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Justin Bailey

Dordt College, Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu

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Beyond Hero Stories

Abstract

"Missionary stories don't often go viral, but Chau's death elicited strong reactions."

Posting about the martyrdom of John Allen Chau from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/beyond-hero-stories/>

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in all things

Beyond Hero Stories

Justin Bailey

Last November, the 26-year-old missionary named John Allen Chau was killed on North Sentinel Island. Home to a remote and protective tribe, travel to the island is against the law. But Chau felt himself compelled by a higher call, and paid fishermen to sneak him past the patrols. Even after an attempt at contact led to an arrow in his Bible, he was undeterred. Journaling about the likelihood of his impending death, he nevertheless clung to the hope that God might somehow use him to bring the tribe to Christ.

Missionary stories don't often go viral, but Chau's death elicited strong reactions. Many outside the church shook their heads in consternation, if not disgust. Some suggested that Chau was obsessed, delusional, and mentally ill. Still others expressed downright glee at Chau's death, asserting that he got what he deserved. Within the Christian community, the response was more ambivalent. Most expressed grief, but many questioned Chau's motives, training, and strategy. Some looked at Chau as a martyr, a servant of Christ who had fallen in the line of duty.

There are clear parallels, after all, to the story of Jim Elliot and the other four missionaries, who in 1956 were killed in an attempt to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador. The story and its aftermath – Elliot's wife and other missionaries took up the work among the tribe – has been told and re-told in a famous memoir, documentary, and feature length film. It is a legend in the evangelical world. Even those who barely know its details will recognize Elliot's famous line: "he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."¹

The response to Chau's death reveals just how much has changed in perceptions about missionary work during the six decades between Elliot's and Chau's death. One of the most provocative responses (sent to me by a colleague) came from a relief worker named Jennifer Robinson. Her headline: "John Allen Chau Was a Product of the Missions Marketing System."² Robinson reflected on her own story growing up in an evangelical

setting and argued that young evangelicals are often driven into ill-considered missions and marriages to prove their love for God. She writes: “The missions marketing system targets young people whose decision-making abilities are not fully developed. Capitalizing on the natural zeal of youth, the system plants irresistible ideas of self-sacrifice and grandeur, leveraging the name of God to do it.”

Chau’s story and Robinson’s response resonated with me on deeply personal level. I remember being sixteen and reading the autobiography of Bruce Olson in one sitting. Olson was rejected by a mission board but decided to go anyway. After narrowly escaping death in encounter with the Motilone tribe in Columbia, he was instrumental in the tribe turning to Christ. I had devoured the missionary biographies of David Brainerd, Hudson Taylor, David Livingston, and Jim Eliot. But after reading about Olson, I had to be convinced not to drop out of high school.

The book shifted the trajectory of my life, and I enrolled at Moody Bible Institute, where I hoped to be trained as a Bible translator. At Moody, we talked regularly about unreached people groups and the possibility of martyrdom. John Piper burst onto the national scene while I was there, speaking to college students at the Passion conferences with a rousing call to forsake the American dream and to be willing to die for Christ. I spent two summers in Siberian Russia, gravitating to that location in part because it felt extreme. I even dated a young woman who told me of her aspirations to be a single missionary martyr—not a bad way to get out of a second date; however, I was undaunted and married her anyway.

I share this bit of my story to say that I feel a deep companionship with Chau. He died trying to take the gospel to an unreached people group—perhaps the most unreached people group in the world. This was exactly the sort of thing I wanted to do as well.

Two decades later, I look back on those days with a mixture of fondness and embarrassment. I remember my dreams of Bible translation, and I am unsettled in what seems like a comparatively comfortable vocation. Has my passion been tamed? Have I been educated out of my zeal?

But at the same time, I feel the force of Robinson’s caution. I teach at a college where I see a familiar missionary fervor in many of my students. For the most part, it encourages me. But I am also aware of how much of my own zeal was an attempt to prove that my life mattered, an effort to justify myself through the extremity of my devotion. This is one reason why the Reformational focus on ordinary life has been such a solace to me. It calls me to consider not just every corner of the earth but also every square inch of daily life. And I hope that my students will take the time to listen to a

wider testimony of people seeking to embody the way of Jesus in everyday vocations—not just in extreme conditions.

We are right to be inspired by the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. But the reality (both of the lives of those missionary heroes and contemporary mission work) is much more complicated than our hero stories. And there is much to consider in a profoundly globalized world. Now that all the hot takes have cooled, important missiological questions remain:

- What, if anything, can we learn from Chau’s story?
- Have we “romanticized” missions (and martyrdom)? Is there a “missions marketing system” at work in the evangelical church? Conversely, is there now also an anti-missions marketing system that has arisen in response?
- How should we mentor zealous young people with support and sensitivity?
- What are the best practices for missionary training, service, and partnership in a world that is increasingly suspicious of missionaries?

In the second article of this 2-part series, we will continue this important conversation from a missionary’s perspective.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Ed Stetzer’s summary and comparison of Chau and Elliot in the *WashingtonPost*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2018/11/28/s-lain-missionary-john-chau-prepared-much-more-than-we-thought-his-case-is-still-quandary-us-missionaries/?utm_term=.4245bc0703a5
2. <https://sojo.net/articles/john-allen-chau-was-product-missions-marketing-system>