shared vulnerability, and empathy (devoting a chapter to each of those three concepts in conversation with theology, colonial history and developmental and self-psychological theories).

The third element that I appreciated was the path to reconciliation that Sharp maps out. We can expect misunderstanding and grief, especially when living communally and interculturally with the inevitable conflict around values and identities. But as Victor Turner’s theories suggest, cultures have ritualised paths repairing damage of intercultural conflict; that is, moving from breach to crisis to redress to reconciliation. These steps, albeit complex, are worth identifying and following so we can take relationships and mutual understanding to a deeper level. These steps themselves require patience and careful attentiveness to cultural differences—and they begin by respectful and mutual “being with” rather than patronizing and destructively “gazing at” the other.

Misunderstanding Stories is valuable reading for anyone involved in intercultural relationships including Christian mission, as well as faith-based leaders and theology students wanting to understand pastoral care and theology in postcolonial contexts.

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