

Contextualization to Avoid Syncretism through Power Encounter

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Abstract

Power encounter is common among Christians in China. It is often a turning point leading to accepting Jesus as Savior. The danger of power encounters alone shaping a salvific understanding of Christianity is the possibility of syncretism with animism, which has its roots in worshiping power in the universe. In order to understand the danger of syncretism with animism, both church members and pastors were interviewed. The contents from the interviews are compared to a framework proposed by Hayward, in order to find out ways of contextualization to prevent syncretism.

Key Words: Animism, China, Contextualization, Power Encounter, Syncretism

Introduction

Encountering the power of God is often a turning point that results in accepting Jesus as Saviour. This is so true among Christians in China. A nation-wide research project in China released in 2010 revealed that 70% of Christians accepted Christ because of a miraculous healing of themselves or their family members (*China Religions Report 2010: China Christianity Household Survey Report* n.d.). This entry point to Christianity helps Chinese Christians see Jesus as the sovereign God of the universe, to trust Jesus in any circumstance, and not to fear any other spiritual being. However, the danger of power encounters alone in the salvific understanding of Christianity is the possibility of syncretism with animism, which has its roots in worshiping powers in the universe. This risk and the way to avoid it will be discussed in this article.

To discover their experiences with miracles, this study asked ten Christians from five provinces in China, "How is the Gospel good news to you?" As well, five pastors were interviewed about their ways to pastor those who have experienced miraculous healing. Lastly, the contents from the interviews are compared to find out the danger of syncretism and ways to prevent it.

What Is Good News?

The first Christian is living in Beijing, aged 30+. He came to Christ because he found that the good news changed his wife's attitude, and she has become a much kinder person. Then after he studied more of the Bible, he found his life more anchored as he could depend on God. The second Christian is living in Shanghai, aged 20+. He came to Christ, first because of the love of Christians, and later he found that God is the answer to life, giving him meaning. The third Christian is also living in Shanghai, aged 20+. He came to Christ because of a *spiritual encounter* leading him to understand that God is the real and sovereign God. The fourth Christian is living in Hubei, aged 20+. He came to Christ because God *healed his depression* and because of love manifested in Christians. The fifth Christian is living in Guangxi, aged 30+. He came to Christ because of the love of Christians and the atmosphere of church. He says that he finds security in the understanding of the power of God. Five other Christians from Henan also

answered the question. Two Christian brothers aged about 50 came to Christ because of *miraculous healing* of their close family members. They found that Christ could do things humans could not do. One Christian sister aged 40+ grew up in a Christian family as a nominal Christian. She dedicated herself to Christ because she experienced *miraculous help* including miraculous healing from God many times when she prayed in need. Lastly a couple aged 40+ who also grew up in Christian families stated that they first understood God as a *healer of sicknesses*. When they grew up and studied the Bible, they understood salvation and committed themselves to Christ.

All five Christians from Henan stated that miraculous healing was common in the past and that their growth in Christ was strongly influenced by these experiences. Among the five Christians who were not from Henan, only one of them came to Christ because of healing. Three out of five stated that love among Christians attracted them to stay in church. Just as Hayward (Hayward, 1997) proposes, truth and love are two important elements helping new believers grow and stay with the Christian community. In addition, two younger Christians expressed that the good news for them has changed their perception about their lives. They treasure the security in God and find meaning for their lives. We also need to note that five of them emphasized that the study of Bible helped them to understand Christianity more deeply and become dedicated to serving God. Even so, seven out of the ten had power encounters during their conversion or early in their Christian lives, significantly suggesting a common experience of power encounter in conversion. In the experiences of the ten Christians being asked, the Gospel first appealed to them as salvation of their earthly lives, relieving them from sickness. Then in a process of learning from the Bible, they came to understand the Gospel as salvation from alienation and punishment brought by sin.

Power encounter causes a great impact on the lives of non-Christians in China. First of all, they see the greatness of God's power and are encouraged to put their trust in Jesus instead of idols. Secondly, they see the love of God. When they were deeply troubled and even close relatives would not continue to provide help, Christians were willing to take care of them and pray for them. In traditional Chinese culture, extended family is a security net to provide help to those in need. Outsiders have no obligation to help. However, as one pastor observed, "miracles would not transform a person to love God." If a person experiencing the power of God is not nurtured in truth and in a loving community, that person would carry the assumptions and practices of idol worship into the church. It is the danger of syncretism. Brown states that there are two kinds of syncretism, one involved with mixing elements from different expressions and the other with mixing different worldviews (Brown 2006). Syncretism prohibits Christians of the new culture from loving God as Jesus commanded (Luke 10:27). Without truth and love, power encounters alone carry a danger of syncretism with animism.

Animism Together with Power Encounter

Hayward defines animism as:

A belief in multiple spirit beings and souls that inhabit the universe, whose existence is found in people or in nature. As most generally conceptualized such spirits are semi-autonomous beings who represent distinct spheres of influence over nature (such as trees, water, animals, weather, etc.); or locations (such as mountains, depressions, forest glens,

etc.); or human beings (that is by causing sickness, inducing possession behavior, evil behavior, or by becoming familial, helping entities, etc.) (Hayward 1997:155).

Among Chinese with a background in folk religion, many share an animistic worldview. They believe in the existence of spirits who can influence their well-being. Therefore, in times of sickness, a Chinese person may look for power from spiritual beings to intervene. In this sense, healing of sickness via prayer demonstrates that Jesus has a power greater than other spirits.

Some pastors in China find that there is danger of syncretism in two ways. Firstly, Christians may try to follow pastors' instructions in exchange for a good relationship with God to avoid any misfortune. This is a practice carried from traditional idol worship. Secondly, Christians may restrict God to the compartment associated with healing and power and for overcoming adversities but without seeing God as their Lord.

From the interviews with the five pastors we have some glimpses of this risk. These five pastors come from the provinces of Hubei and Henan:

1. P1 has served in church for 23 years. She is a senior pastor in a church located in a rural area. In her church, over 70% of the congregation came to Christ through miraculous healing.
2. P2 serves in the same area as P1 and has served 19 years full time in church. His church has 200 people attending Sunday service, and about 60% of them came to Christ through miraculous healing.
3. P3 serves in a small city near where P2 serves, and he has served 22 years full time in church. In his church, less than 50% of the believers came to Christ through miraculous healing. He observes a rising proportion of believers who came to Christ because of marriage problems, unemployment, other pressures and seeking prayer for their children's marriage.
4. P4 has served 20 years full time in church work. He has served in several churches in rural and city locations. In his present small congregation, 17 out of 20 came to Christ because of miracles. They found power and love in God, so that they accepted Christ.
5. P5 has been serving 15 years full time in church. He serves in a church in a big city. In his congregation, less than 50% of the believers came to Christ because of miraculous healing. There are increasing numbers of people coming to Christ because of interpersonal problems, especially marriage problems.

From the experiences of these five pastors, we can see that more than 50% of the believers in their churches came to Christ because of miraculous healing, again confirming the commonality of this experience among Chinese Christians.

Dangers of Animistic Syncretism

These five pastors observed the following practices being carried over from animistic and idol-worshipping worldviews. Most Christians in their churches who came to Christ through miraculous healing:

- Perceive God as an external source of power that can help them. Therefore, their purpose of going to church is to get immediate help. When they need God to help them solve certain problems, they go to church to ask for prayer; if not, they don't go.
- Kneel before the cross in church to pray, just as they pray before an idol in a temple. They feel that God would grant their prayers if they pray in this way.

- Ask full time pastors to pray for them because they think that these workers are more powerful than themselves.
- Continue participating in idol worship especially in funerals or other ancestor worship activities. Halverson analyzes the beliefs of animism and finds that "animists are not concerned so much about offending the supreme God as their concerns of a more immediate nature - afraid of offending the local spirits." Animists also have a common belief that "the person who dies becomes an ancestral spirit. The family must then continue to give offerings to that ancestor because it has the power either to protect or to plague the family" (Halverson, 1998: 61-62). Therefore many Christians still participate in ancestral worship to avoid not just conflicts with their relatives but also troubles that these ancestral spirits may bring.
- Equate donations to the church with donations in a temple, to thank God for hearing their prayers.
- Choose lucky numbers and lucky days for marriage, or work related situations.
- Care about issues of the present life much more than eternal life. This is because there is "no universal and consistent doctrine about afterlife... Many see the person's spirit as continuing to exist after death either by being reincarnated into another life on earth or by "graduating" to a higher spiritual level" (Halverson 1998:-61).
- Try to use good works to please God.
- Are blessings oriented, in that they want to get abundant blessings from God but are only willing to give a little bit to God in terms of time, money, and their hearts. P5 comments that many pastors have this orientation too.

In the observations of these pastors, we can see the influences of animistic worldviews. Jesus as the supreme God replaces the idols they worship in the past because Jesus has greater power. Therefore the believers now turn to Jesus to ask for blessings such as health, wealth, and better jobs, as well as solving their problems in everyday lives. If they find Jesus does not fulfill their requests, they will turn back to the idols. Salvation from sin and eternal life are not issues they are concerned with. Thus, there is a pressing need to help believers fully understand the Gospel. This is also a process of contextualization, making Christianity relevant in a new culture. It is not just making the outlook of Christianity acceptable in the new culture, but renewing the worldviews with biblical truth. Whiteman explains the purpose of contextualization as:

Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture (Whiteman 1997:2).

Hayward suggests three kinds of encounters that can help believers who have an animist background to understand Christianity, namely power encounter, truth encounter and love encounter. Hayward points out that "the purpose of power encounters among animists is not so much the need to demonstrate the superiority of faith in Christ, but rather how faith in Christ brings peace with God, establishes a harmonious relationship with His eternal purposes, and empowers us for the tasks of everyday life" (Hayward 1997:158). From the contents of the interviews with pastors, we can understand that most believers accept Jesus as the Supreme God because they experienced His great power. However, they are far from establishing a harmonious relationship with His eternal purposes, as most of them focus on earthly blessings. Here the

framework of Hayward's three encounters will be used to review the strategies of the five pastors interviewed.

Strategies of the Pastors

The five pastors interviewed have developed various strategies to tackle the need of Christians who came to Christ through miraculous healing.

1. P1 tries hard to establish believers in truth so that they can grow. She arranges for visitation every year to clarify with them justification and salvation.
2. P2 feels an abundant need for building good communication with these believers, to pray with them and care for them in order to demonstrate the love of God.
3. P3 tends to explain clearly the Gospel before praying for a sick person for healing. He challenges the person to trust God even if God does not heal him or her from sickness. Then, he visits the sick person twice in the following week to encourage him or her to trust God in all things and also to join a suitable small group. P3 also quickly invites these new believers to join Gospel teams so that they start sharing the Gospel. This stimulates them to learn more.
4. P4 tries to help younger Christians to understand their worldviews and to find out what assumptions they may have about their lives. This will be done through camps and small groups. For the older generation, P4 studies the *Heidelberg Catechism* with them to help them have a full understanding of the Gospel. P4 also tries to deliver practical sermons and to stress being a good witness in daily living.
5. P5 tries to help believers grow through Bible study and discipleship.

Truth Encounter

Four out of five of the pastors employ truth encounter to help new believers. Hayward points out that ignorance of truth brings fear in the lives of the believers: "One of the consequences of ignorance is fear which is a feature of animism that has been noted by evangelicals and missiologists... An appropriate response to these issues of ignorance and fear is truth and trust" (Hayward 1997:156).

Truth encounter can be carried out through personal visitation like P1 and P3. P1 visits all the believers at least once a year to explain the truth of salvation to make sure they understand. P3 challenges people to accept the lordship of Jesus and not just ask for healing and help. Truth encounters can also be carried out in small groups catering to the needs of the believers. P3 and P5 invite believers to join a small group Bible study. P4 sets up small groups according to the ages of the believers to teach them basic doctrine systematically. P3 even has Gospel Teams in church so believers can keep on sharing the Gospel. P3 believes that by sharing the Gospel, these new believers will see fully the power of God, not just in healing, but also in transformed lives.

Halverson emphasizes that believers from an animistic background need to build up trust solely in God. Without this trust, hearts of believers may swing between idols and God. He points out three elements in building trust in God alone. Firstly, a believer has to "let go of whatever he or she is clutching for protection or prosperity and to cling instead to the only true and secure source of our protection and prosperity." Secondly, pastors need to help believers relate faith with their everyday life. Believers need to see through the lives of Christians that "God is intensely interested in every aspect of our lives." Thirdly, pastors must "point the animist

to Scripture. Make it clear that approaching God through prayer is the answer to our problems" (Halverson 1998:63).

In examining the strategies of the pastors being interviewed, one can see that they try to help new believers understand the scripture and basic doctrine, especially salvation. However, there is a deficiency in the content of their materials. P4 is using material developed in Germany during Reformation. P1 and P3 adopts the Gospel presentation and the new believers' course from Evangelistic Explosion. These materials are taken from western churches with an assumption that all readers have the concept of "one supreme judging God." Furthermore, the materials used for training lack Biblical teaching for daily life, e.g., how to handle wealth, work, and family. Therefore contextualization to tackle the animistic worldview is a pressing need.

In addition, truth encounter should include teaching on the truth about the spiritual world. Believers need to know the "deceptive nature of the spirits" (Halverson 1998:66). Believers with an animistic background are in a state of constant fear of revenge from these spirits, because they feel that they are rebelling against them. They need to experience their close relationship with God and understand that Jesus will protect them from any attack from these spirits. Not only protection, they need to understand that these other spirits are of no consequence to God. Truth encounter reconstructs a person's view of their life to acknowledge Jesus as Lord of life.

Love encounter

Three out of ten of the Christians interviewed stated that they stayed in church because they were attracted by the loving atmosphere among the Christians there. P2 also finds that caring for believers, praying with them, and communicating with them were helpful for their growth in faith. Love encounter is powerful. Hayward proposes love encounter as an essential strategy to evangelize animists:

Love is foundational for establishing trust that is, as noted earlier, the antidote to fear. It is the climate by which new information can be incorporated and embraced, making it possible for an effective truth encounter to take place... Love in both word (truth) and deed (power) are the key to the successful proclamation of God's word to a blind and confused world in which allegiance of the heart toward God is our goal (Hayward 1997:158).

Relationship with God is built in love, for God is love. Without love, truth would only bring legalism, and power would bring in fear of God. However, love binds people together and reveals scripture as truth that they can practice. Love makes Christianity different from animistic beliefs. I witnessed a loving act of P1 more than ten years ago. One day in a snowy winter, P1 walked home after a church gathering. She found a young man who had fainted on the road. Immediately, she and other sisters picked him up and brought him home. She and other sisters took care of him until he got well. After she found that he was a poor worker and did not have money to go back to his hometown, she bought him a bus ticket home. Another time, her church had an old lady who was so weak that she could not walk. A brother in the church made her a bed with wheels. Then, a group of sisters in the church would go to her home every Sunday morning, help her into her bed and walk to the church. They made a great impact on people in the neighborhood and attracted many people to go to church to join this loving community.

Both stories of P1 show us love encounters are ways of living out the scripture. Love encounter is a contextualized expression of the truth. Outsiders would not be able to tell how to contextualize the scripture into actions expressing love in a particular culture. This is what local Christians need to work on.

Need for Contextualization

After reviewing power encounter, truth encounter and love encounter in evangelizing animists, we see a need of contextualization especially in teaching the truth of the scripture. Otherwise, Chinese churches may fall into syncretism with animistic worldviews.

Whiteman shows us the risk of not contextualizing Christianity:

When we fail to contextualize, we run a much greater risk of establishing weak churches, whose members will turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanations, follow nonbiblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals. This is because a noncontextualized Christianity seldom engages people at the level of their deepest needs and aspirations... (Whiteman 1997:5).

This danger is true when we analyze the cases presented in this paper. Believers who had power encounters would turn back to idol worship easily, and they would be reluctant to give up all the rituals they had participated in before coming to Christ. It is easy for them to live split spiritual lives trying to please both the idols and God. To avoid this, it is important to develop contextualized truth encounter answering questions deep in believers' hearts. In this process, people may feel offended by the scriptures because truth would point out their sin and transgressions. However, Whiteman reminds us that, "good contextualization offends people for the right reasons. Bad contextualization, or the lack of it altogether, offends them for the wrong reasons" (Whiteman 1997:3). Pastors should not be afraid of offending believers, but they should try their best to develop good contextualization.

What is good contextualization? Moreau lists out four markers to identify good contextualization. First of all, it is grounded in scripture. Secondly, the agent of contextualization must immerse in the specific context to adapt to the specific manner of thinking, speaking, and acting in it. The agent needs to be able to demonstrate Christ-centered living in that context. Thirdly, the process of contextualization is a dynamic one. Different voices in the community need to be taken into consideration. Changes in the context need to be considered too. Lastly, good contextual products "address local needs in local sensibilities" (Moreau 2012:64).

The pastors being interviewed are trying hard to help believers grow. There is a need to work with them to contextualize the Gospel well. In light of the analysis of Moreau and the work of the pastors, I propose the following contextualization strategy. Firstly, missionaries need to immerse themselves in the context to understand the reasons believers cling to the old idol worship practices. They also need to understand contextual ways to express love and care. Secondly, Bible studies on local needs are needed. And these studies should be made together with local pastors to hear their viewpoints and their difficulties. These materials should be focused on discussion of Christ-centered living in context and not in an abstract truth of doctrine. Lastly, topics of study should include both understanding relationship with God and Christ-centered living. Believers need to learn that Jesus is the creator of all things (Col 1:15-16), Savior (Col 1:13-14), and Lord of our lives (Col 1:18).

Conclusion

Heideman encourages us to see the process of contextualization as continuing: "Each generation in every culture is faced with the need to come to an understanding of what the salvation of Jesus Christ means to them in their context" (Heideman 1997:46). As the early church took time to contextualize Old Testament teaching into the Greek world, it takes time for each ethnic group to contextualize the whole Bible truth into their culture. Heideman asks us to have patience and allow them to make mistakes in the process. In the process of making good contextualization, we can foresee a number of heresies appear with syncretic teachings mixing biblical truth with animistic practices. This process is a movement from what people once were to where they need to be in Christ. It is a process of reconstruction of thinking and worldview. In this process there will be phases that are not so clear, and familiar practices of animism may occur in the form of Christian heresies. However, we need to note that, though there is a residue of these practices, they are on a journey from what they were to what they will become. They are not fully animists anymore but becoming fully Christian in their worldview, a process still in the making. As such, we need to be patient to listen to these voices. We also need to take initiative to help them to build up good contextualization.

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