

Cameron D. Armstrong

Listening between the Lines: Thinking Missiologically about Romanian Culture. Târgu Mureș, Faith Venture Media, 2018. Pp 177. \$10.00.

It seems that there is always space for more attention to listening in intercultural encounter. Therefore, *Listening between the Lines: Thinking Missiologically about Romanian Culture* appears to be a fitting title for the valuable book by American scholar and mission practitioner Cameron D. Armstrong. Its goal is that Western missionaries learn from Romanians in order to enhance cultural adjustment in their mission work. Armstrong aims for an insider's view of Romanian culture and this is mediated in the book by Romanian interviewees, both Evangelical and Orthodox, and by author's personal observation as a reflective practitioner in Romania where he has been working as a church planter and seminary teacher. The study is focused in scope to Baptists and the city of Bucharest.

The book is a compilation of seven separate essays the author was progressively writing during his PhD study in social anthropology and missiology at Biola University. The chapters can stand on their own, and indeed several were published as journal articles. In spite of the absence of a central argument, throughout the chapters the common thread is the examination of how an Evangelical American missionary negotiates Romanian culture. *Listening between the Lines* starts by a case study in chapter 1 which concludes that Evangelicals should aim at reaching out to the whole family and personal networks. In chapter 2 on leadership, the author offers a solution of a small-group based church multiplication model. In Chapter 3 he depicts changes in the identity of Romanians who have spent extensive time with Americans. In Chapter 4 Armstrong observes Christian Orthodox religious practice and develops three primary lessons Protestants can learn from it. In Chapter 5 he concludes Evangelical believers of Orthodox background still keep their Romanian identity. Chapter 6 he uncovers honour and shame aspects in Romanian culture with which should foreign missionaries get acquainted with. Chapter 7 observes a lack of systematic mentoring, and suggests a four-year mentoring plan for Romanian Bible schools.

In tackling a number of topics lays the strength of the book, yet it also entails certain weakness. It is definitely beneficial to approach the matter from different angles, nevertheless, due to the nature of the compiled essays it gets evident that the author often repeats himself. Sections of the text on Romanian history and language, interviewees' responses, and secondary literature quotes appear multiple times thorough the book, which gives a bit redundant impression when reading the whole book in one piece. Therefore, the reader must keep in mind the original purpose of single papers to balance out the occasional lack of compactness.

The publication is well structured, and Armstrong's writing is clear. Within each chapter, usually, the informants are properly introduced, situations of personal observation are described, the interviewees' quotes are analysed, the findings are linked to secondary literature, and each passage has a relevant conclusion. A good example of such sound analysis is chapter 3, where the author participated at two Orthodox services and interviewed three respondents. It is refreshing to find a book by an Evangelical missionary that shows not only how Evangelicals can evangelize, but also how they can themselves, so to speak, be "evangelized." According to Armstrong's field findings (p. 95), they can learn from the Orthodox believers in the areas of humility before God, of appreciating the past and of including the oral way of learning.

The findings in the book are practically oriented and valuable especially for American missionaries and others coming from similar cultural contexts. The argumentation, nonetheless, does not come without problems. Chapter 7 is based on personal observation only and chapter 1 is grounded on the response of solely one respondent whom the author considers as "objective

enough” (p.4) and declares about him: “I am confident that the picture he has painted of Romanian social organization is as authentic as possible” (p.4). The reader may at times struggle in believing the representativeness of the responses enlisted here. Admittedly, the book gets progressively better in the use of primary sources and more persuasive writing follows. Regarding the content, there are only minor issues, such as inconsistent usage of table titles, poor-quality graphs and several vague spots calling for clarification. Apart from that, the book is overall coherently written and meets its objective: to give an “insider”’s view of Romanian culture for Western missionaries to learn from.

Armstrong’s work with its innovative practical outcomes for Evangelicals in Romania can be followed by further research. Chapter 3 focuses on Romanians who adjust to American culture, which is interesting, yet perhaps not that relevant for the foreign missionaries’ contextualization in Romania. The other way around appears to be a way forward – it could be explored how Americans, and others, embrace aspects of Romanian culture. Next, the scope of Armstrong’s book is clearly mission to Romanians. Another area to explore could be intercultural negotiation of Romanian mission. Romanian authors Rițișan and Constantineanu notice that it was not only the legacy of Communism, but also numerous foreign missionaries coming to Romania which “brought the false impression that Romania was a mission field and not a country with real sending potential” (Rițișan and Constantineanu 2017: 347, cf. Vlasin 2017). Further research could follow up on how expatriate missionaries can help equip Romanian missionaries in their own identity as mission agents, either as classical missionaries or “tentmaking” emigrant workers abroad.

The book by Cameron D. Armstrong is with its timely content highly recommendable to read. Not only for those from the United States of other Western country, who are to some degree engaged in Romania or other Eastern European context. Arguably every attentive learner will appreciate to learn about aspects of Romanian culture and, moreover, one can also listen in between the lines in a different manner: the book’s side effect can be that a European reader might grasp a better understanding aspects of American culture.

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References

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