

Book Review

From the Roots Up: A Closer Look at Compassion and Justice in Missions

Joann Butrin

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Reviewed by Johan Mostert D.Phil., Professor of Community Psychology
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

A few years ago, economist William Easterly stunned the Establishment with his scathing criticism of the way the West has been trying to help the poor in the rest of the world. In *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (2007), Easterly accuses Western ivory tower "planners" of being utopian dreamers.¹ The end result of their well-intended help has been a total waste of multiplied billions of dollars in aid money and a greater poverty and dependency in the nations that were supposed to be the object of this help.

Dambisa Moyo, the Zambian-born and Harvard-educated economist, later joined Easterly's criticism.² Western aid, she says, has crippled Africa's ability to solve its own problems; it has created unhealthy dependency and corrupted African leaders. She begs for personalities like Bono, Oprah and Gates to take their money and go home.

Is it possible that so much good will could be spoken of so badly? Is it possible that the good intentions and well-thought out plans of good people could fail so miserably? Is it possible that after so much sacrifice and significant financial investment the net result is greater poverty, more resentment, and debilitating dependence?

Against this backdrop, Joann Butrin's newly published book is a welcome addition to

missiological praxis textbooks. Like Butrin, I see a resurgent interest in compassion ministry energizing the church. I see hundreds of short-term mission teams going into the Majority World with a passion to work with orphans, rescue the slaves entangled in the human trafficking industry, provide food for the hungry, care for the person affected by HIV/AIDS, and give resources to people in need. They have been inspired by their popular cultural heroes to become socially sensitive and politically correct; but, like this veteran African missionary, I have also been watching as our well-intentioned Western help has created unhealthy dependency. The "rice Christian" syndrome has drawn millions of people to hear the gospel and enjoy the gifts of the West; however, it has failed to turn the hearts and minds of nations to live in peace, to love justice, and to love God.

Butrin sounds the alarm, stating that many present compassion initiatives could actually end up being rejected by the equivalent voices of the Easterlys and Moyos of the global Church. When the West sends hungry people its excess grain, does this unwittingly destroy their agricultural infrastructure? When Americans send their "lightly used" clothing, are they not putting their textile industries out of business? When the West provides baby formulas for the starving children of HIV+ mothers, did anyone consider how difficult it is for these mothers

to mix their formulas with clean water? When Americans build an orphanage to care for the orphans, do they consider how expensive it would be for them to maintain such an institution until the children are grown up?

Butrin begins her book with a stunning warning to the church. After years of missionary service and watching the damage that good intentions have wrought on the poor, she says the unthinkable: “It may be better to do nothing at all” (p. 6). Then, from this rather sober revelation, she gently begins to show her reader how compassionate helping can actually become transformative.

There are no “quick fixes.” A list of ten secrets to instant development does not exist. Instead, Butrin presents a biblically sound, empirically supported strategy of good development practice—a strategy that works “from the roots up.” She deals sensitively with the dangers of the Santa Claus mentality, where the almighty donor dollar seeks to prescribe to the receivers of aid what needs to be done. She leads the missionary practitioner away from the dangers of the “savior” mentality to an understanding of what it means to be friends with those to whom the Holy Spirit has

called one to serve. She bravely engages the tensions between remaining apolitical and addressing global social injustices. She ably differentiates between the complementary missionary roles in relief and in development and provides many critical tools for the practitioner to ensure that “best practice” models are applied for the glory of God and the benefit of His Kingdom.

Fortunately, we have not had an Easterly or a Moyo criticize us for the way we have often done compassion ministries in missionary praxis, but if we learn to do development “from the roots up,” transformation will indeed take place. To Butrin, “transformation is the change from a condition of human existence contrary to God’s purpose to one in which people are able to enjoy fullness of life in harmony with God” (p. 71). Indeed, transformation is the *missio Dei*!

From the Roots Up should not only be required reading for every missionary and missionary-supporting pastor, it should be the Standard Operating Procedures Manual for every short-term missions team that intends to do some good in the field. In the theological academy, Butrin’s book will become a much-read and referred-to reference work for students in missiology.

¹William Easterly, *White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²D. Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).