

Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity: An Introduction

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Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity? is a product of the William S. Carter Symposium on Church Growth. More than five hundred persons from around the nation gathered in East Tennessee for the three-day conference sponsored by Milligan College in April of 1974. The twelve lectures given then constitute the present chapters with only minor editorial changes. I am delighted that the William Carey Library is making these lectures available in book form, not only to those who gathered at Milligan, but, more importantly, to those who were unable to be there.

By way of introduction, I wish to explain briefly the metamorphosis and significance of the Carter Symposium, to elaborate on the plan of the book, and to give credits where credits are due in the preparation of this book. Why should a small East Tennessee liberal arts college such as Milligan become the setting for a large symposium delving deeply into one of the most crucial issues in missions today? How did the Carter Symposium come about? What significance does the

symposium have for Mulligan and for the missiological world at large? The key to unlock these questions lies with the person of Jess W. Johnson and his dream. Milligan President Johnson once remarked: “The heart of Christianity resides in the mission which our Lord has committed to all his disciples. A college, if it be Christian, must be caught up in this mission.”

Johnson wants Milligan to become *a college with a missionary vision*. It was this dream that brought me to Milligan College in 1972. When this dream was made known to them, Mr. and Mrs. William S. Carter of Dallas, Texas, provided a generous gift enabling us to carry the dream a step further. The first thing that was made possible by the gift was the appointment of Dr. Charles R. Taber for the academic year 1973-74 as the William S. Carter Visiting Professor of World Mission and Anthropology and Dr. Taber has now become a member of the permanent faculty. Second, the *Milligan Missiogram* (a missiological quarterly) was begun that same year and has now become self-supporting. Third, the William S. Carter Symposium was planned to stir up interest at the College on missions and church growth and to introduce *Milligan's* dream to the missiological world. The significance of the Carter Symposium is not limited only to those who assembled at Milligan in April of 1974. The Carter Symposium transcends the time and space categories. For Milligan College, it has a symbolic meaning. Granted, it was a declaration to the missiological world of Milligan's commitment to the Christian world mission, but, more than that, it will serve as a reminder to what is yet to be accomplished to realize Milligan's dream. The 1975 launching of Milligan's Institute of World Studies/Church Growth is only one among many services which the College will provide to the missionary world. For the missiological world, the Carter Symposium was significant

because four highly qualified missiologists in different disciplines and with different areas of experience examined the perennial problem in the effective and sound communication of the gospel. This comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach in the setting of a conference paved the way for future cooperation among missiologists in solving the missionary problems of the first order. The accommodation-syncretism axis which the Carter Symposium took up as its central theme is not a new topic; the issue has remained problematic from the time of the Apostles to this day. That the topic keeps coming up indicates that each generation must wrestle with it utilizing the best insights gleaned from various disciplines. I hope this book will serve as a catalyst to the continuing debate on the issue of cultural accommodation and syncretism in missions.

Now I shall turn to the plan of the book. Perhaps an explanation on the format of the symposium will reveal the structure of the book. As symposium coordinator, I first settled on the topic to be the accommodation-syncretism axis which may be described in this way. The acts of God on behalf of men are, in their ultimate reality and significance, the same for every man. But they were concretely enacted on the human scene, and later reported and explained in terms of specific human cultures and languages. In order to make the message intelligible and relevant to people immersed in their various cultural settings, God became fully man and used exactly the same media and symbols as men used in everyday life. The same process of transposition necessarily occurs every time the gospel crosses a new cultural frontier. But it may happen as a result of careful, sensitive planning, in which case the form of the message is *accommodated* precisely in order to preserve the integrity of its meaning; or it may occur spontaneously, haphazardly, as a result of insensitivity and carelessness on the part of the evangelizer, in which case the

message is often *syncretized* and thus distorted. The purpose of the Carter Symposium was to explore both the criteria by which one might distinguish legitimate accommodation from illegitimate syncretism and practical approaches designed to achieve the one and avoid the other. In short, the axis was thus defined: As Christianity spreads into the myriad cultures of the world, it must adjust to each culture to present an intelligible and relevant message, but what are the limits of such adjustments? Twelve lectures comprised the basic format of the symposium, with three main divisions: (1) the axis defined and illustrated, (2) principles applicable to the axis and (3) critical issues in the axis. Drs. Donald A. McGavran, J.C. Hoekendijk, Alan Tippett and Peter Beyerhaus were asked and agreed to address themselves to the axis, each incorporating his own discipline and area of experience. The following lecture assignments were given with each participant delivering three.

1. 1. The terms defined (Tippett)
2. 2. The axis illustrated from India (McGavran)
3. 3. The axis illustrated from Indonesia (Hoekendijk)
4. 4. The axis illustrated from South Africa (Beyerhaus)
5. 5. Anthropological principles which apply (Tippett)
6. 6. Biblical principles which apply (*Beyerhaus*)
7. 7. Historical principles which apply (Hoekendijk)
8. 8. Strategic principles which apply (McGavran)
9. 9. My reactions to my colleagues (Tippett)
10. 10. My reactions to my colleagues (Beyerhaus)
11. 11. My reactions to my colleagues (Hoekendijk)

12. My reactions to my colleagues (McGavran)

The whole symposium was manuscript-based. Dr. Tippett had his first lecture on the definition of the terms circulated among the other speakers before they wrote theirs. Then lectures 2 to 8 were to be in my hand before Christmas of 1973 for me to distribute them to the other participants so that lectures 9 to 12 could be finished and in my hand by January 1, 1974. This was my suggested procedure. As the participants worked on their lectures, the concrete titles took shape and constitute the present chapters. To tie things together, I have asked my colleague, Dr. Charles R. Taber, to write a conclusion. In it, he will summarize the issues, delineate the range of opinions, identify the points of contact and disagreement and bring out the areas yet to be explored.

To thank all the people involved in the preparation of this book is a difficult task. I must thank the four lecturers, those who gathered at the symposium and the Milligan community which served as a cordial host to its guests. Appreciation must be expressed to Mrs. Freddie Smith, my secretary, who typed the manuscript and worked long, hard hours to see the book to its completion. To Dr. Taber whose willing help in this and other ventures is a source of inspiration, to President Johnson for his dream and to Bill and Liz Carter for their generous gift and exemplary missionary concern, I am grateful.

GM Editorial Note:

Excerpt pages 9-12 from the out-of-print book, *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity*, Tetsunao Yamamori (Editor)

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Another chapter from the same book written by Alan R. Tippett entitled "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity" (pages 13-34) was posted in the "Featured Articles" section, July 2006, www.globalmissiology.org